

Regional Oral History Office  
The Bancroft Library

University of California  
Berkeley, California

University History Series  
Department of History at Berkeley

Lawrence W. Levine

HISTORIAN OF AMERICAN CULTURE,  
PROFESSOR AT BERKELEY, 1962-1994

Interviews conducted by  
Ann Lage  
in 2004-2005

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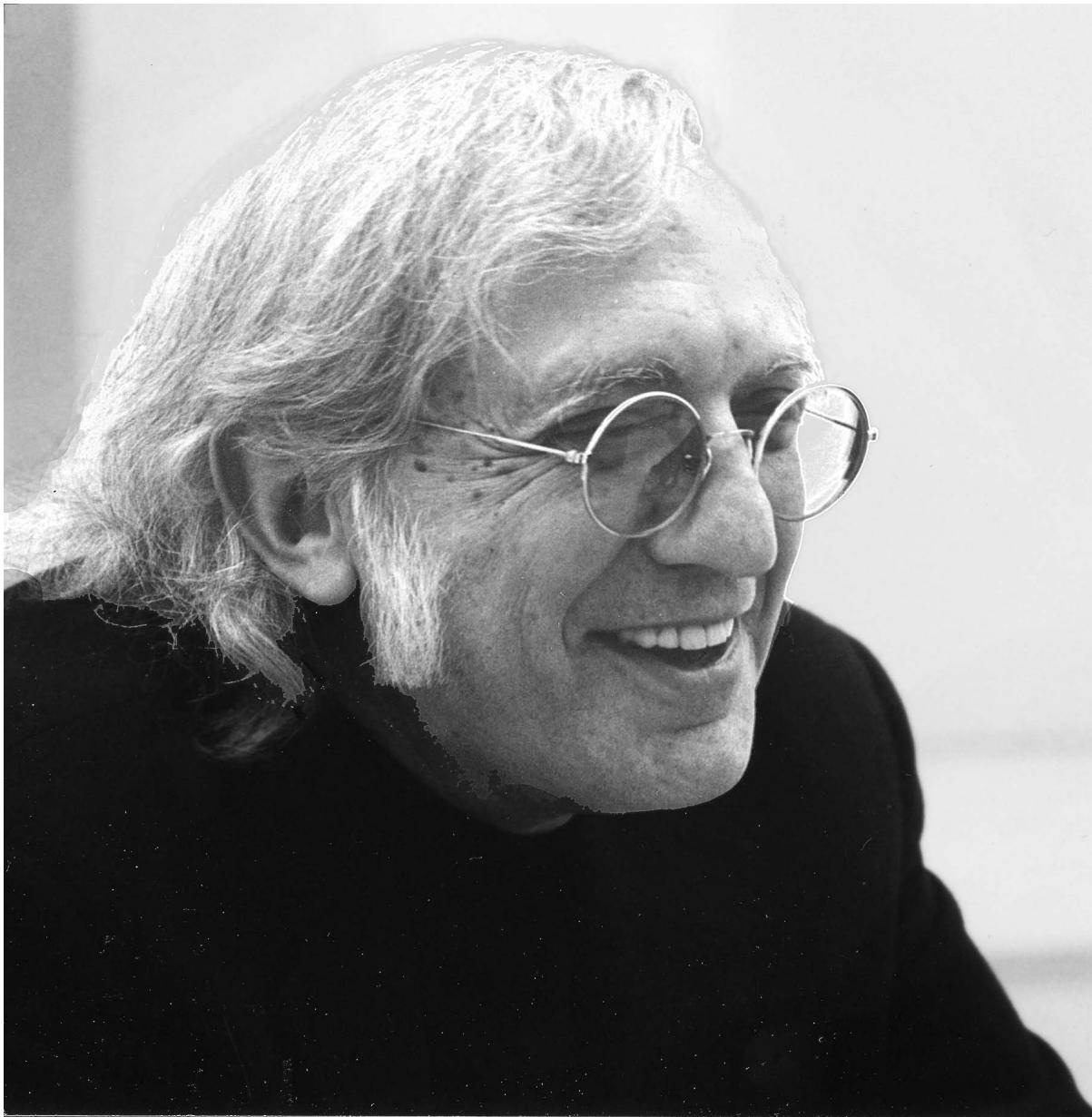
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Lawrence Levine, 1999  
*Photo by Bruce Jackson*

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[End of Interview]

## Preface to the Department of History at Berkeley Oral History Series

The Department of History at Berkeley oral history series grew out of Gene Brucker's 1995 Faculty Research Lecture on "History at Berkeley." In developing his lecture on the transformations in the UC Berkeley Department of History in the latter half of the twentieth century, Brucker, whose tenure as professor of history from 1954 to 1991 spanned most of this period, realized how much of the story was undocumented.

Discussion with Carroll Brentano, coordinator of the University History Project at the Center for Studies in Higher Education, history department faculty wife, and a former graduate student in history, reinforced his perception that a great deal of the history of the University and its academic culture was not preserved for future generations. The Department of History, where one might expect to find an abiding interest in preserving a historical record, had discarded years of departmental files, and only a fraction of history faculty members had placed their personal papers in the Bancroft Library.<sup>1</sup> Moreover, many of the most interesting aspects of the history—the life experiences, cultural context, and personal perceptions—were only infrequently committed to paper.<sup>2</sup> They existed for the most part in the memories of the participants.

Carroll Brentano knew of the longtime work of the Regional Oral History Office (ROHO) in recording and preserving the memories of participants in the history of California and the West and the special interest of ROHO in University history. She and Gene Brucker then undertook to involve Ann Lage, a ROHO interviewer/editor who had conducted a number of oral histories in the University History Series and was herself a product of Berkeley's history department. In the course of a series of mutually enjoyable luncheon meetings, the project to document the history of the Department of History at Berkeley evolved.

In initial discussions about the parameters of the project, a crucial decision was made. Rather than conduct short oral histories focused on topics limited to departmental history, we determined to work with selected members of the department to conduct more lengthy biographical memoirs. We would record relevant personal background—family, education, career choices, marriage and children; discuss other institutional affiliations; explore the process of creating their historical works and changes in the discipline. A central topic for each would be, of course, the Department of History at Berkeley—its governance, the informal and formal relationships among colleagues, the connections with the broader campus, and curriculum and teaching.

<sup>1</sup> The Bancroft Library holds papers from history professors Walton Bean, Woodbridge Bingham, Herbert Bolton, Woodrow Borah, William J. Bouwsma, George Guttridge, George Hammond, John Hicks, David Keightley, Joseph Levenson, Martin Malia, Henry May, Thomas Metcalf, William Alfred Morris, Frederic Paxson, Herbert Priestley, Franz Schurmann, Engel Sluiter, Raymond Sontag, and Kenneth Stampp. Miscellaneous files of the Department, 1915-1929, are also held in Bancroft's University Archives.

<sup>2</sup> Two published memoirs recall the Berkeley history department: John D. Hicks, *My Life with History* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1968) recalls his years as professor and dean, 1942-1957; Henry F. May reflects on his years as an undergraduate at Berkeley in the thirties in *Coming to Terms* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1987).

Using the Brucker lecture as a point of departure, it was decided that the project would first document the group of professors who came to the department in the immediate postwar years, the 1950s, and the early 1960s. This group, most of them retired, was the one whose distinguished teaching and publications initially earned the department its high national rating. They made the crucial hiring and promotion decisions that cemented the department's strength and expanded the curriculum to meet new academic interests. At the same time, they participated in campus governing bodies dealing with central social, political, and cultural issues of their times: challenges to civil liberties and academic freedom, the response to tumultuous student protests over free speech, civil rights and the Vietnam War, and the demands for equality of opportunity for women and minorities. And they benefited from the postwar years of demographic and economic growth in California, accompanied for the most part through the 1980s with expanding budgets for higher education.

Carroll Brentano and Gene Brucker committed themselves to facilitate project funding and to enlist the interest of potential participants. Members of the department responded with interest, joined the periodic lunch confabs, offered advice in planning, and helped find funding. In the spring of 1996, Brentano and Professor Sheldon Rothblatt organized a symposium, titled "Play It Again, Sam." There, Gene Brucker restaged his Faculty Research Lecture. Professor Henry F. May responded with his perceptions of events, followed by comments from other history faculty, all videotaped for posterity and the Bancroft Library.<sup>3</sup>

Meanwhile, the oral history project got underway with interviews with Delmer Brown, professor of Japanese history, and Kenneth Stampp, American history, both of whom came to Berkeley in 1946. To date, we have completed a total of seventeen in-depth oral histories with this group, nine of which are now in print and on line. The interviewees represent a variety of subject fields and historical approaches. The series also includes one interview with a faculty wife. (View on line at [http://bancroft.berkeley.edu/ROHO/collections/subjectarea/univ\\_hist/history\\_department.html](http://bancroft.berkeley.edu/ROHO/collections/subjectarea/univ_hist/history_department.html)) Diverse in their personal backgrounds and scholarly interests, the faculty who came to the department in the postwar years had one thing in common: all but one were men.<sup>4</sup> In the 1970s and 1980s, as more women completed PhDs, women within the academy and the women's movement nationally worked to increase women in tenured faculty positions. The Department of History at Berkeley slowly began to add women to its faculty, beginning in 1971 with the appointment of Natalie Zemon Davis. By 1990, the department had two female full professors, five associate professors, and four assistant professors, of a total tenure-line faculty of sixty-two. During these years, women historians nationally were part of a broader critique of universalist assumptions about history and society that included significant contributions from Berkeley faculty. Feminist scholars, in particular, were integral to the radical changes in subject matter studied, methodology, and modes of discourse in the profession.<sup>5</sup> The new intellectual and programmatic directions associated with an increase in female

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<sup>3</sup> The Brucker lecture and May response, with an afterword by David Hollinger, are published in *History at Berkeley: A Dialog in Three Parts* (Chapters in the History of the University of California, Number Seven), Carroll Brentano and Sheldon Rothblatt, editors [Center for Studies in Higher Education and Institute of Governmental Studies, University of California, Berkeley, 1998].

<sup>4</sup> Adrienne Koch was a faculty member, 1958-1965.

<sup>5</sup> Joyce Appleby, Lynn Hunt, and Margaret Jacob, *Telling the Truth about History* (New York, London: W.W. Norton, 1994), 153. Peter Novick, *That Noble Dream: the "Objectivity Question" and the American Historical Profession* (Cambridge University Press, 1994), 471.

faculty were accompanied by sometimes contentious battles at Berkeley as elsewhere over the evaluation of academic work, teaching priorities, and curriculum development.

The second phase of the project on the Department of History at Berkeley focuses on the women faculty who came to Berkeley in the 1970s and 1980s. In 2003, Natalie Davis was interviewed during a visit to the campus, and in 2008 we launched a three-year project to document several more of Berkeley's women historians. As in earlier interviews, we explore the faculty member's contribution to her scholarly field, examining the development of her intellectual project and working methods, and probe experiences relevant to understanding the development of the discipline and the department. In addition, we discuss challenges facing women in the academy over the course of their professional careers.

The organizers of this project are grateful to the Department of History and to the many individual donors that have made these interviews possible. The considerable interest in the fruits of our project to date confirms our initial premise that departmental histories and personal memoirs are essential to the unraveling of some knotty puzzles: What kind of a place is this University of California, Berkeley, to which we have committed much of our lives? What is this academic culture in which we are enmeshed? And what is this enterprise History, in which we all engage? As one of the project instigators reflected, "Knowing what was is essential; and as historians we know the value of sources, even if they are ourselves."

Carroll Brentano, Coordinator  
University History Project  
Center for Studies in Higher Education

Gene Brucker  
Shepard Professor of History Emeritus

Ann Lage, Project Director  
Regional Oral History Office  
Berkeley, California

May 2009

**Series List—Department of History at Berkeley****February 2014**

- Bouwsma, Beverly Hancock. *Observer of Campus and Community Culture, Berkeley Department of History Faculty Wife, 1956-2001*. 2008, 136 pp.
- Bouwsma, William J. *Historian of European Culture in the Early Modern Era, University of California, Berkeley, 1956-1991*. 2008, 137 pp.
- Brown, Delmer M. *Professor of Japanese History, University of California, Berkeley, 1946-1977*. 2000, 410 pp.
- Brentano, Robert. *Scholar and Teacher of Medieval History, University of California, Berkeley, 1952-2002*. 2005, 370 pp.
- Brucker, Gene. *Historian of Renaissance Florence, University of California, Berkeley, 1954-1991*. 2005, 211 pp.
- Davis, Natalie Zemon. *Historian of Early Modern Europe, Professor at Berkeley, 1971-1978*. 2010, 79 pp.
- Fass, Paula S. *American Social and Cultural Historian and Historian of Childhood, University of California Berkeley, 1974-2012*. 2012, 113 pp.
- Herr, Richard. *Historian of Spain and France, University of California, Berkeley, 1960-1991*. 2009, 256 pp.
- Hunt, Lynn A. *Historian of France and Modern Europe, Professor at Berkeley, 1974-1987*. 2013, 110 pp.
- Jordan, Winthrop D. *Historian of Slavery and Race Relations in America, Professor at the University of California, Berkeley, 1963-1982*. 2009, 194 pp.
- Keightley, David N. *Historian of Early China, University of California, Berkeley, 1969-1998*. 2003, 163 pp.
- Levine, Lawrence W. *Historian of American Culture, Professor at Berkeley, 1962-1994*. 2014, 478 pp.
- Litwack, Leon F. *Historian of the American People and the African American Experience, Professor at Berkeley, 1964-2007*. 2014, 315 pp.
- May, Henry F. *Professor of American Intellectual History, University of California, Berkeley, 1952-1980*. 1999, 218 pp.
- Malia, Martin Edward. *Historian of Russian and European Intellectual History*. 2005, 229 pp.
- Riasanovsky, Nicholas V. *Professor of Russian and European Intellectual History, University of California, Berkeley, 1957-1997*. 1998, 310 pp.
- Schorske, Carl E. *Intellectual Life, Civil Libertarian Issues, and the Student Movement at the University of California, Berkeley, 1960-1969*. 2000, 203 pp.
- Stampp, Kenneth M. *Historian of Slavery, the Civil War, and Reconstruction, University of California, Berkeley, 1946-1983*. 1998, 310 pp.
- Halperin, Tulio. *An Oral History*. 2013

**Donated Collection:**

- Borah, Woodrow W. *Woodrow W. Borah interview: oral history transcript*, by James W. Wilkie and Rebecca Horn, 1983. Transcript in Bancroft Library.

**In Process:**

- Jay, Martin, European Intellectual Historian  
Wakeman, Frederic, Historian of China

## Interview History—Lawrence W. Levine

Lawrence W. Levine (1933-2006) was a distinguished teacher and scholar of American cultural history, a field of study that his pioneering work helped to create and define. He joined the Department of History at Berkeley in 1962, retiring in 1994 as the Margaret Byrne Professor of History. Following his retirement from Berkeley, he spent each fall semester teaching history and cultural studies at George Mason University in Arlington, Virginia, and continued his research and writing. His scholarly work, with its emphasis on the use of nontraditional sources to understand the history of people “long absent from the historical narrative,” was groundbreaking and widely influential.<sup>6</sup> His first book, *Defender of the Faith*, cast a new light on William Jennings Bryan and the rural society he represented. His second, *Black Culture and Black Consciousness*, “transformed the study of black experience in slavery and freedom,” digging deeply into previously overlooked sources—folktales, songs, jokes, verbal games, and religious expression—to explicate the culture and lived experience of black Americans. *Highbrow/Lowbrow*, *The Opening of the American Mind*, and *The People and the President* (written with his wife, Cornelia) continued his study of the many facets of American culture.

Apart from his scholarly writings, Levine was known as a creative teacher and generous mentor to undergraduate and graduate students alike; he embraced teaching as a learning experience for himself as well, acknowledging how thoroughly the practice of teaching informed and enriched his own scholarly work. Levine was also an active participant in civil rights and civil liberties struggles in Berkeley and on the Berkeley campus, struggles which he describes as deeply impacting the course of his research and writing. In 1983, he was named a MacArthur Fellow; in 1985, he was elected to the American Academy of Arts and Sciences, and in 1992-1993 he served as president of the Organization of American Historians.

Larry Levine’s oral history provides a window into the life and thought of this eminent scholar/teacher/activist. Full of his wit and love of storytelling, it is in part a tale of his own complex acculturation as a many-hyphenated New York-Jewish-American-Californian-Academic. Born in 1933, the son of an orthodox Jewish immigrant family, he grew up during the years of the Great Depression and World War II. As a youth he worked in his father’s fruit and vegetable store and played on the streets of his predominantly Jewish Washington Heights neighborhood of New York City. Educated in the public schools, as well as on the street, at the movies, and in the jazz clubs, he was, in his words, “a lousy student,” barely graduating from high school. He managed to enroll at City College of New York, where he studied history and began to think of becoming a college teacher. Graduate school at Columbia University, where he studied under Richard Hofstadter, led him into the world and the culture of the academe. In 1961, he “crossed the Hudson River to America,” to a position at Princeton, and the following year he crossed the country to Berkeley, where he taught for the following three decades.

In discussing his family, youth, and education, Levine is ever the cultural historian, reflecting on how his own acculturation experiences contributed to his deep interest in the study of the history of

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<sup>6</sup> Quotes here are from Leon Litwack’s introductory remarks at the conference in honor of Levine, September 2006, published along with other conference proceedings and excerpts from the oral history in *The Journal of American History*, Vol. 93, No. 3, December 2006, pp. 755-804.

American culture and of the process of minority group acculturation in America. The oral history discusses the genesis, development, and reception of each of his books. It includes his recollections of his involvement with civil rights demonstrations and with the Free Speech Movement and anti-apartheid struggles on the Berkeley campus. As part of the oral history series on the Department of History at Berkeley, it examines departmental culture and several memorable controversies over three decades and recalls many close colleagues and friends.

Our interviews began with three sessions in July and August 2004. We settled quickly into an easy relationship, with Larry holding forth expansively from his rocking chair in the living room of his north Berkeley home. That fall, he and Cornelia left for a semester at George Mason University, where he was to teach a course on autobiography. We resumed our interviews in April 2005 and held seven more sessions, completing the interviewing in August 2005. Session 9 on July 6, 2005, was videotaped; all others were audiotaped. In the meantime, a conference in his honor on “The State of Cultural History” was planned by former students and colleagues, to be held at George Mason in September.

In June 2005, Levine received a diagnosis of cancer and soon began chemotherapy. We scheduled our final sessions between chemotherapy treatments. When he was unable to attend the conference in his honor, we made a selection of videoclips from our July 6 session, where he spoke in depth about his scholarly work , his love for teaching, and his final act of civil disobedience in support of the university’s divestment from South Africa. The selections were presented at the conference and are available for viewing at  
[http://bancroft.berkeley.edu/ROHO/collections/subjectarea/univ\\_hist/history\\_department.html](http://bancroft.berkeley.edu/ROHO/collections/subjectarea/univ_hist/history_department.html).

Larry had expressed from the beginning of the interview process that he wanted a chance to lightly edit the transcript for clarity, to be sure that he had said what he meant, to correct grammar and remove any untoward personal remarks and unnecessary repetitions. This was not to be. Although in spring of 2006, he reviewed and made corrections to the transcript of session 8 and parts of session 9, in preparation for a new introduction to the thirtieth anniversary edition of *Black Culture and Black Consciousness* for Oxford University Press, his failing health prevented him from reviewing more of the transcript. He passed away on October 23, 2006.

In 2012, Cornelia Levine took on the task of reviewing the entire transcript. Assisted by her friend Susanne Lowenthal, she listened to the more than twenty hours of tape recordings and meticulously made innumerable significant corrections in the transcript, improved the punctuation, verified spellings of names and Yiddish words, and filled in difficult-to-hear phrases. At the same time, she faithfully followed our request not to alter his wording (or correct his grammar). The result is a written product that accurately represents our ten oral interviews in 2005 and 2006. While not as polished as Larry might have produced himself, had he been able to review and edit, it allows us to “hear” his voice and unique verbal delivery as we read. It is informal and spontaneous and full of enthusiasm and laughter, as well as keen analysis. He makes liberal use of what he called “the Jewish parenthesis,” circuitous departures from the initial subject, but always elaborating on and connecting back to his initial point. And as he anticipated, there are a number of repetitions, all of which have been retained, for they often make a new point in the retelling, or simply demonstrate his

love of a good story. The videotapes of session 9 and the complete audiotapes are available in the Bancroft Library.

This oral history is one of twenty-two in-depth interviews on the Department of History at Berkeley; the list of completed oral histories in the series is included in this volume. Most of the interviews can be found online at

[http://bancroft.berkeley.edu/ROHO/collections/subjectarea/univ\\_hist/history\\_department.html](http://bancroft.berkeley.edu/ROHO/collections/subjectarea/univ_hist/history_department.html).

Copies of all interviews are available for research use in The Bancroft Library. The Regional Oral History Office is a division of The Bancroft Library and is under the direction of Neil Henry. Special thanks are owed to Cornelia Levine and Susanne Lowenthal for their careful work on the transcript. Thanks are also due to Mark Westlye and Linda Norton for their parts in the production process, and to former University Archivist James R.K. Kantor for proofreading the final transcript.

Ann Lage  
Interviewer, Project Director

Berkeley, California  
March 2014

**Interview 1: July 14, 2004**

[Audio File 1]

01:00:00:07

Lage: Now we are recording. I just want to put a little introduction here. This is an oral history interview with Larry Levine, and today is July 14, 2004. This is our first session. We're going to look at the whole shebang here, starting with your personal life. So we want to start back in New York.

01:00:00:30

Levine: New York.

01:00:00:31

Lage: Tell me something about your family.

01:00:00:32

Levine: Okay. I was born at the end of February 1933, February 27. I lived for five or six days under the Hoover administration. Then March 4—the last March 4 inauguration in our history, because the Constitution was amended to be January 20 starting in 1936—March 4, 1933, Franklin Roosevelt came into my life. [laughter]

01:00:00:56

Lage: It's interesting as a historian, that you think of your birth this way.

01:00:01:01

Levine: I was born into an immigrant family. My father was born in Lithuania, and raised in a little town called Shot, which no longer exists. It was wiped out during WWII. It's what was called a shtetl. It was—can I ask you right off the bat, should I spell things? Or would you rather get the spellings later?

01:00:01:29

Lage: We can get them later.

01:00:01:30

Levine: He was born into a shtetl in Lithuania. It was a small town that had both gentiles and Jews in it, but the Jews were pretty segregated. My father did not know Lithuanian, for instance. I had an embarrassing moment a few weeks ago: I gave a commencement address at George Mason University, and I mentioned the fact that my father—I was talking about how I got to college, I'll tell that story again here too—I mentioned the fact that my father was an immigrant from Lithuania. After the commencement address—it's a big concert hall, a beautiful place at George Mason—I entered the foyer of the concert hall to look for friends I was going to be there with. I met with, of course, the families of the graduates. It was a graduate graduation, graduates with MAs and PhDs, and people were very nice. Then I was standing alone for a second, and this young woman and young man, beaming from ear to ear, came over to me. They were carrying a baby. She said something to me I didn't quite get, but it was very noisy. Then her or his parents came over, and

they were beaming too. I mean, their faces were so happy! They started to speak to me, and I suddenly realized they must be speaking Lithuanian. [laughter] I had never heard Lithuanian, but I figured that's what it was. They were so happy, because they don't meet Lithuanians, and here I was the son of a Lithuanian. I didn't tell them that my father didn't speak Lithuanian; it would have been too heart-breaking. I just said, "He didn't teach me Lithuanian," which is certainly true; he didn't.

01:00:03:03

Lage:

Had you mentioned that he was a Jewish immigrant, in the address?

01:00:03:06

Levine:

No, it didn't have anything to do with it, so I didn't. I didn't mention that. And I didn't mention it to them, because it was too complicated to get into all that. I simply said, which was true, that he married my mother, who was not a Lithuanian, and they didn't speak Lithuanian at home. All of which is true.

01:00:03:22

Lage:

Did they speak Yiddish?

01:00:03:23

Levine:

Oh yes. They did indeed. That was the only language he knew; he knew Yiddish. If you didn't deal with the gentile world, which he didn't, when he was a young man, you didn't need Lithuanian. You lived in a totally inclusive world. He came from that town of Shot. His father died—. His father was a—I don't know what the right word is—in one of my writings I called him a butcher. He handled—the Jews of course had to eat the meat prepared the way—certain kinds of animals, with cloven hooves and who chew their cud; cows qualify. They only could, in those days, eat the front half. It has to do with "thou shalt not eat the kid in the milk." It has to do with blood, and the big veins carrying blood are in the rear half of the animal. These are rabbis, not doctors, deciding this. So they used to—in Israel, I understand they now just remove the veins and the arteries. He used to cut the animal, sell the second half to the gentiles, and then butcher the first half and sell it. That's what my grandfather did.

01:00:04:31

Lage:

Was this seen as a health measure?

01:00:04:34

Levine:

I don't know. What we all like to do, when it comes to religion, is find rational reasons for why people did what they did. I don't believe in any of the rational reasons. I think they partly had those dietary laws to set themselves apart. Now, you listen to rabbis and Jewish doctors, saying, "Isn't that remarkable, they understood this and they understood that? They circumcised the baby on the eighth day, which is exactly the day when the blood flow was minimal." They were all proto-scientists and doctors. I think there were spiritual reason for these things; who knows why? They have very firm dietary laws, I grew up on many of them, most of them in fact. Two sets of

dishes, you can't mix dairy and meat. See, there's a perfect example of how you can find a scientific reason, because the dairy goes into the pores of the wooden bowls, and then you put meat in them, and the meat spoils, blah blah. So they separated the two. Do I think that's the real reason? I doubt it. But maybe. You never know why people—it's a very old thing. You can't eat dairy and meat. You have to have two sets of dishes, one that has dairy on it. Two sets of pots, two sets of utensils. This gets very complicated.

01:00:05:54

Lage: This is the way you grew up, your kitchen?

01:00:05:55

Levine: I did grow up that way. You can't put milk in your coffee. You have to wait at least thirty minutes, so you drank black coffee. Now of course they have all kinds of non-dairy things. Then there are those dishes called parve, vegetables and things that could go with either. I'm amazed at the number of products you can buy in supermarkets that say "parve" on them. I wonder what it means to most people, since Jews are only 3 percent of this population. Nevertheless, I grew up under those restrictions.

He died, my grandfather, in 1904. A hundred years ago. There were eight children. The oldest one, Ida, my aunt Ida, was already in this country. She had come—they were very poor, and she came to see if there was some uncle or something here. So when her father died in the old country, she saved money and brought her next oldest brother over, and one by one the eight children came over, and then they brought the mother over.

01:00:07:01

Lage: Interesting that the woman came first, the daughter.

01:00:07:03

Levine: She was the oldest, she was the most adventurous; she was a very strong woman, my aunt Ida. They were a pretty strong family. They came over, and my mother's family—my mother was, in fact, born in the United States—her family came from Odessa. Her father was a deserter from the Russo-Japanese war. He was in the Russian army. You spent a lot of time in the army if you were drafted. It's a complicated story which I probably don't need to tell. Briefly put, his next oldest brother was what my grandfather told me was a weakling. The mother sent her next youngest son when they called the brother. He went in instead of his brother, without them knowing it; they lied. When they found out, they kept him for his term too. He was in the army a long time. Then the war came, the Russo-Japanese war in 1904-1905. As a Jew, he could never be promoted or anything; he was the lowly of lowlies. He decided he didn't want to shed his blood for the czar, and he walked across a big hunk—this is story he told me—he walked across a big piece of Russia to tell this teenage girl—see, they're another species, these immigrants. This teenage kid, who barely knew him—he was some years older—he told her he would send for her, and when he sent for her, she came. This is amazing; she

left her parents, and her siblings. He told her he was going to send for her, and then he walked up through some part of northwestern Europe, worked for his—

01:00:08:45

Lage: It's an amazing romance in a way.

01:00:08:48

Levine: Worked for his passage, took a ship to the United States in 1905, and his first job in America was painting those classrooms of the new city college at 139<sup>th</sup> Street and Convent Avenue. So when I went to City College many years later, he said to me, "You think you're the first one? You aren't the first one, I was the first one!" [laughter] He painted the walls. He ultimately became a laundryman. He had a little store on 118<sup>th</sup> Street and 2<sup>nd</sup> Avenue, which was East Harlem, which was then a Jewish and Italian immigrant neighborhood. He even learned Italian. He was a very gifted guy. With education, he would have been a formidable man, my grandfather Isaac. Our youngest son is Isaac.

01:00:09:37

Lage: I saw an Isaac plaque outside.

01:00:09:40

Levine: Oh yeah.

01:00:09:43

Lage: Were you close to your grandparents?

01:00:09:44

Levine: Very close, my maternal grandparents. My paternal grandfather died a hundred years ago, and my paternal grandmother I knew only as a very old—she seemed very old, she was old, and she never learned English. Neither, really, did my maternal. My maternal grandmother knew more English than my paternal grandmother. They lived with us. In 1939 they moved into the same building we lived in, so they lived on the fourth floor and we lived on the fifth floor, and they were very much part of my life. My grandfather, unlike most of the other men in my family—there were some exceptions—was a rebel. He's the guy who left the army; he's the guy. He was a very admirable character in my eyes. He took guff from nobody, which was not the immigrant way and was not my father's way.

My father was very nervous about authority, very nervous about the fact that he wasn't a fully acculturated American; he knew that. He was an immigrant, and he kept many of his immigrant ways of thinking. A good example of this is, my father never drove, never learned to drive. We never had a car, nor a need for a car. When I was in graduate school I got my first car. I was living down near Columbia University. I drove back—I'll tell you where we lived—I drove to my parents' neighborhood, and I went to see them. It was dinner time. I was there for a while, chatting, and my father said to me—he's all the time checking his clock, his watch—he says to me, "Where are you parked?" I

told him where I was parked, a couple of blocks away. He said, "There are meters there." I said, "Yes, I'm by a meter." He said, "Well, it's an hour; I'll go put a dime in." I said, "No, don't put a dime in; just forget it. It's in the evening; they're not going to give me a ticket, and if they do, it's two bucks, and I can pay it." He said, "No, no, you never let them get your name!" Now, I had a draft card in my pocket, a Social Security card in my pocket; he was living in some other world. He was also—there was just his nervousness.

01:00:11:57

Lage: Fearfulness.

01:00:11:58

Levine: My poor father lived to see me arrested a couple of times, in civil rights and things. He was very upset at this. They had my name; he was living in another world. They may not have had his name though; who knows? Though he must have had a draft card from World War II; he was a little too old to go in the army; he was beyond draft age. I don't know whether those people had to register for the draft. Anyway, that was the usual atmosphere, but my grandfather never spoke that way and never thought that way.

My parents met in Manhattan; they both lived in East Harlem. They got married in 1930—my father went on a walking tour to see if he could find a store. He wanted to open a fruit and vegetable store; he knew that biz; he worked with his brothers-in-law in it. Terrible business, a fact that he knew. A grocery store, at least, you're dealing with packaged things. A fruit and vegetable store is endless work. You've got to open the vegetables or fruit, and what you have on the stand you have to take off to put the newest stuff under it so you sell the older stuff first, because this stuff spoils. So you're constantly packing and unpacking stands. It's hard work; it's very hard work.

01:00:13:15

Lage: Then the neighborhood boys come and steal the fruit.

01:00:13:18

Levine: That they do. The cops were the worst offenders. He found the store at 176<sup>th</sup> Street and Broadway. They moved from East Harlem to what is called Washington Heights in Manhattan. Washington Heights is geographically Harlem Heights, which it was known as until George Washington's time. It was Harlem Heights; it was just north of Harlem, which becomes the black section. Washington Heights becomes an immigrant neighborhood. It has one fancy little enclave, north of 181<sup>st</sup> Street and west of 181<sup>st</sup> Street; when you're getting near the Hudson River there are some very fancy houses that were put up. But that wasn't my part of Washington Heights.

01:00:14:03

Lage: Then there's the Cloisters.

01:00:14:05

Levine:

And then there's the Cloisters at the end, which is beautiful. We used to walk up there to Fort Tryon Park. We lived at 176<sup>th</sup> Street and Broadway in a building; we lived on the fifth floor. Our windows opened five stories above my father's fruit stand. My mother could lean down and talk to him. They had no phone; when I was a kid, she would say, "Hey, Abe," and he'd come out of the store, and they'd have a conversation. [laughter] Sometimes she'd throw things down; she'd say, "Larry didn't take his sweater down." It would float, and my father would catch it and come around the corner where I was playing and give me the sweater.

Let me say this about New York, which I think gets lost. We have these dichotomies in our minds; there is the big city and then there are communities. The big city was a congeries of communities. Washington Heights, or more finitely my part of Washington Heights, was a little village. My father had a fruit store, and people knew him because they came into his store. I could get away with nothing. I'd be wrestling in the street five blocks away when I was growing up, and someone would come over and say, "Larry Levine." Someone I didn't know would say, "Larry Levine, you get right out of the street now," because they knew who I was. There were neighbors all around, people sitting outside playing cards, old ladies and old men, people on their fire escapes. You slept on your fire escape in the hot weather. It was teeming, the neighborhood. It was like living in a village; people knew who you were; you could get away with nothing.

Later in my life, when I was an older fellow, a college student, my father was getting old and he went away with my mother for two weeks every year to a little Jewish place in the Catskill Mountains, and I took the store over because I knew the business by then—I'll get to that too—I knew the business by then. Here I was, I was still living at home when I went to college because we had no money, and I went to college just twenty blocks away, City College of New York, thirty blocks away. I could have brought a young woman up to the apartment to have some privacy. But I couldn't bring a young woman up to the apartment; everyone would have known it! There were phalanxes of people sitting around, in the elevator, wherever, in the lobby; they were all over. There was no way of misbehaving in that neighborhood.

01:00:16:45

Lage:

The social controls were really there.

01:00:16:46

Levine:

It was like Main Street, it was just like a little town. The only difference is you could get on the subway and in twenty minutes you could be down at 42<sup>nd</sup> Street. But my parents never took advantage of that—well, they did; they would go down to movies, that was a big Sunday activity. My dad would put on—he worked half a day Sunday for long periods of my life, but in the afternoon he put on his suit. He wore workingman's stuff, his cap and everything. He'd put on his suit and a tie, and he and my mother and the kids,

my sister and I, would get on the subway and go down to the Paramount movie theatre or Radio City Music Hall and go to a movie. [laughter]

01:00:17:27

Lage: I bet that was a great treat.

01:00:17:29

Levine: It was a great treat.

01:00:17:29

Lage: Did you ever cut school and go to some of those movies?

01:00:17:32

Levine: Well, yes, I'm going to save that for a moment and talk about my education.

01:00:17:34

Lage: Tell me more about your family and your—

01:00:17:39

Levine: The fruit store was a dominant influence in my life, because at the age of twelve or so I was brought into it. I always hung around it; it was right there. They brought me in seriously as a worker for the fruit store, and for the rest of my youth, such as it was, I spent my afternoons working in the fruit store after school and all day Saturday. The fruit store became a universe in which my father needed my labor. My sister was never—she was younger than I by six years, but she was never impressed into it. My mother worked in the fruit store, not all the time, though later she did, and I worked in the fruit store after school, except for Hebrew school. One or two days a week I went to Hebrew school to learn how to read and write—well, I never learned to write, but I learned how to read Hebrew, the ritual language, and prepared for my bar mitzvah, and all of that. Aside from that, it was the fruit store. The consequence is, a lot of things I should have done as a kid I didn't do. I never learned to ride a bike, I never learned how to skate, I never learned those things.

01:00:18:47

Lage: Some of that could have happened before you were twelve.

01:00:18:50

Levine: Some of it could have happened, and indeed, I don't want to paint a Dickensian picture of myself, because I played on the street corner—

01:00:18:58

Lage: Yes, how did you play before you were twelve, and who were your friends?

01:00:19:01

Levine: Now, here's another thing—to read the present back into the past, that is the danger of history. You go to the neighborhood I grew up in, and I went to that neighborhood until 1988 when my mother died; I kept going back to visit her. She came here every year, but basically she lived in the same—they moved

into that apartment building in 1930, and I was born and we lived in apartment 4B. These people have no sense of privacy *at all*. 4B was a one-bedroom apartment, which means that young married couple had a kid in their bedroom until I was six years old. When I was six years old my mother got pregnant, and they then got a two-bedroom apartment, 5C. They moved up a flight, they moved to 5C. In those days there were lots of apartments around, and they weren't that expensive, and he could have gotten a three-bedroom apartment, so he could figure each kid would have a bedroom ultimately and they'd have a bedroom, but that's not the way they thought. By the time they may have thought that way it was too late. The war came, apartments were impossible to get, and they got more expensive. They had a rent-controlled apartment, and they didn't dare leave it.

01:00:20:24

Lage:

Did they have an elevator? Or was it a walk-up?

01:00:20:25

Levine:

There was an elevator in that building. Well, many of the buildings in that neighborhood were walk-ups, but that one had an automatic elevator.

01:00:20:32

Lage:

That seems a little fancy for then.

01:00:20:36

Levine:

Yes, it was fancier than other buildings. But they went into that building not because it was fancy but because it was over the fruit store. That was very important, to have links. They literally had no phones. He had a phone in the fruit store, but we had no phone upstairs until—I was born in 1933, and I think we got a phone in 1940, 1941.

01:00:20:55

Lage:

Was that unusual?

01:00:20:58

Levine:

No. People didn't communicate that way. If there was an important phone call—and it had to be important, like my little baby cousin died, my mother's sister's girl, she died—they phoned the candy store, and the guy in the candy store came upstairs. I remember that. We were sitting at home on a Sunday, and the guy in the candy store knocked on the door, and said, "Abe, you got a phone call." He went downstairs, and when he came back upstairs his face was red, and he said something to my mother in Yiddish, that her niece died. In Jewish fashion, the funeral was that afternoon. Jews bury you while you're still kicking. It's part of the religion, they bury you very quickly. I remember that. When there was a phone call, there was trouble. Or there was a happy event like a birth; people would phone you for that. Other than that—New York had, even when I was a kid, it had two mail deliveries a day. I remember reading, Virginia Woolf and her sister Vanessa would meet in London at her apartment, house, and then her sister—I remember there was one time—her sister left, and Virginia, like mid-afternoon, Virginia Woolf said, "I forgot to

tell Vanessa," and Virginia Woolf wrote her a letter, and it was delivered that evening. [laughter] Because there were five or six deliveries in London. The mails were important. Most of the people we were close to weren't that far away.

01:00:22:42

Lage: And you could shout out the window.

01:00:22:43

Levine: You could shout out the window. [Jules] Feiffer has a cartoon where an older kid is telling her younger brother, "When I was young, when I was your age, we lived in an apartment building where Mama could lean out and she could throw me apples. She'd say, 'Would you like an apple?' and she'd throw an apple out." And the kid says, "You've never tasted an apple till you've tasted one thrown out of a three-story window." [laughter]

01:00:23:10

Lage: Nostalgia!

01:00:23:11

Levine: The other thing I want to say about that world, which you can't—you have to imagine, you have to take a leap of empathy, there were no cars. What this meant was that the streets were playgrounds. When I went back to see my mother in the seventies and eighties, there was double parking. Now this was still a poor neighborhood. The particular part of the neighborhood I lived in, it's a very beautiful neighborhood because it's a narrow part of Manhattan, and you have the Harlem River and then you have the Hudson River, and it's, I'd say, twelve blocks between the two, maybe fourteen. You could walk in twenty minutes from one river to the other. It's a very pretty part of Manhattan, it's very narrow. It's Washington Heights, so it's getting higher. You walk up to the highest point, which is around the Cloisters, that's the highest point in Manhattan, which is a very flat island. Washington ran through that part of Manhattan, running from the British, and his strategy was not to engage. Or to engage as little as possible. He was running to Fort Tryon, and then he put his army on boats, and they went over to Fort Lee, New Jersey, escaping the British. There were apartment buildings all over my neighborhood saying, "Washington slept here, August 12, 17, whatever." [laughter]

01:00:24:29

Lage: That will give you a sense of history.

01:00:24:30

Levine: Yes. So the streets were empty, to go back. (My friend Sidney Mintz, the anthropologist, was married to, for forty years, a woman born in China, a Chinese American woman, Jackie. She once said to him, "How do you do that, Sidney? You're saying something, and then you go away from it, for a long time, and then you come right back again?" He said, "Oh, that's the Jewish parenthesis." [laughter] So that's what I'm doing!) I began to say that

the streets were empty, and they were playgrounds for us. Until I started to be impressed in my father's fruit store, drafted into it, so to speak. I spent much of my time—the two things about that neighborhood with its emptiness in terms of the street: there were hardly any cars, and we played on those streets and when someone parked—. First, it was the Depression, then it was World War II, there were no cars, or very few. The people in that socio-economic group didn't drive, didn't own cars. Very few people I knew owned cars. So that we could play all over those streets. If someone parked, we'd go over and say, "Mister, hey Mister, can you park over there?" And you'd have to be an idiot when twelve kids are standing there and you're going to leave your car. They're asking you to park, and you say, "No, brats," you're not going to come back and find your car undamaged. We would take a matchstick, a wooden matchstick, and we'd put it in the valve of the tires, we'd put four matchsticks in the valves of the tires and walk away. The matchsticks let all the air out of the tires.

01:00:26:07

Lage: Only for the people who refused to move it?

01:00:26:10

Levine: Very few people refused to move their cars.

01:00:26:13

Lage: What kind of street games did you play?

01:00:26:15

Levine: We had a whole variety. That's another thing I want to talk about. There were seasons, I should say. The games that were played all year long were—we played a game called slug. Slug, slug-o maybe it was; it was played with a spaldeen ball. The center of our universe were fifteen-cent pink spaldeen balls, you know those little rubber balls, that were light and they'd fly. These buildings had little edges on them. We played this perpendicular to the street. Here's the street, and there are buildings on both sides. You'd have two or three fielders in the street and on the other sidewalk, and you'd stand on one sidewalk with your little rubber ball. You'd hit it on the edge of the building. We had rules; now, we'd sometimes go over the area. If they caught it, you're out; if they didn't catch it—

01:00:27:05

Lage: So you threw it at the nearby buildings?

01:00:27:07

Levine: Yes. You stood right in front of the edge, you took the ball, you could do whatever you wanted. You tried to get the ball to hit that edge and go flying. If the ball hit the flat part it would just go back down to the ground. The skill was in getting the ball to hit the edge. If it went on the ground, that was strike one, strike two. You had three strikes to get it to hit, and if they fielded it you were out. That was one very common game; another was stickball. Here we

played parallel to the street, in the street, and the street was long, so you had outfielders, and a guy would pitch the ball to you, and you used a broomstick.

01:00:27:48

Lage: Same kind of ball?

01:00:27:48

Levine: Spaldeen balls. Yes, we lost a lot of them, but they were only fifteen cents, and we contributed money, we ran to a candy store—there were candy stores on every corner—you just ran to the candy store and bought another spaldeen and came back and the game went on. [laughter]

We played football in the winters, with a real football. We played touch football, touch tackle. You had to touch the guy with two hands, and that was a tackle. One hand wasn't good. There were games like that which we played all year round. Then there were seasons. I don't understand, I thought back on this; who regulated the seasons? Who said, "Okay, it's marble,"—we called them nibbies—"nibby season"? Suddenly the streets were alive with entrepreneurs and customers. The entrepreneurs would take cottage cheese boxes, everything was wood in those days, it was pre-plastic. Things were packaged in wood. All the boxes my father's fruit came in were wooden boxes. Cottage cheese would come in long, oblong boxes, so you could take an empty cottage cheese box, put it upside down, with the bottom on the top, and then you could cut little holes into it, little square holes. Then a kid would take his marble ten feet away, and he'd try to get it into one of those square holes. If he did, he won a marble. We played on the manhole covers. They were great because manhole covers were a congeries of—it was a maze. You had to do things with your marbles. The people you played against—you played against your friends but there were these entrepreneurs that would decide, they would go into business here, and the business was, you win marbles. I don't know why we valued these damn marbles; some marbles were worth more than other marbles, a pure marble, we had names for them. So there was marble season. There was—I'm blocking the seasons. There was a skating season. I did a little skating before—roller skating this was, of course, not ice skating.

01:00:29:52

Lage: With the screw-on type of skate.

01:00:29:55

Levine: Yes, and the noise. It was noisy. You had a key, to tighten the skates. There were seasons to do certain types of things.

01:00:30:06

Lage: Did you do any bicycling—you said you didn't bicycle.

01:00:30:08

Levine: I never learned, I still don't know how to ride a bike, to this day. I never had a bike, never learned to ride a bike. But I did skate, actually; I did learn to skate.

By about the age of twelve I was retired from those activities and I was into the fruit store.

01:00:30:25

Lage: So you never had a chance, even on weekends, to go back and play?

01:00:30:27

Levine: Oh, yes, on weekends I did. No, no, on weekends—I worked on Saturdays but on Sundays I could go. Saturday was a funny day because when I was very young, it was a synagogue day, but New York had blue laws, and it was illegal to be open on Sundays, it was the day of the lord. Jews resented this, because their day of the lord was Saturday, and so many Jews, like my old man, had to start working Saturdays. He couldn't be closed two days a week. Ultimately, they broke these blue laws, at first de facto and ultimately de jure I think they stopped. But I grew up in a world—anyone in my generation remembers that a Saturday night baseball game—you were listening to the game, if it went past midnight, it stopped. The game stopped. In certain states. Pennsylvania had laws, you could not play baseball between midnight and—I'm making this up—2:00 pm. Why midnight? Of course it was now Sunday, and you couldn't play before 2:00 in the afternoon so people would have time to go to church. There were quite a few states that had laws like that. Ultimately my father began to open his fruit store, and I began to get lessons—

01:00:31:39

Lage: On Sunday.

01:00:31:40

Levine: On Sunday. And I began to get lessons in American justice and jurisprudence. The police would sometimes come by with a wagon, and it was a Sunday, it was illegal what he was doing. They'd get out, two or three cops would get out, and they'd start to confiscate his stands on the street. They'd start to just take the boxes of grapes and stuff and put it in their car, their wagon. My father and I would kick the things and go into the store, hide them there.

01:00:32:12

Lage: Did they ever arrest him?

01:00:32:15

Levine: Well, you know what, there was a kind of quid pro quo that existed, which was very interesting. He was broken into a lot, because it was a store where the doors were removable. It was really a flimsy store. He had four or five doors, and you lifted them out at night and stuck them in—another thing to schlep—and then lock them up, so they were very flimsy. In the summer time he used doors with screens on them, so you could just cut through with a knife, because of the fruit—they would spoil—there was no air conditioning in the summer. During the day, the doors were in the back of the store, and the whole thing was open. He was broken into a lot. I remember cops would come, and they would say, "I don't see any evidence of you being broken

into.” And he’d say, “Well, sure!” He’d tell them, he’d show them how they broke into his cash register. They’d finally, reluctantly write it down. See, the precinct, it didn’t look good for them. The precinct couldn’t stop those kinds of—but it looked lousy, they had all these unsolved break-ins. So they would try to tell him he didn’t [get robbed]. The way he finally got the message is, they’d come and confiscate his stand because the other law he was breaking was you couldn’t have anything that protruded from the building line more than two or three feet. But these fruit stores had a stand that was like six or seven or eight feet out. They’d just—you know, “You’re not going to play ball with us; we won’t play ball with you,” —they’d just take his fruit stand.

01:00:33:48

Lage: This kept him from reporting the crime.

01:00:33:50

Levine: So he stopped reporting crimes.

01:00:33:52

Lage: Were they mainly Irish?

01:00:33:53

Levine: The cops? Well, there were a lot of Irish cops, but I had relatives who were cops. It was an immigrant thing, it was a good steady job. I had a cousin Paul who was a policeman and got to the rank of lieutenant, and when he retired he became a school bus driver.

01:00:34:13

Lage: So it wasn’t an us-versus-them immigrant thing?

01:00:34:15

Levine: No, no. Most of them were not Jewish, it’s true, but I don’t think my father ever thought—he thought of it as us-versus-them, being the people versus the military. [laughter] The usual thing. He came from eastern Europe; it was the Cossacks, Polizei, you know, the people he was scared of; they did these things. Every Friday night—I say every; commonly, a policeman would come into my father’s store and say, “The lieutenant sends his greetings.” And my father would take a huge bag, and he’d fill it with fruits and vegetables and give it to this policeman. The policeman would thank him and walk out. If you multiply that by—so there was that kind of stuff, you keep on good terms with the police.

All of that gets us back to the story I told you before about, “Don’t let them get your name.” My father still saw the world as a world in which they were “them” but it wasn’t an ethnic “them,” it was the official “them.” There were those people that kept you in line, and you had to placate them to keep them from beating you up, from taking advantage of you. He was a great Democrat with a capital D, he loved the Democratic Party. One year—Jacob Javits was a veteran, he was a Jewish guy, in our neighborhood, came back from World War II and went into the Republican Party, not because he was a Republican,

but because he would have had to wait forever to get a Democratic nomination. The Republicans couldn't win in our neighborhood so he joined the Republican Party. Lo and behold, in 1946 he's nominated for Congress, the Democrats split, and he got elected. He was a smart guy, he got elected term after term after term. In a neighborhood in which Hitler probably could have been elected in the Democratic Party. [laughter] It was an Irish, Jewish, Greek immigrant neighborhood and the Democrats were—. So I said to my father, in one election where an Irish guy was running for the Democrats, I said, "Who're you voting for?" And he said, whatever the guy's name was, "Feeney." I said, "That's kind of interesting. Here's this Jew, just like you, Jacob Javits, why are you voting for an Irishman?" He said, "No, I can't vote against a Democrat!" [laughter]

He just believed, well, Roosevelt did a lot of that, Roosevelt made him believe that the Democratic Party was the party for him, for people like him. So he never got disillusioned from the system, he voted in every election, and he believed in the Democrats, and they worshipped Roosevelt. On the day Roosevelt died, it was April of 1945 I believe, I was playing in the street, and some kids told me the President was dead. I ran upstairs and I entered our apartment, and I said to my mother, "Roosevelt is dead, President Roosevelt." This was my mother's reaction, she said, "*Mama*," meaning her mother, who was on the fourth floor just below us. She ran down the stairs, and I ran after her, and she opened the door, and there, sure enough, was my grandmother, this old Russian lady from Odessa, sitting in a chair, a wheelchair, this very imperfectly acculturated woman, terrific lady, the tears were rolling down. She had the radio on. She used to listen to soaps, her English was good enough to listen, this woman with infinite problems of her own, money problems, health problems. Both her sons were damaged in World War II; they weren't killed but one of them suffered grievous physical injuries and the other one suffered grievous psychological injuries and never was the same again. Nonetheless, she sat there, the tears rolling down. It's such an interesting phenomenon for this rich guy; they loved this man, they loved him.

We didn't have a lot of art in our house; my parents were in limbo between Orthodox Judaism and something less. If you're really Orthodox, it's the whole iconography thing, like the Puritans, when the Puritans ran around knocking off the heads of statues in the churches in England. They were following the Old Testament: "ye shall have no graven idols." Really Orthodox Jews don't go in for pictures, but there were some pictures in my house. One of them was a red-framed—though they didn't know the significance of that—a red-framed portrait of Franklin Roosevelt, hanging on the wall.

01:00:39:09

Lage: That wasn't unusual, I'll bet, in the neighborhood.

01:00:39:11

Levine: No, oh no. The neighborhood, ethnically, was on the—Broadway ran right in front of my father's store. My father's store was on Broadway, and there were trolley tracks. On the west side of Broadway, there were mainly Jews and Greeks and a good sprinkling of Armenians. The Greeks seemed to me to be just like Jews. They were Mediterranean people. I mean, I didn't know that at the time, they just seemed very familiar to me, except they spoke Greek and I Yiddish. Their food seemed similar. I had Greek friends, I'd go into their homes, the father, the using of the hands, it was more Mediterranean stuff. The Jews ultimately—

01:00:39:57

Lage: Even though Lithuanian, Odessa—[laughter]

01:00:39:59

Levine: That's right, but the habits were there. Well, Lithuania, well, that's another sensitive point. My father was a redhead, and his sisters—he had five sisters and two brothers, eight of them—they were all redheads. My aunts remained red into my youth, which I am aware—the boys didn't use the bottle, and their hair began to change. It was a redhead family, freckles and all of that light skin. My mother's family was quite dark, coming from Odessa, but my father's was a very light-skinned family. I didn't know this when I was very young, and when I got to be a graduate student and began to realize it, I would never have said to my father, but how did Jews get to be redheads? There are only two ways, one way is interbreeding with others, or another way is conversion. They could have converted indigenous people to Judaism who became Jews and therefore, whatever. Or Jews, whatever—

01:00:40:59

Lage: Did the unspeakable. [laughter]

01:00:41:00

Levine: Did the unspeakable. Or the unspeakable was done to them. But my father would not have been able to understand or listen to that kind of talk, so I never talked to him. That's an interesting thing which I'll talk about later, about what college does. College is a deracination machine in a way, and there were things I couldn't really talk about at home.

01:00:41:22

Lage: And you sensed that very clearly, it sounds like.

01:00:41:25

Levine: Oh yes, I did. I don't want to say this pejoratively at all; they were what they were, and they were very conventional on a whole host of issues. My father more than my mother, more imperfectly acculturated. She was born here, but she was born here in such a—right off the boat. I once tried to say something to my father about homosexuality when I was a young man. I don't remember what it was, but we were having a chat about something, and I brought up homosexuality. My father's reaction was to get up from the couch we were

sitting on and to say to me, “Don’t talk to me about that crap,” and walk out of the room. If you didn’t know, you would soon learn that there were limits on the things you could say.

When I was very young, right after World War II, 1945, I read in *Reader’s Digest*—it could have been early 1946—I read in *Reader’s Digest* something that just made so much sense to me. I was twelve. It said that it is harder to feel anything when you learn that six million people are dead than it is when you learn that a dog has been run over in the street. Well, it had a real ring of truth to me. My goodness, this wasn’t that smart; yes indeed, I understood that. It was just when we were beginning to learn about the proportions of the Holocaust and all that. I went to tell my father. His response to that was “anti-Semites.” He said, “Anti-Semites comparing a dog—.” He didn’t get it at all.

So I began to get the business that I was dealing with people who were partly in another world, as our parents always are. And being immigrants makes it a little starker, and they were not as educated. I quickly became more educated than they, and more American from the beginning, because I was an American. So there were all those things that took place, and you learned what the limits were. This is true, of course, of any family you see in colleges, but I’m always struck by the number of kids I teach who remain very loyal to their parents and very influenced by their parents in a way that they shouldn’t be influenced by their parents. They go to the schools their parents choose for them. We had a young Korean American at Berkeley who’s a student of Bob Middlekauff’s. I mean, he was a student of mine too, but he became converted to colonial history, and he was a sensational, sensational young man. He wanted to get a PhD in history, and we very much wanted him to come to Berkeley. We gave him the best fellowship we could. He *wanted* to come to Berkeley—he had worked with Bob Middlekauff—to write a dissertation with Bob Middlekauff. His father said to him, “No, you’ve been to Berkeley; now you’ll go to Harvard,” which he got into, and he got a great fellowship from Harvard. He was a stunning student. I don’t know what ever happened to him. He didn’t come to Berkeley. Maybe this is a good bridge to talk about my rebellion. [laughter]

01:00:44:47

Lage:

Okay, but there are a couple of other things. I just wondered, you mentioned the war, the Holocaust, did your family listen to the radio, follow events in Europe?

01:00:45:01

Levine:

Absolutely. The radio was the most expensive thing my parents owned, the only expensive thing, because we had no car. As I said, we had a simple house with—most of the furniture in the house was part of their wedding things. They went out and bought good furniture at their wedding, and they had it for their whole lives. Good solid pieces of furniture [knocks, laughter]. They had that forever; I grew up with it.

01:00:45:30

Lage: And they took good care of it.

01:00:45:31

Levine: Yes, and it was nice stuff. They had a nice dresser and—the living room stuff changed because it was fabric, and it wore out. My mother would cover it anyway. She covered it with what Jews called schmattas. Schmatta really means a rag; they weren't rags, but they were pieces of cloth. She'd cover her couches and chairs with these, so we lived not with the nice fabric, we lived during the week with these things that were covering the fabric. Then when someone came to the house, mainly relatives, we didn't have parties for friends, but we had a lot of relatives, we had a big family. He had seven siblings; she had three siblings. When they married, then you've now got a lot of uncles and aunts, and they had children, so there were cousins by the dozens. It was a big family, and they came. That was their social life, to be with each other. All those schmattas, all those pieces of cloth would come off. The worst part, the worst thing that ever happened to my mother, was she discovered after World War II plastic. She could get plastic covers with zippers and she could cover this stuff. I say they bought new living room stuff, but even there they preserved it for a very long time; by covering it against the children. And it was probably right, but it was terrible too, to live with all that stuff. I'm sorry, now I have deviated too far from the Jewish parenthesis.

01:00:47:02

Lage: I had asked you about living through the war, and listening to the war reports, and knowledge about what was happening.

01:00:47:08

Levine: Oh yes, so in the middle of the living room was the only expensive thing they owned, and that was a Stromberg Carlson radio, a console radio, which was the center of our existence. We listened to it every evening. I listened to it as much as my parents would let me. There were so many wonderful things on that radio. I was convinced that there were little people in that radio. It was a rather big radio, and I was convinced there were people, but I didn't understand how they lived, how did they get food. That's part of a pattern which I'm a little confused by; I didn't ask my parents things like that. It never occurred to me that they would know the answer to that. I guess I saw them as immigrants; I don't know. It never occurred to me that I could say, "How did those little people get in the radio," or more to the point, "Where do those voices come from?" They couldn't have answered that, really, because they knew less—nor could I, really, today, I couldn't tell you how those voices got in the radio. [laughter]

01:00:48:17

Lage: But you know they're not little people.

01:00:48:18

Levine: But I thought they were little people. A good example of this is, I read comic books. And we used to trade them. I bought comic books when I could, when

I had money, and then you trade them. There were stores, you trade with your friends, you could go to stores, and you could trade comic books and get—you'd bring three in, you'd get two back, whatever. I read comic books. Comic books had on the cover “No. 163” or “No. 149,” and I couldn't figure out what that meant. I think about that now. I couldn't figure out what that meant. I had all kinds of theories. No more than 163 people can buy this? [laughter] No more than one person can read it at a time? It *never* occurred to me to ask my parents. They would have known that. It never occurred to me. I wonder now about that. Maybe it's just a male thing, like not asking directions!

01:00:49:17

Lage:

That's always what men are accused of, of course.

01:00:49:20

Levine:

So it's a very interesting ethnic thing. I grew up as an American kid in an immigrant family. It was a big immigrant family, so there were all stages of acculturation, from my grandmother's rather low stage of acculturation to perfect acculturation. It does something to you to grow up in that kind of family. You're living in several worlds. I think in America you often live in several worlds, but I really was living in several worlds. There were the schools that I went to.

To go back to your question before I get into this, we learned from, there were also newspapers, my parents took the *New York Post*. The *New York Post* was a liberal, lefty-liberal newspaper, though I could hardly say they were lefty liberals, but they certainly were Democrats. My grandfather, who, from 1939 on spent a lot of time—in 1951, his wife died, and he lived for another sixteen years. While he had his apartment downstairs, he ate all his meals with us, and as my grandmother got sicker, she did too. They were in the house a lot. My uncle, their oldest son—my mother was the oldest child, but he was next—after World War II, he never went to work again; he had a terrible psychological breakdown. He was in several invasions, and the invasion of Sicily, he was both hurt physically and he was hurt mentally, and he never recovered from that. For the rest of his life, he just kind of hung around, hung around the corner, and oh, it was sad. My poor father had his in-laws in the house a lot.

My grandfather was, in his own way, the most educated person in that family. He had no education at all. When he was a little boy in Odessa, the rich kids would have a Hebrew teacher. Now all kids should have a Hebrew teacher. It's very important for Jews as it later becomes for Protestants to be able to read the holy book themselves. Therefore you've got to learn Hebrew. He was so poor that he didn't have anyone. So what he told me he did is he hid under the table from which the rabbi would be teaching the other kids, and he would learn. Finally the rabbi found him and pulled him out, and talked to him, and he said he wanted to learn, and the rabbi let him stay there. So he learned how

to read and write Hebrew, and he learned how to read and write English, and certainly Yiddish. You know what they did, I don't know, you probably know this, but it's interesting. They decided to write indigenous languages like Yiddish—which is a western language, it's a dialect of German—they decided to write it in Hebrew because most Jewish men could read Hebrew but they couldn't read, they were not educated. But if you printed this Germanic language in Hebrew letters, that's why people get confused about thinking that's Hebrew. But it isn't! It's Yiddish. Yiddish is printed in Hebrew letters, and therefore instant literacy, at least on the part of the males. So he knew Yiddish perfectly, he learned Italian, he knew Russian because he was in the Russian army. He was a very educated guy.

01:00:52:39

Lage: And curious about the world, it sounds.

01:00:52:42

Levine: He would have been something.

01:00:52:43

Lage: You could have asked him about the little men.

01:00:52:48

Levine: He would have told me some story that wouldn't have been true though. [laughter] He told stories all the time. He read several newspapers. It's interesting. He read the *Jewish Daily Forward*, which was a socialist—it's the *Forward* in English—Forvertz was the way it was pronounced in Yiddish. The *Jewish Daily Forward*, and he read it from cover to cover, from front page to back. He read the *New York Daily Mirror*, which was kind of a conservative newspaper. But he didn't read it for the politics. I think he liked the format, it was a tabloid; well, they were all tabloids. We didn't read—

01:00:53:22

Lage: The *New York Times* or the *Wall Street Journal*.

01:00:53:23

Levine: Yes, the *New York Times*, we didn't read those. I mean, there was the *Daily Telegraph*, which was also one of those big papers that you folded. It wasn't a tabloid. We got the tabloids in my house a lot. The *Post* was a very liberal one. So they got the news from the newspapers, and they got the news from the radio. They listened to the radio a lot, to answer your question, and they knew about World War II.

01:00:53:45

Lage: And they were following family members.

01:00:53:48

Levine: And they were following family members who were in the war.

01:00:53:50

Lage: Were they also aware of what was going on in Germany?

01:00:53:54

Levine:

I think that awareness was—some educated Jews, well-fixed Jews, well-placed Jews knew what was going on and tried to warn the world. But we didn't know. We didn't know until the rest of the world knew, after the war. The war was a traumatic—not for me, for me the war was wonderful. I was eight years old when it began, when our part of it began, and I learned the silhouettes of all the planes, and all of that stuff. My cousin Leo Levine—there is a family of Leo Levines; my mother rebelled and called me Lawrence. My grandfather, the one who died in 1904 in Lithuania, my grandfather's name was Leib Wolf, so we all became Leo William. My mother rebelled, and I became a Lawrence William. My cousin, Leo Levine, one of my father's older brother's sons, was killed in Burma in a plane crash; his plane was shot down over Burma. I had cousins who were wounded, and all of my mother's brothers were hurt in the war. The war, in that sense—we had a lot of people in the war, and it was all those letters. I don't know what happened to all those letters, there were so many.

01:00:55:19

Lage:

Did you have letters from them?

01:00:55:19

Levine:

Yes, they wrote, both my uncles. My grandmother couldn't read English, so we read them to her. The war was significant. It was significant for me in that those were very important years of my life. It was a patriotic thing, and it was something to follow. So yes, there was a lot of radio listening and newspaper reading and discussion of things. Then the brilliance of the Roosevelt administration. Roosevelt's big problem—I've learned this now, I didn't know it then, of course—was how to involve the American people. My wife and I did a book of letters that the people wrote to Roosevelt. Many of those letters said, "How do I help? I want to help." Roosevelt talked to his advisors and they said, "Look, the only way they can help is either to go into the army or to go into the defense industry; for most Americans there is no way to help." That troubled Roosevelt a lot. When it came to financing the war, almost every one of his advisors, save Henry Morgenthau, his Secretary of the Treasury, said, "A war tax, just have a war tax. Everyone is taxed, their income is taxed. A war tax is all you need to do." Didn't even have to be a huge tax, it would be big enough. And that bothered Roosevelt a lot. He and Morgenthau, against the advice of all his other advisors, decided on the war bonds. Now, they had had war bonds in World War I, so it wasn't a brand new thing. But they did it—they didn't need war bonds, they could have done this through taxing. They used war bonds and all the accoutrements that followed it, the campaigns on the radio and people traveling around and stars begging you for money. Every week I bought ten-cent war stamps and stuck them in my little book until I had \$18.75, and then we got a war bond. Everyone got involved, and that was the point of it, to involve the American people, to give them a sense that this was their war and that they were part of it and that they were sacrificing for it. So there was that, which was very important.

01:00:57:25

Lage: Different from the shopping that we're asked to do today.

01:00:57:29

Levine: Yes, different from the shopping. Then there were all the collections, some of which I think were bogus also. Metal and fat. I mean, you collected fat in jars and brought it to the butcher, and the butcher sent it to the government, and they used the fat to make munitions, supposedly. I mean, maybe they did! There were metal drives, there were newspaper drives, you gave your newspapers in. All of this, probably some of it *was* helpful.

01:00:57:51

Lage: Victory gardens, which you probably didn't have in Washington Heights.

01:00:57:54

Levine: No, we didn't. Well, there were probably some in New York, in empty lots. No, we didn't; I don't remember victory gardens. Then there was, of course, price control, which was a problem for little guys like my old man, because it didn't take into account spoilage and things like that. It said you pay so much for a crate of melons, and this is how much you can charge. My old man would say, "Yeah, but how about the three melons that spoil and I can't sell them? How about that?" He said that to me, not to them. Life was a little hard that way. There were all those rules that affected your life. You had gas rationing, which again didn't affect *us*, but things disappeared from your life. Bananas disappeared. *Bubble gum* disappeared. There was no more bubble gum. That was very sad in my life, that bubble gum was gone. [laughter] I missed bubble gum. There were things like that; there were things that were hard to get, some of them silly things. Sugar was hard to get, it was rationed. I remember people used to go into the automat, Horn and Hardarts' automat. There was one in Harlem, there was one in Madsden, New York where you got your dishes; well, there was a steam table, but you could also get rolls by putting a quarter in, and the door would open. Until they discovered what was happening, people would go in with little paper bags, and they would empty the sugar. There was sugar on every table, and they would empty the sugar into their paper bag. [laughter] I remember seeing people do that. You used to have to take your coffee and go over to a table where there was a woman, and she'd say, "How many spoons do you put in?" They removed the sugar. So sugar rationing was a big thing. I think you did have a real sense of being part of this. And there were blackouts and air raid drills, and they expected New York to be bombed; it never was.

01:00:59:45

Lage: All of this must have been part of the acculturation, and becoming an American.

01:00:59:48

Levine: Oh, absolutely, it was. The other part about becoming an American for me was at the age of eleven, a year early, and I lied, I joined the Boy Scouts of America.

01:00:59:58

Lage: You lied to get into the Boy Scouts.

01:01:00:01

Levine: Well, I was impatient. I'm an impatient guy. I'm not any longer.

01:01:00:06

Lage: How was that experience?

01:01:00:07

Levine: That was a very important experience in my life. It was important because it was an acculturation experience. I think, looking back on it, I was trying desperately to get out of that little town that I was growing up in, and the family. My family was a warm, loving, wonderful family, and I am a product of it. It was full of love, and I always knew that I was important to those people; they let me know that, physically; it was a physical culture. People touched you and kissed you, and they also hit you. I was hit *a lot*. I never thought it was abuse; that's the way it was. You did something stupid, you got hit for it. But nevertheless it was a little smothering, all that love and all that stuff. I think I was looking for ways out of it. One way out of it was I spent one evening a week [in Boy Scouts]. Just at that age I was beginning to be impressed into the fruit store. I've used that word before. [laughter]

01:01:01:11

Lage: I know, I've noticed!

01:01:01:12

Levine: Impression! That's right, they just came and got me, I didn't volunteer! [laughter] When I used to complain, my father's litany was very simple and probably a true one. He had no sympathy for my complaining about the fruit store at all. It's probably the way he thought of the fruit store, which was pretty damn hard for him also; he worked endless hours in it. He said to me, "You hungry?" And I'd say, "No." He said—the first time I didn't know what was coming, after that I did but I played the game with him because you didn't fool with my father—he said, "Are you cold, you got enough clothing?" I said, "Yes." He said, "You have a nice bed to sleep in at night?" I said, "Yes." "When it rains, do you get wet?" "No." He said, "Well, thank the fruit store." And he was right. [laughter]

01:01:01:59

Lage: Yes.

01:01:02:00

Levine: The fruit store was our means of a living; he had no other way to earn a living.

01:01:02:03

Lage: And he got through the Depression okay?

01:01:02:05

Levine: Yes, he did. I remember in the mornings, I must have been down some mornings, and he opened the fruit store very early. There were lines of old ladies, sometimes old men, standing outside his store. It must have been the late Depression because I was born in 1933. So by 1939 I would have been six. It was maybe a little earlier than that. I remember this, they'd stand outside, and my father kept little—they were little plum baskets; they were made out of a kind of wicker. It wasn't wicker, but it was a very thin wood; you could break it with your fingers. That's how plums came. He'd line those plum baskets up; he had stands, and under the stands he would put fruit to ripen. Then you'd have to go and move the fruit, blah blah. Then take the ripe fruit and put it up. So he would put a line of these wicker baskets every night, and he'd take ripe fruit that was getting ripe, too ripe, but still quite edible, and he'd fill each one of these baskets. That's the last act he did before leaving the store. And in the early morning, there'd be this line of old ladies, mainly, and he'd give each one of them one of those baskets of fruit. They carried a bag, they put it in the bag, it was all done mostly in Yiddish, and mostly Jewish ladies. There was that image of the Depression that affected me, but we ourselves were never hungry. My father had a living, and of course he brought fruit up. We ate huge amounts of fruit and vegetables in my house. In fact, my father would sit down with a huge bowl of cooked vegetables before he would eat anything else, because the vegetables were cheaper. [laughter] As long as we're on it, can I just stay on this for a minute?

01:01:03:54

Lage: Sure.

01:01:03:56

Levine: I want to talk about the whole business of acculturation and a kind of culture, and then I'll get back to the Boy Scouts.

01:01:03:59

Lage: We have Boy Scouts and we have rebellion to get back to.

01:01:04:04

Levine: The acculturation is very interesting. There were things in the fruit store that my father knew nothing about, that he sold all the time. He didn't eat them, he didn't know what they were. I would ask him, I *would* ask him that, because I was learning the business. I'd say, "What do you do with an artichoke?" And he'd say, "I don't know what you do with an artichoke, but they like them." Or, he'd never tasted an avocado. After the war—

01:01:04:29

Lage: Alligator pear, as they were called, right.

01:01:04:30

Levine: Alligator pear, they were called. After the war, young men who had served in the Pacific would come to the store and they'd say, "Do you have mangos, do you have papayas?" The only tropical fruit we knew before the war were

pineapples and bananas, and I guess maybe alligator pears. But after the war, it exploded. Mangos, papayas, other things. My old man carried those but he never did it even dawn upon him that we should eat them. With one great exception. I'll never forget this. It must have come after the war. He brings up a bag of artichokes one day, and he says to my mother—there was a very clear division of labor, my mother worked in the fruit store but my father never worked in the kitchen. Very clear, it was a very traditional lower middle class, working class. If my father had worked for a fruit man, I would call him working class; he really was working class but he owned a little fruit store. Owned is a funny word, he rented the space. There was nothing to own; there were no fixtures. When he got sick and had to close the store, he literally just closed the store and walked away. There was nothing there to sell, some scales and some stands.

He brings up these artichokes—a very interesting moment—and tells my mother that one of his customers said you just cook them in water and then you take the leaves off from the side and you suck, you scrape the meat off them. So my mother did what he said, and each of us got a bowl—I had a sister then; there were four of us, the immediate nuclear family. My grandparents weren't with us at that moment. They were living downstairs but they weren't eating with us yet. It was just the four of us. Each one of us got an artichoke, and out came the leaf. We looked at him and looked at each other, the leaf was awful. Then a second leaf. Of course, no one—this woman forgot to tell him you dip it. So we were eating these dry leaves and we looked at each other, and my father finally pushed the bowl away. We never got to the heart, we didn't get that far. That would have been too complicated. He pushed it away and he said the famous words, "*goyishe naches.*" *Goyish* means gentile, and it's not a bad word; it just means gentile. *Naches* means pleasure. "This is the kind of thing that gentiles take pleasure in. Who can understand it?" He pushed it away and we all pushed it away, and that was the end of my artichoke experience until my first Berkeley dinner.

The first people to invite me to dinner [in Berkeley] in 1962 were Roger and Elly Hahn. Roger is of course a historian of science at Berkeley—Roger is still teaching—and they were friends. I was brand new, and they invited me to dinner. It was a much fancier dinner than any dinner I had ever gone to. They were very cosmopolitan, and Elly is a wonderful hostess. There were three forks! My heart dropped just looking at the table. But I figured I'd just look at what other people do—that's what you do—and they know what they're doing and I'll follow them. The first dish served was an artichoke. I hadn't had an artichoke since that evening. [laughter] An artichoke comes on my plate, and I'm saying, "Oh boy, I'll get through this if everyone else gets through it." So I watched and people took off the leaf and they dipped it in little thing of butter—

01:01:08:09

Levine: It was good. Then, of course, the difficult part was watching what they did with the heart, but I tried, I learned from watching. Artichokes caught up with me again and I would still eat them. I love artichokes.

The Boy Scouts. I asked my parents if I could join the Boy Scouts. There was a troop of Boy Scouts, 777, troop 777. It met in my elementary school, PS 173; I'm still in elementary school. I guess you enter junior high school at twelve, something like that. We met every Friday night at PS 173, and I had a uniform and everything else. In 1944—what year was it; yes, it was 1944—I got so into the Boy Scouts that I asked my parents if I could go to Boy Scout camp. They weren't so sure about that, but I wanted it, and I nagged them. I was very young; I was a little too young to go to Boy Scout camp. I was only eleven. But I was a tall kid, I was about six feet tall at twelve.

01:01:09:20

Lage: Oh, you were?

01:01:09:21

Levine: Yes, everyone thought I was going to be a giant, but I only grew another few inches. I wasn't a giant, but I was a giant at twelve and I towered over my friends. So I looked a little older. In any case, they finally agreed, and I went to Boy Scout camp for a few weeks. Not only that, but I volunteered for the—there was a, I don't know what we call them now—it was all on an Indian theme. There were tribes, and we had tribal names. There was one that was all the way out—it was a mile from the center of the camp, and we lived not in cabins but in lean-tos. They were wooden lean-tos, they were comfortable. Only four kids to a lean-to, and they had no front.

01:01:10:02

Lage: Sort of like a tee-pee type thing?

01:01:10:03

Levine: But they had a roof. Well, it was three-sided, back and two sides, and it had a roof that came down, but there was no door and it was all open. And it was very exciting.

01:01:10:15

Lage: Where was it?

01:01:10:16

Levine: It was a mile—where was the camp?

01:01:10:18

Lage: Yes.

01:01:10:18

Levine: It was in the Catskill Mountains, about two and a half hours from New York, those days. You can get there in an hour and a half now, but in those days there was one road. The cars would overheat, I remember that. I loved it, I

really loved it. This was very rugged living, and was totally different from anything I—and I really enjoyed it a lot. I learned to swim at Boy Scout camp, I never was a very good swimmer, but I learned to swim at Boy Scout camp, and I learned other things. I learned to camp, and went on hikes. I went back again in 1945, and I think I went back—my parents allowed it. This was all part of the break with—. Because, actually, of the economics of the situation and maybe my own insecurity—though I don't know what my alternatives would have been—I lived at home right through four years of college, and I lived at home for the first two years of my graduate school. We lived at 176<sup>th</sup> Street, and I went to college on 139<sup>th</sup> Street, a twenty-minute bus ride. I went to graduate school on 116<sup>th</sup> Street, just sixty blocks away from where I lived. The whole—New York transportation is good, and this stuff was all nearby. I could have stayed in that little room for ever and ever.

01:01:11:33

Lage:

This was one of your biggest departures, going to Boy Scout camp.

01:01:11:35

Levine:

This was a big departure. Of course, the biggest departure was going to college. Because that really was another world, even though I was still living at home. The other departure was my rebellion which is the only way I can—I don't understand it, but I was a bad boy.

01:01:11:50

Lage:

When did this begin?

01:01:11:52

Levine:

I was a good boy in the sense that I worked in the fruit store and everything. But I was a bad boy in the sense that I was a terrible student. I broke my father's heart. He was in school a lot; I misbehaved really badly. I spent my junior high school years in classes with kids with names like Benino and Madera, and they put me in the rough classes with kids who came from the other side of the tracks.

01:01:12:22

Lage:

You mentioned—that's one thing we got diverted, the Greek and Armenian and Jewish.

01:01:12:28

Levine:

The Jews tended to live on one side, the west side, the Hudson River side of the trolley tracks on Broadway. The Irish and the Italians, et al—there were some Hispanics but not many and they were Puerto Rican—they lived on the other side.

01:01:12:44

Lage:

And you lived in the middle?

01:01:12:45

Levine:

Well, I lived right near Broadway. There weren't that many streets; it was very narrow. I lived three blocks from the Hudson River and they lived,

maybe, four or five blocks—they lived right near Broadway—from the east, the Harlem River. Manhattan is very very narrow.

01:01:13:02

Lage: But you went to the same school.

01:01:13:04

Levine: We went to the same school, and that was on the other side of the tracks. Yes, we went to the same schools. The elementary school tended to be more on our side because there was an elementary school. But the junior high school, PS 115.

01:01:13:16

Lage: I have to stop you here because this is about to run out.

01:01:13:18

Levine: Absolutely.

[Audio File 2]

02:00:00:07

Lage: Okay, now it is recording.

02:00:00:09

Levine: Okay. I called this my rebellion, but I think that's a misnomer. I didn't think of it as a rebellion at the time; that's a post-facto judgment. At the time, it was just the way I was. I didn't like school, and I wasn't good in school, and I didn't do my homework, and my parents were called in a lot. Ultimately they put me in—I was separated from those bright Jewish kids—though there were a lot of Jewish kids who weren't so bright. But there were some, because the neighborhood had some more middle class people in it too. I came from a really lower-middle-class group of people, but there were others. Most of my friends, their fathers were cab drivers, or one father owned a candy store; it was the same kind of thing, he sold pop and ice cream and stuff like that. One guy was a butcher. Those were the people I hung out with, the children of the kind of people my father was. They were all immigrants and the children of immigrants.

02:00:01:16

Lage: Were the families pushing for more education? Did they expect—what did your father expect of you?

02:00:01:22

Levine: It became clear to me as I got older that my father and mother wanted me to be a school teacher. A high school teacher. That, to them, was the epitome of respectability. I'm deviating, but what the hell. This is what they wanted me to be, and ultimately you see, they got what they wanted, though a little more than they wanted. [laughter] They wanted me to be a schoolteacher. It was never articulated; they never said, "You're going to be a schoolteacher." Until a certain confrontation I will tell you about later, they never said that. Their

respect for schoolteachers was immense. My father, who worked so hard and had so little, gave a 15 percent discount to schoolteachers. Took 15 percent off their bill every time they bought something. When I got older, in college, and realized the disparity between him and the schoolteachers—they earned better livings than he did, they had security, they worked much less hard, they had gobs of time off. Of course, I didn't know what it was entailed, being a schoolteacher. It looked easy. But nevertheless, they did have more time off than he did; he barely got two weeks, and that's only if I took the store over.

So I said to him once, "Why are you doing this? Why do you give those people who are much better off than you? They've got a union, blah blah blah, they have much more than you have, they make more money." He said, "Yeah, you're right. But you see, they're educated people, and they could have earned a lot of money if they had wanted to, but they wanted to give back to us, and they're giving their education to us, and they're not making as much money as they could be making, so I'm telling them that I appreciate that."

02:00:03:07

Lage:

That's a very nice thought.

02:00:03:08

Levine:

It was a very lovely thought, actually. That's how I knew what they would like me to be, not because they ever told me. My parents were pretty smart, actually, about how to raise a child. Though I got whacked a lot, they never repressed me, a phrase which I will explain. Anyway, in spite of all that, I was giving them a hard time. I was not disobedient at home; I did exactly what they expected. I went to Hebrew school, I bar mitzvahed, I even became more religious than they did for a couple of years. I went through a religious thing, where I put on—every morning I'd wake up and put one what they called tfillin, a little black box with leather thongs, and there were prayers in the box, and you wind it around your head, your hand, and you pray to the lord. And I wore fringes under my clothing, real fringes, and you could see them under my shirt. After my bar mitzvah, I went through two years of really religious stuff, and went to the synagogue and like that. I didn't rebel against that. Then I stopped and became a free thinker. [laughter] But I even outdid them, I always went to synagogue, I never rebelled in those ways.

But I was a lousy student. And I liked the kids who were lousy students; they were my buddies. I cut school—well, I didn't cut school until I got to high school, which was further away. This is how we got to high school. We met in the candy store on the corner, and one of our friends, Sherwin Levy, who lived five or six blocks away, so he didn't go on our—Sherwin Levy had a father who drove a taxi cab, Mr. Levy. Mr. Levy would pick up—the way he earned a living in the mornings is he picked kids up at candy stores and took them to the high school, which was a mile or two away. We had like—I'm making this up, I don't remember—we had a like an 8:05, he'd pick us up.

We'd meet in the candy store, by then we were smoking [laughter]; I started smoking early. I smoked for thirty-two years, from the age of fifteen to the age of eighty or something like that, I forgot what it was. Age of eighty!

02:00:05:26

Lage: Not eighty!

02:00:05:27

Levine: The age of forty. I smoked until 1980; after 1980 I stopped smoking. I once figured that out, from 1948 when I was fifteen, to 1980. That's how I got thirty-two years. I was a heavy smoker for a while. So we would sit around smoking cigarettes in the candy store and BS'ing with each other, and Mr. Levy would come and honk his horn, we'd run out to the cab. It was quite a way to get to school.

02:00:05:53

Lage: Yeah!

02:00:05:53

Levine: And we'd give Mr. Levy a dime each, which is the same price the bus was. We'd give him a dime. He got—how many kids could he have taken, five I guess, so he got fifty cents, up to the school. Then he came back and picked up another group of kids and took them up there. We got out of Mr. Levy's car—this is what's so interesting—we paid our dime and got out of Mr. Levy's car and then often we wouldn't go to school. We'd walk down to the subway and go downtown, and we'd hang around 42<sup>nd</sup> Street, and we'd go to movies and we'd see stage shows. It was only fifty cents, and you could sit the whole day in one of those movies. I saw Lewis and Martin, Dean Martin and Jerry Lewis, and they were so funny! We had never even heard of them, and they were at the Paramount, so we sat through the movie again and we saw them again, and you could do that. We'd go, we'd get hotdogs and hamburgers and hang around, and look at the girls.

02:00:06:44

Lage: Did they still have the live vaudeville events then?

02:00:06:47

Levine: They did. Yes, that's where we saw Martin and Lewis. They did up there.

02:00:06:50

Lage: Oh this was live, not a movie?

02:00:06:52

Levine: Oh it was live! No, it was live. You'd see the movie, and then you'd have the stage show. These were downtown movies, the Paramount, the Capital, Radio City Music Hall. Or we'd just hang, we'd just hang, go to someone's house, their parents weren't home. So there was that. Now, I never failed out of school; of course there were limits to what I did. But I did get—to give you two of my grades, I got a 25 percent in French and a 45 percent in algebra. So my parents were called into school a lot. In junior high school my poor

father—it was only three blocks away from the store—he'd come in his apron and his working class cap, in his working class cap he'd come into the store, into the building, and he was so ashamed, and he'd talk to me and sometimes hit me.

02:00:07:43

Lage: At the school?

02:00:07:45

Levine: No, no, he never did that. At home. One day, you know, and God has a way of playing tricks on us, I was shaving one morning when I was in high school, and he came running up. There was a mail delivery that early, it was before I went to school, he got a mail delivery in his store, and he comes running upstairs. I was shaving and he whacked me and the razor flew out of my hand across, and he said, "You promised me you wouldn't cut anymore and you cut." And I hadn't cut, that was a mistake. So there I was, feeling very aggrieved. But I think I was being paid back for all the times I cut when he didn't know about it. I barely graduated high school. I had a 67 percent average. There were a couple of teachers who turned me on. One was a history teacher whose name I still remember, Ms. Gloster; she was a red-headed teacher. She turned me on to history. I'll tell you something, for all my horror as a student, I barely got an academic diploma from high school. You had to take regents exams, I don't know if you know about those.

02:00:08:52

Lage: I've heard of them, yes.

02:00:08:53

Levine: New York had regents exams, and I barely—I failed a lot of the math stuff. But I did well enough on my regents exams to get an academic diploma, but I had a 67 average; 65 was the lowest passing average. I barely got out of high school. I got 96 on the history regents. Imagine that. I mean, I was almost perfect.

02:00:09:16

Lage: It was either Ms. Gloster, or it was some pre-ordained interest in history.

02:00:09:21

Levine: I wrote well. I always wrote well. Teachers would say to my mother, "When I looked at his IQ, I thought I was getting a teacher's helper, not a bandit!" [laughter] That was my—that and hanging around with the boys when I could. And I made up for all those afternoons and days in the fruit store at night. We played poker and we drank. We discovered at the age of fifteen—

02:00:09:46

Lage: Even in high school?

02:00:09:47

Levine: Oh yes. We discovered scotch, or just rye whiskey, and we'd sit around someone's home, drinking. We didn't know how to drink. We drank the way

our parents did, but our parents hardly ever drank. On a holiday, my father would pick up a glass of slivovitz or some drink they brought with them from the old world, and he'd go, "L'Chayim," "to life," and he'd, gulp, and chugalug it right down and that's it. He'd do that a few times a year, but he did not drink. So that's how we drank. We didn't know anything about ice cubes and mellowly drinking; we'd go gulp! [laughter] Right down! This is very interesting that I got through school. Is there anything I want to say about high school?

02:00:10:32

Lage: You kept saying "impressed into the fruit store." Was this a great sense of resentment that you carried?

02:00:10:39

Levine: Yes, it was, but sure, that could have something to do with it. But it was not so great. I always understood that they needed me and I loved them, and they loved me. I grew up in a really loving house. I am very thankful for that.

02:00:10:51

Lage: And you did like to eat, after all.

02:00:10:52

Levine: Yes, I do like to eat. [laughter] You know, it's an ambivalent feeling, because there was something very manly about working at the fruit store. I'd go up to the truck, and I'd take a hundred-pound bag of potatoes on my shoulder, I was a man. And that man thing was very important. I was working by the side of my father in the fruit store. I did manly things. While the kids, my friends were playing kid games, I would be selling things to people, helping my father pack the fruit stands, learning how. It was a mixed bag. Part of me was very proud of this.

I also delivered orders. He had a push-cart. I'm not a nostalgia buff, and I don't believe in the golden age, and I don't like to look back and say things were better then, because I think most of that is junk. But there is something that I look back on with some surprise. What little guys like my father had over the beginning of the supermarkets in New York—they didn't get into New York until later than they got into other places, but they did get in—was that he delivered. People could call him on the phone and he'd take down their order, he'd put it in a bag, and I had a little push-cart—it was literally a push-cart, it had two wheels and I had a handle—and I'd push this thing. I'd fill the push-cart up with bags and I'd wheel it through the streets having all kinds of fantasies about driving a car. [laughter] I'd push this thing through the streets and I'd park it in front of an apartment building, and I'd take the bags for that apartment building and I'd walk up. Sometimes it was a six-story walk-up—you have to be in good shape to do this—or sometimes there was an elevator. But as you said before, there were a lot of walk-ups. I'd walk it up, and I'd walk in, and usually the lady of the house would greet me; sometimes she'd give me a drink, a little water if it was a hot day. I'd go down, and everything

I left in the push-cart was still there. That's the thing I think about. No one took anything. And the streets were full of kids, you have to understand. Then I'd push it to the next, waving to friends, I'd push it to the next house and I'd lift something in, and come back and it was all there. I never had things stolen from that push-cart. Otherwise you'd have to do one order at a time. Why was this true? It was not a rich neighborhood, but no one was starving, and no one stole anything from the push-cart, is what I wanted to say.

I got into fights, there was antagonism. Halloween was not a nice day, Halloween was not a day of juvenile pranks; Halloween was a day of gang warfare. The Irish guys and others would come over and they'd take—I don't know if you know, but we did not wear long pants. You didn't wear long pants until you got into high school, or at least junior high school. We wore knickers. They came down to just below our kneecaps, and then we wore socks, and you pull the socks up to the knickers and you put an elastic band around the sock to hold it up, so the knickers went on top of the socks. That's how I went through youth. I remember my mother—someone gave my mother a pair of white duck pants when I was about ten, and they were very warm, but I was a very tall kid. I put them on, and they looked so nice, and I looked so great in those pants that I went down—big mistake—I went down the street wearing my white duck long pants. I was surrounded immediately by neighborhood kids, and a lot of my friends. They'd say, "Look at the big man; hey, look at the big man." Then they'd ask me questions I couldn't answer. "You're such a big man, tell us," and they'd ask me a question, I don't remember the question, and I ran back upstairs and took the damn pants off, and put my knickers back on. So we wore knickers. You could take a sock—we had these long socks, and what the kids would do, and we learned to do it too, you fill the sock with chalk, hunks of chalk, until the sock was a pretty damn solid thing. You kept the end of the sock loose so you could wrap it around your hand, and you hit people with the sock.

02:00:15:13

Lage: This is Halloween?

02:00:15:14

Levine: Yes. This had two effects. One effect is it hurt, and the other effect is it left a mark on you because the chalk would come through the sock. It was like those guns they use today when they're playing, they shoot those paint guns. We had our own paint guns, and you could tell when you hit somebody because there was this chalk streak. So they'd come into our part of the neighborhood, whacking us around. We quickly learned how to whack back, and we fought. Halloween was a dangerous day. I never remember anyone getting really hurt, but you got bruised and banged, and your clothes got chalky. That's what it was.

02:00:15:51

Lage: Were there any other kinds of inter-neighborhood fighting?

02:00:15:54

Levine: There was fighting.

02:00:15:55

Lage: Of a more serious or routine type?

02:00:15:59

Levine: Well, you know, in 1944—I remember the date because I was wearing a sweater which was full of Roosevelt buttons—he was running for reelection for his fourth term. They were buttons just with his beautiful face on them; I loved him too. [laughter] There were buttons that said, “Three good terms deserve another,” and buttons that said, “Don’t change horses in the middle of the stream.” I was festooned with these buttons and we were playing football. Three kids came up, and there were about ten of us, and we were young, we were—in 1944 I was eleven. I was with a group of my peers, ten to twelve, maybe. These kids were like fifteen and they were Puerto Ricans and they spoke Spanish and English. They were just moving into the neighborhood, and one of them says to one of my friends, “Hey kid, let me see the ball.” My friend throws him the ball, and I say, “Stupid,” to myself. “Stupid.” It was a football. It wasn’t a spaldeen, you couldn’t replace that for fifteen cents; it was a leather football. They start throwing it around, and I said, “There’s ten of us.” I said to my friends, “Let’s take that ball back.” They were all afraid, so I went up—I was this way, I fear—I went up to the kid, one of the kids, and said, “Give me our ball back now.”

02:00:17:25

Lage: And you were big.

02:00:17:26

Levine: Yeah, but he was bigger, he was stronger. He was three or four years older than me. I couldn’t beat him, not without the help of my friends, and they were backing away. They saw what was going to happen. He backs me into the wall, and he says, “You’re a big guy, hit me.” I said, “I don’t want to hit you, I just want the ball back.” “Hit me.” And then he started to hit me, and he hit me hard and he bloodied my nose. I came home and my mother had a fit; I was bleeding. And we never got the football back. So, yeah, there were occasions like that.

I should show you this picture. This is a WPA painting which we bought two years ago. Some alumni gave it to the History Department at George Mason University; he had been a history major. It’s a WPA painting, paid for by the feds. [wrestles with painting] The painter is Floyd Gahman; it was painted in 1937. The George Washington Bridge was built in 1928, and it was built to take a second deck, which they put up after I left New York. So it’s now less lovely, but it’s a lovely bridge. This is the beginning of the building of the West Side Highway, which goes right under the New York side of the bridge, right here. It’s 1937, so when I grew up, there was no West Side Highway.

Maybe by the forties there was, I don't know how long it took; it was a Depression project.

I'm sitting in my chairman's office one day and I see this picture and I say, "You know what? You know that I grew up like three blocks away from this picture? Do you know that I spent a lot of my life right here?" See, there's the Palisades—I'm sorry, am I too far away [from the microphone]?

02:00:19:11

Lage: No, I think it's getting it.

02:00:19:12

Levine: There are the Palisades without the buildings on them, they're now full of apartment buildings. You could walk across the bridge—it has a pedestrian walk—and we would often walk across the bridge and play—it was all empty land. We played in Jersey, especially when it snowed, you could have snow fights and things right there. I looked at that picture and said, "Wow, that's my neighborhood." I'm looking at it and admiring it, and said, "I've never seen it before, I guess I just never stared at it." As it turns out, he had never had it in his office before. Before he tells me this, he says, "Would you like to buy it?" I thought it was his. I said, "You'd sell this?" He said, "Well, we do want to sell it." Then he tells me it was left to the department, and some dean took it and put it in his office. Then the dean went to a New England school and offered the department \$100 for the picture. We're a department of history and art history, so we have art historians in my department, and they said, "That picture is worth more than \$100," and they wouldn't give it to them. So the chairman had it for the first time; it came back from the dean's office, and he stuck it up—he didn't hang it—he stuck it on top of his file cabinet, and that's where I saw it. So he offers it to me, and then they did a thing; I think they decided—

02:00:20:32

Lage: They appraised it.

02:00:20:33

Levine: The artists decided it was worth about \$450. It's a lovely picture, I love it, so we bought it, my wife and I. I had to bring her down to look at it, I didn't want to buy it without her, since it was more than nothing. But it's a picture of the bridge as it looked when I grew up, and the Palisades as they looked when I grew up.

02:00:20:52

Lage: And the construction.

02:00:20:53

Levine: And there are workers; they're doing the soundings, I guess. They're figuring out what they're going to do when they put in the West Side Highway, which was a part of my life too. So, the whole reason I thought of that, is we had bad—in so far as we had fights, we had them there. We went down, under the

George Washington Bridge, and there would be fights. There were gangs. Gangs is a little too strong. The neighborhood had a bunch of teams, I belonged to one—not the most fearsome one—one called the Dolphins. There were the Bears, there were the Amerks, Amerks being short for Americans, interesting. We had jackets, we saved up and we bought jackets for some exorbitant amount, like twenty dollars, and they had our team—

02:00:21:51

Lage: Were they ethnically aligned?

02:00:21:53

Levine: A lot of them were. Mine was pretty Jewish. Others were, and then there were those that were Irish.

02:00:22:00

Lage: What about the Amerks?

02:00:22:02

Levine: The Amerks, they were Jews too, and there were a whole bunch of them. We played ball against each other, and sometimes we fought. I wouldn't call this the height of delinquency, but there were fights, and there were beatings, and people stole things from each other. When you crossed Broadway, the deeper you got towards the Harlem River, which was the other side of the tracks, the more you were in alien territory. Now, I went to a synagogue on that side, I'm not trying to say it was a deep line. My school, Junior High School 115 was on that side. But if you walked from my junior high school another four or five blocks to the river you got more and more—if you were a kid, they'd come over to you and say, "Hey, where you from? Hey! Hey! Where you from?" You had to know, it was safer to—

02:00:22:59

Lage: So did you learn to be streetwise and savvy?

02:00:23:02

Levine: Yeah, I think we did. But I remember the streets of New York as much less dangerous than I think of them now, but you know, that may be an exaggeration.

02:00:23:10

Lage: Well, people didn't have guns, wouldn't that be—?

02:00:23:12

Levine: Well, they didn't have guns. For instance, throughout my time, until I got my own apartment near Columbia—but even then, I walked around that whole neighborhood without a second thought—I would leave the Columbia library at 10:00 when I was still living at home and I'd walk down to Riverside Drive, which is the last street above the Hudson River, and then there are parks going down. You wouldn't walk in the parks at ten o'clock at night, but I was standing right in the street, deserted as hell, waiting for a bus to take me to my parents' neighborhood. Or, I would—I don't know why all the girls seemed to

live in the Bronx, but they all did—so I would walk to 181<sup>st</sup> Street, and there was a bridge at 181<sup>st</sup> Street across the Harlem River into the Bronx; the Bronx was on the other side of the Harlem River. I'd get a bus, and I'd go across—this was at 7:30, eight, six o'clock, and I'd go to the girl's apartment house, and I'd pick her up, and then we'd do something. We'd go to downtown New York or we'd go to get a bite, or go to a movie or something, and then I'd take her home, and then I'd catch—the busses ran all night, the subways ran all night too, it was a wonderful paradise—I'd sit in her neighborhood waiting for a bus, on the street, it could be two o'clock in the morning, I'd just sit there, never a sense of fear. I'd take the bus home, it left around 181<sup>st</sup> Street, and I'd walk from 181<sup>st</sup> Street to 176<sup>th</sup> Street where my parents lived.

I remember a couple of times, I met my cousin, Paul the cop. He said, “What are you doing out, kid?” [laughter] I wasn't a kid anymore, I was sixteen. “What's he talking about?” [laughs] We did move—I moved around without a sense of fear. But there were neighborhoods in our neighborhood that you didn't walk in without friends because they beat you up, because you were a member of another team, another group. I was called “kike” and all that, but I didn't take it too seriously. “Gimme, kike,” that was a term that was thrown around. In my classes, especially the classes where—like there would be 9A1, 9A Special—9A was the first half of the ninth grade, 9B the second half. The ninth grade was as high as junior high school went. There was 9A Special, then there was 9A1, then there was 9A2, then there was 9A3.

02:00:25:42

Lage: Were these tracked?

02:00:25:44

Levine: Tracked, partly by how you behaved, and partly by how you did on the tests. I did well on the tests, I had a high IQ, I'd be like in 9A6, because I had miserable grades, and I was not nice to the teachers. One teacher called me “scum of the earth.” I can't call that guy; my poor old man would get called in. Anyway, this went on into high school, but in high school I had a couple of civilizing teachers, one who was in English and one was history. The English teacher—we were oppressed by Shakespeare all the time.

02:00:26:18

Lage: Why do you say oppressed?

02:00:26:21

Levine: Well, I hated Shakespeare.

02:00:26:22

Lage: Oh you did?

02:00:26:23

Levine: Until I got into this class where we did *Macbeth*, and I was *stunned*. I was stunned by *Macbeth*. Then I remember rethinking some of Shakespeare. *Romeo and Juliet*, which bored me out of my mind. You don't meet many

teachers like that; they make you rethink things. I remember going back to *Romeo and Juliet*, because that story had intrigued me but it was so boring to read, and the teacher was so boring and pretentious. When I wrote *Highbrow, Lowbrow*, which was about Shakespeare in America, in part, there was—Gerald Nachman was a columnist for the [*San Francisco Chronicle*] at the time; it was the 1980s. He had a column which really I loved. He said, “You know what the problem with Shakespeare is? There was always a little teacher on your shoulder, and he or she still remains. And they say, ‘It’s good for you kid, read it, it’s good for you. Yeah, it’s boring, but read it, it’s good for you, it’s like good medicine, you’ll be a better person.’” That’s the way they taught Shakespeare. But this woman didn’t teach Shakespeare, she taught Shakespeare as a human document.

So I had two teachers I really loved. They had a lot to do with a lot of things. Whether this is skipping ahead or not, when I was seventeen years old, I informed my father—he knew I was not doing well in school and all that, but he never thought I would stop going to school when I got out of high school; he had ambitions for me. As I later learned, he wanted me to be a school teacher, which is ironic as hell. If you had told me—I hated school teachers so much. So I told my old man when I was seventeen years old that I was not going to go to college, which seemed to me to be pretty clear with a 67 average, which I was getting, I was not going to go to college. He came over to me, and he took his—I’ll never forget this; it sounds a little corny but it was very moving to me—he took his hands, which were very deeply calloused and had lots of cuts on them from the boxes he spent his life lifting and opening, and he put them right in front of my face. He said, “You are not going to have hands like these. You are going to earn your living with *this*.” And he began to thump me hard on the head. Not beating me up or anything, but just making his point.

That’s all he said to me. He was not a very voluble man, in spite of the stereotypes of Jews. I should talk about stereotypes of Jews and my experience. My father did not talk much. I had to read this—I now call it reading this, I didn’t call it that then, but I’ve learned that you read things just as you read a book, you read events. My reading then, as my reading now; it was an instantaneous reading. I understood what he was telling me and I was moved by it. What he was telling me is, “*You are not going to turn your back on an opportunity I never had, you are going to go to college, kiddo.*” That’s what he was telling me. That was not the only discussion we had about this. He had his way, and I did go to college. We’ll talk about that, I did go to college.

That was an interesting story in itself, because I couldn’t get into college with a 67 average, and we couldn’t afford—there were colleges that would have taken me, there were colleges—but I couldn’t go out of town, and I couldn’t afford a place like NYU. NYU was not a very good college then, I probably could have gotten into NYU, but my parents couldn’t afford it. The only

college they could afford to send me to was City College of New York, and that was very hard to get into. You needed something like an 86 average to get in, or then you had to take a test. Well, because my father was bugging me I took the test, because I certainly didn't have—and then they averaged your test grade with your average. Well, I would have needed an impossibly good test grade, and I still would have—67? [laughter]

02:00:30:35

Lage: How did you know all this about City College and what was required? Did your father look into it, or he expected you to?

02:00:30:42

Levine: No, no. The way I knew most things, through the grapevine, through the kids.

02:00:30:48

Lage: Did your teachers, those two teachers, encourage you?

02:00:30:50

Levine: Well, the teachers, I don't know if they would have even encouraged me go to college, I was such a lousy student, but not in their classes, but I never talked to them. I did have an advisor, whatever you called them in high school, but I don't think he thought I should go to college. It was my father who thought I should go to college. I was pretty fatalistic about it, I was not going to get in. I didn't get into City College and I didn't see any alternative. Then the grapevine told me about something that I didn't know about. That City College of New York, which was very hard to get into, had an afternoon and evening school, called the afternoon session. It started at 3:00 in the afternoon and went into the evening. There were no—it didn't give AA degrees. There may have been some AA degrees, there was some things called junior colleges, which gave the associate of arts degree, even then. But it wasn't a big thing, there were public ones. I know a kid that went to some school in Rhode Island called a junior college, Bryant Junior College or something. But City College would let you in if you had a high school diploma; that's all you needed. And you could enter City College in the afternoon, it costs \$5 a semester to go, it was free. That's all City College cost, five dollars a semester for registration fee. If you took a science course you paid a lab fee, that was it. It was a free school. And in fact, a few years before I went, they gave you your books too, it was just like public school, you got book with a thing in it, with peoples' names. That was over, so you had to buy books, but other than that it was a free school. So I enrolled. Anyone could get in if you had a high school diploma, didn't matter what your average was, and that's how I got in.

02:00:32:33

Lage: And it was for working people too, it seems.

02:00:32:37

Levine: The nicest thing, the thing that really changed my life, was it was 1950 and it was full of veterans on the GI Bill. Full of veterans. I admired these guys, and I became friends with them and they took me to bars, where I could drink,

because I knew how to drink. [laughter] I had been practicing. I'd sit there and they'd tell these stories about the army and World War II, and they were not like the little punky kids who were in 9A Special and 9A1 and 9A2. These were men; boy, the manhood thing was probably big with me. When we grew up we used terms like fags, sissy, fairy, if you weren't a man.

02:00:33:18

Lage: What terms did you use for women?

02:00:33:21

Levine: What terms did we use for women?

02:00:33:22

Lage: I mean, how did you treat and look at women?

02:00:33:25

Levine: That is such an interesting question, how did we treat and look at women? Women didn't play games with us, there were no women—I don't know if I ever adequately told you how many kids were in my neighborhood, but let me give you an example. In my apartment building, which was a five-story apartment building, six-story apartment building, and it had three, six apartments on a floor, except for the first floor which had fewer. So we're talking about thirty-six apartments, let's say—maybe thirty-two apartments because the first floor only had three—thirty-four, thirty-five something like that, apartments in the whole building. I would guess that there must have been seventy kids, fifty to seventy kids in that one building. The street was lined with buildings. There were kids out the ears. I don't know what it was.

02:00:34:20

Lage: Teeming.

02:00:34:21

Levine: It was the demographic of the neighborhood. They were young people living in that neighborhood with young kids. That whole northern part of Manhattan was developed with nice housing, and apartment buildings were nice earlier, and it failed. Harlem was like that. When you pushed up into Harlem, that whole thing north of Central Park was under-populated, but they had built houses thinking—apartment buildings, I don't mean houses, this is all apartment buildings, there were no private houses. It wasn't like Brooklyn or Queens, which had lots of private houses. This was a solid line of big five-story, six-story apartment houses. They were pretty nice, these apartment houses. They had not been lived in long, and they went empty. So blacks moved into Harlem; they could move into Harlem because the stuff was empty. And so it went, it went up.

So when my father and mother moved in in 1930, this was an available neighborhood, and the rents were cheap because no one was living in these places. He was an eastern European Jew, and the Jews that lived in that neighborhood at the time that he moved into it were eastern European Jews.

Then in the middle of the thirties the German Jews began to come over; they came over in huge numbers. I lived in a neighborhood that was very German. Though, my father did not have—his customers, at least half of them, were German Jews, when they first came over.

02:00:35:48

Lage: And very recent immigrants, just over.

02:00:35:50

Levine: They were brand new, brand new. They didn't speak English. He tried to speak—there was, look, the German Jews—I have to be careful here because these were fellow Jews, and I had good friends who were German Jews. My father's native language was Yiddish, which is a fourteenth century—you know, they were thrown out in the fourteenth century from Germany, they came back later, but the Jews were thrown out. They took with them Middle High German and Middle Low German. The verb was still in the middle of the sentence. Yiddish has the verb in the middle of the sentence, because the German they took with them was—and then they went wandering. They added to this the languages of places they settled, so there were Russian words and there were lots of Hebrew words. When they came across something they didn't have a word for, because they were out of the country, they would take Hebrew or they'd take a word of the country they were living in, Lithuanian, whatever the hell it was. So there are all kinds of words in Yiddish, including lots of Hebrew words. But it's a German dialect. So my father could understand their German, and he would try and speak Yiddish to them. He would come home scratching his head; these were fellow Jews, but they would pretend that they didn't understand what he said. Because the German—here's what I was about to say—the German Jews had German attitudes towards eastern Europeans.

02:00:37:12

Lage: Oh, even after what they'd been through.

02:00:37:15

Levine: Well, they were Germans, you know. That they were forced out of the country was one of the great ironies that makes us think a little bit about how acculturated you ever get to anything. They were completely German, they didn't speak Yiddish, they had no need to know Yiddish. They were living in Germany, they were parts of a later migration to Germany after the Jews were expelled. You know, the Spanish Jews have the same story. When they were expelled in 1492, they took Spanish with them, they took fifteenth century Spanish with them. I don't know how Spanish developed, but certainly languages develop. They took this language with them and they walked out into the world and they walked out into the Mediterranean world and they were the Jewish progenitors of the Moroccan Jews, the Italian Jews and all that. They just flooded into those places. Well, flooded, there weren't that many of them. They spoke a language which is still alive called Ladino. They

spoke Ladino, which was fifteenth century Spanish with all those additions, some Hebrew, some Arabic, some whatever.

Anyway, he would come up with—so he understood them and tried to speak to them, they would say things—you know, there'd be a sign on the potatoes that would say, “Five pounds, fifteen cents,” and pounds was abbreviated, “lbs,” so they would say things—I heard it myself—they'd say things like “finf-libs,” they would pronounce the “lbs.” “Fimf-libs, Kartoffeln,” potatoes.

So suddenly, so what's interesting is, I had lots of German friends, my father had none. My father and mother had only east European friends, though his customers were German. I never understood why he liked that store; he didn't by the time he got old. But he liked it because he was surrounded by all these young women. They were young women, they looked old to me, but they weren't old. They were younger than him, some of them. They came in and they talked to him about their troubles, and they talked to him. His life was filled with people, and he was a young handsome man.

02:00:39:16

Lage:

Now is this in retrospect that you're realizing that? Or did you get the sense?

02:00:39:20

Levine:

Well, he was the kind—oh, I don't think he did anything! My parents were the straightest human beings in the world. But you get a certain kind of pleasure out of it. Natalie Davis used to say, there's so much flirtation that goes on among the male and female faculty. She's the only one who would say anything like that. “I love these flirtations,” she would say. [laughter] Well, there are flirtations, and they do go on. So a handsome young guy and a handsome young woman, both married, and both would never fool around, are still having that, you know, talking—and some of these women would talk to my father, he later told me, about their marriage problems, or medicine, or problems with their kids, and he became a kind of counselor. Well, you know, that does go on in stores, little neighborhood stores. So he got certain pleasures out of this, I'm sure.

But he never had any German friends at all, all his friends—I just look back upon this in retrospect, it's amazing, because there were so many German Jews in the neighborhood—all his friends were east European Jews. That's so interesting. I'm sure that was true of the German Jews. But the kids didn't make these distinctions, we were all American kids. Now the difference between us and the German Jews is most of the German Jews were born in Germany, whereas we were born in the US.

02:00:40:36

Lage:

Did you have a sense of status?

02:00:40:39

Levine: I don't remember. In fact, I—no, I don't think so. They were also—you know, those German Jews were religious, more Orthodox than a lot of us were becoming. I don't quite understand why, because they weren't so religious in Germany before.

02:00:40:58

Lage: That's what I thought, that the German Jews weren't very religious.

02:00:41:00

Levine: They were the most religious group in our neighborhood. The Greeks were; they built Greek Orthodox temples. I don't know about the Armenians, there were fewer of them, and I had a few Armenian friends.

So, stereotypes of Jews. The people of the book, learned, smart—none of that was true in my life. They were not learned, there were no books in my house, there was no music in my house. There was a radio. My parents didn't read. When I became a scholar and wrote, they didn't read my books. It didn't occur to them to read my books, that was just nothing they did, they did not read books. Even if the book was dedicated to them, they didn't read it. They covered it in plastic and they put it on the table. My father said he wanted me to give all my aunts, his sisters, copies. I would say, of my father's five sisters, three probably were illiterate. I know there's an old Jewish joke, she was illiterate in five languages. [laughter] Because these people spoke many languages, coming from Europe. Then they had to learn to read and write because they had to earn their own livings. I had an aunt, a lovely lady, who would walk into a restaurant, and she'd pick up the menu, sometimes upside down, but she'd pick up the menu, and she'd say, "I'll have the fish." [laughter] She always said, "I'll have the fish!" She wasn't fooling us, we knew she was illiterate. All my aunts got copies of the book, so they valued that. But these were not people of the book, they were not—.

I learned everything I learned about music—when I was fifteen, I should tell you this story, I discovered jazz. I discovered jazz because friends of mine and I—again, this ability to drink came in handy. In New York in 1948, there was no draft. The draft started in 1948, but there was this short period, 1947, 1948—

02:00:43:06

Lage: 1948?

02:00:43:07

Levine: Yes, Harry Truman had a draft.

02:00:43:09

Lage: Oh I see, a new draft.

02:00:43:10

Levine: Yes, there was the World War II draft, but I was too young to worry about that. Between 1945 and 1948 there was no draft at all. Hence no draft cards. I guess there were Social Security cards, but no one ever asked you for social security cards. I had one, I had to have one for my father's store; he had to declare me as an employee. Other than that, there was no way of identifying us. They had to ask you how old you were, and you said eighteen, and they had no way of proving it one way or the other. I was tall, and I could sit and drink, so I was allowed into places—and it was eighteen in New York; thank God it wasn't twenty-one when I was growing up; it is now twenty-one. I could go into places. So my friends and I started to go to places like Bop City and the Embers and places like that and we discovered black jazz and bebop. We—two or three friends and I were just wiped out by this music, and by these people. And there they were. One of the things that really—

02:00:44:14

Lage: Was this in Harlem, you'd go to?

02:00:44:16

Levine: Well, I did go to Harlem a few times, but this was in downtown New York. There were these jazz joints that opened up and we'd go and we'd fall over the music. I fell so in love with the music and with the people doing the music—and by the way, the only time in my life I've ever sniffed marijuana was in those joints. It never attracted me and it wasn't my generation, but it was around.

02:00:44:40

Lage: Yes, the musicians.

02:00:44:41

Levine: Yes, it was around, the people in the audience often had it, and just to be sociable I took a puff or two but it never turned me on, and I never did it in my life, though I was a heavy smoker of tobacco, quite addicted to it. I think in retrospect—you don't have these thoughts when you're—I think in retrospect, what attracted me in addition to the music, the art, which was wonderful, what attracted me was these people who had openly—there were whites too, they weren't all black—openly had a foot in more than one culture. Since I had a foot in more than one culture, I was really attracted to these people because they didn't apologize for this. They used it, they trumpeted it. They were black, and they were American. They were *very American*. A lot more American than my people were! My people were immigrants, just learning to be American, these people had been here for a very long time. They had a lingo, they used music, they used expressions, they were funny, they were difficult. Some of them were difficult.

02:00:45:57

Lage: These are people in the audience? Or the performers?

02:00:45:59

Levine: Well, I'm talking about the performers. The audiences were mixed; there were more whites in the audiences than blacks, but they were mixed. You sat and listened to them, but these were nightclubs, so people were clinking glasses and drinking. I was appalled at how much noise there was, but these musicians learned to play amidst that noise. And now that jazz has become an art form, and people go to places and sit quietly and listen, that's wonderful, but I realize that that other scenario had its charms, where people were talking and yelling out. It's like the old Italian audiences for opera, "Encore! Encore!" And in America, they'd throw things. There was audience participation; there isn't any longer. You can still go—

02:00:46:50

Lage: Like Shakespeare. [laughter]

02:00:46:52

Levine: Like Shakespeare. So I brought that. What made me think of that was my saying there was no music at home. Suddenly, at the age of fifteen—and here was another area where my parents were really good and smart: I not only was pleasing them, in the sense that I was an obedient boy, I worked in the store, I was good, as far as they knew I was moral, I had lots of friends, I was popular. I didn't do well in school, they tried to change that, but I was not a bad boy. So when I suddenly appeared in the house with a phonograph, which I bought, and two speakers, which a friend of mine hooked up to the phonograph and they were on endless wire—I could keep the phonograph in one room and carry the speakers to another room. I was listening to bop, which must have been like Martian noise to them; they sometimes would ask me to turn it down a little bit, sheepishly. They allowed that, they allowed me to do that. I don't know what their sense was, because they certainly weren't shy people. My father was a tough guy; he hit me and he demanded things of me, like college and the store—and he never apologized to me, "Oh, I'm sorry." As I told you, he gave me the litany of my physical needs and how the store met them all and therefore I should shut up. But they allowed this, they allowed this foreign music in their house. They never liked it, they never—

02:00:48:23

Lage: You knew they didn't like it?

02:00:48:24

Levine: I didn't think of them, I was a teenager. [laughter] I thought of me! I needed this music, so suddenly music appeared in my house. Since I lived through college in my house, and I lived into graduate school in my house—though I got out of it shortly after I got through graduate school—it wasn't only bop. It was bop for a few years, only—jazz, I also discovered, Dixieland going back a little bit, I brought that music into the house. Then I got into college, and I might as well tell the story now since it has to do with music, I took Music 1 because it was a required course as I recall. What they were doing in college is they were acculturating us. They understood who they had, at City College.

For instance, to leave music for just a moment. We had to take four semesters of speech. Since I was the first college student in my family, although I had cousins who were older than me, but they lived in Brooklyn and they went to Brooklyn College and they probably had exactly the same experience I had. There was no one in my Levine or Schmookler families going to Harvard or anything like that. They went to the city colleges. Four semesters of speech. Now these speech courses were only worth one credit. We had a clue right then, they were trying to clean up our English. I had to take four semesters of speech, and I guess it cleaned up my English a little bit but not enough, because I came out of college unprepared to pass the teaching exam. That's another thing we'll talk about later. I said "mudder," I couldn't get my tongue between my—it was a physical thing, because my father said "mudder" and I guess most of the people around me said "mudder" "fadder" "brodder" so my tongue was not trained to say "brother," and I ultimately had to go to a speech teacher, but that's a later story, because I wanted to get a teaching license. One of the classes was debate, extemporaneous speech, and that probably was helpful to me.

02:00:50:26

Lage:

Did they correct your pronunciation along the way?

02:00:50:28

Levine:

Well, they must have corrected some of it, but not enough, because I really needed an intensive course to get rid of some of that stuff. And when I get tired now, I find myself reverting, the tongue gets lazy. They used to call that, "Oh, you have a lazy tongue," they would say. And I did tongue exercises, with a mirror.

02:00:50:47

Lage:

Was this later when you had your individual instruction?

02:00:50:49

Levine:

Yes. Well, they did a little bit of this in these classes, but these were one-credit classes that met once a week, and they had thirty kids in them, and how much individual stuff did they do? But the point of telling you about the classes is they were civilizing us. What other school had speech classes? The city colleges had them because we came from immigrant families and we spoke funny English. I had a teacher at City College, a nice man, Michael Kraus. I said something ungrammatical to him—I must have said lots of ungrammatical things—I said something ungrammatical to him, and he said, "You know, Larry," —he was a nice man, very intellectual fellow—he said, "I came from exactly the background you came from, and you've got to rise above it, Larry." Some of this turned me off when he said it to me, I heard this too much.

I dated a young woman who I liked a lot, I liked her better than she liked me, and her mother was a widow and she took me home. Her mother liked me—I wish she had liked me as much as her mother. Actually, her mother was a

nicer person than she was, I finally came to the conclusion; I liked her mother a lot better than I liked her. Her brother—I can't think of his name, I think their family name had been Levine but they had changed it; I can't think of his name, he had a very Anglo name—her brother was a well-known historian at Dartmouth and I knew of him, because I was already in graduate school by now. That's what it was, I was in graduate school and I was dating this young woman who went to a fancy school away from New York, but she came homes on weekends often and I dated her. She was very pretty and very smart.

Her mother invited me one evening to meet her brother, who was this professor at Dartmouth, and he did military history. He had been drafted into the war, and he had a degree, he had a PhD; he was a colonial historian, and they gave him a job of being the naval historian or something. He worked with admirals, keeping records so they could write the history of them, and he became a military historian. He took a long walk with me, he said, "Let's take a walk." I was finishing my MA at Columbia, that's what it was. We take a walk in the street, and we walk downstairs from her apartment building. She lived closer to the river than we did, but she lived in my neighborhood, his sister. We walked in the street. I would tell you his name if I could think of it; he was a very well-known guy, as a historian. We were walking in the street, and he says, "See that over there? That was my father's tailor shop. I know your father has a fruit store in this neighborhood." My father still had it; his father was dead. He said, "I know how embarrassed you are about that." Well, I wasn't embarrassed at all about it, but I didn't say anything to him; he was older than me and was distinguished. He said, "I know how embarrassed you are, you must be just like me, I would never bring friends home in my neighborhood." Not true of me! I brought kids from Columbia home all the time, and they loved my parents. But I kept my mouth shut. He said, "Well, let me tell you something. Do what I did. I went to William and Mary for my PhD"—I think he went to William and Mary for his PhD, I can't remember, some school in Virginia—"I went to William and Mary for my PhD, you should—you're finishing your MA now? Good. Get out of New York, you will learn to stop talking with your hands." He so turned me off, this guy, totally turned me off. I said nothing to him, I was respectful. We walked back to his sister, and I thanked her for introducing me to him. I thought, "What a shit, this guy!" [laughter] I just didn't like that.

02:00:54:25

Lage:

But his was one response to this immigrant background, and you had a different one.

02:00:54:30

Levine:

Yes, it was very definitely a response to it: get rid of it as quickly as you can and learn to be like the rest of them. But in my sense, the rest of them were all different. That's one of the things—I'm trying to link these together—that's one of the things that I learned from these black musicians, that you could be who you were born and also be something else. Because they were

transcending what they were born into, they were becoming musicians. These guys were very musically literate, and some of them like Miles Davis, are going to Juilliard. The greatest hero I had was Thelonious Monk, and he went to Juilliard; these were not guys from rural Alabama; some of these were trained musicians. Even ones who weren't—later I learned, I didn't know this at the time—they'd say things like—I wrote an article on jazz—they'd say things like, "Yes, you know, I take something I learned from Chopin and I turned it into—." They knew Chopin, these pianists would listen to Chopin. They didn't make these categories; we made the categories. "It's all music," they say things like that, it's all music, it's just music. "The only two kinds of music," Duke Ellington said, or Dizzy Gillespie, one of the two, "are good music and bad music." [laughter] I was so impressed with these guys. These black musicians especially really impressed me, and were a model in a certain way, though I didn't know music. I played the saxophone but badly. I didn't know music.

02:00:56:02

Lage:

How conscious was this thinking, or did it come later? Looking back.

02:00:56:07

Levine:

It was never conscious, it wasn't conscious at all, I didn't know what I was doing. I had the apparatus in the house, that is, the phonograph and the endless wire on the speakers which you could carry—it was a small apartment—the speakers could be carried to every part, there was no escape for my parents. It was one speaker, it wasn't two. One speaker and I could carry it everywhere. I took—we're going way back now, this time the Jewish parenthesis worked—and we're going back to the fact that Music 1 was a required course because they were civilizing us.

02:00:56:41

Lage:

At City College.

02:00:56:41

Levine:

Yes, so music was required. I took Music 1—my only motive was to get through this course, and Music 1 was a real course, three credits, like all the other courses. We had a gentleman named Otto Deri; he was a Hungarian refugee and he was a cellist, and he played in some—I can't think of the name of it, but he played in some quartet which I later heard. In fact I went when I got into classical music. I was as far from classical music as you could imagine. I said, "Oh, another boring course." Otto Deri had no fireworks, he had no light pat banter, he was a Hungarian intellectual. I was taught by these refugees. A lot of them were refugees from Germany, Czechoslovakia; this guy was from Hungary, and he was serious with a capital S. There was no fooling around with him. What he had was a cello. So we didn't just listen to records. He would set us up by taking his cello out and he would play this beautiful—I knew nothing about cellos—he took this beautiful instrument out and he'd play. He'd show us how different themes worked, and how harmonies worked. I understood very little of this, but I heard those sounds.

Then he'd play a record of a chamber quartet so we could hear all the instruments. He did this all the time. I loved that class. I fell in love with that class. He changed my life, this guy. Oh yes, he changed my life. He introduced me—I went through the usual progression. This sounds very elitist, but I went through the usual progression of Tchaikovsky and all that. But he got me to turn on WQXR and listen to classical music. In those days, we were still in the days of the seventy-eights; long-playing records were just beginning to happen, and my dates are a little fudgy here. To listen to a symphony, you had to have a record changer, and [slaps hands] the records would fall, and there were breaks until the record fell, and the needle relocated, and you had to turn the whole thing over. Listening to a symphony was as big event.

I remember working in my old man's store one Sunday morning, and I was now a college student, and I had taken Professor Deri, and I was beginning to listen to music. I had gotten to Beethoven and the celestial Ninth, and I loved that, and I'm listening. It's a Sunday morning, and the guy on WQXR—my father's not in the store. I turned on the radio, we had a little radio and I turned on the radio to WQXR, I didn't do that when he was in the store. He didn't like the radio on—

02:00:59:22

Lage:

He didn't like the radio.

02:00:59:23

Levine:

He would turn it on to hear the news occasionally. I had the store to myself and I was listening to WQXR. And they announced that—I'm making this up—at noon they were going to play the entire Ninth Symphony. Now that's a very hard thing to do, if you're at home, if you happened to be lucky enough to own the Ninth, it was many records and you had to set them up. They had more than one turntable there, so they could set them up and synchronize them and you didn't even hear the breaks. I remember telling customers who I knew liked classical music, "Hey, they're going to play the Ninth at noon!" I remember one guy, it was just before noon, he said, "Really? The whole Ninth?" And I said, "Yes," and he ran across the street, running home with his bag of fruit. [laughter] Now I began to bring home records of classical—I went to a barber, Lou, he was an Italian guy, nice guy. When he learned—Lou was foisting off on me his used records. By now we had long-playing records. He said, "Hey, you have Saint-Saëns' blah blah?" And he'd bring it in and sell it to me for seventy-five cents. I bought all of Lou's rejects, but I could afford those. It was wonderful. I added that to the bop, and my parents dug that a little better. My mother said, "Oh, that's very pretty."

02:01:00:47

Lage:

So you were opening their world too?

02:01:00:49

Levine:

Yes, well, not through the jazz, but yes, a little bit. Not my father's world, but my mother's world. My mother listened to a little bit of that stuff. But their world was their world. Even their son publishing didn't change their world. I wrote a—you may have read it, it's one of the essays, it's the first, second essay in my book of essays, and I mention in there that—my father went blind from diabetes, he had lousy medical care, he shouldn't have gone blind. He didn't even know it, it was too late; they should have seen it, they should have been checking his eyes. He lost enough of his vision, he was never totally blind, so he couldn't work the fruit store anymore. So he closed it. This was already—I was in graduate school, in fact, I may have been in California by then, I can't remember. I think I may have been.

My mother had to get a job. She was a woman in her, probably late fifties or so, I don't know. When I went in 1962 she would have been fifty-five, something like that. No, she would have been fifty-seven. She was born in 1907 so she would have been fifty-seven in 1962. Somewhere around there, she was in her late fifties. She got a job at Metropolitan Life as a file clerk, and she loved it. She got there at 7:00 in the morning and worked until 3:00 in the afternoon, and they had free lunch. My mother was very simple in her tastes, they had free lunch, she said, [whispering] "They give us free lunch!" I was a lefty, and I wasn't going to say, "They're exploiting you!" [laughter] But I didn't say that. And they had free medical care, they had a nurse at least, if you had a pain. So she was working at Metropolitan Life when I wrote that piece, she was still working at Metropolitan Life, in which I said she was born in 1907. I sent the piece to her; it was published in Perry Curtis' book *The Historian's Workshop*, and my dad was dead by then but my mother was working in Metropolitan Life. She really liked that job, she made friends there and they liked her, she was a nice woman, Annie. I sent it to her. She didn't even think of reading it. I even said to her, "You'll find the beginning of this article interesting, it's a little autobiographical." Didn't cut any ice with her. She really did love me, but not that much. [laughter]

02:01:03:13

Lage:

Not enough to read your book.

02:01:03:14

Levine:

Not enough to read.

02:01:03:17

Lage:

Well, maybe her reading skills weren't good.

02:01:03:19

Levine:

No, she could read. She did read, she read. She was born in America, she knew English well and she could read. She took the article to work, because she was so proud of me and I already had a book published by then. She took the article to work and she shoved it on her friends. Well, one of her friends began to read the article, just standing around, sitting in the cafeteria,

whatever they were doing. She said, "Annie, I didn't know you were that old; you were born in 1907." My mother may have been lying about her age a little bit, as women were taught to do in our society. My mother wrote me and said, "Why'd you go and do that? Why did you tell them?" I said, "Well, if you had read the article, you would have known." I was a little annoyed with her because she didn't even read that article where I talk about her and my father. So life goes on.

No, this gets us back to the Jewish stereotypes; I left that. The notion that Jews are really sharp and that they're educated and that they're hungry for—see, my parents wanted me to be a high school teacher, not a banker.

02:01:04:27

Lage:

They didn't think of the doctor, lawyer.

02:01:04:31

Levine:

Can I mention the doctor-lawyer thing? That's something I've thought a lot about. It was never an aspiration of theirs. Of course they probably thought I couldn't do it, I was really a lousy student. But my getting a PhD was a thunderbolt to everybody. My friends in the neighborhood, they didn't believe that. I was the worst student in the whole gang. I was terrible. One of my friends got 15 in our subject; we were vying, I got 25. People couldn't believe that I went on to get a PhD and became a professor. I had problems with it, and my parents were a little thunderstruck, and I'm not sure they were totally pleased by it. They wanted me to be a high school teacher and live in New York and come on Friday nights with my family for chicken soup and gefilte fish and the like.

But the doctor, I've thought about that. My son the doctor, hey, my son the doctor is drowning, those Jewish jokes. I expanded that as I got knowledge, to my son the minister, black, or my son the teacher, my daughter the teacher. Blacks went into the ministry, they went into teaching. Jews went into teaching a lot, there are a lot of Jewish teachers, when they were allowed to teach, not always. And they went into medical school, they went to medicine, they went to law. I began to think about that whole thing. In the day when Jews and blacks could never go to work for Dupont, or the Bank of California—they never could work for those places. Those were big institutions that did not hire Jews and blacks and other—Catholics, maybe. What they could do is go into a profession where they controlled themselves. They needed the institution to train them. But in those days, doctors didn't need hospitals the way they do now. Doctors without hospital connections now are dead meat. There is no such thing. But in those days, the doctors we had didn't have hospital connections. We had immigrant doctors. They were mostly German doctors who came to America and had to take the test again. They were Jews, and when my grandmother, who was the first one in my family to die that I knew closely, my maternal grandmother—my paternal grandmother died too but she was living with another set of relatives; my

grandmother was with us. When she died, she died in Lincoln Hospital. Lincoln Hospital was a city hospital. Her doctor had no connections, he had no hospital connections, and she died in a washroom because he had no—when I say a washroom, I don't mean a john, I mean literally a washroom, where the doctors went to wash up. First when I visited her, she was in a bed in the hallways of Lincoln Hospital. But the hallways were lined with beds.

02:01:07:22

Lage: Was this a public hospital?

02:01:07:24

Levine: It was a public hospital, they had more poor people than they knew what to do with. Then when she got really sick and they couldn't leave her in the hallways, they still didn't have a room for her, they put her in the washroom, which was a relatively nice place, compared to the hallway. Doctors went to wash up, but other than that, it was a clean room. She died in that.

What I'm saying about Jews is if you could get yourself into medical school—and that was where you needed the institution—if you could do well in college, well enough so they couldn't deny you, or if you found some medical school and they did, they often went to black medical schools, Howard, places like that, Atlanta University, places that would take them. Once you got that medical degree and passed your license, you were a free agent. You could go into your own neighborhood and put a sign out, Dr. Siegfried Cohen, MD, dentist, abogado—we know the signs, [laughter] abogado in Spanish neighborhoods, that's what they did. They went back to their people. Blacks did it, black lawyers, black whatevers, ministers. They weren't crazy, these people, they didn't study to be an engineer. Who would hire a Jewish engineer? They studied to be something they could control. They could control medicine because they had people who needed them, their own people needed them. So I think that's what the whole thing is. Then it grows into a genetic thing and Jews are hungry, Jews make good—there was even—I read an article from the forties about how blacks made good surgeons because they had long sensitive fingers, the same thing that made them good bass players. You turn everything—you go from genius to genes, you turn everything into genes. Black are good, Jews have genes for making money, they have genes for medicine.

02:01:09:11

Lage: Well, you do hear a lot about Jews respecting learning from studying the Torah and having their Hebrew school as part of their upbringing.

02:01:09:20

Levine: Well, it's true, that's right.

02:01:09:23

Lage: Does that ring true?

02:01:09:24

Levine: Yes, it may ring true. My parents did have respect for learning, like my father's 15 percent discount for school teachers. [laughter] There was a respect. But there were not the accoutrements of learning in my house. That's what I was trying to say. So you're right, you're right. There was a tolerance for it. They never tried to talk me out of being—well, they wanted me to be a schoolteacher. Today, kids tell me, "My parents say, 'How can you make a living as a historian? Why are you going to be a schoolteacher?'" There is some prejudice against this today, it's true. They thought it was the end all, if they could have a kid who was a teacher. You're right, those are values. It would have been nice for me if we had a house full of books.

02:01:10:06

Lage: I know, it would have been great.

02:01:10:08

Levine: All of that I discovered at City College. I didn't discover it in high school because I didn't allow high school to help me discover it except for two classes. City College was my home, all of that.

02:01:10:19

Lage: I think we should save that.

02:01:10:20

Levine: Great.

02:01:10:21

Lage: Is there any parenthesis we need to close now, about those early years? There are a couple of things that probably we could start out with next time, but if there's a thought that you haven't completed? Otherwise I think we should—

02:01:10:32

Levine: No, I think I've got—if I think a little more about my youth I can start with that, my pre-college youth.

02:01:10:39

Lage: Yes, think of what we haven't said.

02:01:10:41

Levine: What do you want to do, Ann, about—we are leaving on the 15<sup>th</sup> of August, so I don't know.

02:01:10:53

Lage: Should we try to get a couple of sessions in?

02:01:10:54

Levine: Well, we could. You know, I was impressed, depressed maybe, [laughter] by the fact that it was clear to me that at least Carl [Schorske], but I suspect Ken [Stampp] and Henry [May] too, prepared for these things.

- 02:01:11:11  
Lage: Ken did not prepare. He said, "I'm not going to prepare." He didn't prepare.
- 02:01:11:15  
Levine: I wouldn't know how to prepare.
- 02:01:11:17  
Lage: I don't think you need to prepare.
- 02:01:11:18  
Levine: See, Carl had papers, and he went through the papers. I have kept things in folders. I probably have some correspondence. I was such a jerk, I kept them by year. Ken, for instance, has a hundred letters from Richard Hofstadter but he must have filed those under Richard Hofstadter. But it never occurred to me, because it never occurred to me that anyone I corresponded with would be important enough to have a file. [laughter] I just kept some in there, "1956," "Letters." And Carl kept records, my goodness!
- 02:01:11:50  
Lage: He has some good papers there.
- 02:01:11:51  
Levine: Things that he wrote, and I have none of that. I wrote things in the Free Speech Movement days too, but they're long gone, I don't know where they are. So I was really saying, I can't prepare for this, so you're going to see a lot of vagueness as we go along about what year this took place.
- 02:01:12:06  
Lage: This part we're in now, I don't think there's going to be a problem.
- 02:01:12:09  
Levine: No, this was very—well, I talked about the parts of my youth that I remember. I mean, how many parts did I not? There were a few things that I should talk a little about more perhaps, but I think basically we covered it. I didn't mention my sister, and I should actually, and my cousins.
- 02:01:12:23  
Lage: You did, and one thing you didn't and we'll do this next time, the attitude towards women, I think is interesting.
- 02:01:12:29  
Levine: Yes, we never did that.
- 02:01:12:30  
Lage: So we'll come back to that.
- 02:01:12:32  
Levine: Oh, am I going to be honest?
- 02:01:12:34  
Lage: Yes! That's the thing.

02:01:12:36

Levine: So far I've been very honest.

02:01:12:40

Lage: Let's just close for now.

**Interview 2: August 3, 2004**

[Audio File 3]

03:00:00:03

Lage: Now we're recording, and today is August 3, 2004. This is the second interview with Larry Levine. And Larry, you said you wanted to recap some of what we talked about last time.

03:00:00:17

Levine: I've been thinking about my youth because it came up in our last interview. I just wanted to talk in perhaps a slightly more organized way, and there may be some redundancy in this, but I wanted to talk about a few experiences that were endemic to my youth and one of them was living in an apartment. I didn't know there was another way to live until I was about eight or nine when my mother's sister moved to Bergen County, New Jersey, which was just over the George Washington Bridge, into a little town called River Edge, New Jersey. She was one of the early Jews that moved in there and there were some problems. So from about 1940 or 1941 I had on occasion the experience of walking into a private home. It was a small private home, but to me it looked quite large because it was a hell of a lot larger than our apartment; it was two stories, and the whole rural scene. Until then I didn't even know that that existed. I had never been in a private home. I grew up in a world of apartments, and I wanted to talk a little bit about that.

First of all, it's crowded. [laughter] Privacy is a whole different issue, in the kinds of apartments I grew up in. Until my sister was born when I was six and a half, we lived in a one-bedroom apartment, apartment 4B in 701 West 176<sup>th</sup> Street. There was one bedroom, and I slept in that bedroom with my parents. My parents had absolutely no need for or sense of privacy because they never had it in their lives. They grew up in very crowded—my father had eight siblings, seven siblings, one of eight he was, my mother three. My mother talks about how she and her brothers lived behind the laundry that my grandfather and grandmother kept, a little hand laundry, like the Chinese laundries. They were just thrown into one bed. She said they had one big bed, she and her siblings were there. They were one year apart, so there were four of them. My grandparents were very efficient in that; they had four children in four years, and they just threw them into this bed. They played in the dirty laundry, everything you're not supposed to do. So my parents had no sense of other kinds of living. Maybe my father did in Lithuania, but not in America. So I grew up in this small apartment.

When my sister was born in 1939, when I was six and a half, we moved into a two-bedroom apartment. There were, in those days, lots of empty apartments. My parents probably could have moved into a three-bedroom apartment, looking ahead, but they didn't see the need to do that, which led to a lot of crowding when we got older because there wasn't a separate bedroom for each kid, and my parents had to live in the living room and all of that.

03:00:03:09

Lage: But they did see the need for a separate bedroom for each kid later.

03:00:03:13

Levine: Because we were different sexes. If we were boys, there would have been no need. They had a very strong sense of gender difference, very strong, which I will get to. So there was crowding, though I didn't know it was crowding. I thought that's the way you lived, and most people I knew lived that way. There was noise. You heard everyone, there was no privacy from this at all. Since the only machine in the house that made noise in addition to the human beings was a radio, that Stromberg Carlson I probably already described, that big piece of furniture sitting in the living room, the noise was always human. Until in my teens, and I think I spoke about that, when I brought bebop records into the house. There was dirt. Now my mother was a meticulous housekeeper. She grew up in that generation where—there's a Jewish word, *balabusta*. God knows how you spell that, but we can find out, the word *balabusta*, which means someone who's very good in the house. My mother was such a person. She cleaned and cleaned and cleaned, but you know, we lived—it was cold. Our house operated on coal, there was the big coal furnace in the basement. We had a bakery—we were a six-story house, the house next to us was a three-story house, it was a commercial building, two or three stories. The bakery, one of them, there was a bakery on every block with the most beautiful breads in the world, and the coal would come up.

03:00:04:53

Lage: From the ovens.

03:00:04:53

Levine: From the bakeries' ovens. Yeah. So my mother could wipe the window sill and in an hour, you could write your name in the window sill if the windows were open, you could just write your name in it. I used to do that! [laughter] So there was that, so she was constantly cleaning. There were cockroaches, no matter how hard she tried—it was an apartment house, you can keep your apartment clean—there were dumbwaiters, you put your garbage in the dumbwaiters. Though we didn't use them for that anymore. It's a wonderful anecdote about an immigrant Jewish family, I mean, I'm sure this is apocryphal, but it's lovely, about a Jewish immigrant family moving into a house. They open the dumbwaiter, and they think it's a closet, the dumbwaiter happens to be at their level. They put all their fine—because a lot of these immigrants brought fine china with them from the old country, and they put their china in this thing, of course the next time they open it the dumbwaiter was gone, they've lost all their dishes. [laughter]

There were mice and cockroaches sporadically, because my mother kept it clean, but there they were and you grew up understanding. One of my kids says, "I'd like to move into the city because unlike you," when he was small, "I didn't grow up with cockroaches and I won't mind."

03:00:06:09

Lage: What about the smells, do you remember the smells?

03:00:06:11

Levine: Well, there were cooking smells. When you opened the door and walked out into the hallway, there were six or seven apartments on a floor, you smelled what people were cooking. And they all were cooking. This was a house—basically, I think I said this—basically filled with immigrant Jews and immigrant Greeks. I think those were the two groups that inhabited this six-story house. Culturally, they are very similar people. There was also a time when people ate the meals they cooked, they didn't go out; there weren't all these fast food restaurants in those days, of course. To go to a restaurant was a big thing, and a very rare thing. So you ate at home, and the woman was supposed to provide the meals. There was a lot of cooking, and there were smells, that's true.

Then there was accessibility of kids, because in my house, there must have been—I forget the number—twelve, fifteen kids at least, maybe more, just living in that one building. So on rainy days when you couldn't play outdoors you played in the house either in yours or your friends' apartment or in the hallways. There was a lot of noise from that. People would open their doors and just shout, and we would be playing ball, running up and down the steps. And then there was living in an apartment, complete accessibility to the city. You didn't walk out onto dusty country roads, you walked out into a teeming mass, you just left your apartment building and the streets were full of people. I can't—this is not nostalgia, because of the lack of cars, because people sat on the streets in those days, in chairs, older people, because younger people and young mothers were around, kids were riding tricycles and bicycles and playing ball, the streets were teeming with people. And they still are. Except now, it's a Dominican neighborhood now. Now the streets—we use different terms, the street was the sidewalk when I grew up, and the gutter was what we now call the street. Where the cars go we called the gutter.

03:00:08:28

Lage: The whole street you called the gutter.

03:00:08:29

Levine: That was the gutter, "Stay out of the gutter!" my mother would yell. [laughter] And the street was the street. That's how I recall it in any case.

03:00:08:36

Lage: Let me ask you, did you have bathrooms in your apartment, and showers?

03:00:08:40

Levine: Oh yes, we had one bathroom.

03:00:08:43

Lage: Because in that era there were a lot of people going down the hall and bathing in metal tubs.

03:00:08:48

Levine: In our neighborhood, it was new housing. It's very interesting, this was true of Harlem too, and we were in fact Harlem Heights, renamed Washington Heights, but it's geographically Harlem. Harlem is a valley and then it rises to the highest point in Manhattan, which is Fort Tryon, around there, which is up, 200<sup>th</sup>, 210<sup>th</sup> Street, something like that, and then Manhattan ends. There is one neighborhood north of Washington Heights, it's called Inwood—I don't know that neighborhood—but that's the northernmost neighborhood in Washington Heights.

03:00:09:20

Lage: Inwood?

03:00:09:21

Levine: Yes, Inwood. I guess it was in the woods. [laughter] That whole neighborhood was. You know, that wasn't populated until the twentieth century. So blacks were able to move into Harlem, which had nice housing, because they had built all of this housing and then it went uninhabited, much of it. This was true of Washington Heights too. The housing was relatively new. The buildings were not old tenement buildings; they just had a lot of immigrants in them who quickly turned them into old tenement buildings. [laughter] The housing stock was okay. A lot of the houses, as you pointed out last time, didn't have elevators, but ours did. There were lots of walk-up buildings. But I don't think any of them had bathrooms in the hall. I think in that sense it was good housing and we were very fortunate. My parents came from East Harlem, that is, that's where they lived as adults, and that was a very different kind, that was much older housing. But even that was relatively new if you compare it to the lower East Side, where the Jews, a lot of Jews and other immigrants came to begin with.

So apartments were the only way I knew of living, living in the city. I think I said some of this last time, and if I'm redundant—

03:00:10:38

Lage: So be it.

03:00:10:39

Levine: —you'll forgive me. But the city is not this big, anonymous—maybe it is to people who come there as adults from little towns. But if you're born in an immigrant community, and that was what the city was, really, to me, a congeries of immigrant communities. They were communities. I grew up in a community. I don't think I could walk a block, when I grew up, without someone I knew being there on the street, saying, "hi" or, "hello," or not saying anything, but I knew who they were. They might be people I didn't like, but there they were. This was good. I could walk around my own part of the neighborhood, the hood.

03:00:11:22

Lage: Did you call it that?

03:00:11:23

Levine: No, that's a black thing. And I think it's a recent thing, I don't think it goes back to my youth even in black neighborhoods. I could walk around my neighborhood with a sense of security. I knew most of the people, I was familiar with the streets, I knew the houses, I knew where the park was. Even as a young kid, I very early seemed to have, from family stories, fought for a sense of independence. I went to an elementary school on 173<sup>rd</sup> Street, my parents and I lived at 176<sup>th</sup> Street, so it was three and a half blocks away. Public School 173, that's where I spent the first six years of my education. When I was probably in kindergarten, probably in first grade, my mother used to come and pick me up, and I didn't like that. I was six years old. She tells the story that I didn't like it and she persisted anyway, a nervous mother, I was her first child. At the age of six when she came one day, I ran away from her into the gutter, into what we call the street, what I now call the street, and a car was coming, and it had to jam its brakes down. My mother tells me, I remember it vaguely, but I was almost killed. That was the last time she ever came to pick me up.

03:00:12:49

Lage: She decided it was more dangerous to pick you up.

03:00:12:51

Levine: Yes. My parents were good that way. When I finally got through to them what I needed in my life, they basically tried to understand these things. It seems to me in a way, and I talked about this last time and I won't repeat it, but my insistence on going to Boy Scout camp—I was eleven and a half years old, too young really to be in the Boy Scouts—all of this was some attempt to be independent, from what was a large, loving, and I guess partly suffocating family. [laughter] I had this need also, and it was also a male thing, I have no doubt. I don't know if my sister went through this, but the need to be able to walk the streets on my own without my mother coming, oh ignominy.

03:00:13:39

Lage: Well, did you venture further than other kids in your neighborhood? Were there kind of invisible boundaries of how far you would go?

03:00:13:47

Levine: There were; there were absolute boundaries. One of them, I think I said last time, one of them was just a little bit east of Broadway. There was the Hudson River Bridge, the Hudson River, then five or six blocks, long blocks, avenue blocks through Broadway, then another seven or eight blocks and you had the Harlem River. So it was a narrow part of Manhattan. I went to junior high school a block or two east of Broadway, the trolleys ran on Broadway. But Broadway was a kind of dividing line, and if you went much east—and the big avenue from Broadway, the next big avenue was St. Nicholas Avenue—going east of St. Nicholas Avenue, that is towards the Harlem River side of St. Nicholas, was not a wise thing to do, if you came from my part. Because

there, there were a lot of kids who were not Jews. [laughter] And it was their turf.

03:00:14:44

Lage: And they were Irish?

03:00:14:46

Levine: They were Irish, and some of them were Italian. When I was in elementary school I didn't see much of those kids. When I went to junior high school, we all went to the same junior high school; it was a bigger school. The Jewish kids from one side, and the Greek kids and the Armenian kids from the west side of Broadway and the Irish and Italian kids from the east side of Broadway all went to the same junior high school.

03:00:15:08

Lage: And did they interrelate?

03:00:15:10

Levine: Well, yes. I began to have some friends. Especially because, as I said last time and I won't belabor it, because I was not a particularly good kid, I was put into many of the slower classes. I had a lot of *school* friends, they weren't after-school friends. It's funny, because you did go back to your little part of the neighborhood, and my part of the neighborhood was Jewish, Greek, and Armenian. In school I did have friends who were not Jews. I'm going to get to that whole business. We played in the streets; as I said last time, we played in the little local park, J. Hood Wright Park. As we got older, I wondered who J. Hood Wright was, and when I was in high school I asked one of my history teachers who I thought knew everything, I said, "Ms. Gloster," I said to her, "Who was J. Hood Wright?" It's J, the initial J, Hood Wright. She looked at me and said, "Oh, probably the guy who invented the traffic light," but clearly she didn't know who he was. [laughter] I never did find out until I was writing my book, *Highbrow, Lowbrow* and I was getting into the whole question of patrons of the opera, I went into opera in New York. And J. Hood Wright was a Morgan partner, a J.P. Morgan partner. I'll bet he left either his estate or a hunk of land—a lot of those people probably owned land up there in the uninhabited parts of Manhattan, speculating, who knows what. Or maybe they had country homes up there. He probably left some land to the city and they named a park for him.

03:00:16:42

Lage: It's kind of nice you found out at some point.

03:00:16:43

Levine: I did, I felt better about it. J. Hood Wright Park, it's still there and my mother used it a lot in her late years because they built a senior center there. It was a very nice little park, there was a baseball field, there was a little wading pool, we went sleigh-riding. It was a small park, but to kids who lived in apartments it was a big park. Everything is relative.

03:00:17:09

Lage: Did you swim in the river?

03:00:17:13

Levine: I did not learn to swim until I was in Boy Scout camp, but some of my friends did. When I was in Boy Scout camp at the age of twelve I learned to swim, I never was a very good swimmer. The river was dirty, and there were—it titillated us—there were what we called scumbags, prophylactics, used prophylactics, floating around. [laughter] People went down to this uninhabited part, I guess, and had amour. So we didn't swim there very much. Then as we got older, there were really lovely parks north of us. Fort Tryon Park, which has the Cloisters in it. And then if you really went—we didn't do this—but if you really went further north, there was Van Cortlandt Park, which is a very lovely park with the Van Cortlandt house in it. I did that as a college student, I would walk up there. Fort Tryon Park, which was on 190<sup>th</sup> Street, only fourteen blocks away from where I lived, and we could even walk to the Cloisters. As I got older, especially, again, when I was in college, I used to walk up to the Cloisters. They were beautiful, that convent full of medieval art. Rockefeller brought that convent over, brick by brick, they brought the whole damn thing over.

03:00:18:37

Lage: Stolen from Europe.

03:00:18:38

Levine: Stolen from Europe. And they reconstructed it on one of the high points of New York, overlooking the Hudson River, very, very lovely. So we had little pieces of nature around us which we used. There was never any trouble finding people; they were all around. This was good, it gave you a sense of community, and it was bad, it was hard to misbehave in your own immediate neighborhood. I may have mentioned that last time; if I fought in the street, people would yell at me, especially because they knew my old man, who was the owner of the little fruit and vegetable store. Even when my apartment was uninhabited as I got into my teens I couldn't do hanky-panky, because you couldn't get into the building without seeing people. They were all, even in the winter time, you met them in the hallways, they were standing around. People would stand in the hallways and talk, just leaning over your—they'd open their doors and they'd talk to the neighbors across the hall. It was like leaning over your fence. So, it was impossible to do anything that wouldn't be reported back. That's part of a community, I suppose.

Well, I think I talked about the variety—there was a variety of people because it was a city. The variety wasn't black and white, but it was different nationalities, east European Jews and German Jews, there were big differences.

03:00:20:08

Lage: And were you very aware of this? Did people—?

- 03:00:20:10  
 Levine: Well, I had German Jewish friends, but my parents were very aware of it.
- 03:00:20:14  
 Lage: They would be identified?
- 03:00:20:16  
 Levine: Oh, well, you could tell who the German Jews were. First of all, they were more recent immigrants and they spoke with thick accents, though a lot of people spoke with thick accents, but their accents were different. And they were German speaking rather than Yiddish speaking, which was a very big difference. Their accents were different. My father was Yiddish speaking, my mother was Yiddish speaking. These people spoke German.
- 03:00:20:35  
 Lage: Were these people who left during the Hitler era?
- 03:00:20:37  
 Levine: Yes, they were.
- 03:00:20:38  
 Lage: And did they bring tales of Hitler?
- 03:00:20:40  
 Levine: Well, I'm sure they did, but I didn't hear them. I'm sure they did. My father knew a lot of them because they came into his store as customers. I may have mentioned this, but none of them were his personal friends. That's something that I only realized later, recently, when I thought back on my youth. With all the people my father knew from Germany who—you know, women would come into his store and tell him stories, they talked about their problems; he was a young guy and they were young women. I guess, thinking back, and trying to say, "What was my father's life like?" Because when I was very conscious, he was older and the store was a burden. He worked too hard, he felt that he didn't have money and none of his dreams would come true in that sense. But when he was a young man, and the store was full of young women and they talked to him, a lot of these women, a high percentage of them, were German Jews. And even later, they would talk to him, they knew my father. I never saw them in my home; we never went to their homes. It's very interesting.
- 03:00:21:46  
 Lage: Was it kind of a social class thing, do you think?
- 03:00:21:48  
 Levine: It kind of was an ethnic thing, in part. I don't really know; we went to different synagogues even. My synagogue—the synagogues, we went to two different synagogues when I grew up, and they were both very much east European Jewish synagogues. Those two groups didn't mingle. But their kids did; the differentiation was generational. I mingled with their children, a lot of

my friends were German Jews, and it didn't matter. They spoke the same English I spoke.

03:00:22:16

Lage: Were they less religious?

03:00:22:18

Levine: They were more religious. Well, they were religious. My family was already getting—my family were Orthodox Jews, we went to an Orthodox synagogue. But my father, soon we found he had to work on Saturdays, which was a big change. But I remember my parents would let me go to a ball game Friday night, or even Saturday, where some of my German Jewish friends had to lie, tell their parents they were doing something else, because the notion of going to a ball game on a Friday night was just—but that must have varied a lot. The German Jewish friends I had tended to come from religious families. They themselves were no more—in fact, I did say last time I went through a religious period myself at the ages of thirteen to fourteen and a half, fifteen; I was very religious. But I'm not sure it prevented me from going to ball games and stuff. [laughter] I went to ball games a lot; that was very important. We lived twenty-one blocks from the Polo Grounds where the New York Giants played. I could actually walk. That was the border between Harlem and Harlem Heights, Washington Heights. I could walk to that stadium, and it was even possible to walk a little further south, across the bridges, across the Harlem River, and be on, I think it was 161<sup>st</sup> Street in the Bronx where Yankee Stadium was.

03:00:23:42

Lage: Did you go to Yankee Stadium?

03:00:23:42

Levine: Oh yes. Yes, I did. But I went even more to—well, I used to go—there was a period in my life when my father let me because I had to work in the store. But there was a period in my life where he was letting me go to afternoon ball games. I went every Saturday. It cost fifty cents to get in and sit in the bleachers, ten cents for a program—of course, I used to like to keep score—and then you had forty cents out of the dollar that I have, you have forty cents to buy a hotdog and soda, which was all very possible. It was wonderful. I used to sit in the Polo Grounds, or in Yankee Stadium, in the bleachers and watch ball games. I was a rabid baseball fan, and a lot of it was on the radio.

03:00:24:27

Lage: Now, what drew you, do you think? What drew you to baseball?

03:00:24:30

Levine: Well, you know, baseball is interesting. Baseball was a motor for assimilation. My father, who was no athlete, and who never had time to be an athlete, assimilated, I'm quite convinced, now thinking back on it, through baseball. He became a rabid baseball fan. He began taking me to baseball games when I was hardly old enough to know where I was, five, six years old he was taking

me to baseball games. I remember sitting there, being bored. He took me, he said, "We're going today, and Mayor La Guardia is throwing out the first ball," at the Polo Grounds, the New York Giants season. He was so excited; my father loved baseball. My grandfather, my mother's father, the only grandfather I knew, was a baseball fan. My uncles, his sons, everyone was a baseball fan. And it was, I think it was a definite instrument of assimilation. You could talk the lingo, you had gossip, you could talk about things. And it linked different groups together, it still does. I can be in an elevator with someone, and we can talk about the 49ers or the Raiders, and we can be from totally different groups. I think those things are very important. People who think that athletics is a profligate thing in cities, and a waste of money, are making a mistake. They're unifiers, they tie people together, give them a sense of who they are and where they are. It was a very big thing in my family.

Now, it was a male thing. My mother didn't know a baseball from a hole in the wall, and my sister grew up totally hating it. My father never thought of taking her to baseball games, never did take her to a baseball game, that I remember. I once asked her, and she had trouble remembering, if she was taken as a kid to baseball games, but he took me all the time. My uncles took me. They'd come in, I had these young uncles, and they'd drag me—I see my middle son, who is not married and who doesn't have children—I see the way he treats his nephews and nieces. He just loves them, he takes them places, he takes them to ball games, he takes them to films, he takes them around. He loves to be with them and take them. My uncles were like that. I had two unmarried uncles who were very young guys and they used to—so I went to ball games all the time and it was a very important thing.

03:00:27:01

Lage: And was it—?

03:00:27:01

Levine: And it was baseball, it wasn't football. Football I discovered as a college student. I used to go to Columbia games. Columbia University had a stadium in upper Manhattan, much further north than where I was, and I went to Pinker Field, I think it was called. But that was later. As a kid, there was only one sport.

03:00:27:24

Lage: And was it one team? Were you Giants fans?

03:00:27:27

Levine: Well, there were—some of my folks were Giants fans, and some were Yankee fans. None were Brooklyn Dodger fans. I really loved both teams, I grew up with both teams. When I came out here, I was so angry at the Giants for leaving New York, I was still angry. They left in 1958, and I came here four years later. I never resumed that.

03:00:27:47

Lage: Oh you didn't resume them as San Francisco Giants!

03:00:27:49

Levine: No, I never did. When the A's came out I became an [Oakland] A's fan. So, it was an important thing. My friends and I spent endless hours talking about baseball, in addition to seeing it. We spoke about baseball, we traded baseball cards, we argued about baseball.

03:00:28:08

Lage: Did you keep the figures? Were the numbers important?

03:00:28:11

Levine: Well, when I went to games—I can never remember going to a game without keeping score. My father taught me how to do that. See, my father learned that as an immigrant. He learned the whole spiel. He knew how to keep score—it's a very interesting phenomenon, it Americanized him. He was in many ways not a very American guy. I was going to talk about this a little later, very soon. He felt very American, my father. He had no real sense—I once said to him that I'd like to go to Europe. He said, "Europe, why would you want to go to Europe?" [laughter] He said, "I left Europe. You want to go to America, you want to see America." He had seen nothing! He didn't see America until I moved out here and he came to visit me with my mother.

03:00:28:57

Lage: But he saw New York.

03:00:28:58

Levine: He saw New York.

03:00:28:59

Lage: But only one part.

03:00:29:01

Levine: But I mean the rest of it, he would say, "You want to go to America, it's so beautiful, it's such a big country." He had seen none of that at all. Our big trip was to a bar mitzvah in Wilkes-Barre, Pennsylvania. That was the only trip I made as a kid. We actually got all the way to Pennsylvania, the coal fields of Pennsylvania. It was very exciting. I don't think my father went; it was just my mother and my sister and I. Of course, these were old friends of my mother's, who had lived in New York and moved to Wilkes-Barre. It was later that my father himself discovered America. But he had this great love of it.

Now you wanted me to—just to stay on this business of the groups. When I went to junior high school, I said this, my friendships broadened out. I actually had Protestant friends and Catholic friends. There were even a few Puerto Ricans; they were just beginning to move into the neighborhood. I told the story last time about being beaten up by older Puerto Rican kids.

Gender. Well, it was a male society I grew up in. Even though there were girls there, they weren't part of it, they didn't play ball with us, they didn't hang with us. We were not very complimentary on the terms we used about them. I'm a little embarrassed about the things we would call girls. I don't know if I spoke about that great day in my life which is—you know, things stay in your mind, when crises come. We were locking—I think I may have spoken about this—we were locking a bunch of girls into an alleyway. Many of the buildings were separated by alleyways, and they went right through the street, from 176<sup>th</sup> Street to 177<sup>th</sup> Street, 175<sup>th</sup> Street, you could walk through these alleyways, like these Berkeley paths. If you knew your neighborhood, you could walk through alleyways from one block to another. They were shortcuts, we used them all the time, that was where the garbage was kept. Houses faced each other in these alleyways. One day we were locking—it was all play; the girls could have run to the other end of the alley and gotten right out, but they wanted to get out this door, and we were holding it. One little girl, Ellen, bit me. She was a German Jewish kid, who lived in my apartment building, and her brother was a good friend of mine. She bit me, right on the knuckle. I didn't think about it, it was a tiny little thing. The next day I couldn't lift my arm, and they had just—sulfa was a recent drug, and the doctor said that sulfa saved my life. I had blood poisoning, which killed people.

03:00:31:38

Lage: Yes, and did you tell how you'd gotten it?

03:00:31:41

Levine: Oh yes, my mother was furious at the little girl! She yelled at her mother. "Why was your daughter biting my son?" But she was quite right to bite me. But we had this—who knows what underlay a lot of this—but we had this adversarial relationship with *girls*. We were little kids. The girls played with the girls, and the boys—they had different games. They played potsy [a variant of hopscotch], they played jacks, they did other things.

03:00:32:05

Lage: They didn't play marbles?

03:00:32:07

Levine: You know, that's a good question. Were girls part of that? I can't remember that they were. I have to tell you, I always liked girls, but I didn't admit that. [laughter] I always found girls interesting, and later on, I found them even preferable to boys. But when we were young we hung; it was, as I said a moment ago, it was a male society concerned with sports, playing sports, talking about sports and watching sports. High school changed this a bit. I began to hang out a little bit more with girls in high school, but the group didn't. We still had this all-male group which went right through college, my college years.

03:00:32:53

Lage: The same group.

03:00:32:53

Levine: Hanging on the corners, neighborhood groups. We played as kids and when we stopped playing in the streets and other kids took our places, and cars began to come in and make it more difficult—after World War II, we hung, we hung on corners, in front of candy stores, and in front of luncheonettes. There was a luncheonette on 175<sup>th</sup> Street and Broadway, and that was our hangout. We'd sit at the luncheonette, drinking coffee, eating sandwiches.

03:00:33:18

Lage: But you didn't hang in bars; how about bars?

03:00:33:21

Levine: Well, we didn't. That's interesting. There was a bar right on the corner, right across the street from where I lived. It was only eighteen, drinking age, and we'd occasionally go into the bar. We didn't come from that kind of culture. There was no alcohol—though I drank, as I said last time. I mean, I learned to drink as a teenager; it was breaking the rules and exploring new worlds. My parents didn't drink, my culture didn't drink, it was not a drinking culture. On holidays they would drink some. My grandfather—I should tell you this story, it's a very cute story. Every once in a while, a little Jewish guy in a caftan, you know, those black things. He looked like a rabbi. He was very short, and he'd come into the neighborhood. I remember him very well because he had a long white beard, and he had two black—it looked like leather, it must have been leather; they didn't have those faux leather substitutes in those days—he had two leather satchels that looked very heavy. He was bent over, and he'd walk into the neighborhood, and he'd walk into my apartment building, and he'd go up to the fourth floor where my grandparents lived, and he'd go into their apartment. He'd come out, and the satchels were empty and he was much straighter. [laughter] He looked like a holy man but what he was a bootlegger. He delivered my grandfather—sporadically, it must have taken them a long time—he delivered, I think they were two five-gallon bottles of alcohol, which my grandfather made into—he took old whiskey bottles—I once drank it, as a teenager, I once drank some of that stuff. Only once. [laughter] My grandfather poured it into old Costairs liquor bottles. My grandfather would drink this stuff, but again, in a very very controlled, measured way; they were not drinkers. My father never drank at all, my father had no tolerance for it. One drink on a high holiday, a feast—we had a lot of feasts in my house on all the holidays, in my apartment. All the relatives came. The Yiddish word for relative, for family, is *mishpucha*, and they all came, *mishpucha*. Then there was food and laughter—m-i-s, who knows how to spell that in English.

03:00:35:47

Lage: I'll have to get a Yiddish dictionary.

03:00:35:49

Levine: We'll find it. On those occasions, there would be toasts. I remember my father, his limit was about one shot. They drank slivovitz, which is plum brandy, very powerful. That's the drink they loved. They'd say "*L'Chayim*," to life, and they'd down the stuff. I remember my father couldn't really drink more than one. I didn't come from a drinking culture. We'd go into the bar across the street as young men and have a beer for fifteen cents, I do remember that for a glass of beer.

Family. My family was an immigrant family, mainly from the Russian part of Europe. My father grew up in Lithuania, but it was when it was owned by Russia. It became independent for a short time after World War I; the Baltic states became independent and then they were swallowed up by Russia, and then of course they were independent again. So he was a Russian Jew. My mother's family came from the Ukraine, Odessa; they were Russian Jews.

03:00:36:58

Lage: Did they see themselves as Russian Jews?

03:00:37:02

Levine: No, they saw themselves as Jews, they spoke Yiddish.

03:00:37:03

Lage: As Jews, what about Lithuania, and Ukraine?

03:00:37:06

Levine: That's a very interesting question. That's a very interesting question. I don't know the answer to that. It didn't figure large in my life, even though, I think I may have mentioned, they were physically very different, my parents. My father was much fairer; his whole family were light skinned and red headed, and my mother's family was darker and smaller in stature.

03:00:37:30

Lage: Were you a lot bigger than your father?

03:00:37:32

Levine: Oh much, my father was a small man. I was bigger. My grandfather was a very small man, and his sons, not his daughters, but his sons were both over six feet. It's interesting. It's the diet! It must be the diet; it's not genes. The capacity has to be there, I guess. But my uncles—and my sister is not tall, my mother wasn't tall, but I grew up very quickly and then stopped. I ended up almost six-foot-two. Both my uncles were also fairly tall guys. So who knows? It probably is diet, they ate a different diet. But they made no difference about this, they were Jews, and that's what united them. It wasn't—even though, as I think I said last time, I think they came from different gene pools. They certainly were physically very different. To us, growing up, to me—I shouldn't say us, I didn't talk to my friends about this—to me, the kids who were the Americans were the Irish, because they looked like the movies, they looked like the ads in the newspapers. They looked like American kids,

they didn't look like us, and they didn't look like the Armenians and the Greeks, and even the Italians. I could tell, they all looked different. The symbol of American-ness was that look that they had.

03:00:38:58

Lage: That you saw in the movies? Do you think that's where it—?

03:00:39:02

Levine: Oh yes, sure, because where else would I have seen it? Because I had never met these people. I didn't know a Protestant; I don't think I knew a Protestant until I was in high school. It wasn't the world where there were many Protestants, not in my neighborhood. There were Catholics, though I didn't know—I should tell you, that in the religious sensibility I grew up in, it sounds harsh but it really wasn't, there were Jews and there were *goyim*. *Goy* just meant gentiles. It wasn't a pejorative word at all; it just meant gentiles. There were them and there were us. I don't think my parents had a sense that there were Methodists and Presbyterians and Episcopalians and Catholics. They were *goyim*. There were—

03:00:39:43

Lage: You didn't need to make these distinctions.

03:00:39:45

Levine: They were Christians, and they were a little dangerous. You had to watch them, because they thought you were Christ-killers and they didn't like you.

03:00:39:53

Lage: Did that come out? Your parents would tell you that?

03:00:39:56

Levine: Well, my parents never talked about that, but the kids told me that. They called me a Christ killer, I was called a Christ-killer.

03:00:40:02

Lage: By the Irish?

03:00:40:04

Levine: By kids, yeah, whether they were Irish or Italian. It wasn't often, but kike, Yid, Christ-killer. None of this shocked me, so I must have been prepared, I think my parents prepared me for this. It was very interesting, if I can do a parenthetical thing for a moment, when I taught at City College of New York, and I taught European history. I will get to my City College days, maybe a year from now. [laughter] At the rate I'm going! When I taught at City College of New York, and I had to teach the Reformation, I was a little nervous. I was teaching—there were lots of Jews in the class, but there were non-Jews too. I was a Jew and I was very aware—I didn't want it to look like anti-Catholic stuff or anything. So I gave a very mild version, I gave a very mild version of the Reformation, of what led to the Reformation. I stayed on theology. There were kids in my class, Catholic kids, who had gone—and they were invariably Catholic kids who had gone to parochial schools who

would raise their hands and say, "Hey Mr. Levine, you haven't talked about Pope X. You know Pope X had children! Pope X had mistresses!" I was amazed. They told me these horror stories about the church. They were invariably, they weren't Catholic kids who went to public school, they were Catholic kids who went to parochial schools; they were prepared for this. Well, my parents prepared me too. I can't remember the preparation, but I was prepared. Black parents prepared their kids, and I was prepared for kids calling me Christ-killer and the like. My parents on some level must have prepared me, or maybe my culture. God knows where I got that from. You know, the one—maybe I shouldn't tell this story, but it is an indicative story. It sounds so negative, and I guess it was. There were people who came into our neighborhood who would give you a New Testament, if you promised to read it. They would just stand on the corner with a satchel, they'd have several little New Testaments. We had no New Testament in my house. I was the first person in my family who ever read—I did ultimately read the New Testament. But they would hand them out, and we were full of scorn. We were young kids, we knew who they were, and we knew that they wanted us to change who we were, and we didn't like that. So we actually once sat in an alley way and tried to burn—we didn't succeed—we tried to burn a New Testament! [laughter] We were lighting matches to it. It was a sense of imperialism, that they were the imperial powers coming and saying, "You ought not to be who you are, we want to convert you to something else." I remember resenting it, I didn't like that at all. Ultimately, of course, I did read the New Testament, and was, you know, very taken with the story of Christ and that whole thing. It's a very moving story, and it comes from my—it comes from *the* culture, that my people supposedly came, or did come from. He came from that culture too. I found the Christ story very engaging, I still do.

03:00:43:29

Lage:

But not enough to convert.

03:00:43:33

Levine:

No, no. Why would I want to do that? [laughter] And that gets us to what Judaism was and what the whole immigrant thing was. Religions played a role in the finding of our identity, that's who we were. Of course, you know, maybe if I had been in 1914 I could have played around with converting, though we'll get—this is a complicated story because after all, I did marry someone who wasn't a Jew. But I grew up—I was six years old in 1939 when World War II began, I was eight years old when we got into the war, and I was twelve years old when the war ended and all that stuff about the Holocaust came out. That just burned your identity into you, whether you had experienced—

03:00:44:17

Lage:

Tell me more about that.

03:00:44:18

Levine: —anti-Semitism or not, you knew it was there, you knew Jews were killed, there were these stories about millions of Jews being killed in concentration camps—well, you knew about the concentration camps earlier.

03:00:44:29

Lage: Now when, how did you come to know about that?

03:00:44:31

Levine: See, I was so young. I knew about the concentration camps very early because a lot of these German Jews—whether they told us, it was all over the place, the stories. Rabbis talked about it in the synagogues, Jews talked about it. After the war you had all these stories about the Holocaust, the pictures of the bodies and the skinny, starved people, and the piles of corpses and all that horror. I was very young when that came out; I was twelve, thirteen. I was being bar mitzvahed, I was becoming a man in the Jewish religion, taking my place. I went through this period of ultra-religiosity.

03:00:45:15

Lage: Do you think learning about the Holocaust had any effect on that?

03:00:45:18

Levine: Sure, it could have. It also made it impossible for me—if I could skip ahead, I became an intellectual and a free-thinker, I wasn't bound by this stuff anymore. So when I met my wife and fell in love, and indeed I had close relationships with women who weren't Jews well before my wife, I wasn't looking for it, and I fell in love with Jewish women too, I happened to marry one who wasn't. I never thought about children, I never thought it would be important for me; it just wasn't an issue to me. It just never occurred to me to worry about that.

03:00:45:58

Lage: To worry about the mixed religion?

03:00:46:00

Levine: To worry about what my kids would be. When I actually had kids, I realized that it was important for me to have them know who the world was going to think they were. They had names like Joshua Levine. [laughter] My wife had no problem with this at all. I guess it was there, and my kids were raised as Jews and bar mitzvahed and everything else.

03:00:46:26

Lage: So you did take them to the synagogue.

03:00:46:27

Levine: They're just like I was at their age, they're free-thinkers, they're not religious, they're not bound by marrying Jewish women or anything like that. Nonetheless, it's an interesting thing. I felt that identity. With me it's less of a religious thing than an identity, this is who I am. It's very hard to back out of

who you are, especially if who you are is a beleaguered group, if you are part of a beleaguered group. To back out of it is almost to identify yourself with it.

03:00:47:04

Lage: But if you saw yourself—I was interested in what you said about the Irish kids were the Americans, and you must have had some drive to want to become American.

03:00:47:14

Levine: Well, I knew I couldn't become American, physically. I never had that drive. I've always wondered at people who—this is not a negative thing, I don't mean to criticize—but I always wondered at people who changed their names. There was a kid in our neighborhood named Goldberg, and when we were teenagers, he came by one day and said—he was peripheral to the group, he wasn't a central part of it but he hung with us sometimes—he came one day and said, "My name is Gilbert. I'm now Gilbert." I remember saying to him—we were fourteen, fifteen—I remember saying to him, "Why'd your family change its name?" He said, "Have you ever picked up the phone book and seen how many Goldbergs there are in the phonebook?" I accepted that but I didn't believe it, because there were at least as many Levines in the phonebook. Levine is a very common name—the tribe of Levy, Levines, Levinsons, Levitz, Levins—the world is full of them in Manhattan. But I didn't know why they changed their name; later I figured it out, but even then I probably figured it out. People have the right to do that, people do it all the time. I was shocked, maybe I said this to you, but I was shocked. I was already an adult, in the sixties I guess it was, when Simon and Garfunkel came onto the scene, they were first entertainers, Jewish entertainers, who managed to keep their names. There was no one before them that I can think of, in my whole life there was no one—I did talk about this last time.

03:00:48:39

Lage: No, you didn't.

03:00:48:40

Levine: No, well, see, we knew, as kids, we talked about this, that John Garfield was Julius Garfinkel and we accepted the fact that he had to change his name to John Garfield to be where he was. And Bernie Schwartz became Tony Curtis, and what was her name? I can't think of her first name; Perske was her last name, became Lauren Bacall. Judith Anne Perske [Betty Joan Perske] or something like that, became Lauren Bacall. And you know what we called Lauren Bacall in the forties, when we were growing up? We called her Lauren Bagel. [laughter] Because we knew who she was.

03:00:49:19

Lage: See, I'm not even aware of this.

03:00:49:20

Levine: Yeah, so we knew that. We had the names for lots of these people who had changed.

03:00:49:26

Lage: Jack Benny.

03:00:49:26

Levine: Edward G. Robinson and Jack Benny, we knew who they were. And we accepted the fact, I guess you had to do that. But I didn't have to do that. They did it, it was a pragmatic reason, and they did it. So when Simon and Garfunkel came out, it signaled to me a change in the culture, and indeed it was a change in culture, that they could have names like this and still make it. Garfunkel? I mean, Garfield had a name like that and he had to change it to Garfield. It was very interesting. There must have been lots of Jews with names like that that we didn't know were Jews. Every once in a while someone tells me X was a Jew and I say, "Really?" Because I'm surprised. I remember when I found out that my colleague Woodrow Wilson Borah was a Jew. I was amazed. Because the other thing is, you have stereotypes of who the Jews are. The Jews to me were European Jews. German, east European Jews were Jews and I knew what they looked like. And they were New York Jews.

03:00:50:32

Lage: And what was his background?

03:00:50:34

Levine: Woodrow Wilson Borah was an east European Jew, but he was born in Mississippi, Biloxi. And his name, and his manners—that's the other problem, it wasn't just where they came from, but where they grew up in America.

New York Jews—I'll tell you an interesting story. I'm skipping ahead but we're on the subject of Jews. I would have kids in my classes at Berkeley when I first began teaching who would have neutral names or names that I would consider to be gentile names, and there was nothing about them that was Jewish in my lexicon, but of course, my lexicon was the New York lexicon. But I didn't realize that. I was a chauvinistic, culture-bound guy, and I came to California. These kids would be in my class, and I would say—nice young men and women—and I would say, "What are you going to do when you graduate?" And some of them would say things like—it was the sixties and the world was full of admiration for Israel; who can remember that, but it was true then—they would say things like, "I think I'm going to spend a year or two working on a kibbutz." I'd come home to my wife and say, "This nice gentile kid, isn't that nice?" Only later did I realize that they weren't gentile.

03:00:51:52

Lage: They were from Los Angeles!

03:00:51:52

Levine: They were Los Angeles Jews! [laughter] They were Los Angeles Jews. They looked different to me, and they certainly sounded, they sounded like California kids. They had neutral names like Gilbert. They were neutral, they were not Jewish names. There's another cute story from that period, I'll tell it

while I'm on this. I had a Tammy, but I forgot her last name, a very pretty young kid who was in one of my early classes at Berkeley. In those days we had the semesters, so after Christmas you finished the semester for a couple of weeks, then you have a semester break between the fall and winter semesters, spring semesters. She came in to say goodbye after the class was over; she was in one of my seminars, I got to know her, and she later became a stewardess in fact. I said, "What are you doing during the break?" She said, "I'm going home." I said, "Oh, where is that?" She said, "Dublin." I said, "Dublin!" I had never been to Europe. I said, "How exciting! Dublin! Well, isn't that wonderful?" Of course, she meant Dublin, California. But I didn't know there was a Dublin, California. It was my first or second year here. She looked at me with this incredulous look. I was talking about how exciting, and she thought, "how dull." [laughter] From Berkeley to Dublin! It was very cute. I learned—she told me right then and there about Dublin, California, she corrected me. I had a lot to learn about California, and I've been here long enough to learn about much of it, I guess.

So Jews. I talked about how my father connected to America through baseball. He also, and I think this was not untypical, he connected through politics. He became a Roosevelt—well, obviously not, he became a Democrat before Roosevelt. But they were, in my knowledge, or when I was growing up, they were Roosevelt Democrats; they loved that guy. I think I told the story of my grandmother crying at Roosevelt's death. They loved that man, and they were very solid Democrats. I think I also told the story of how my father would vote for a Catholic Democratic candidate against Jacob Javits, who ran as a Republican.

03:00:54:20

Lage: That's a big leap.

03:00:54:21

Levine: Because the Democrats were very important to him and he identified as an American through the Democratic Party. They were Democrats with a big D.

03:00:54:30

Lage: Were there Democratic Party workers who would come around?

03:00:54:34

Levine: Oh yes, but so did Jacob Javits come around. I met Jacob Javits on more than one occasion; he would come into the store. He'd work the streets. He had to work very hard, because that was a very Democratic neighborhood. He was reelected and reelected and reelected. He was never defeated in that neighborhood for Congress. He would come into the store at least once every election cycle, which is every two years. He'd walk into the store and say, "Hi," shake hands, "I'm Jake Javits, blah blah blah." So yeah, they all did that.

I wanted to talk a little bit about World War II, which was a very important event in my life. As I say, I was eight when we got into the war, so between

the ages of eight and twelve, a very important age period, when you're really forming your identity; it was a period of great patriotism with the war. My family was very much connected with that war. It seemed to me, a lot—probably every family was, but I knew my family and my neighborhood—all of my cousins who were old enough to serve, served. Several of them were wounded. My cousin Leo Levine—I may have mentioned this—was killed in the war, which was a big event. He was killed in the worst kind of way in a way; he was missing in action over Burma. He was in a plane—I don't know what his job was, he wasn't a pilot but he was something and they flew. There was a regular run over Burma during World War II, and his plane must have been shot down or crashed. My Uncle Meyer, my father's older—he was a butcher—they were all in that kind of, the whole family, all the men were in that kind of thing, butchers, poultry guys, they had little stores.

03:00:56:25

Lage: It sounds all food oriented.

03:00:56:27

Levine: Well, see you could do that without an education. You could come to America, my grandfather opened a little laundry store and learned how to be a laundry guy. My father opened a fruit store and learned how to be a fruit guy, and they were independent. It's very important for these ethnic minorities, when there's lots of prejudice, it's very important for them to be able to do something independent, where they don't depend on others to hire them. Because they weren't, and you never were going to get hired. My father learned that. He worked in a piano factory, and he was hired because the guy mistook his name for French—Levin. My father didn't like them, but he didn't ask him to speak French so it was okay. [laughter] But he understood that it might have been difficult for him to get a job as a Jew. So a lot of them went into this—you know the whole joke—while I'm talking about this, it's important I think, the whole joke about "my son, the doctor." "My son the doctor is drowning, help, help!" All those wonderful jokes about the Jewish—it almost gets to the point that, they must have a gene for being doctors. But what it is, and again this comes to me later in life, is that in those days, when I grew up, you didn't need hospital connections. What you needed to be a doctor, what you needed was to get into medical school. That could be hard. But once you got into medical school, and once you got through your internship, you could come back to your neighborhood and hang out a sign, Lawrence Levine, MD, and in your apartment you could be a doctor. You didn't need hospital connections. I think I mentioned my grandmother—we had doctors who didn't have hospital connections. Lawyers, you could come back, *abogado*, that kind of thing. Blacks did it with the ministry and teaching. You did things where you could be independent in the community. Teaching, because there were black schools that hired black teachers in the South. Ministers. All of these groups found ways of being independent. Well, Greeks have no gene for being restaurateurs, but that was a way. For some reason, Greeks got into that. Italians and Jews got into the fruit thing. Chinese

and many others got into the laundry stuff. It was just opening, and that still goes today. Asian gardeners who go around leaving little notes in your mailbox, "Mr. Lee, Gardener." It's what you can do, and you don't depend on the other, the gentile, whoever the gentile is.

03:00:59:01

Lage: And it doesn't take a lot of capital to start it up.

03:00:59:03

Levine: Doesn't take a lot of capital and it doesn't take much education. It takes experience, but if you don't have it to begin with, you learn it. I don't know that my father knew a hell of a lot about fruit, vegetables, before he opened the store. His brothers-in-law were in it. He tried a few things that didn't work. He worked for people, and he got fired. He realized that being a Jew wasn't an advantage if he worked for non-Jews. So he went into his own thing. He worked for his brothers-in-law, learned how to do it, and then opened his little store. It was the only store he ever had. He opened this little store. He went looking, they lived in East Harlem, he found this empty store on 176<sup>th</sup> Street and Broadway. He thought it was nice, a lot of Jews around, he felt comfortable, and he opened the store. He just rented it, he didn't have to buy it; there was no capital, as you say. I guess maybe he had to build some stands in it, or had them built, for fruit. And they moved upstairs and they were in business, they never left. My mother died upstairs. They lived there—my mother died in 1988, she lived there from 1930 to 1988, except for that big move from 4B to 5C when my sister was born.

03:01:00:20

Lage: How long did your father keep the store?

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Levine: He went blind, well, mostly blind, through diabetes and bad doctors, but maybe he would have anyway, even with good doctors, so he couldn't work the store anymore. That must have been—he died in 1969, and I went to teach, I went to California in 1962, so it was somewhere in between those two dates, in the middle sixties, that he left the store and my mother went to work for Metropolitan Life, as I mentioned.

So the war was an important event, and it was an important way of them identifying too, even to the point of losing—both my mother's brothers were badly hurt, well, one of them forever, psychologically, never recovered, and lived an unhappy life, hanging around the neighborhood, never working again. He was a pistol, and the war took that out of him. The other one was badly hurt physically, but they put him back together. His fingers—he had a tank fall on him, but it was in sand. His fingers were found a few feet away from his hand, and they managed to—

03:01:01:29

Lage: Even back then.

03:01:01:30

Levine: To put his fingers back on. They got him right away, they found his fingers and put them all back, and he was able to live a normal life. He's still alive, he's the only one who's still alive from that family. He's lost it.

I wanted to talk about morality, if I could.

03:01:01:48

Lage: Sure, that's a good topic.

03:01:01:49

Levine: A sense of—yes, it's a good topic. I don't know how to approach this, because all people are raised with morality. But I just, in thinking back, you sometimes wonder, where do my values come from? A lot of them—I often wonder about this. People are so different. You meet people who are open and tolerant to difference and you meet people who aren't. I don't know what that is, I don't know where that comes from. So I wondered about myself because I've always been open. "He said modestly." [laughter] I've always been open. My parents, you see, my parents were not open in terms of their education. They lived in a much narrower world, but they must have been open—I never remember ever—there was always words like *goyim*, gentiles, *schwarze*, blacks. But *schwarze* is not a negative word, it's just black; it's what you attach to it that could be negative or positive. I don't remember anything negative or positive being attached. Black people were *schwarzes*; it's not an analog for niggers, it means black. It's the German, Yiddish word for black, and they were black people. Jews had never encountered them before coming to America, so that's why the word was probably applied. In any case there were those words. There were very few words because the world was lumped into very few categories. There were the others and there was us. But I think in the case of my family, the difference was not vertical. I don't think the "chosen people" thing—everybody says, all that Bible stuff—I don't think that was important in my life. It wasn't a vertical thing; we were up there and they were down there. It was a horizontal thing. We were here, they were there. You had to be a little careful of that. I told you last time about the term *goyishe naches*, gentile pleasures, with the artichoke.

03:01:03:47

Lage: Oh yes, right.

03:01:03:50

Levine: There were *goy* things you just didn't understand. There were lots of Jewish jokes like that. German Jews would tell them. Freud talks about jokes, his Austrian and German Jewish patients would tell him, a lot of these jokes work on *goyishe naches*, "Tell me, tell me, Schwartz," says an officer in the army, an Austrian officer to a lieutenant, "Tell me Schwartz, why should a man die for the fatherland?" And Schwartz says, "Exactly what I say, general, why should he?" That kind of thing. Or a funeral, Freud tells a joke about a funeral of some important—white horses and a hearse and all that. One Jew turns to

another and says, “*Goyishe naches.*” [laughter] This is what they get pleasure from, who can explain it? So I was raised with that, but it wasn’t—as I say, there was always a sense they were a little strange, those people—they have strange tastes in food and pleasure. Drinking was *goyishe naches*. We didn’t drink, that kind of stuff. But it wasn’t a vertical thing, I wasn’t taught to look down on anyone. I was taught to look up to myself, to not let people tell me I was no good. Somehow, I was prepared for that and it worked.

My father was an incredibly honest man; that probably had an effect on me. I’m just trying to account for it—I’ll tell you a little story. My mother’s sister Mary and her Irish—I’ll get back him—her Irish, Dublin-born-and-bred husband, a Jew, Emmanuel, Manny, lived in the Bronx for many years before they moved to New Jersey. That’s the first people I knew—

03:01:05:35

Lage: Oh, they’re the ones?

03:01:05:36

Levine: Yes. I was very close to my cousin Harvey, their oldest son, very, very close to him. He was like a brother to me, and we spent a lot of time there. My grandparents lived with them then. When they moved to New Jersey, my grandparents moved into our neighborhood. On one of our many weekends in the Bronx, it was Easter time. My cousin Harvey and I went into a Woolworth’s. This is what we stole from the Woolworth’s. We stole grass—you know, it’s just this phony grass that they put around because it was Easter and they had things on the grass—it wasn’t anything that they were selling. But we filled our pockets with grass. Then we stole little bunnies, an inch or two. I guess they were selling them or maybe they were just decorations, again, but we stole them. And then we stole round—you know the adhesive tape they come in round metal things, and there’s a hole in the middle?

03:01:06:34

Lage: Yes.

03:01:06:34

Levine: We stole those. We went back to his apartment, and we laid the grass out on his bed—we were very young—we laid the grass out on his bed and we put the hoops on the grass, and we jumped the little bunnies through the hoops. We were having a lot of fun doing this, probably fantasizing. My aunt comes in, Mary. There was very little money in this family, and she said, “Where’d you get that?” And we tried to lie but we failed, and then we admitted we stole it. This is what she did, she said, “You know what you’re going to do, you’re going to put those back in your pockets, you’re going to walk back to Woolworth’s, and you’re going to put it back.” We said, “Well, what if they catch us and think we’re stealing it?” She said, “Then you’ll pay the price that you should pay for stealing.” We went back and we did what she told us to do.

03:01:07:24

Lage: Carefully.

03:01:07:24

Levine: We could have dumped it in a garbage can. I've thought about this; why didn't we just dump it in a garbage can and go back and say, "We did it, Aunt Mary, Mama"? But we didn't do that, we actually did what she told us to do. I still remember it, putting the grass back, putting the bunnies back. We could have been caught but we weren't caught either time, when we were stealing or restoring. That left a very strong—and that's what she meant to do. That left a very strong—I never stole anything again, ever. It left a very strong impression about the dangers of stealing. I remember that.

In terms of morality and group-ness, there's another memory I have. During World War II, on the fourth floor of my apartment building where my grandparents lived and where I once lived—we were later on the fifth floor—a soldier, a sailor—but he was a petty officer, he wore a uniform, he didn't wear sailor uniforms, or a cap and a jacket. He moved in, it was during the war and he moved in, probably subletting an apartment or whatever. One day there was a terrible commotion, and his wife went running out of the apartment, and he went running after her and was beating her in the hall of the apartment house. We heard it up in our apartment; it was very noisy. My grandmother, who was an old semi-crippled lady, big lady, came out of her apartment, and when I came down the stairs, my grandmother got between the two of them, and she stood there saying to the guy, "Hit me!" He didn't, of course. She took this crying young woman into her apartment. I was very young when this happened, nine, and it stayed with me. What stayed with me was, these weren't my grandmother's people. She took this risk for people who probably may well have looked down on her as an old Jewish woman, who knows? But there was a human being—and, without getting dramatic about it, I think that's the way I was raised, that we are all connected. I think that was very important in my life.

One other quick story, which has stayed with me and really was an initial story for me. I worked one summer as a dishwasher in the Catskill Mountains. I was already in college, so I must have been seventeen or eighteen years old. There was a black guy from Detroit working as a—this little hotel was owned by people from Detroit—there was a black guy from Detroit working. I say a black guy, but only in America would he be called a black guy. He was called Red, and he was called Red because he had red hair. He looked a lot like, if you could think of Malcolm X, he was that guy. He was a light-skinned, red-headed, freckled guy.

03:01:10:20

Lage: And your family was red-headed.

03:01:10:22

Levine: They were indeed. He and I got tight. We worked together as dishwashers for two months. He had never been to New York. So I said to him, I can't remember his real name, and I can't remember his surname, all I remember is Red, this was a long time ago, more than half a century ago. I said to him, "Why don't you come to New York on your way home and stay with me? Share my room, and you'll see New York City." He liked that idea and that's what we did. When the hotel shut up and we left, we took a bus down to New York from the Catskills and he stayed in my little apartment for a couple or three days, my parents' apartment, I should say. One day, he and my sister, who would have been eleven or twelve, she was a pretty blond kid, very blond, she took after my father's family. The three of us, this very light-skinned black guy and me, and my sister, in our innocence, walked out into New York. We were skipping we were so excited, we were showing this kid from Detroit New York, and we were skipping around downtown, holding hands, the three of us. What occurred just shocked me, just shocked me; this is New York! But it was New York in the early fifties, '51, '52. People stopped, people pointed, people stared, people shouted, because this black guy was holding the hand of a blond girl. She was obviously a girl.

03:01:11:55

Lage: But she was young.

03:01:11:57

Levine: Yeah, and she was pretty. He was less shaken than I was, nothing shocked him about this. But I was shocked and remained shocked, for a long time, and angry about it. It's just one of my recollections about group differences. He was the only black guy I ever met before I became a real adult and went into the world. I mean, I had never known any black kids growing up, and there were none in my elementary school, and I can't remember black kids in my junior high school. There were blacks in my high school, but I didn't hang with them. So this was the only black guy I knew, and this was the only incident I saw. And of course, as a Jew, it really bothered me a lot, and it bothered my sister. My sister is a very—okay.

03:01:12:48

Lage: Now you say, as a Jew it really bothered you, why?

03:01:12:51

Levine: Well, because it was 1950, it was five years after the Holocaust, and I knew that kind of stuff, that pointing, that yelling, that anger.

03:01:13:00

Lage: You identified with him.

03:01:13:02

Levine: I identified with him, I always identified. And that's something I don't understand. I didn't grow up in a family that talked about black oppression or anything like that, or got angry at it. Later, my friends did, you know, in

college and the like. Yet I always grew up with a sense of identity, they were like us, they were oppressed like us, they were handicapped like us, and we had to be with them.

03:01:13:26

Lage: You felt that, even at this early age?

03:01:13:29

Levine: I always felt that. I felt embarrassing things on the subway. I wanted to go over—I never told this to anyone, but when I was a young kid, riding on the subway, I had this feeling I wanted to go over to black people and say I was sorry the way whites treated them and things like that. I had this urge, which I happily never acted on. [laughter] How embarrassing, but nonetheless I had it. The final thing I wanted to say about my family—

03:01:13:58

Lage: Want to hold it one second, because we're about to run out of—

[Audio File 4]

04:00:00:00

Lage: Okay, we'll continue.

04:00:00:04

Levine: The last thing about my family and neighborhood was the sense of belonging it engendered in me. My memory banks are full of family gatherings, family feasts, singing, lots of touching; this was a touchy-feely culture. Many uncles and aunts. My parents had eleven siblings together, most of them married, so we got over twenty aunts and uncles and we got lots and lots of cousins. Then there were great aunts and great uncles, and lots of close friends who I called aunt and uncle. These family gatherings in these small apartments [laughter] were huge! We had feasts! There was a lot of kissing and a lot of the pinching of cheeks. Jews like to do that, these European Jews, they pinch your cheek, and there was an awful lot of that. It gave me a sense of belonging, like the neighborhood itself. I was part of something bigger than myself and I felt it. It's a very positive thing and it makes you secure, but it can also suffocate you a little bit, and I'm going to talk about this. Well, let me talk about it.

My need to go to Boy Scout camp, my retreats to 42<sup>nd</sup> Street with my cousin Harvey. I'd go to 42<sup>nd</sup> Street a lot, and it was a different world. We'd get on the subway and we'd get off at 42<sup>nd</sup> Street, Times Square, and we'd go out. There was this very seedy block from 8<sup>th</sup> Avenue to Broadway, of seedy places, movies and girlie places, bars, and there were prostitutes—I guess they must have been prostitutes—hanging around, and pimps and gamblers. I would just love that. He dragged me into these salacious movies. We sat and watched them.

04:00:02:01

Lage: Was he older?

04:00:02:03

Levine: Yes, he was two years older, my big brother. So that was an escape. Baseball was an escape, you went into larger groups of people. There were ways of getting out of your neighborhood, there were ways of getting out of—and Times Square, and downtown New York was one of them. As I said last time, when we played hooky we often went to the movie houses in downtown New York, the Paramount and the Roxy and the Capitol Theatre, all those places. They were a different world. It was easy and it was accessible to us. What amazed me later, when I became a teacher and taught in Harlem, was how many kids—I taught in a middle school, and I'll talk about that some time—on 129<sup>th</sup> Street. I taught young black kids, and some of them had never been to Times Square. Times Square was 42<sup>nd</sup> Street, we're talking about eighty blocks away, eighty blocks away. You could almost walk it, four miles. They had never been there. These were junior high school kids. Well, as a junior high school kid, I was there. I went there.

04:00:03:10

Lage: And did your friends, or was this more—

04:00:03:12

Levine: Yes, a lot of my friends did. I played the saxophone. I should tell you, at the age of fifteen, fourteen, fifteen, my uncle Manny, who I'm going to talk about in a minute, my uncle Manny bought—well, he was an insurance salesman; he was the only one in my family who worked for a big—he worked for Prudential, and that was a problem for him. They didn't treat him very nicely at first, because of his politics more than because of his religion. He brought home a saxophone that he bought for \$75 and he gave it to me because he knew I loved jazz. He gave me a saxophone. My parents always wanted me to play the piano or something but I didn't ever do it. But the saxophone intrigued me, so I got a teacher and I learned—like Bill Clinton—I learned to play the saxophone. My teacher was on 48<sup>th</sup> Street and the Strand; one of the big theaters was the Strand Theater, in the Strand Building. Up on top of the theater was my Italian American teacher, who was an old man who taught me how to play the saxophone. I used to go—

04:00:04:16

Lage: Who provided the money for this?

04:00:04:18

Levine: Well, my father. It was cheap and my old man gave—of course, I earned, I saved my father a lot of money.

04:00:04:24

Lage: Yes, I know, but he wasn't—

04:00:04:26

Levine: Oh, they wanted me to play. The things they bought for me was—they bought Hebrew school lessons for me, because that was important. I went to Hebrew school twice a week to learn Hebrew, to learn the rituals. We learned Hebrew

to read. There was no Hebrew spoken until 1948. So when I went—at least there wasn't much Hebrew spoken, it wasn't a spoken language anymore, it was like Latin. But I learned to read Hebrew—of course I still know how to read—so I could read the prayer books. Every Jewish male is supposed to be able to do that, and they paid for that and they paid for these lessons. They would have liked me to have—early on they wanted me to learn, it was something that was important to them, that I learned music. They didn't know music. But they wanted me to know music. It was a genteel thing; they were trying very hard, I think, to be middle class, and one of the things you did for your kids—they didn't take me to museums, that wasn't in their ken, and they didn't buy me books, but they did want me to play an instrument. Saxophone wasn't exactly what they had in mind, but they accepted it. Because at least I learned to read music, which I did, and blah blah.

I used to go every week with my saxophone case, and the nice thing was, when you carried the case and you got in those crowded subways, you had a thing to sit on. You stood the case up on its end and you sat on it. I loved that. I got off at Times Square and I walked to the Strand Theater which was in the high forties. I used to pass—and this was another interesting lesson to me—I used to pass a little Jewish guy with a hole-in-the-wall store, if you could even call it a store. There were a lot of these things in New York, little closets that went back. He sold candy bars and hot dogs and sodas. Little old man, Jewish man. I used to go—I was hungry, I was a teenager, I got out of the subway, I'd been in school all day—well, maybe—and I stopped and I got a hot dog before my lesson. I always got a hot dog and a soda. We spoke a little Yiddish together, I knew more Yiddish then. One day he says to me, after I had been going there a long time, he said, "Where's your father from?" I said, "Lithuania." He said, "Your father's a Litvak?! Phtoo!" He spits, but he doesn't really spit, it's that symbolic spitting Jews did. He goes, "Phtoo! Then he's a *gonif!*" *Gonif* is the Yiddish word for crook.

04:00:06:44

Lage: Oh my lord!

04:00:06:46

Levine: And he was—

04:00:06:46

Lage: He was not one of your tolerant—

04:00:06:49

Levine: No, he was a Galicianer, he was from Galicia. See, there were Jews from all over. Galicianers were from Galicia, Litvaks were from Lithuania. He had no use for Lithuania. I didn't know much about that, I went back and talked to my father about this. I was already fifteen years old, and I could talk to my father about these things. It turns out—my father was such a sweet man, he had none of this. That's another thing, you see, I didn't grow up with that. But

this guy had it; he didn't even know my father and told me my father was a crook. Interesting. So that's one of the stories that has stayed with me.

This family, this sense of belonging, did not prevent me from trying to be independent. That independence, one of the salient things I did in my life, that changed my life, was moving away from New York, moving 3,000 miles away from that whole big warm embracing family, to be here alone, to marry a woman who was not a member of the group and to raise children away from that whole family. It was a very important act. There were reasons for it. I think one of them was the need to be independent and strike out on my own, whatever that means. Let me just talk for a minute about my grandfather, who I talked about last time, who was from Odessa, grew up as a poor kid and who learned—my grandfather was the only member of my family of that generation, or my parents' generation, or his generation, who could have been a scholar. He had all the temperament to be a scholar, but he was a totally uneducated guy who spoke several languages, who was in the Russian army—I mentioned last time—who deserted. I think I told that story.

04:00:08:32

Lage:

Yes.

04:00:08:34

Levine:

I admired him enormously. Because my father, who I admired also, was a frightened Jew. He was scared of authority, he wanted to meld into the—he was a Jew, but he wanted to be a peaceful Jew and meld in and not offend those—"them." [laughter] My grandfather didn't give a damn about "them." He spat at "them." My grandfather, he worked, you know, he lived in East Harlem before they moved first to the Bronx and then to Washington Heights. He had a little store in East Harlem until he was in his seventies. He lived among Jews and Italians, immigrant Jews and Italians. He spoke Italian, because he learned it from his customers. He spoke Russian, because he was in the army. He was a very bright guy, and he read two or three newspapers a day. Full of beans, this guy, and very Jewish. He was the only one in my family who would say intolerant things about the *goyim*, about this. He This is what I both admired about him and what shocked about him; when my mother and her sister made him retire from the store—my grandmother was dead, he lived many years after—they said, "You can't keep going to the store." He was an old man. So he quit the store, he closed the store, but he couldn't stand it. So he walked down to a theater, Loews Rio on 157<sup>th</sup> Street and Broadway, and he got a job as an usher, as a ticket-taker. He wore a little red uniform and he took tickets. He'd come home and say things like, "Well, today," —and he said this all in his thick accent; he came here in 1905 and he had a thick accent—he said, "Well, today," —this was like sixty years after he came to America—"a black man and a white woman came together into my theater," and he tore the tickets. You remember those old days, where there were real ticket-takers in uniforms. He said, "And I said to them, 'Have you thought of the children?'" And I was, by now, in college, and I said, "What are you

talking about?! How can you!” I couldn’t, I didn’t yell at him, I’d call him on it, but he really—I’m telling you this background. He was a bigot in a way. But not that he held anything against, he didn’t believe in it. He believed you stuck with your group. He thought blacks were all right but they should stay with blacks and white should stay with whites.

04:00:11:08

Lage: And Jews with Jews.

04:00:11:09

Levine: Absolutely. So when I announced that I was moving to Berkeley my grandfather took me aside and he said, “You’re doing a terrible thing. You’re doing a terrible thing.” [using heavy accent] He said, “You can’t leave your family.” See, I had a job at Princeton. If I had not had the job at Princeton, they would have said, “Oh, that’s the way it is, his job is out there.” But I was turning my back—

04:00:11:33

Lage: You made a choice.

04:00:11:34

Levine: They knew about Princeton, they didn’t know beans about Berkeley. Princeton was a proud moment. I taught at Princeton, it was their university and they hired me, I must be very smart. [laughter] They didn’t know University of California, Berkeley, at all. They had never heard of it, they didn’t know what it was. Neighbors would say to me, “Poor Larry, you had to leave that wonderful job at Princeton.” So my parents didn’t even get any *naches*, pleasure, out of my teaching at Berkeley, whereas teaching at Princeton the whole neighborhood thought, “Wow! This delinquent is now teaching there.” So my grandfather told me I was doing a terrible thing and I shouldn’t do it.

04:00:12:11

Lage: To leave your family? It wasn’t you so much as your family.

04:00:12:15

Levine: Yes, I was leaving my family, I was leaving, yes.

04:00:12:18

Lage: And you were the only son.

04:00:12:20

Levine: Yes. And I said to him, “Look at you. You left your entire family, you went to another country, with a different language, and you never saw them again, ever, and you knew it when you left them that you were never going to see them again.” “That was different,” he said. And it was different! Of course it was different. He left to get out of the Russian army where he would have been for years and years and years, mistreated, and a buck private. He did leave, a lot of Jews left, a lot of people left. But a lot of people left in America too; mobility was part of the whole thing. I wanted to say about my

grandfather, he grew up in stark poverty, and learned to read. He told me, and I believe this story, he hid under the table in the *cheider*, that is, the Jewish school; he didn't go because his parents couldn't afford it. He hid under the table and listened to the lessons the rabbi was teaching to the richer kids. And then the rabbi caught him, and yelled at him. He said, "I want to learn." The rabbi let him hang around. He was a very admirable guy. So there is that story about his telling me, and then there is a story I heard later, when I phoned, right on the eve of my marriage. I did not have a big marriage. We went to Berkeley City Hall and got married by a judge, but I did not give my parents much time to react to this. I knew they would say things they would regret, so I did it a day or two before I got married [to Cornelia Roettcher Levine]. I told them what I was doing.

04:00:13:52

Lage: Had you given them any preparation?

04:00:13:54

Levine: None.

04:00:13:54

Lage: You didn't tell them about your dating life?

04:00:13:57

Levine: No. I brought home a gentile girl once, a Utah Mormon, and I never brought one home again. My mother was very upset. She said, "Why are you doing this? You should be dating Jewish girls. There are so many nice Jewish girls. You want me to get you the phone numbers of some?" [laughter] I didn't just date gentile girls. I dated Jewish girls too, fell in love, in fact. I would have married a Jewish woman earlier, there was one I fell in love with, but she wouldn't have me. So it wasn't a question of my going out, I fell in love with who I fell in love with.

04:00:14:27

Lage: You weren't trying to leave.

04:00:14:28

Levine: I wasn't put off by who they were. My grandfather, I am told, stood up for me when the family was very upset. I was only the second one in the entire history of the family who fell this way. A cousin, a younger cousin of mine, did the same thing. My grandfather said, "I know she's a nice girl," I'm sure he said girl, "I know she's a nice girl, because Larry wouldn't marry anyone but a nice girl, so I think we should just accept her." Well, they would have anyway. See, that's why I did this, I knew they would have accepted her. But I didn't want to give them too much time to worry about it. We got married in May of 1964 and in June we drove across the country. There was a son involved, my wife had an eight-year-old boy when we got married. The three of us presented ourselves to my family, and they couldn't have been nicer and warmer and kinder.

- 04:00:15:21  
Lage: Oh, isn't that nice.
- 04:00:15:22  
Levine: And I knew that.
- 04:00:15:24  
Lage: Your wife must have been slightly nervous.
- 04:00:15:27  
Levine: Yes, she was. But I was nervous when I met her family too, who were Germans.
- 04:00:15:34  
Lage: And in Germany.
- 04:00:15:34  
Levine: They were in Germany. But I met them here. They came here not to see us—well, they came here to see two of their daughters, one of whom lived in New Jersey. That's what I wanted to say about the family. Except, let me talk quickly about politics. I grew up, as I said before, in a Democratic family. I knew no conservatives, and I really thought that Jews—I'm kidding now—I was going to say I really thought that Jews had a gene for liberalism. [laughter] But I didn't know a conservative Jew.
- 04:00:16:04  
Lage: Well, you knew Jacob Javits—not conservative.
- 04:00:16:06  
Levine: He was not conservative.
- 04:00:16:07  
Lage: But he was Republican.
- 04:00:16:08  
Levine: But he was quite liberal, he was a liberal Republican. I could have voted for Jacob Javits, though I was to the left of Jacob Javits, I would have voted for—how I got to the left I don't quite understand. But in 1948, I was fifteen so I couldn't vote, but I would have voted for—and it was twenty-one in those days—I would have voted for Henry Wallace, no question about it.
- 04:00:16:31  
Lage: Now tell me about that. You mentioned Uncle Manny in connection with that.
- 04:00:16:36  
Levine: Well, Uncle Manny was a lefty. He was an Irish kid who was born and brought up in Dublin. His parents had been Polish Jews who somehow ended up in Ireland. There were lots of fantasy stories about this, but my uncle was interviewed in a book on Ellis Island in his late years. He lived to be over ninety. I loved that guy a lot. He was a story-teller, he was a jokester. He was a very funny man, and he was an insurance salesman who ended up doing

okay in his life, but he had hard times. He had hard times because he was a union guy, and he believed in unions and he fought for unions. He tried to unionize the Prudential Insurance salesmen, and they stuck him in the worst district they could, in the South Bronx, where in fact he lived. He used to go around collecting dimes and quarters, every week people would put a dime or a quarter. He had a little book, he said, "This family, the Steins, ten cents." That kind of thing. He couldn't make much of a living doing that. Later, after he moved to New Jersey and they forgave him, or maybe he stopped organizing the unions. He was a left guy.

When I was six years old, we all, the whole family, rented a house in Spring Valley, New York, which was in the suburbs. We rented a house—no one would consider going to Spring Valley today for a vacation, but we did. Then it was—it wasn't what it is now, now it's a suburb—then it looked like it was the country, a little town. They rented a house, the whole family. No sense of privacy, again. One little house, and there were what, twenty-five of us, and we'd go on the weekends to this place. I remember my uncle discovered when we were all together that I was six years old and I didn't know my right hand from my left hand. He said, "It's to your left," and I didn't know what that was. I didn't know what my left was. He was appalled. He grew up in Ireland and he had a different kind of education. He may have even gone to a Catholic school. He had this very rigid education, and he could be rigid about things like that. He said, "You and I are going for a walk." We went for a day-long walk in the woods—there were woods around Spring Valley—so we went for a walk. I always think of this symbolic story. He would say, "Left! Right! Left! Right!" Like a sergeant in the army.

04:00:19:04

Lage:

He'd put it right into your body.

04:00:19:05

Levine:

He made me go down with my left foot, and then reach out with my left hand, "Grab the branch with your left hand!" When we left the woods a few hours later I knew my left from my right. I love that story, because he also taught me my left from my right politically. He and my aunt, who he converted to his politics, whatever they were, he was never a Communist, but he was a very left-wing guy. Not when he got older, but he ended up a liberal.

04:00:19:33

Lage:

Did he read the left-wing papers?

04:00:19:35

Levine:

He did, and I began to read them. The *PM*, which was a left-wing newspaper, started by Marshall Field. It was called *PM* because it was an afternoon newspaper. When it went broke after World War II, it was succeeded by this paper called *The Star*, and I read that. They subscribed for me to newsletters, but I can't remember them now. I was trying to remember, thinking about our session. There were newsletters I would get every week or every other week.

04:00:20:06

Lage: That Uncle Manny would subscribe to?

04:00:20:07

Levine: Well, he'd begin me and I had to keep the subscription up myself. But he'd start me; suddenly, something would come. One was called *In Fact*, and it was a kind of left-liberal thing. These were not Democratic things. In any case. You know what, I don't think I was converted, I think I was ripe to be converted. This was another way of independence. I don't know what makes some people left, some people right, some people center. I'm still much more left than any of my children. They yell at me, "Don't you dare not vote for Kerry!" They see me as a wavering fellow. Because I haven't voted for a number of Democrats. I didn't vote for Hubert Humphrey in 1968, I couldn't do it. Another guy called the Vietnam War a glorious adventure, I just couldn't vote for him. My sons now say, "You let Nixon become president!" [laughter] Well, it wasn't just me. So politically I—

04:00:21:08

Lage: Did that make you scornful of Roosevelt? You didn't reject that part?

04:00:21:12

Levine: Oh, no. Even my uncle Manny thought Roosevelt was a good guy; he liked Roosevelt.

04:00:21:18

Lage: So Wallace seemed to come out of that tradition too.

04:00:21:20

Levine: Yeah, Roosevelt—if it had been up to Franklin Roosevelt, Henry Wallace would have become President of the United States instead of Harry Truman. Because Roosevelt didn't want to kick him off the ticket in 1944. He was forced to by more conservative Democrats who didn't like Wallace, and he just—he was old, he was tired, he wasn't going to fight about it. Ultimately he accepted Harry Truman. He didn't even tell Harry Truman about the atom bomb, that's how much Harry Truman was in on things. Maybe Henry Wallace wouldn't have known either.

Finally, while I was still in New York—I mentioned this before—my identification with black people was very strong throughout my life. I didn't have much occasion to manifest that identification, but I felt for their plight. I didn't know much about them. The history I learned in school had no blacks in it at all, except as slaves. There was nothing about civil rights, there was nothing about—

04:00:22:22

Lage: Was there something in these papers maybe? The newsletters?

04:00:22:25

Levine: Probably, but you know, the socialists and the communists—the communists were better than the socialists on the black issue, though they had some crazy

ideas too. In the thirties they wanted a black republic, Mississippi and Alabama would be a black republic, Russian style; all blacks would be moved to Mississippi. They had that kind of—that didn't appeal to black people, I'll tell you that. The Socialist Party was never great on this issue. So, to be progressive politically and to be progressive racially, it wasn't part of the progressive matrix yet. But I always felt it—I don't say this with any sense of boasting, I say it with some sense of wonderment, I just made—I think it was very simple, I suspect I just made the identification; I later did this with women—I think I mentioned that last time—I just made the identification between Jews and black, and I saw them as having the same problems we did. I couldn't conceive of not trying to help them, but I had no way of helping them, until [claps hands] I got old enough, I joined the NAACP. But that was just giving money, they didn't mobilize me. Finally, CORE mobilized me, the Congress on Racial Equality.

04:00:23:40

Lage:

But that comes later, right?

04:00:23:41

Levine:

Well, I was still in New York, I just wanted to get on with this—yes it does, it comes when I was in the university and I began to picket. Yes, it does come later.

04:00:23:53

Lage:

Is there anything else to say, since you mention women, identification with women, about the gender roles your sister—was she given saxophone lessons and was she encouraged to go to school?

04:00:24:02

Levine:

No, well, she was given piano lessons, they wanted her learn. And they wanted her to graduate from high school, but they had no greater. I will tell you about my confrontation with my father in just a moment, because I'm about to enter college, then I think we've gotten through my youth a little bit.

04:00:24:18

Lage:

Yes, right.

04:00:24:21

Levine:

And the big revolution in my life, becoming an academic. My father and mother didn't give a damn whether my sister went to college or not. She did go, but they certainly didn't force her to go. They would have been perfectly happy if she had graduated from high school, they did want her to do that. They wanted me to be a schoolteacher, that was their great ambition for me, to be a high school teacher; they wanted her to get married and have children. They didn't fight her when she wanted to go to school.

04:00:24:47

Lage:

Where did she go?

04:00:24:48

Levine:

She went to City College, that was the only school we could afford. City College was free, \$5 a semester for registration. Cost you \$40 for your education, plus lab fees if you took science courses, as you had to take some. So that's one thing. Another big difference between my sister and I—and this is interesting to me, and I had never thought about it until much later—she was never required or welcome to work in the store. She just never did work in the store. Of course, she was also almost seven years younger than me. The consequence is she has a different view of our upbringing. I felt I had a very hard upbringing and worked hard, I was deprived of a certain part of my youth. I worked in that store, and I had the sense of being a working-class guy. My father was a very working-class man, and wore a worker's cap, he was a worker, he had the hands, he had physiognomy of a worker. He didn't like unions very much because he had that little store, but he was a worker, his whole mentality. He was led to love Roosevelt because he saw Roosevelt as good for the working class people. He wouldn't use "class" but working people.

My sister has a—because they were trying to embourgeoise her—that's not a word.

04:00:26:13

Lage:

Refine her.

04:00:26:14

Levine:

Yes, they were trying to refine her. And she has a very different view, and some resentment, I suspect, because they didn't care about whether she went to college or not, and it might have been good for her to work in the store, who knows? But they didn't, that was not their sense. But my mother worked in the store—but that was a different generation, she was going to be saved from that. They were going to save me from that too, but not as a youth, but they were going to save me from it. I did have a different sense. The women I knew, though my mother did work in the store, the women I knew were in the kitchen, the women I knew cleaned the house, the women I knew—this gets us to, I was going to say "catered to the men," and they did. They did on the level that my father was the master of the house, poor guy, he worked so hard.

He had his seat, he had his food, we ate his food, he didn't like sauces. I always sound like I say "sources." [laughter] He liked sources but he didn't like sauces. He didn't like sauces, so we had no sauces. The meat was served dry, with a little—my mother would have a little thing of gravy, he would like gravy over certain things, very thin gravy, not thick gravy. But there were no mayonnaise, there were not salad dressings; we squeezed a lemon over the salad. It was his food, he ate his food, and my mother cooked it. It was very close to her food, it was Jewish cuisine. Even though they came from different parts, they were still eastern European Jews and they had a cuisine, and she cooked it. She was a very good cook; my grandmother was even a better cook, her teacher. Since we lived with my grandmother, we ate a lot of her food. It

was traditional food. It pleased my father a lot. We had gefilte fish, we had chicken soup, we had those dishes, knaidlach, matzah balls, made out of matzah meal. We ate—I won't go into the dishes we ate, but we ate dishes that are very strange. When I tell my children—one of my favorite dishes growing up, I might as well say this, was stuffed derma, and stuffed derma, which was part of my father's cuisine and my mother's cuisine, so it became part of our cuisine, was the intestine of the cow. They'd buy the intestine of the cow, either the butcher had cleaned it or *they* would clean it. I don't remember who cleaned it, but you had to clean it quite rigorously. Then you took—it's a lot like black food, it's the food of poor people, and Jews in Europe were, at least these Jews, were very poor people. So you ate every part of the animal. I may have mentioned my grandfather eating fish heads. Every part of the chicken but the head was eaten in my house. Every part, all the organs were cooked in one way or another and eaten. We bought the whole chicken. It was plucked, but we bought the whole chicken and we ate every part of it, the gizzards, the liver, everything, the heart. The intestine of the cow was filled with a dough, mixed with gravy. They filled, yes, yes, so it had a golden color to it. They put the dough in the intestine and they tied it up, and they baked it in the oven, and then they cut it and it came out in rounds. So you had the intestine was the covering, the skin outside—

04:00:29:33

Lage:

But did you, you ate the skin also, the intestine?

04:00:29:37

Levine:

Yeah, I did. I loved that dish, I adored it. In fact, I still—there's a delicatessen, the Second Avenue Deli in New York, and they sell it. But they don't use the intestine anymore, they use a kind of ersatz thing which holds the dough. You don't eat it, you just eat the baked insides. I'm probably not giving you the right recipe for the baked insides.

04:00:30:01

Lage:

That's okay, I'm not going to make it. [laughter]

04:00:30:05

Levine:

It's the food—oh, you should! I'll come over for dinner! It's the food of poor people, and we ate it because it became traditional food. But my father was—and yet, my mother picked his clothing when we went out, she laid his clothes out, she'd pick the tie he wore, he only wore a tie when we went to the synagogue or when we went on our Sunday excursions downtown to a movie. My father put on the one suit he had with his little tie. She picked that. If we were going to do anything, she decided what to do. She made the menus, though; she knew what foods he liked. Yeah, I saw women in that role, of course I did, I grew up with women in that role. But because I went to college, because I became a teacher, I saw women in other roles as well. It was a mixed picture for me. But it wasn't for most of the people in my family. Those were the roles women played in most of them. So my generation, the

ones who went to college, married educated women. The ones who didn't, didn't.

04:00:31:11

Lage: Well, that stands to reason.

04:00:31:14

Levine: Yes, it's a reasonable thing. At the age of seventeen I told my father that I was not going to go to college. Did I talk about this?

04:00:31:24

Lage: You did tell this, about your father's hands.

04:00:31:27

Levine: Good, yes. So that got me into City College.

04:00:31:30

Lage: Right. He insisted you go and you had to enroll in the afternoon program, or evening program.

04:00:31:34

Levine: Okay, I talked about all that. It was called the afternoon session, but it started at 3:00 pm and went to 11:00, or 10:00, something like that. You could take courses throughout the whole thing. So for the first year and a half or so, I went to college in the afternoons. It turns out, later, when I got to Columbia, most of my classes remained in the evening because a lot of the professors taught then. It's not true—even before I left Columbia it became less true, but it was very true then. Hofstadter's seminars, now, he was an exception, he sometimes taught in the morning. But Bill Leuchtenburg taught in the evening, David Donald taught in the evening, Dumas Malone taught in the evening, all my kind of professors taught at night. Maybe they write during the day, I don't know. I do that now, myself, at George Mason University. All our graduate courses are at night because so many of our graduate students work that we accommodate them. They don't start until five o'clock, our classes. One goes from 5:00 to 7:00, one goes from 7:00 to 10:00, that kind of thing. So I do a lot of night teaching. So I became a night guy, and it left me time to do other things, which is an important part of my—. So I just got me into college, last time?

04:00:32:54

Lage: Yes, you didn't really talk about it, and that's where we—

04:00:32:57

Levine: Well, let me say—maybe I said this, but let me say it again if I did—that my father's notion of the university, and why should he have had any other notion, was that it was a mobility machine. Maybe I mentioned that.

04:00:33:08

Lage: No.

04:00:33:08

Levine:

And it was my notion. He wanted me to go to college so I wouldn't have hands like his, so I would have a better life than he did. The university was the only way he saw for that to happen. And since they would take me, and since there was a free university in town—and I couldn't get into it, my father knew none of that, but then I found a way of getting into it. It was just made for me, and he wanted that to happen. When I entered to City College, I entered it with some reluctance.

04:00:33:37

Lage:

1950.

04:00:33:38

Levine:

1950, September of 1950, I entered it with some reluctance, though I didn't really have a firm alternative in my mind. Did I really want to go into the fruit store? One of the things I said to my father was, "Why don't we go get a nicer fruit store, a bigger one, and I'll work with you?" That didn't go over very much. And I'm not sure I really wanted to do that. I didn't know what I wanted to do, but school was not on my agenda. But for all the reasons I've already given I went to school. And I went to it with the notion that this would be a machine to help me walk up the ladder to a better job and a better life and a more interesting existence. All of that was true, but it was something more than that. I didn't know that at the time, but I learned it very quickly. I don't quite know why.

I just gave a commencement address, and the reason the story about my father was so firmly in my head is I have given other commencement addresses and I never told that story, but for some reason—this was a graduate school commencement address at George Mason University, which I gave in May—I told that story in the address. What I learned—and this is all from my commencement address, but because I wrote the address I had to think about this—what I learned in school was that it introduces you to new neighborhoods. So I got out of my 'hood. Not in New York, though I had those little avenues, but I didn't really get into Times Square; it was just a way of—but the university got me out of my 'hood.

If you don't mind, I want to talk about something. I want to read, the only quote I will read in this whole interview, but I'm going to read it, because later when I read this quote many years later—I was already a college teacher when I read this quote, or at least a graduate student—it resonated with me. This is W.E.B. DuBois in his 1903—though he wrote this essay earlier, it's a collection of essays—*The Souls of Black Folk*. This is what he wrote—DuBois used the term "the veil" to describe the separation between white and black. It was the veil, "we lived within the veil," they would be outside it, and we couldn't get outside it. Here's DuBois talking about his college experience and his post-college experience: "I sit with Shakespeare and he winces not. Across the color line I move arm in arm with Balzac and Dumas, with smiling men and welcoming women glide in gilded halls.... I summon Aristotle and

Aurelius and what soul I will, and they come all graciously with no scorn nor condescension, so, wed with truth, I dwell above the veil.” And I realized when I read that, it was exactly what college did for me, and does for a lot of people. There’s a negative way to say this. The negative way to say it is it deracimates you. The positive way to say it is—that is, it didn’t deracinate DuBois; he remained a black. And I remained a Jew. But you became a different kind of black and a different kind of Jew with different dreams and a different program for your people.

That’s exactly what happened. It allowed a lot of people to realize they could dwell above whatever the veils that encompassed them when they were young. Certainly it did that to me. It’s not that it said, “Hey, I could be something other than a Jew.” It introduced me to new neighbors. When I went back home there were things I couldn’t really talk to my family about. This is what happens, this is why minority groups cling together in colleges. They recognize the danger of their losing their culture. Of course, in part, that’s exactly what happens. *Exactly* what happens. DuBois became a Victorian black. Now, he was already from Massachusetts, he didn’t grow up in the South. But nonetheless, it does this to you.

I think I said this earlier, but I don’t know if I did or not. One of my favorite uncles told us crazy stories about digging up subways in Egypt that were ancient subways. I didn’t—my mouth didn’t drop open anymore, and I realized there were things I couldn’t talk about with my family, simply because to do it would be to educate—you have to be very careful not to come home and be condescending to the people you love. But I knew much more than they did. At least much more in learning, maybe not much more about life; they lived longer than I had, they knew a lot about life. But I knew more because I had walked in different neighborhoods and because I sat with Shakespeare and he winced not. [laughter] And the like. So this is very interesting. Maybe I should talk a little more about—

04:00:38:43

Lage: Yes, talk more specifically about the—

04:00:38:44

Levine: Deracination.

04:00:38:46

Lage: Yes, and the actual experience of the faculty, the students.

04:00:38:49

Levine: I’m going to do that. But let me talk in general for a moment. I was at City College; I was not in the position blacks are at Berkeley or at Harvard. City College was one of the few places in the country where Jews probably were the majority, New York Jews. There was a New York school and a lot of Jewish immigrant groups. They were in the majority. Or if not the majority, they were there in large numbers and there were lots of them, on the faculty

and off the faculty, so that in that sense I was surrounded by people from the group I came from. But what we were learning—let me explain. First of all, we were learning all these things which had nothing to do with the Jewish world. We were being introduced to other neighborhoods, and that was good. I didn't know about that, I didn't know that's what college was about. Because high school didn't really work with me. But college opened my mind, my heart, my being. I was excited, I was really excited. City College had four semesters of speech. I didn't talk about that last time, did I?

04:00:40:12

Lage: No.

04:00:40:12

Levine: Well, you know, I was a first generation college student, that is, I didn't know of any people who had gone to college. My older cousin Harvey on my mother's side, my older cousin Bill on my father's side, Bill Taylor, who I am very close to, to this day—he lives in Washington, he's a civil rights lawyer, an important guy—they went to college before me, but there was very little—a lot of my older cousins never went to college. They went into these stores, just like my father did, they went into the stores, they became fruit men and meat men. Two of my cousins had been to college, and I now went to college. There were four semesters of speech at City College, there were two semesters of English, blah blah, four semesters of science. I didn't realize there was anything unusual about that. But of course there was something very unusual about that. That was a conscious attempt to deracinate us, to take our New York accents away. They failed in my case, to a certain extent. I will get back to that because my desire to be a school teacher forced me to take speech seriously. But there were four semesters of speech, and I had a fifth semester, because you went in to see someone before you started four semesters of speech, and he put me in remedial speech.

04:00:41:27

Lage: And this was basically accent they were talking about?

04:00:41:30

Levine: Yes, and also a lisp, I lisped a little bit, they told me, I don't remember lisping to the point where it was embarrassing, but to their ears I had a lisp. A sibilant s. Sister Susie sat in the seashore sifting seashells. [laughter]

04:00:41:48

Lage: You did a lot of that.

04:00:41:49

Levine: Oh, I had to do those things forever! “Get that tongue up, get that tongue up! Don't let the tongue go between your teeth.” So I took remedial speech and then I took Speech 1, 2, 3, 4 and passed my speech. Then when I went to become a school teacher, I failed my speech test, and that's another story. So there were speech courses. There were Jewish professors I'd walk with, nice

people, nice guys, who had names like—not invariably, but a lot—J. Alexis Fenton, who was Jacob A. Feinberger.

04:00:42:23

Lage: So they changed their names also?

04:00:42:25

Levine: Oh yes. I. I. Gaines, who was Isador Isaac Ginsberg. I didn't know that at the time, I've learned that since. I didn't know who was I. I. Gaines. So I'd walk with these guys. I didn't walk with many of them; one or two of them befriended me. I was a history major and one or two historians walked with me together.

04:00:42:45

Lage: When you say “walked with you?”

04:00:42:46

Levine: Well, between classes. They'd say, “Where're you going?” Or, “I'm going here, walk with me.” And they'd talk to me after class. Michael Kraus was a very sweet—Michael Kraus was a kid like me, brought up in a Jewish immigrant family who became a high culture guy, married a very educated woman. I went to his home once, I forget where it was, but it was a nice address. He lived in a beautiful house with art, and beautiful, I had never been in an apartment like that, it was gorgeous. Michael Kraus, who was a publishing historian, there weren't many in the History Department, but he was a publishing historian. He once said to me, and he said this out of affection, “You've got to learn, Larry, to speak correctly. You often speak ungrammatically, and you have to learn to stop using your hands.” I told you a story, I think, about someone else who said that to me. Michael Kraus said it to me with great affection, and I didn't resent it when he said it. He said, you know—of course by then I was talking to Michael Kraus about the possibility of my being a professor, and he was trying to prepare me.

So there was a lot of that. There was a lot of that. If you want to talk about deracination, maybe we should talk about declassification. They were trying to raise us from working class, which many of us were, and we were immigrant working class to boot, so the accents were strange, to something else. They were, and the speech courses were part of that, and all of that attention to how we spoke and that worrying about it. They didn't have to worry, at Harvard, about people speaking like that.

04:00:44:25

Lage: No.

04:00:44:26

Levine: So we were taught non-immigrant manners. Let me tell you a story which I still think of a lot. I took English 1 or 2, it must have been 1, because we were reading *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*, and we had a professor named Fitch, Professor Fitch. This was one that was in the afternoon session, but

many of these professors were regular professors, I don't know who Fitch was, not a nice man as it turns out. Professor Fitch, one day, while we were reading *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*, got all funny—he was born and raised in China, the son of missionaries, and he described, in fascinating detail, he described a Chinese famine that he experienced as a young person, bodies all over, people dying. He described it in some detail, it was fascinating and horrible. What the hell it had to do with *Sir Gawain* I didn't know, but then I do that, as you know. [laughter] He told us this long thing. And then he said something which stunned me, and it must have been a class who, at least half of the people in the class must have been Jews. He said, "So,"—this is how he finished the coda to his story about Chinese starvation—"So, don't let the Jews tell you that they are the only ones who have suffered." This was five years after the Holocaust; there probably was a lot of Jewish breast beating about suffering. I was shocked by that, just shocked. I didn't even understand how to respond to this, nor did I.

A year later I was in a paleontology class with Professor Hawkins, a nice, ineffectual fellow. I took a year of paleontology, so I didn't have to take a year of physics, or something like that, a year of biology. I took the humanistic sciences; I took a year of paleontology. Professor Hawkins was talking to us in class one day about climate, and how climate affects humans. He said, "You know, in the South, how things are lazy," and he gave this bad imitation of a southern accent. In that class was a black guy named Ed House. I remember his name because he went to high school, he went to George Washington High School and he ran for student council president and was elected student council president at George Washington High. I paid no attention to that stuff. But I remember Ed House. He was black and he was the head of the student government for years at City College. He was in my paleontology class. We were not friendly, we had no intercourse, but he was in the course. When Hawkins did that, and there was a black woman in the course as well, when Hawkins did that Ed House got up and walked out of the room.

This was a long class, it was a lab. Sometimes we met on the Palisades to look at fossils, and sometimes we met in the Museum of Natural History. This was a lab, an in-class lab, we were in the lab, and he told this story, and Ed left, and comes back like a half hour later with another black man, an older man. The black man walks right into the room, interrupts Hawkins, and says, "Professor Hawkins, Mr. House has said that you said derogatory things vis-a-vis blacks, Negroes." I forget his exact words but he accused Hawkins of having said anti-Negro things, which he did not. He was talking about the South being lazy and slow, and the southerners being lazy and slow. Hawkins had a fit! He ran over to the poor black woman, a nice tall, thin lady, who I used to chat with, I don't remember her name, he ran over to her and took her hand, and said, "If I offended you in any way,"—he hadn't—"if I offended you in any way, I'm so sorry." He ran over to Ed House, and he shook his hand, and he apologized.

I sat there stunned, and I said, "Now, why the hell didn't I do that with Fitch?" Why did I sit there allowing him to do this? It was an interesting education for me. On the other hand, I thought Ed House—though he may have had many reasons to do that, in his life I'm sure he did—I thought Ed House reacted too strongly to what Hawkins did. He didn't really do what Ed House thought he did. But Ed House was very sensitive. He heard that accent, he heard "South," he heard "lazy," and he said, "Blacks, he's talking about us," and he ran to the NAACP. Hawkins apologized to everyone, apologized to the rest of us too, apologized to the whole class, as if anyone had thought—I don't think anyone but Ed House did think. It was an embarrassing moment. But it was interesting, it educated me. There is a time when you stand up for your rights, and you can do that, even with these educated people you could do that, you know. It's an anecdote which stayed with me. I remember it vividly, visually, to this day, that episode. Both of them have stayed with me. There aren't many episodes. I can talk about one great exception at City College to these professors who were affecting our manners, were trying, some of them, to affect our manners, maybe, especially, the Jews who had Jewish names, though Michael Kraus didn't, his name could be German. We had a whole group of immigrants—is it time for you to leave?

04:00:49:58

Lage:

No, I'm fine for another ten minutes or so.

04:00:50:02

Levine:

We had a whole group of immigrant professors. They were people who had run from Germany and Czechoslovakia and places like that. Some of them were quite famous. The one I remember most was Hans Kohn, whose books are still read on nationalism. He was an intellectual historian. He was a very famous pioneer in the area of nationalist thought in Europe. Hans Kohn taught a famous course. At City College courses closed at forty students; we had no big lecture courses, and you had—every year, you picked your courses and you registered in terms of your seniority. Seniors, upper seniors, graduating seniors, right down. So you often had to wait years to get a Kohn course. You registered for it and you were told the course was closed. When you registered there was a big blackboard—this was the pre-computer days—there was a big blackboard. I later worked in registration. You erased courses, you put "closed" next to courses. So you'd sit down and you'd look at what was still open, and you'd fill out your thing, you'd get in line and hopefully you'd get into your courses, or you were told, "just closed." Forty students closed a course, but it took like ten students to open a course. So year after year after year I registered for Professor {Baro Mayes?}; he was a Jamaican black, Negro, in those days, the only black member of the History Department. He taught a course on the Negro and the New World, I never got into it, because it never had the requisite—

04:00:51:34

Lage:

It didn't have ten people?

04:00:51:35

Levine: Well, you know, I made that up, it needed a minimum, maybe it was fifteen, I don't know. It needed a minimum and never got it; I never was able to take that course. It was hard to get into other famous courses, but as you got more and more senior you had a better chance. I finally got into a year of Hans Kohn's course on intellectual history. It was an amazing course, and yet when I think back on it, it was not a course I would teach. But he so excited us. For instance, he lectured for a week—and they spoke with accents—

04:00:52:05

Lage: Was this European intellectual history?

04:00:52:06

Levine: Yes, European. And they spoke with thick accents.

04:00:52:10

Lage: He was a refugee?

04:00:52:11

Levine: Yes, and there were a lot of them, City College hired these guys. He spoke with a very thick Czech Jewish accent. Very educated man. There was a woman named {Leen Vershovski,?} who taught medieval history too; she was another refugee. Don't ask me to spell Vershovski. [laughter] Hans Kohn would lecture for a week on Goethe and I remember he spoke—my wife knows the name of this woman—Goethe in his old age married a milkmaid, and Hans Kohn went on to tell us that milkmaids had this beautiful skin, unlike many people who had gotten smallpox and had pockmarked skin, which was very common, because they got cowpox. And cowpox, you just get one or two little sores, they drop off and you're immune, and they have this beautiful skin. Anyway, Goethe fell in love. He said, "We can imagine why Goethe fell in love with a milkmaid, but why would she, why would a sixteen or seventeen year-old,"—my wife knows her name, she learned her name in school—"why would she have married Goethe? Why would she have fallen in love with Goethe if he was a man in his sixties or something?" And Kohn said, see, things like this would blow us out of the room, he said, "But this was *Goethe!*" We would just grip our chairs, we were so excited! When I think back, do I remember the basic ideas of Goethe? No. But I remember he married a milkmaid and I remember he was a really important guy. [laughter] And that may have been enough, maybe that's all he had to do. He certainly must have told us what his basic ideas were. He was a very dramatic man.

04:00:54:02

Lage: And he was having quite an experience, I would think, teaching to these immigrant American kids.

04:00:54:08

Levine: Yes, absolutely, absolutely. So they countered, in a way, this deracination, because they were Jewish immigrants. They were much more erudite than anyone I knew, in my family. But they were immigrants, they acted like

immigrants, they spoke funny, and they were uninhibited there. They spoke with their hands, boy. [laughter] So one professor tells me, "Cool it with your hands," and the other guy gets up there and he's powerful because he yells, because he—you could hear him down the hall. People who couldn't get into his class would stand outside the room, and they could hear lots of his lectures. There was this other model that was there. He [Kohn] was one of the most exciting professors I took—

04:00:54:53

Lage: Did you get to know him?

04:00:54:54

Levine: No, I didn't get to know him, but I did get to know, and was profoundly affected by, one of his students, Wallace Sokolsky, who taught me History 2, which was western history, really European history from the middle ages to the present. My first history course at City College was with a young man. I remember his name and I don't mean to blaspheme him or anything, but he was a lousy teacher, Vito Caporale, and he was full of himself. He was full of knowledge, and he's teaching in the afternoon session, and lot of us were marginal people; we were there because we couldn't get into the day session. Others were there because they worked. There were lots of veterans; I do want to talk about them. But I sat in class, and he would just—"You've never heard of that?" He'd laugh at us and he'd call us jerks, it was a terrible experience. I got an A in the course, but it was a terrible experience. I just memorized. I just memorized. I used to come home with lists. I'd write out lists of kings or pharaohs; that was a question, the beginning of man to the middle ages, so we did Egypt and all that. My mother would take the list and I would recite the list. I would memorize all the pharaohs, I would memorize all the kings of England, that got me an A. Ideas, forget it, but that's how I coped with that, I used my memory, and I wrote well. I always wrote well, even when I was a delinquent in high school, teachers said, "You write so well, what are you doing not coming to class?" Even when I was in the third and fourth grade, I remember teachers writing on my little one-page essays, "brilliant," because I always wrote well.

04:00:56:34

Lage: It was just natural, you didn't have a particular—

04:00:56:37

Levine: Yes, so then I got Wallace Sokolsky, we'll finish with Wallace Sokolsky.

04:00:56:43

Lage: I'm surprised you were a history major, after Caporale.

04:00:56:48

Levine: Yes. Vito Caporale was terrible. But I did well in history in high school, the only subject I did well in. Wallace Sokolsky came into my life just this one time, just this one course; though I saw him occasionally, I went to talk to him. It's the only course I took with him. I thought he was a professor, but a

lot of these guys were still graduate students, they were still finishing. It was after the war, they were veterans, they were finishing their degrees, they were harassed. Wallace Sokolsky was married with two kids, what did I know, he was a brilliant teacher, just—he made me feel this stuff, he made me feel the scientific revolution. For the first time in my life, I was preparing to be a high school teacher. I was eighteen when I took Wallace Sokolsky; I had just turned eighteen in February and this was the spring, the winter term or the spring term, semester. For the first time, I said, “I wonder if I could do that? I wonder if I could do that?” Poor Wallace Sokolsky, I went to him, I went to him and I stood outside, I looked at the schedule the next semester, the next year, I stood outside his classroom and when he exited after the class I went up to him and I said, “Mr. Sokolsky, d’ you remember me? I was in your class last semester,” and I told him my name. He said he remembered me. I got an A in his course, but poor guy was probably teaching four courses, five courses. He said, “Oh yes, I do.” I said—listen to this question—I said, “Do you think I could be a professor?” Poor man. I had him for one introductory course. He said, “Oh sure, sure, you’re a very good student, yes.” Maybe he did remember me a little. Then he said, “However, don’t put all your eggs in one basket. Take your education courses so you can get a high school job if you have to.”

I thanked him and I walked away crushed, because the way I read this was, “Jerk, of course you’re not good enough to be a college professor, stay where you are.” Though my parents thought high school was the greatest mobility jump in the world, and so did I, so did I. But he put the other bug in my head. Only later, many years later when I met him again somewhere—he never got his PhD, I think—I met him again, very nice, bright man. He was a student of Hans Kohn, and he worked with Hans Kohn. I learned that he was struggling to finish his PhD dissertation, he was teaching four or five courses, so hard—a semester, not a year but a semester. He was giving me very good advice from his life.

04:00:59:29

Lage: Sure.

04:00:59:29

Levine: He wasn’t telling me I wasn’t good enough; he was telling me, “Make sure you have a way of earning a living, guy.” And by the way, that’s exactly how I got my PhD, by teaching high school. We will get to that, but that’s exactly how I did it. So he had a very great impact on me, and there were a few others—

04:00:59:46

Lage: And it was a fleeting impact, it seems like, if you just took the one course.

04:00:59:48

Levine: Well, he only taught me that one course, but he humanized it. You know what they did, both Hans Kohn—Hans Kohn was such a high intellect, I didn’t

identify with him, I didn't think I could be Hans Kohn, and I'm not. But I did think I could be Wallace Sokolsky. Vito Caporale was a mess in my life; he was too harsh and too difficult and obviously had security problems. But I thought, "Yes, I could be Wallace Sokolsky, I could do that, I think I could do that." He made it such a human thing to do. Hans Kohn didn't, Hans Kohn made it a high intellectual thing to do. Wallace Sokolsky was a human being; I could identify with him. That was very important. And I had a few other professors who were like that, fallible human beings, but excited about what they were doing, open to students, liked students. I never got to know Wallace Sokolsky—are we too late? I could mention one other guy.

04:01:00:44

Lage:

Yes.

04:01:00:45

Levine:

A man named Aaron Noland, who I didn't know—see, Aaron Noland didn't seem like a Jew to me, but I realized in retrospect that he was. Aaron Noland was another, he was in French history, and he taught a course in intellectual history. I took his course, it was in a different period than Kohn's course, but I took his course in intellectual history, and he excited us. He was so exciting that if the bell rang and he was still teaching, he would run over to the door, and he'd put his leg up to not let us out the door, and he'd lecture to us with his leg across. [laughter] He was so exciting. And one final guy who affected me was a man named Ed Rosen who I took ancient history from. He was totally different. He was a terror in class. He was a guy I admired, because I think he had been a Communist, or very close and had almost been purged in the forties from City College in New York. He was a great teacher, but he taught Socratically. He would say, "What was the name of the boat the Phoenicians used on their rivers, Levine?" And then if you couldn't get it, he went down the row. Then when someone finally told him the name of the boat, the sukka—I'm making it up, I don't know the name of the boat, but he asked questions like that—he would then go off and talk about navigation, and the Phoenicians in the water. He asked me, I was a paranoid guy, and when I took his course he was scary. He was a very plain-spoken tough guy, he was like a gangster, he was tough. I knew he was going to ask me the first question. He gave us one chapter of a book by a man named Childe. It was a book on what is man—a very good book, on ancient man. I read the first chapter of that book, and I read it three times because I knew in my heart he was going to ask me the first question. I knew that chapter. I walked into class and he asked me the first question and I couldn't answer it. [laughter] He said, "What was the title of the chapter you read last night? Levine?" I didn't know the name of the chapter! Who remembers the titles of chapters? [laughter] He had a great impact on me, because he was another spinner of tales, and he was very rough; I could never teach the way he did. I got to know him when I went back to teach at City College. He was a tough guy. So I had models of people who were just plain people. They were very smart, and I began to think, "Well, maybe I could do that." That was an important moment for me,

because from that moment on, I began to think of being a college teacher. It was after my first year of college.

04:01:03:27

Lage: That's very quick to have that transformation.

04:01:03:29

Levine: Well, I began to think of it. I wasn't convinced. I wasn't convinced I could do it right into graduate school. You must understand, I'm not a confident guy, but we will talk about that. I took a very long time doing all this, but we're in college now.

04:01:03:43

Lage: But we're there, we're in City College.

04:01:03:45

Levine: So I guess next time, next time will probably be when I return, right?

04:01:03:50

Lage: Well, should we turn off the—

04:01:03:51

Levine: Oh no, we can keep talking. You had to leave.

04:01:03:53

Lage: No, I should go, because I have a meeting.

04:01:03:55

Levine: I can talk for a while.

04:01:03:58

Lage: No, I think this is a good stopping place.

**Interview 3: August 10, 2004**

[Audio File 5]

05:00:00:03

Lage: Today is August 10, 2004. This is the third interview with Larry Levine. Now let's see, we were just sort of recapping where we were. We were at City College.

05:00:00:25

Levine: Yes, we were talking about professors there.

05:00:00:27

Lage: Professors.

05:00:00:28

Levine: I described a number of professors who left an impression on me, mostly positive. I had some very good teachers there. I don't know if I said this last time, but let me say it now, that the people who taught me were so diverse. I mentioned Ed Rosen's Socratic method, I mentioned Hans Kohn's and Aaron Nolands's great starring, they were great lecturers, these guys. And the classes were small there, but they still lectured to us. And Wallace Sokolsky's humanity and the way he very meticulously brought us into the world of the age of reason and the like. One thing I think I took away from this, though I wasn't consciously trying to figure out how to teach, though by now I knew I was going to be a teacher of some sort, I think. But things happen when you're not conscious of them, and in retrospect I think that what these people did—because I do remember their teaching methods so it must have made an impression on me—they taught me that there was no single way to teach, that you had to reach into yourself for the way to teach, that these people were being themselves, and themselves led them to different ways of teaching. All my experience—I've had a lot of it by now, I started teaching in 1955, so that's a long time ago—all my experience tells me that is true, that there is no single way to teach. And that's good. You can be whoever you are and still find a way of communicating.

05:00:01:59

Lage: Did you think about this at the time, or is this in retrospect?

05:00:02:02

Levine: I think—I don't know. [laughter] I don't know, but I was very impressed by these people, because it stayed with me. I think that memories that stay with you must be based on something that impressed you at the time, so that it's stayed with you all these years. I can remember a guy like Vito Caporale, who I didn't particularly like as a teacher. I can remember his face, his motions, why I didn't like him as a teacher, what he did wrong. I'll give you a good example, I was going to tell it later, but let me tell it now. I was very insecure at City College, I was very shy. This followed me through, by the way. Students don't believe me when I tell them this, and I think it's very important

to tell them this, because they think that they are frozen in time, that they are what they will always be, and you do that when you're young, positively and negatively. They come and say, "I can't do that and I can't do this." I tell them, "You know, I was enormously shy; no one was more afraid of taking his orals than I was." I tell them these stories, they don't quite believe me, and I tell them I was pretty inarticulate, which is true. I was.

I took a seminar at City College, the only one I ever took; they were very rare. But remember, classes were not huge there. Forty was the largest they could be, except for labs in the sciences. Nevertheless, the seminar was different; there were a bunch of people sitting around the table, and there was a gentleman whose name I don't remember, who taught the seminar. I got in. I was probably by then a high junior or a senior, so I was experienced, but shy as can be. I got into this seminar, but it was a mistake for me to take a seminar in one way. We sat around a table, and we read German and Russian novels in translation, that was the title of the seminar. The books were wonderful. There were lots of papers you had to write, little papers on the books you read. And I was a good writer. I really was a good writer, but I was silent as a stone around the table, and when I did speak—I had to be urged to speak—I wasn't very good. I was nervous, I was a little ungrammatical, I just wasn't good. After my first paper, he calls me in and he says, "I have tried very hard to see where you plagiarized this paper from, and I know you plagiarized it. This is not your work, it is not your work." He was taking the verbal Larry Levine and comparing it to the written Larry Levine, and it didn't add up. He was sure I was plagiarizing. The second paper.

05:00:04:51

Lage:

How did you defend yourself?

05:00:04:52

Levine:

I told him I wasn't. What could I say? What could I do? I said, "This is my work." I told him that I wrote well, and I understood I didn't speak well yet; I hoped I would grow. The next paper, same thing. "You're very clever," he wrote on it.

05:00:05:11

Lage:

This must have been hard to hear.

05:00:05:13

Levine:

And these were A papers. He himself said they were A papers but he didn't give me As on them, because he didn't believe they were mine. But since he couldn't prove it he couldn't fail me either. I just felt so defeated, though I kept writing good papers for him, and he gave me a B in the course. Now I may have deserved a B in the course because I didn't speak very much, and when I did speak I wasn't very good. It was my first seminar ever.

- 05:00:05:38  
 Lage: Were you concerned about your speech? You've mentioned that several times.  
 Your accent and all?
- 05:00:05:42  
 Levine: No, no.
- 05:00:05:42  
 Lage: Or more just verbally, expressing yourself on your feet.
- 05:00:05:46  
 Levine: No, it was a sense of confidence. Look, I had been a terrible high school student, and I never really thought I belonged in college. Even though I was doing well and I ended up a Phi Beta Kappa and *cum laude*, I just never believed it. I still thought of that kid that messed up in high school. So it took some growing time for me. We all feel insecure. It's very common to feel, "They're going to find me out. Oh God, this time, I've been lucky but this time they'll find me out and I'll get this lecture and they'll yell, 'fraud, jerk.'" [laughter] It's probably very healthy to feel that; by the way, I think. Not everyone feels it.
- 05:00:06:27  
 Lage: Were you verbal at home? Were you expressive?
- 05:00:06:31  
 Levine: Yes, I was.
- 05:00:06:31  
 Lage: So it was in that setting.
- 05:00:06:35  
 Levine: It was, yes. It was really having to feel more secure. I've never felt completely secure in the academe, I still don't feel completely secure, I run scared all the time. That translates itself into working enormously hard. There's a term in Yiddish, German too, *sitzfleisch*, it's the flesh you sit on, and you know, people say, "He's got a lot of *sitzfleisch*." For some people *sitzfleisch* is very important, the ability to sit in one place and work, and concentrate. If you're going to be a scholar, you really need that. I have bright, bright friends and relatives who are peripatetic, and they can't sit still, and they can do very well at certain things. But I don't think they'd make good scholars, because you've got to sit in one place if you're a scholar, for a while, and you've got to stick at it. A lot of it is a bit boring. So anyway, I did have that. Experience overcomes a lot of the insecurity, and teaching. You can't be inarticulate and nonverbal in teaching. You're tossed into a situation, the kids are younger than you. My first teaching, as we will talk about, was junior high school, and you know more than they do and you're a little more secure.
- 05:00:07:55  
 Lage: And that gives you confidence.

05:00:07:57

Levine: It happens in college as well. Then you discover, "Hey I can speak, look at that." Students come up and say, "That was great!" And you begin to feel some confidence.

05:00:08:11

Lage: It sounds like you may have given this talk to a lot of your students, that you have sympathy with them.

05:00:08:15

Levine: I do, I do talk. Did I tell you last time—no, I guess it's a later story. Did I talk about Ken Stampp telling me that one of his books was—well, this—

05:00:08:27

Lage: Finish that sentence.

05:00:08:29

Levine: Ken Stampp, the day I sent my manuscript off to—this is jumping into the future to when I'm at Berkeley, and I turned my dissertation into a book, and I sent it off to Alfred Knopf, because Hofstadter insisted on it. Knopf was his publisher, and Hofstadter told Alfred Knopf—and I got a letter from Alfred himself saying, "Our mutual friend Richard Hofstadter has told me about your work." Knopf in fact was going to come out here for some other purpose and I was going to have lunch with him at the Clift Hotel in San Francisco, but he fell ill and we never met. Maybe that would have made a difference, probably not. I never thought Knopf would publish my book because Knopf was very much around in the 1920s, and he did not like William Jennings Bryan, and I wrote a sympathetic book. It was sympathetic to Bryan and unsympathetic to Mencken, who was published by Knopf. Nevertheless, I did what Hofstadter told me to do, and I mailed it to Knopf.

The day I mailed it—I'll tell this story in more detail later—the day I mailed it I went to a picket line around what was then Palmer's Drug Store in Berkeley. We were picketing for hiring, fair hiring. Ken Stampp was on the picket line. It was a Saturday. I mailed it at the downtown Berkeley post office. I said to Ken, my colleague, "Well, I just mailed my manuscript off to Knopf." He said, "Well, that's good. I hope you have better luck than I had," he said—this was so important to me—"I hope you have better luck than I had." He mailed his second book to Knopf, and they rejected it. Ken said, "They rejected it in only three weeks; I don't even think they sent it out." It really annoyed him a lot, though Knopf later published Ken. Three weeks later, on a Saturday, I got my book back, with a letter saying, "Mr. Knopf wants you to know that he doesn't think this is an appropriate book for Alfred Knopf to publish." I'll go back to that story later. Ken's story really—and I happened to also be driving with Henry Nash Smith, a great scholar, whose work I loved; we were driving to Stanford, my first year here, to the home of a mutual friend, a friend of mine and a former student of Henry's. In the car I must have said something

about Knopf also, because Henry Smith's great book, *Virgin Land [the American West as Symbol and Myth, 1950]* was rejected by Knopf.

05:00:11:00

Lage: He rejected a lot of good books.

05:00:11:01

Levine: Yes, all publishers do. It was rejected by Knopf, and Harvard published it. And in those days, Harvard didn't have a paperback series, so Knopf did the paperback. Henry was talking about his anger at Knopf. And again, I said, "Wow, Knopf rejected Henry Smith and Ken Stampp, two of the great scholars." It just made it easier for me. What I learned from that is you tell stories like that to students. You tell them stories like that.

05:00:11:30

Lage: You might have been devastated, getting that three-week rejection.

05:00:11:34

Levine: Yes, I expected him not to publish it, so it wouldn't have been too devastating, but it was easier because people told me. So I tell my own students, "Oh yeah, my first book was rejected." I think it's a very useful thing. And when they send their book off—I used to tell them, but Ken once asked me why I'm telling everybody that his book was rejected. [laughter] So I realized it was different for me to say mine was, and let him tell them. I used to say, "You know, my book was rejected, Ken Stampp's was, Henry Smith's book was rejected." Now I just talk about my own. So that was very helpful.

I must say that Jack Hexter—I am parenthetical here—Jack Hexter, who was a professor of English history at Queens College and later went to other places, I think he ended up at Yale. Very nice man, who is, I think, now gone. Jack Hexter wrote a book of essays, which I read, because everyone said it's a great book of essays, and even though it wasn't my field, I learned a lot from them about method and approach. In the introduction to the book, he says, "Because I want this to help young scholars, I'd like to say this, my essay on the bourgeoisie," which is one of his famous essays, "was rejected by the following journals," and then he lists three journals. [laughter] And then he says, "My essay on X and Y was rejected by two journals." It was so terrific. No one's ever done that, I think. He talked about his rejections so young scholars—he was now a famous guy—young scholars would take some—he wanted to let them know that rejection is not the end of your life, and life goes on.

05:00:13:21

Lage: It is interesting in oral histories, too, where we tend to hit on the successes and leave those dead ends behind.

05:00:13:29

Levine: Yes, that's right. I also learned how to teach and not to teach by watching people, and watching their positives and their negatives. Even great teachers

have negatives. I will save some of that for when I talk about Richard Hofstadter, who was probably not a great teacher, but he was a great man. That's important too.

05:00:13:50

Lage: I was wondering, if I'm not interrupting right in the middle, I read something about Hans Kohn and his ideas of nationalism.

05:00:13:58

Levine: Yes, he was famous.

05:00:13:59

Lage: Were the ideas—did they shape you at all? He seemed to be almost talking to an immigrant population.

05:00:14:07

Levine: I took his course on intellectual—I don't think he thought he was talking to an immigrant population, but he was an immigrant, and I realized you don't have to speak this perfect English. You see, I was worried—I think I said that last time, and very important for me, because I have these other teachers saying, "Watch your hands, watch your pronunciation." My speech courses. And here's this guy, and he wasn't the only one, I had a number of immigrant teachers, but he was *the one* great teacher. Here's this guy who spoke very halting English and with a thick accent, and he was a great teacher. I said to myself, "Hell, you don't have to speak like the guys on the radio to communicate." That was a time—I said this in another interview session; I think I did, God knows what I said—that was a time when all our models were white Anglo-Saxon Protestant models. The way people spoke—I think I mentioned the Jewish movie stars had to take on names, Simon and Garfunkel were the first Jewish names that I knew of people who become stars. When I was in college everything was, you had to be this in order to have positions in business and entertainment—

05:00:15:22

Lage: And in the academy.

05:00:15:23

Levine: The university. These refugee professors didn't do that, and that was important for me to see. When I came here, one of the great people at Berkeley was Hans Rosenberg, who had been at Brooklyn College when I was at City College. He was a very, very important teacher and professor, and scholar and intellectual. And there were lots of other people. Now, you know, then you begin to learn it depends what your accent is. German accents are okay, as Henry Kissinger found out at a young age, and kept his. I'm convinced that—you know, his brother was older than he—he lost it, he has no accent. My wife came here when she was lots older than Henry Kissinger when he came here; she has no accent. So that can be an individual thing. But a lot of people think he kept it. The point is, it didn't hurt him. If you're going to go into the academe having a German accent is okay. Having a Lower East

Side New York accent isn't okay. Anyway, it's interesting. I guess I was taking from these things, unconsciously, a lot of stuff that helped me shape who I was going to be as a teacher.

05:00:16:31

Lage: Right, right.

05:00:16:31

Levine: Stuff not to do, stuff to do, stuff you couldn't do, stuff you could do, stuff maybe you should be able to do, and stuff maybe I should do [laughter] even though—that kind of thing. I know very few people, though I don't talk to them about it much, just in my own experience, who talk about their failures to their students. But I think it's crucial to do that. Did I talk about my talking to Natalie Davis? I once had a talk with my friend Natalie Davis, who was *so* wonderful, *is* so wonderful. But one of her students came over here, happened also to be a friend of ours, and had a very hard life. She had kids and very little money, and she was—it was the woman you met last week, Greta Sloan. Greta came after an evening at Bill Bouwsma's house, came here, and I was sitting in the living room, it was very different then with the couches over there. I remember this very well. I was sitting on the floor reading, which I did as a young person. Greta came in and I poured us each a glass of wine, and she sat with her back to the couch, and I was sitting here on the floor. She was saying, "You know, Larry, I can't do this. I went over there, and Natalie was there, and she is *so*—I can't be Natalie Davis. She just conquers everything, and she can do it, see? And I can't do it." I said to her, "Do you know how old Natalie was when she published her first book? Do you know the difficulty she had getting a job, because she was a woman, and she raised kids." I went on, and then it occurred to me that maybe Natalie ought to *say* this. It was very presumptuous of me, but I was a friend of Natalie's, so I went to her. I said, "You know what would be good, I think," because Natalie was always so in control, so wonderful.

05:00:18:23

Lage: So put together.

05:00:18:26

Levine: So put together. I was standing in the hall, talking to a colleague about how hard teaching lecture courses was. We were both US historians and we had big classes. I said, "You know, we Americanists are special, we suffer, blah blah." Down the hall, Natalie happens to come carrying an armload of blue books and regular books. I said, "Hi." She said, "Oh, I'm so excited! I just came from class!" I'm feeling small, because I was just complaining, and this woman has a million blue books. She had big classes, it wasn't just Americanists, and she was so positive about it. She's a positive person; she's learned to be positive. I think it's good, and Natalie, by the way, agreed with me when we had this chat, that it's good to tell students, if you're a woman, what you suffered, if you're a Jew or a black, what it was like to get into the academe, and to tell them about your failures as well as your successes,

because you look like some kind of model of success, streamlined, made for this world. I guess I began to pile up those things even as an undergraduate, to look at them and it was so helpful.

05:00:19:40

Lage: Did you have anyone at City College who did sort of take you under their wing?

05:00:19:45

Levine: I can't say I did, but there were professors who were very nice to me. Michael Kraus, who was a professor of American history, and who was a guy who invited me to his home once. I think I mentioned this last time, he had a very beautiful apartment with art in it and everything. He grew up a little bit the way I did; he was a Jewish guy, as many of my professors. I still hadn't left that world. City College was still part of that world.

05:00:20:10

Lage: Did you ever get into the day program?

05:00:20:12

Levine: Oh yes, you had to.

05:00:20:15

Lage: So you became a regular student.

05:00:20:17

Levine: You only had a finite time.

05:00:20:18

Lage: I see.

05:00:20:19

Levine: I got in after a year and a half, to the day program. Or maybe after a year. I didn't mention this—did I mention my broken back? Have I mentioned that?

05:00:20:28

Lage: No.

05:00:20:29

Levine: After my freshman year. So I dropped out of City College for six months. After my freshman year, some friends of mine and I, three friends and I, two of them working at a hotel in Asbury Park, New Jersey. We all kind of owned, jointly—I grew up in a non-driving home, we never had a car. But my friends and I think I chipped in, bought a 1937 Chevy—this was 1951—a 1937 Chevy coupe. It had one seat and a well behind the seat. It was a little tank. We were out there in Asbury Park, and we pulled over to the side of the road for some reason. I don't really remember why, it was one or two in the morning. A guy driving a 1951 Buick, that was a new car, 1951 Buick convertible, crashed into us. We were standing still, off the road. So he drove off the road, right into our car. Because I was lying in the back in that well, my chin met my

knees, I just doubled up and I heard a crack. But I was lucky because I thought—lying there, I thought I was going to be paralyzed for the rest of my life.

05:00:21:49

Lage: Could you not move?

05:00:21:50

Levine: No, I could move. But I heard a crack, you know. [laughter] Well, I knew I could move, because my friends then yelled, “Larry, get out! Get out! The car’s going to explode!” So I had to climb over the front seat, that’s how you got into the well; there was no door. I climbed over the front seat with this broken back and stood up outside and then collapsed onto the ground. I had a girlfriend later, a woman friend, who had exactly the same accident, and just in the few years between my accident and her accident they improved the treatment a lot. I was in a cast, the kind of cast they put on your arm. I was in a cast from my Adam’s apple to my penis for six months. Then when I was cut out of that cast, I was put into a brace for another six months. I dropped out of school for a while, and when I went back I was still wearing this brace. I had little angel’s humps on the back of my shirt because of the brace. I had good posture for the only time in my life. [laughter]

05:00:22:56

Lage: Did you have rehabilitation? Exercises?

05:00:22:58

Levine: I did exercises and stuff. And I was young. How old was I? I was eighteen. If that happens to you when you’re eighteen years old, you probably don’t need rehabilitation. When you’re forty-eight, you’d need it. I went for my physical with that brace on for the Korean War. This happened in the summer of the 1951, and in the spring of 1952 while I was still wearing the brace—I was now back at City College. I missed the fall semester of 1951—I took my physical with the brace on. And of course they don’t trust you when you come in, but I was wearing the brace, I didn’t put it on for my physical. They took their own x-rays, and the doctor came out and said, “Congratulations young man, you’re better than new!”

05:00:23:49

Lage: So you were eligible for the draft?

05:00:23:52

Levine: Yes, I was eligible for the draft. As far as the back goes. But at the end of my physical, they make you fill out a big form, and there were boxes, “Did you ever have any of these diseases?” and then charts for them, and there were a whole bunch of them. I just clicked on asthma, which I had had since I was fourteen, and it didn’t hamper me terribly, but you are subject to attacks; I still am. That got me out of the army. In fact, I was quite amazed at the process. They gave me something like a 2-S classification instead of a 1-A and they said, “Go to your doctor, we need a letter from your doctor.” So I went to my

doctor, a local guy, not a terribly good doctor, in fact. He wrote a letter saying, "This young man has chronic bronchial asthma," which is what I had. I got a 4-F, and I remember saying, "If you come from a more privileged background than I do and you know doctors, why can't you have any doctor write that for you, who is willing to do you a favor. "He has chronic bronchial asthma." It's hard to test asthma, you know. Asthma is an occasional thing, it happens under certain circumstances. I've thought about that a lot, coming from worlds of privilege and worlds of non-privilege. We didn't know any doctors, but it was an interesting experience. I saw no import when I clicked off asthma. I had it, it was one of the few things I clicked off because I was, knock on wood—[knocks on table] "he knocked on wood just now"—it was one of the few things I had. I was healthy.

05:00:25:43

Lage:

Did you think you might end up in the Korean War?

05:00:25:46

Levine:

I had a big debate about myself, whether I would serve in the Korean War, because I didn't believe in the Korean War. Even then. I wasn't even sure I thought Syngman Rhee was a guy whose republic I wanted to die for, and I wasn't even sure if you could trust Syngman Rhee about who attacked whom. There was a big two-volume work—I forgot the author's name, a historian—who argued that North Korea was attacked by South Korea. So in the circles I ran in, the liberal left circles, there wasn't great love of this war. But I came to the conclusion I would fight in the war. This was five years after the end of World War II. I was still very young and still filled with—will you defend your country even if the war is blah blah—after all, there were people who didn't believe in serving in World War II.

There's a story I wanted to tell last time and didn't tell it to you, maybe when I was talking about World War II. Maybe I can say it in this context, because it stayed with me and struck me very profoundly at the time. I don't know what it really means, this story. My Uncle Harry, my mother's oldest brother—she's the oldest, and the next sibling was her brother Harry—went into the US Army in his thirties, and was a bit older than—and became a kind of father figure to a lot of these soldiers. He was in North Africa, the battles of North Africa, and he was then in the invasion of Italy and ended up hurt physically but really much more hurt mentally and was on disability for the rest of his life, which was another fifty years. Sad. But when he first came home, it was either late 1943 or it was early 1944, so I was eleven, ten or eleven. He was in the hospital in Long Island and I don't remember, because I had nothing to do with it. My parents and my grandparents got a car. They didn't drive, none of them drove. They got a car and a driver, they must have hired it. But it wasn't a taxi. There were limo services. They had to get out to Long Island. They didn't know anything about the Long Island railroad, if indeed it went to where we were going. So they must have hired this guy, is all I can think of.

I remember it was a very unusual thing for me to take a long car trip, very unusual. And it was exciting. I was in the car, and in those days I guess there was much less traffic and the highways were small, probably two-lane roads. I was looking out and we were somewhere in Long Island, and I saw—I can see it to this day, and it's a long time ago—I saw a group of guys with buzz cuts, crew cuts we called them, marching with their right arm on the guy in front of them, his shoulder, they were marching in single file, right arms on the shoulder of the person in front of them. It was a long line of these guys and they were wearing—my memory tells me gray uniforms, I don't know, just a tunic and a pair of pants and the shirt, the tunic was outside the pants. I was just kind of amazed, it looked like something out of a war movie. I asked who they were and I was told they were pacifists; they were people who refused to go into the army for conscience, reasons of conscience. This is the way they were treated. This is all I know about it. But I was shocked, even then. Something in me, I said, "That's wrong." I was a kid. So that's always stayed with me.

- 05:00:29:38  
Lage: Wrong for them to be treated in that way?
- 05:00:29:39  
Levine: Exactly, wrong for them to be treated that way.
- 05:00:29:40  
Lage: Just to clarify.
- 05:00:29:42  
Levine: Oh yes, wrong for them to be treated that way, wrong for them—
- 05:00:29:45  
Lage: And then visiting—
- 05:00:29:46  
Levine: That a person should have—then I visited my poor uncle who was a victim of that war.
- 05:00:29:52  
Lage: Was he physically hurt at all?
- 05:00:29:54  
Levine: Yes, he had some physical injuries, but not like his brother, my other, his younger brother, who had very bad physical injuries from the war, but who recovered psychologically well and had a wonderful life, whereas my uncle had a terrible—I say terrible, he was a bright young hot shot, and he ended up hanging around street corners and living on his disability checks and never having a family, never having a life, never having a job. It was very sad. He was a victim of the war. Anyway, I didn't put all this together.
- 05:00:30:31  
Lage: So were you having a growing sense of pacifism, do you think?

05:00:30:34

Levine: Well, you know, it was World War II, and I was full of the war. My room was full of models of airplanes, and I could identify them by their silhouettes, and I collected metal and paper. I was a little patriot. But I was troubled by the human thing. They looked like prisoners out of some movie I had seen. Their crime was that they felt they couldn't take life, and I wondered whether—I don't know, I wasn't very sophisticated about this, but it bothered me. I remember it bothering me, and the memory has stayed with me. How many memories from the age of ten have stayed with me? Very few. This one did, and I can see it. So it must have troubled me a lot, or fascinated me maybe; that's another word. That's what happened. Anyway, this was only eight years, seven years before the Korean War, or six years, depending on whether it was '43 or '44.

05:00:31:40

Lage: Well, tell me something about the political atmosphere at City College, and how you—you said you supported Wallace in 1948, when you were still too young to vote.

05:00:31:49

Levine: Yes, I was still in high school in 1948.

05:00:31:50

Lage: Where did you go politically at City College and what were the influences?

05:00:31:54

Levine: You know, I voted for—I was a Democrat, like my old man. I just had ideas like, the government went into Korea, they had reasons to go into Korea, and he supported this. That was my family's attitude. They trusted the government, they were afraid of the government. Did I tell you the story about my parked car? I think I did.

05:00:32:18

Lage: Yes, you did.

05:00:32:19

Levine: My father was afraid of authority. He came from Russia; they weren't very nice to Jews there. Here was a place where he could earn a living, where he could raise his children, where he could go to synagogue, where he could pray, where he could be what he wanted to be. He loved this place. And he wasn't really too much open to criticism of it. He thought this was the most wonderful place in the world. If the government said they had to go to war, they had to go to war.

05:00:32:46

Lage: Would you have these discussions with him? Or you just sensed it?

05:00:32:50

Levine: Oh, well no, I knew who he was. I knew my father well. Though I heard him talk about this, I didn't argue with him. He didn't argue with me. He knew I

had some doubts about the Korean War, but my father wasn't a guy I would talk to about these things. He wasn't a heavy newspaper reader or anything like that. My father did what he was meant to do in the world on his terms. He was a good father, a good husband, a loyal person. He had good friends, and he worked, worked, worked all the time, and made a living for his family. That's what he was meant to be. He wanted better for his kids. So at some level he did not want me to be him. First of all, this country allowed that. So he must have had some dissatisfaction with who he was, because he wanted me to be better, to work less hard, to work with my head and not with my hands. But I did nothing political. My grandfather, Isaac, who had an enormous influence on me, I used to argue with him all the time.

05:00:33:50

Lage: Oh you did?

05:00:33:51

Levine: Yes, because he was a newspaper reader. He read three newspapers in Yiddish and English every day, and he listened to the news and he was a very opinionated guy. He would tell you statistics about how many people died in China last year. I would say, when I was a teenager, "Where did you learn that?!" And he'd say, "*The Daily Forward*, that Jewish newspaper!" It was a socialist newspaper. Was he a socialist? Absolutely not. But the newspaper was a liberal, left newspaper. It was the leading—I don't know what it was by the 1940s because I didn't read Yiddish. It was started by Abraham Cahan as a socialist newspaper by the forties. Now, it's still alive, though now it publishes in English and Yiddish, and it's quite conservative. You never can tell with newspapers, what they're going to be.

05:00:34:42

Lage: Where they're going to go.

05:00:34:44

Levine: There wasn't a lot of political discussion with my friends, but I lived in a rather homogenous world. Most of my friends, especially at City College were liberal, to go back to City College. There was a guy at City College in the years I was there, who started a young Republican club and could get no members, and said—this is so funny hearing this today—said, in the newspaper—I didn't know him, but I read about this in our newspaper—said, "I might as well be in Mississippi!" [laughter] Because Mississippi was completely Democrat in those days.

05:00:35:20

Lage: Right. So there was a definite outlook at City College.

05:00:35:25

Levine: There was, yes.

05:00:35:25

Lage: Were there tensions within the left liberals? I know there was a lot of anti-Communist concern, and professors fired earlier on, I guess.

05:00:35:34

Levine: Sure, absolutely. One incident I remember very well while I was there was Paul Robeson, the great singer, actor, and Communist and African-American guy. Paul Robeson was invited to come and sing at City College. This was in the fifties. I went to City College during a period of political oppression. He was invited to sing and the administration wouldn't let him because he was a Communist, which gave way to lots of jokes. I joined the picket line—it was my first picket line, I think—eighteen, nineteen years old, whatever I was, I joined the picket line to protest this. I spent a lot of time in that picket line. One day I was marching with this guy, and we're marching together—this was an interesting lesson to me—this guy, I think, belonged to some Communist youth movement. We were walking together and chatting, we had petitions and picket lines, and we were trying to get people to sign. People were a little afraid of signing, even at City College, but we got lots of signatures.

05:00:36:53

Lage: So there was a sense of the McCarthy era.

05:00:36:55

Levine: Oh absolutely. He said, "I wish McCarthy would try to come here to speak. We would shut him down, we would shut him down." I said, "Wait a minute, what is it we're marching for exactly?" He said, "We're marching for Paul Robeson to have the right to be here." I said, "Yes, but aren't we marching for the right of people to come here and speak politically?" He said, "I'm not marching for that! I'm marching for Paul Robeson." [laughter] I realized I was kind of marching for the principle, though I understand—would I have wanted McCarthy to come? No. Would I have shut him down? I don't think I would have, no. In fact, I'm pretty sure I wouldn't. I never believed that. There was a reprise of that at Berkeley when Mickey Lima came. Did we speak about that?

05:00:37:39

Lage: No, no we didn't.

05:00:37:41

Levine: When Mickey Lima came, many years later when I was an assistant professor at Berkeley. Berkeley had had, and Clark Kerr broke, a prohibition of controversial speakers, and members of the Communist party definitely were. Carl Schorske and others really pushed hard and they got this broken. Clark Kerr was responsible for that. In 1963 I think it was, 1962 or 1963, Mickey Lima, the head of the northern California party, came to speak. Dwinelle Hall or Wheeler Hall, I forget which one it was, was jammed with people. There were overflow crowds in other rooms. Carl Schorske gave a beautiful introduction, "Now we have arrived as a true intellectual community," he said. Everyone was so excited. Then Mickey Lima got up and gave the dullest talk

in the world. Only *he* didn't understand the significance of the moment, or didn't give a damn about it. Because I'm not sure he believed in free speech. He got up and spoke and then there were some questions. Someone asked him something about McCarthy. Now McCarthy could have come, of course, McCarthy always could have come. He said, "Oh no, McCarthy should not be allowed to come because he's unscientific." That's the word Mickey used.

05:00:39:04

Lage: Oh, that's interesting.

05:00:39:06

Levine: It was like you put a pin in a balloon, you could feel it. It was just "sigh," everyone understood what he was saying, except him, that this occasion isn't so important, that he doesn't understand the meaning of this occasion. It was very interesting. Well, I had that experience many years before at City College with my unknown, I forgot who he was, I only met him that one time.

05:00:39:32

Lage: Did you get involved in any of the clubs or organizations?

05:00:39:35

Levine: No, I wasn't very political. I found—I should say this—I struggled in City College. I did well, I was Phi Beta Kappa and *cum laude* and I got a B+ average, or A- average, whichever it was.

05:00:39:51

Lage: Nowadays, with grade inflation, it would have to be A+.

05:00:39:55

Levine: Well, we'll talk about grade inflation, which I don't believe in. Nevertheless, I did work. It is true that when I was taking the bus to my graduation—because I lived so close to City College—I was taking the bus to my own graduation, I read in the *New York Times* that 10 percent of the class graduated *cum laude* or better, *magna, summa*. I quickly figured that out. You needed a B average to be *cum laude*, so it said that 90 percent of the class had less than a B average, I was amazed at this! It was harder to get grades.

05:00:40:36

Lage: You hadn't realized how well you had done.

05:00:40:38

Levine: Well, I knew I was doing well. They let me into the day school. I was doing well. I had professors who didn't laugh when I said I was thinking of going to graduate school and the like. They were nice to me and they gave me A's, I got a lot of A's in history. That was all to the good.

05:00:40:58

Lage: Anything else about politics? Just to stay on that line.

05:00:41:01

Levine: Yes. I was going to explain why I wasn't very political. I was still working in my father's store at times; he needed me. He worked so hard, and his store was failing by then. I worked a lot. My father and mother were killing themselves, and I helped them in the store. I never took more than four courses. The minimum load you could take was twelve credits, though it was expected that—you needed fifteen credits a semester to get out in four years. I couldn't take more than twelve credits, I couldn't take more than four courses. I realized I had never tried, because I had taken four courses, and I realized I couldn't do more than that; even if I could have taken three, I would have, but they didn't allow that to be a full-time student, taking only nine credits. They were three credit courses. So I took four courses a semester and did the others in summer schools. So I would have graduated in four years, but I graduated in four and a half years because of my broken back.

05:00:42:07

Lage: So you did make the four-year count.

05:00:42:09

Levine: I did make the four-year thing by going to summer school. I just found it such a challenge that I didn't get too involved in anything. I had no extracurricular activities. I had good friends at City College, we had a table.

05:00:42:25

Lage: What table?

05:00:42:26

Levine: I'm sorry, in the cafeteria there was a table where all day long someone I knew would be hanging out, that happened. People would just grab a table and someone from the crew would be there all the time, they'd come and go.

05:00:42:38

Lage: Now who were your good friends? What types of people? Were they fellow historians?

05:00:42:42

Levine: Well, some of them were neighborhood guys I didn't know well. Very few, none of my very good friends went to college with me, but there were some people I knew visually from my neighborhood. They said, "Hi Larry," and that's how I got into this table. I sat down and I was introduced by a guy named Ronnie Stringer, who later became a lawyer. He wasn't a close friend but I knew him from the neighborhood. He introduced me to a whole bunch of people, one of whom I dated for quite a while while I was at City College. So there was that. I shouldn't say this probably, but it's true and maybe it's good for me to say it. Walking into the cafeteria and making my way to that table was excruciating. I was so self-conscious, I thought every eye was on me and I looked like a *schlomp*, kind of. [laughter] I just didn't dress well, whatever. I just felt very conscious. When my friends weren't there I sat alone, or I went outside. I didn't even like to sit in the cafeteria, because invariably someone

would sit at the same table you were sitting at. So I still had that terrific self-consciousness. But I did make friends there, and I made my first—I was going to say I made my first non-Jewish friends there but that's not true because I had Greek and Armenian friends growing up. But I made my first WASP, WASC [laughter]—one of my students at Princeton University when I taught there, wrote a paper for me in which he called John F. Kennedy our first WASC president. White, Anglo-Saxon Catholic. I thought that's a good term, because there were other Catholics in America, Polish Catholics and Italian Catholics, who probably couldn't—still could not have been President of the United States. But John F. Kennedy was a northern European from—he was Irish. It's true the Irish had hard times, but the Irish also had something else going for them, they had that look. Everyone said how beautiful John F. Kennedy looked. Well, partly, that was the model and he fit it. The Cary Grant kind of model, another English, northern European. So I made my first friends from that group in college. Although I certainly don't remember most of their names, because they didn't stay with me post-college. One of them was a very nice guy who I had seen, and even been in a class with, at George Washington High School, but I became friendly with at City College. John MacBeth his name was, wonderful man. He was about 6'4", and a terrific guy. I just loved having a few friends I could see and go sit down with.

05:00:45:33

Lage:

Did you have a strong sense of crossing a cultural divide?

05:00:45:38

Levine:

Well, I didn't really have that. I didn't have that until later when I went to Princeton. A lot of my professors were Jewish, and even with John MacBeth, I began to understand that Catholics had their own problems. I didn't understand that as a kid growing up when the Catholics looked like the Yankees. But I did understand it later, and by college I understood it. John had his own problems growing up. I think he was a Catholic, I can't even remember now, but I didn't meet Catholics.

05:00:46:13

Lage:

You mentioned making friends with a lot of returning vets.

05:00:46:15

Levine:

Yes, now I did. Though I've been searching for names I can't come up with any. They were really nice to me. They were older guys, and I felt completely—see, the genus, is that right, the genus I worried about the guys who were in 9A1 and 9B1 and 8A1 and 8B1. Those are the premier classes in the eighth grade and the ninth grade in junior high school and high school. Those are those I used to call little snots. [laughter] Those are the people, you know, in high school, who did very well and I didn't do very well, and people I didn't really want to associate with. I thought City College would be full of them, and it was, of course. They were in City College too, many of them; they came from homes like I did. Those were not the people I wanted to hang with. I still had this lingering prejudice about who they were.

05:00:47:07

Lage: People who succeeded in high school?

05:00:47:08

Levine: Yes, and who were very serious. I met these vets who succeeded in college, but they were regular guys, they told jokes. Well, these others probably did too, but I didn't know it; I didn't hang with them. These guys told jokes and spoke about girls and went to drink beer and sang songs in the bar. [laughter] I liked that. I did that as a teenager, as a guy, and here people in college—but they tended to be these older people, older guys; they were all guys, the ones I knew. Well, most veterans were guys in World War II.

Then there was this wonderful Jamaican, who was not a veteran, but he hung with us too, and he was a singer, and in fact has sung with the Kingston Trio or something, I forget. These were all people who were serious about getting degrees, and some of them had families. We all went to the evening session. They were a very important wedge for me; they got me into the college world. They, and the immigrant professors began to tell me, "This can be your world too, you don't have to be like them, and you don't have to be a high school hotshot. This can be your world," and that was very important. That really made me feel much more secure. And to my amazement, when I did go to the day session—I could have hung in the evening session for another year but I saw no point in it—I was cutting myself out of classes I could take with people like Hans Kohn, because he didn't teach in the evening session. So I did enter and I expected now I'm going to be inundated with "them," but in fact it wasn't true. I, in fact, met many people I was sympathetic with. I did want to talk about that, so that was good.

I should say I made a number of women friends, one or two of whom I dated. I got very friendly—this is interesting—with a young girl named Lucy, who I often met on the bus. She lived further north in Manhattan. I got on the bus at 176<sup>th</sup> Street and Broadway and it took us to 139<sup>th</sup> Street and Broadway and then we walked a few blocks to Convent Avenue, and there was City College. So she took the same bus, but she lived twenty or thirty blocks north of me, and she was often on the bus. We became bus friends. Then I was in a class or two with her. She was an Armenian American, and I had grown up with Armenians. She was very pretty and I never dated her and I don't know why, and you're now asking me, was I conscious of crossing lines—up to that point, through college, I never dated a non-Jewish girl. This is true, and I never dated Lucy, and I have thought of her occasionally because she was a very lovely, nice young person.

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Lage: But you think it just wouldn't cross your mind to make that step?

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Levine: I don't know if it never—I can't remember. But I never did it. I think I had the feeling that she would have welcomed it, but there we were in a world where

the guy had to do it, the young woman didn't. And I may have been wrong, she may have said, "No," but I never did, and not because I thought she would say, "No." I just didn't. She was a friend. I did have women friends at City College. So my circle began to grow, though it was still within a very comfortable nexus because I was going to a New York school filled with people like myself. Though there were others too.

05:00:50:43

Lage: And living at home.

05:00:50:45

Levine: And living at home, and still hanging with my friends. That was the last period I did that, right through college.

05:00:50:51

Lage: Your friends from the neighborhood.

05:00:50:53

Levine: My neighborhood friends. I still hung with them on weekends, still hung around the luncheonette.

05:00:50:57

Lage: But were you thinking of different things than they were thinking of?

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Levine: Well, I was, but I didn't let that—I remember one, I don't know why I'm telling this story, but I had a date in the Bronx, and this young woman who I had dated before, had loaned me a big fat literature book, one of these tomes. They weighed pounds, it was a textbook full, and I needed to read something and she had this textbook. So I had it at home, and I was going to date her, I was walking to the bus to the Bronx, carrying this huge book and I passed the luncheonette. The guys said, "Where you going?!" I said, "I got a date!" They said, "What's the book for?" [laughter] I said, "In case she's boring!" You know, what can I say? I still was in that circle of people.

05:00:51:50

Lage: It makes it a little harder to sort of transform yourself.

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Levine: Well, I didn't want to, you see. I didn't want to transform myself. I said last time about the whole process of becoming something else in college. You're aware of that, but you don't want it to happen. You don't want to be taken out of your culture; I didn't want that to happen.

05:00:52:10

Lage: I'm even thinking of intellectually, not giving up your—

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Levine: Oh sure, then you understand that you can be taken out in certain ways and not other ways, but it changes you. I still hung on to my neighborhood friends

and to my neighborhood. It was important for me to. I liked having these guys. Graduate school was going to kill all that. Something happened to me there, that is, I became a pre-professional, I guess. But I still did this. I was still part of the neighborhood. I even talked a couple of my friends—quite a few of my friends served in the Korean War, and one of them was even killed in the Korean War. He wasn't a close friend, but he was a guy in the neighborhood, a nice guy. But quite a few of my friends served, and as they got out of the Korean War, after that two years, I talked a few of them into going to college. I think they must have said, "Jesus, if he can do it, I can do it." [laughter] Because I was a much worse high school student than they were, or at least as bad. I felt good about that. I talked four or five people I really liked into going to college at City College, and they all went to City College. But there were others I couldn't talk into it.

05:00:53:26

Lage:

Did you keep in touch with these people?

05:00:53:29

Levine:

Well, no. I did for a while, but I don't know if this is the place to say it, but perhaps it is the place to say it. In 1981 we had a neighborhood reunion. It's interesting, it made the *New York Times*. Some of the guys I grew up with decided they would like to get the old crowd together, and how they found me—and I was living in Washington. My wife, my family, and our two younger kids; our older kid lived, in fact, in this house, our oldest kid, who had a significant other at the time. We left the house with them and went to Washington for two years, 1981 to 1983, those academic years. I was living there, and I got this message—how they found me, God knows—that there was going to be this thing. It was going to be a two-day thing, and I went up on the train.

05:00:54:21

Lage:

Alone?

05:00:54:22

Levine:

With one of my sons. My wife didn't want to go; this wasn't her scene. And one of my sons went up just to hang—he stayed with my mother, as did I. She still had the apartment I grew up in. I went off to a delicatessen at lunch time—we took an early train—and the first meeting of the crowd, it was twenty or twenty-five guys, all guys, was in the delicatessen, one of the delicatessens we used to hang in. I went there, and there were these guys I grew up with. This was 1981 and I hadn't seen them in a long time. It was very nice. We went back to the park, we played basketball, we went out to a restaurant that night, the next morning we all did something, and the *Times* had a reporter, and we walked, I remember, I was part of three or four people who walked her around. We said, "These are streets we didn't dare walk. This is where we went to the synagogue. These are the bakeries we bought our bread at." We walked into one of the bakeries, and it was a lovely story in the *Times*.

05:00:55:29

Lage: Oh that would be fun to look up.

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Levine: Two or three years later they reprised it. It was less good the second time. There were some new people, but the first time was really an elegant experience.

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Lage: Well, someone must have put that together who had the connections at the time.

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Levine: Yes, sure, it must be true. And some of the guys had done pretty well. The point of telling the story is I did connect for that weekend, and one or two of my old friends reestablished relations, and for a while we saw each other. They'd come visit us in Washington, but it didn't last much beyond that. One of them came all the way to Berkeley with his wife. And one of my very closest friends when I was growing up, Stanley, I saw him at this thing, but there was a gulf. It was just too big. I was kind of—when the first meeting took place—is this possible? No, it must have been the second meeting, by then I had won the MacArthur [fellowship]. Even then, I was a professor at Berkeley, they couldn't quite believe it because I really was a slug in school. I was a guy who showed no academic promise at all.

05:00:56:43

Lage: Did anyone else become an academic?

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Levine: I think the majority of them didn't even—well, quite a few of them never went to college. Did anyone else become an academic? Yes. He wasn't a close friend of mine, a guy named Robert Weisbord. Weis-bord. Or -broad. I've got to be careful here. I think it was Weisbord. He became an academic at somewhere in New England, yes he did, yes he did [University of Rhode Island]. I can't—I may be making a mistake, but I can't think of others. A number of them had good jobs, like a few of them became school teachers. One of my best friends growing up, Jerry Golub, became a high school athletic teacher and coach and something else, he taught something else in Spring Valley, in New York.

05:00:57:36

Lage: Did most of them stay in the New York area?

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Levine: Yes, most of them did. They didn't live in the neighborhood anymore, but they did, in the suburbs and places like that.

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Lage: That's interesting.

05:00:57:45

Levine: So it was quite wonderful. But no, I think once I got to graduate school my connection with my friends weakened, and then when I moved to the West Coast it died. One of them was out here in Los Angeles, and I saw him for a while. In fact, when I first came here I went down, they were the only people I knew at Thanksgiving; when Thanksgiving break came I went down to spend Thanksgiving with them. But it was rare that I saw them.

05:00:58:14

Lage: Should we talk about getting to Columbia? Or does the teaching come in there before? You mentioned you taught in the public school.

05:00:58:22

Levine: Yes. I think we have covered my experience at City College.

05:00:58:31

Lage: Yes, sum up.

05:00:58:33

Levine: Yes, I'll sum up. It was a very positive experience. I loved the place, and still do, and still give money to it, and never went through this, "Oh, it's ruined." One of the real dangers in life is the golden age syndrome. There was a golden age back then, it was wonderful. It's so easy to fall into that. You go back to New York and it looks dangerous. For a while, now it doesn't so much, but it did for a while. We went back a lot when my parents were still alive. I went back once or twice a year to see them. You begin to say, "Well, people can't take the subways anymore." There was a great cartoon in the *New Yorker* of a street, it looked like Harlem, and everyone's sitting—it was a sketchy thing—everyone's sitting on the steps and playing and the streets are all full of people, like the neighborhood I grew up in. But these were blacks, and there's a big Cadillac driving through the street, and you don't see any figures at all, but there's a Cadillac, and the driver is talking to his passenger, "I remember when you could live in this neighborhood, when people could live in this neighborhood." That's the danger, "Oh, the subways, no one takes the subways anymore." Well, you go into the subway and it's packed with people. The fact is, you draw some golden age and it's very dangerous, very dangerous to do that.

But I did love City College, and I still do, the whole concept of it. I know people say it's not as good as it was and whatever. I have very strong feelings, which will come out before we are finished with this whole thing, but I think I'll save it for later. I have very strong feelings about grade inflation, which I don't believe. Grade inflation assumes something we don't know, that the students are worse now and don't deserve the grades. The grades are higher, so the real question is not "are the grades higher." It is true that probably 90 percent of the students at City College no longer get below the average, or anywhere else. It's not whether the grades are higher, it's whether the students deserve the higher grades, and we don't have a hell of a lot of information to

that. I think it's part of the golden age thing, so I try not to play that with City College. It worked for me, and it still works for people. It introduces them to the world of college and they still get educations. The difference is that mine was a free education and theirs is not. They now pay, and that's very interesting. I think I mentioned it cost me forty dollars plus a few lab fees.

05:01:01:13

Lage: Over the whole course of the—

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Levine: For four years. I paid five dollars registration fee every semester for eight semesters. I took four science courses, and I had to pay lab fees, period. In fact, if I had entered a few years before that the books would have been free too. It was like the public schools, they gave you books. But it's better that they weren't, because then you were forced to use—professors couldn't change the books, you see, you kept using the same books, and you had to give them back as in public school. I would say, in retrospect—but retrospect is a very dangerous thing, it can be good and it can be dangerous. At the time, I thought these professors were terrific. I had bad ones, I had good ones. In retrospect, having now taught for all these years, at a number of places, I realize that the courses we took weren't very good courses. Not enough was demanded of us. Maybe we couldn't have done it, but we demand much more from our students now than was demanded of me. An upper division course—

05:01:02:21

Lage: When you say we, you mean both at George Mason and at Berkeley?

05:01:02:24

Levine: Yes. An upper division course at City College in New York was a textbook, every course had a textbook; it was a textbook age, and then they'd give you a list. You had to do two book reviews; that was a standard course. You had to do two book reviews. They gave you a list of books, and you went to the library; it wasn't a great library. The paperback revolution hadn't really happened yet. You went to the library and got a book. You got the book you could get, and you read it and you wrote a review, and then you did that again. And you read the textbook, and there were exams. At Berkeley, my students in my lecture course had to read eight books, and none of them were textbooks, and they had to write papers, and I gave them difficult exams which made them not just tell me what they knew, but use it in a way. I made demands of them. Even at George Mason, where the student body probably has a larger base—the pyramid has a larger base; it's easier to get into than Berkeley—they read five or six books and write difficult papers, and you toss things at them that were never tossed at us, visual things, audio, music. You make them cope with these things, they love it.

05:01:03:41

Lage: Were you required to think for yourself, or present a point of view that was different from the professor's at City College?

05:01:03:48

Levine: Well, some professors encouraged that and some didn't. I can't imagine doing it in some classes, and in some classes there was no room for a point of view at all. Hans Kohn lectured, and you sat there enthralled, but no one would dream of asking him a question, as I recall it. I never took his nationalism course. It didn't interest me particularly, and it was hard to get into his courses. I got into a year-long intellectual history course with him, which was great, and I needed that, I thought. I never did take it [the nationalism course], though I later learned that his fame was built on his nationalism, his theories of nationalism and the like.

05:01:04:23

Lage: You mentioned textbooks, and I came across a reference to a protest—you may not have been there—in 1950, over the Samuel Morison/Commager text and the attitude, the racist attitude. Were you aware of any of that?

05:01:04:39

Levine: No, I wasn't. I later became aware of those books. Commager was one of my teachers, in fact, at Columbia. I became aware of that later. Two things to be said about that, it could have happened the semester before I got there.

05:01:04:53

Lage: It just said 1950.

05:01:04:54

Levine: I got there in the fall of 1950, it could have happened in the winter term, spring term, whatever they call it, which begins in January 1950, and it undoubtedly happened during the day, and I started school at 3:00 in the afternoon.

05:01:05:09

Lage: Were things like that discussed in your classes?

05:01:05:12

Levine: You know, I do recall—not a hell of a lot. One of the books I read for a history course I took with Professor Fenton, J. Alexis Fenton, a nice man, he was very nice to me. It was an American history course, and it was one of the books I picked up for my book review, Claude Bowers' *The Tragic Era*.

It was about Reconstruction. It was a book in that southern mode, which became the national mode, that the South was persecuted after the war, and the Northerners came down and blacks were irresponsible, that whole thing. Now, I had no objections with that because I didn't know enough to realize that was really fallacious. I learned that in graduate school but I didn't know it in undergraduate school. But Claude Bowers, the way he wrote about blacks just shocked me. "The Negroes," this is almost a quote, "were slightly more intelligent than the mules they drove." Things like that.

05:01:06:39

Lage: This is in his public school historical—

05:01:06:43

Levine:

Oh yeah. You know who Claude Bowers was. Roosevelt appointed him the ambassador to Spain in the 1930s, and Claude Bowers became an anti-Franco guy. He was so anti-Franco, so pro-republic and anti-the revolution and the civil war that Roosevelt had to remove him. He was too partisan. Here was this guy who was this eloquent Democratic voice who wrote a book like this. A lot of them wrote books like this at the time. So I went into class and I raised my hand, which was not common for me, and I said to Professor Fenton, I told him what I thought. I don't remember what I said, but I told him I was shocked at this and offended by it. I'm not going to name names here—he later became a colleague of mine at City College when we both taught there, and he had a long career teaching at City College. He was a student in this class and he went to Columbia just as I did and became a professor at City College, and I don't want to—he's still quite alive and it's not important. He raised his hand and he said, "Oh no, no!" And he disagreed with me, and we had a big discussion going, and Fenton stayed out of it. That's always something that's a wise thing to do when your students are—so I don't remember what Professor Fenton said about Bowers and the way blacks were treated, but I do remember I was very offended.

05:01:08:14

Lage:

But he assigned the book, but then maybe there weren't alternative—

05:01:08:16

Levine:

No, he didn't—oh, well, he gave us lists of books, but it's okay—

05:01:08:19

Lage:

I see. He didn't assign it, you picked it.

05:01:08:21

Levine:

Yes. But you know, at the time that was still considered to be a good book. Claude Bowers—he wasn't an academic historian, but he was a gentleman historian, and there were a lot of those. At the time, he had books [on the list], though I didn't read it, oh now I'm blocking his name, the famous historian of slavery who Ken Stampp wrote against in his wonderful *Peculiar Institution*, but his name isn't coming to me. [Ulrich B. Phillips] His books were all over our reading lists, you could have read his books. That was the standard history of slavery. He said things in the introduction to the new edition to that book after he had been in World War I, this Mr. X, Professor X. [laughter]

05:01:09:10

Lage:

We'll fill him in later, I'm trying to think of it.

05:01:09:12

Levine:

His name will come to me, we'll fill it in [U.B. Phillips]. He was writing a preface to the new edition, or whatever, in 1918, and he said he's watching black soldiers playing dice, crap, on the deck of the ship, he says, "And they're just like they were in slavery." That's very offensive. You could just see the same "happy go lucky," you know, "their loud cackling." There you

go, unbelievable. But that was *perfectly*—well, it wasn't unbelievable, it was quite common. It was perfectly legitimate to do that. It was perfectly legitimate throughout much of the twentieth century, up to my day, probably right through it, to write about “darkies” to write about “dagos” for Italians. That kind of stuff, it was all over the place.

05:01:10:00

Lage:

But I somehow have the impression that City College was a very kind of politically alive place where you'd get lots of students saying this is—

05:01:10:11

Levine:

Well, I think there was a very few—I was the only guy in the class who read that book, so there was less outrage on the part of others, but we had a good discussion. Well, the other guy had read it too. The man I'm calling Mr. X on purpose, he read it. I'll call him Fred. Fred read it too. He must have also taken it off the list and read it for his book review. He was not offended by it at all. “Oh, he meant nothing by it,” he said. But you see, I think it has to do with the tolerance for the stereotype. Somewhere, I mentioned this last time, I lost all tolerance for it. Others still had it. It took the civil rights movement and more.

05:01:10:50

Lage:

Were there very many African Americans at City College?

05:01:10:53

Levine:

No, there weren't. There were some, but there weren't many, as I recall. I didn't have any African Americans in my classes. I got to know none of them, not even this fellow Ed House I mentioned last time, who I had known but only visually, had known from high school; he was there. There were very few. There were some in some of my classes but very few. And very few when I went back to teach at City College, and very few at Berkeley when I got there. And still there are fewer than the numbers in the population in these schools.

To just finish my evaluation, if you would ask me to evaluate my experience at City College when I graduated, I would have cited the professors and the great courses and everything. And that's what's important, I suppose. I loved the place, and my fellow students. If you want me to evaluate it now that I'm an experienced hand, I would say the most important part of that education for me was not the courses, which were in a way antediluvian, textbooks and book reviews—that's why that seminar I took was so exciting, because we read whole books. Everyone read them and we discussed them, and they were novels. It was an exciting experience even though I had that painful problem. I would say that the most exciting thing were not the courses, though they were important to me, those courses, and not even the professors, but the students. They were intellectually exciting, these kids. They were like me, except a lot of them were more articulate. They were being transported into new worlds, and they were so excited. It was very common for a kid to say, “I was reading

Kafka,” and to bring Kafka into a discussion that had nothing to do with Kafka.

05:01:12:54

Lage: Around the table?

05:01:12:56

Levine: No, no, this was in class, in classes that encouraged—kids would bring up all kinds of things. I’d sit there and say, “Kafka,” and I’d write it down. [laughter] Because he made it sound, “Kafka, he wrote this book, you know, about a big cockroach, a guy turns into a big cockroach.” *Metamorphoses*, he meant. So I was introduced to lots of stuff that way, or guys just hanging around talking about the books they had read. Maybe I’m doing a golden age thing now, but there was a lot of that at City College. People discovering these new neighborhoods.

05:01:13:32

Lage: Yes, people discovering, that’s a good—

05:01:13:32

Levine: And they were excited by it, and they were a lot of bright, articulate kids. A lot of them from immigrant homes, a lot of them finding this stuff for the first time. Others came from homes where there were books. There was no mold that we were all produced from. I may have been, in fact, at one end of the spectrum. I came from a home with very few books and very little of this, almost none of it. And there were kids who came from the homes of doctors. City College was a good place to send your kid to, and it was free, and a lot of people did send their kids to it. I think on all levels, though, there was a lot there; the students were very good. The professors could be very good, and to someone who didn’t know anything about college, the curriculum seemed okay. Now I realize they could have given us a better curriculum. They could have given us more. In one sense it was very limited, but then all education probably was. I learned nothing a whole series of things.

05:01:14:37

Lage: I’m going to have to stop here because we only have thirty seconds left.

## [Audio File 6]

06:00:00:04

Lage:

Okay, we're starting our sixth disc, and you were right in the middle of a thought, sort of winding up about City College.

06:00:00:13

Levine:

Well, if I were to say what the great limitation of my education at City College was, I would say it was the great limitation of education in America at the time, the 1950s and before, and it was to persist for a while, and that is, it was a very limited education. Within the United States, we learned nothing about black people past slavery, and the vision of slavery, I've already said, was very, very limited. They were happy, and Reconstruction came, and they were one of the forces exploiting the poor Southerners. Poor Southerners! And then they disappear, and if you ever hear about them, there's a race riot somewhere. The treatment of blacks was execrable. The treatment of women was execrable. They were also hardly there, and when they were there, they were there in very stereotyped roles. The suffragette movement was mentioned and things like that. Workers were hardly there. I could go on with this. Parts of the world were not there. Nothing about Asia after the ancient world, nothing about Latin America or southern Europe after the age of discovery; these places just weren't there. When you talked about the world, when we took a course in world history it meant western Europe basically, and within Europe, except for the ancient periods, southern and eastern Europe weren't there.

We came out very limited people with a very limited vision because our education had been very limited. That no longer is true. My students, my poor grade-inflated students [laughter] have a much richer education and know much more when they get out than we did, unless all they do is computer work or business. And that is another problem in our education today, and that's not the kids' fault. That's one of the reasons I have so much trouble with the golden-age junk. "Oh, those students at City College." You know what is so interesting? When I was writing my book on education and the opening of the American mind, which was a defense of the university, *The Opening of the American Mind [Canons, Culture and History, 1996]*, James Atlas, who was one of the critics—one of the more intelligent critics, but not always as intelligent as he should have been—James Atlas said that when you think of the City College of thirty or forty years ago—that puts it in the 1950s, I want to say, when he wrote this, so he's talking about my City College—you can't even compare the students there. Well, what's so interesting about that is, first of all, what I just said, how limited our education was and how limited our knowledge was. And the other thing is what our professors told us. "You should have been here in the thirties, then we had students! *Incomparable years*," Hans Kohn used to say, "Incomparable years!"

06:00:03:15

Lage:

Oh he did?

06:00:03:15

Levine: Oh, yeah, they all did. "Oh, those students, they were so smart, they were so full of learning," and we were told we were dregs. So people in the fifties were told that people in the thirties were great. The students in the nineties are told that students in the fifties were great. It's a very dangerous little game that we play. James Atlas believed this stuff, that there were paragons walking the campus in the fifties. And I believed, because I was told, that there were paragons walking there in the thirties. None of that is true, and one has to be very careful. But my experience at City College was great. Then the dilemma.

06:00:03:56

Lage: What to do?

06:00:03:56

Levine: What was I going to do with my BA? Did I want to be a junior high school, high school teacher? I didn't think about—I turned out to be a junior high school teacher, but I had thought high school. Did I want to be a high school teacher, or did I want to be a college teacher? And it wasn't just what I wanted; it was also what I was fit to do. [laughter] And I honestly didn't know. I'd like to talk a little bit about that now, before we get to Columbia.

06:00:04:21

Lage: Okay.

06:00:04:22

Levine: Because talking—one of my students used to say—in the sixties and seventies they'd say, "Your problem, Professor Levine, is you're too linear." They would say, "Can I do a film instead of the paper?" And I would say, "No. You can do a film *and* the paper. If you want to do a paper for me and the film, sure you can do it. You can't do a film without a paper." They'd say, "You're too linear!" That was Marshall McLuhan and all that stuff. Well, speech is linear, alas, so I can't talk about Columbia and this other thing at the same time, but they happened at the same time.

06:00:05:05

Lage: Okay, well that's good to point out. We can cross over at some points.

06:00:05:09

Levine: Well, that's true of much of what we've done; that's true of oral history, it's linear, so is writing. I decided to apply to Columbia. Everyone told me to do that, my professors told me to do that, my friends, so I applied to Columbia, which I think was probably easier to get into, the graduate school. I think the graduate school was easier to get into then than it may be now, but who knows, that may be golden age in reverse. I applied to Columbia, and I also took the teaching test when I graduated from City College. I got into Columbia and I failed the teaching test, as I told you. So I had this dilemma. Columbia had so many courses in the evening. It was almost like going to the City College evening session, but it wasn't; this was Columbia, but lots of

professors opted to teach in the afternoons, late afternoons and evenings, and opted to teach on Saturday. There were courses on Saturday.

06:00:06:07

Lage: And did they do this to accommodate a working population?

06:00:06:09

Levine: No, it wasn't my impression they did. But they *were* accommodating us, and maybe that's true. I never thought there was anything conscious about it. Dumas Malone, the great southern historian, d-u-m-a-s, Dumas Malone taught his lecture course in the late afternoons or evenings. David Donald taught his on Saturday mornings, Bill Leuchtenburg taught his in the evening. It goes on and on, so I really could do both things for a while. But I failed my teaching test because of the speech.

06:00:06:42

Lage: And it was just the speech? An oral exam?

06:00:06:45

Levine: It was, yes. Well, I passed the written part. I never had to take that again. All I had to do was pass the oral part. The oral part I failed because of my pronunciation. We spoke about this last time.

06:00:06:55

Lage: Yes, pronunciation.

06:00:06:57

Levine: My "mudder, fadder" stuff. So I looked in the help wanted ads for jobs, and I found one. I graduated in January, and I didn't work that January. I graduated in January 1955, so it must have been the fall of 1955 that I found a job at a yeshiva in Brooklyn, the Williamsburg section of Brooklyn and the name of the yeshiva was Yeshiva Torah—t-o-r-a-h, of course, and the second word was Vodaath, I think there were two a's, maybe one. Yeshiva Torah Vodaath. They wanted a—see, their problem was, to get certified they had to follow the New York curriculum, but their existence had to do with their teaching the kids about Judaism and teaching them Hebrew and the like. So they put the curriculum as late in the day as they could get away with, so that for a while I was in fact teaching in the late afternoon and taking classes in the morning. Then that reversed itself when I got into the New York public schools. For one year, that was my first teaching experience, at Yeshiva Torah Vodaath.

06:00:08:31

Lage: They didn't mind your speech, your accent?

06:00:08:35

Levine: They minded that they had to hire me at all. But I was a Jew, and I think they wouldn't probably have hired a non-Jew. But this was a very religious place, and I was a Jew, but not a Jew Jew. [laughter] I wasn't religious the way they were, I wasn't one of them, but they needed to hire us. They had quite a few public school teachers doing this in the afternoon. Our day began at 3:00 in

the afternoon, and we taught Monday, Tuesday, Wednesday and Thursday. They had no school on Friday, no English school on Friday, no public school classes because they finished their day early because, you know, in Judaism the day begins in the evening, which is very logical in certain ways; the sun goes down and the next day begins. So Friday night was the beginning of the Sabbath, and the kids had to go home and prepare themselves. They couldn't be taking classes from 3:00 to 6:00 in the afternoon. So we taught Sunday afternoon instead. We taught Sunday, Monday, Tuesday, Wednesday and Thursday, not a bad schedule, and I made enough money to pay for my tuition, and I got my first experience. I taught seventh and eighth grade kids, and I was teaching them the New York City curriculum. So when I got into teaching in the New York City schools, I already was teaching some of the curriculum and knew some of it, and that was good. I had adventures, I will say. I took the train out to Brooklyn, to Williamsburg, which was a *fascinating neighborhood*. It was a diverse neighborhood. Lots of Asians, lots of Puerto Ricans and lots of Orthodox Jews, very Orthodox Jews. This Torah Vodaath was a well-known yeshiva, and kids came to it, kids were sent to it from all over. I had a kid from Chile, I had kids from all over, I can't remember now.

06:00:10:32

Lage:

Were they scholarly kids? Or more religious?

06:00:10:34

Levine:

They were seventh and eighth graders, God help us. [laughter] So they were religious, they were products of their religion and of their schooling. I was shocked, and I learned a lot. But they were lovely kids, and I became friendly with some of them and met some of them again at City College, because some of them went to City College. They would come up and say, "Remember me, Professor?" And I did! I said, "Wow!" They were, however, as I say—let me give you a couple of examples, shocking examples. I said, one day—you already know me, I'm a parenthetical fellow, and I was talking about something. I was teaching eighth-grade history, but somehow I got onto—what was the subject now, I'm blocking—oh, I got onto the world spinning around the sun. Get this, now this is 1955, and hands go up, and they say, "Well, the earth doesn't go around the sun." I say, "Where'd you learn that?" They said, "We learned it in our science class. We learned it in our biblical class. The earth is the center of the universe, Mr. Levine." I'm just shocked.

06:00:12:01

Lage:

I thought that was a medieval Catholic thing.

06:00:12:04

Levine:

I'm just shocked—well, we're talking medieval Jews here. [laughter] I'm just shocked. And their science teacher was a guy named Mr. Ettinger, who was a New York public school teacher, so I didn't want to just crash in and say, "Wrong!" I go to Ettinger, and I say, "Can I ask you something?" He was much older than I was, and a nice enough guy. I didn't get friendly with most of my fellow teachers there. We came in, we taught three hours very intensely

and left. I said, "What are you teaching these kids? They think that the earth is the center of the universe." He said, "Well, I didn't teach them that. That's what they learned, and I don't interfere with that. When you've been here as long as I have," he said, and I'm thinking to myself, "God forbid." [laughter] He said, "When you've been here as long as I have,"—I love this story—"you will learn to stay away from controversial subjects." So that was one.

Another—there are probably many, I remember two. Another was when I said, "If you were alive 100,000 years ago," whatever I said—at that time, I thought I knew how old man was. They keep changing the dates. But I gave some long date. Hands go up again. These kids were smart kids. They said, if you look at a Jewish calendar, the world is 5,700 and something years old. Bishop Usher also dated the world very similarly to the Jews. The world is, from the Bible, if you date it from the Bible, it's 5,000-something years old. They give me the date of the world, 5,700 whatever it was. I say, "Well, that's not," now I decide to stand up for myself; I said, "That's not true, the world is much older than that." And they say, "Well, my rabbi said!" They're getting very excited, and I decide that my function is not, I'm not teaching them science, I'm teaching them history, and they weren't interfering with that. I did have one encounter at the end of the year.

06:00:14:14

Lage: So you say you decided that wasn't your function?

06:00:14:16

Levine: Well, I wasn't going to argue with them. I wasn't a science teacher, and I was on pretty shaky ground.

06:00:14:21

Lage: Well, there is sort of a historical aspect to it.

06:00:14:23

Levine: Yes, well of course, yes. I just told them, well, I did then—the earth circling around the sun was one thing, this I did say, "Your teachers are wrong," I did tell them their teachers were wrong. I didn't dwell on this, it wasn't my goal to rip up—I was not, I'm not a great friend of that kind of religion, I have to say, whether it's Judaism or anything else: a religion that measures the entire world by its own warp and woof, you know. So I wasn't a great friend. And the whole thing is, these kids wore payis. Payis is the part of the hair that grows near the ear, you let it, in Orthodox Judaism you—

06:00:15:10

Lage: You let it grow.

06:00:15:10

Levine: You let it grow. It's symbolic. You're not supposed to cut your hair; men aren't supposed to cut their hair. Well, they do cut their hair, but they leave part of the hair uncut, that kind of thing. So the kids had payis, many of them. Many of them had fringes; you're supposed to have fringes in your clothing.

Orthodox Jews—I went through this for a while—wear a fringe under their clothing, and you could see the little fringes, the little tassels.

06:00:15:35

Lage: You went through that in your stage.

06:00:15:37

Levine: When I was thirteen, fourteen.

06:00:15:38

Lage: About the age of these kids.

06:00:15:40

Levine: About the age of these kids. These kids came from much more Orthodox homes than I did. I came from an Orthodox home but not like this. These kids were short of Hasidism. The Hasids wouldn't let people like me teach probably, and for good reason. This is what I did in my seventh grade social studies. Seventh grade history, when I taught it, went from the individual to the family to the community to the city—and maybe the borough first, I can't remember—to the city and the state, and we then did colonial history at the end of the year. So in the eighth grade—this was seventh grade—in the eighth grade, which is really the last year of junior high school, though it goes on in New York through ninth grade, which is the first year of high school, in the eighth grade you pick up American history at the Revolution and go on with it. So I'm teaching this curriculum from the individual to the community. We're in the community part of it, and I said, "This is what we're going to do." I didn't tell you how—I mentioned it was a fascinating neighborhood. You could walk in Williamsburg, and you could pass the Jewish butcher store and you could see the slaughtering of animals with a rabbi saying blessings. You could see Puerto Ricans cooking food or whatever, Chinese. Just fascinating.

06:00:17:06

Lage: It was diverse.

06:00:17:07

Levine: Very diverse. So I sent the kids out. I said, "Let's study our community." It's a good thing to do. I was very excited, and they were very excited. We had little groups. One group was studying stores, whatever, playgrounds, parks, everything. Like a jerk, I have one group studying institutions of religion. [laughter] And these kids go out.

06:00:17:30

Lage: As if there was more than one!

06:00:17:32

Levine: That's right. Well, there are, but they didn't want their kids exposed to this stuff. My little group goes out—they're all boys, the girls were in their own school. I must say, the girls—well, let me finish this story. They go out and they have a little camera, and they're going around to other synagogues they

go to, and they go—here's a Catholic church. They're standing around the Catholic church, and they've never been near a Catholic church before, not that I did when I was growing up either. They'd never been near a Catholic church before, and they don't know what to do. They're all wearing yarmulkes, the little skullcaps, and they're very Jewish looking kids, in their attire. And there's a priest sitting in the little parish house attached to the church, and he comes out. Like Bing Crosby in *Going My Way*, he comes out and says, "Can I help you boys? What would you like?" And they tell him what they're doing, and he says, "Oh wonderful." He takes them into the parish house and gives them cookies, then he takes them for a tour of the church. They're snapping photographs, and they come and they're all excited. We put our book together. The principal went out of his mind! Parents screaming. The principal calls me up, "Are you out of your mind? You're sending little Jewish boys into a Catholic church!" [laughter] I realized that I didn't have much of a future at this school. It was a very interesting experience. I'm a little confused about exactly what year, and whether I taught there for a whole year or a semester. But while I'm doing this I'm taking speech lessons.

To go back to the school for a moment, it's a very good experience for me, because I'm learning how to teach students who were, most of them, quite bright. I learned about rebellion, even in this little Jewish—I had a kid from Chile, this kid from Chile, who would raise his hand, Jaime, he'd raise his hand, and he'd tell me he had to go to the bathroom in his thick accent. He was never engaged, never spoke, and I said, "Okay." One day we're in the middle of a really great discussion, me and the kids, and Jaime raises his hand. I said, "What's up?" He says, "I got to go to the bathroom." I said, "Just sit for a minute, this is a good discussion." He opens his fly and takes his penis out and pees on the floor. [laughter] It was a very interesting experience for me because I was going to go into difficult schools, and I had to handle this. We handled it; I never yelled at him. I said, "Jaime, now that you've done it, you're going to have to go get a mop and clean this up." I decided he could go to the bathroom whenever he wants to.

06:00:20:13

Lage:

I would guess!

06:00:20:14

Levine:

The students were wonderful, and the experience was good. It was a good intense three hours, and I had lots of time to do other things. I had to prepare classes. The pay was execrable, but it was enough for me. But meanwhile my future wasn't here, I realized. I had to get into the public schools or something else to put my way through school, if I decided to put my way through school. That was a decision I had to make yet. So I took the test for Social Service Investigator, the city test. That is, a social worker investigator, meaning you went out—it sounded like an awful job, but it was possible. I read the book. You could buy these books, and the book gives you the test, and I realized I

could pass this test without taking courses or anything. I just read the old exams and I read some stuff, and I then took some exams, and passed them, in my living room. So I figured I could—and it paid real money. Though it was also 9:00 to 5:00, but you were on your own. You know, go check on Mrs. Rodriguez, is she really living without her husband, that kind of stuff. It sounded terrible, but I thought, “I can do this for a year.” So I took and passed it, that test, no speech test, and I passed that one. Meanwhile I found this wonderful woman who was the chairman of the—I think I mentioned this—the chairman of the Evander Child’s High School English Department. She gave me speech lessons. I did mention that.

06:00:21:46

Lage: You mentioned that you had speech lessons.

06:00:21:47

Levine: Yes, and I passed the next. So I guess by the fall of 1955 I must have been ready to teach in the—.

06:00:21:57

Lage: And you chose that over this social investigator?

06:00:21:59

Levine: Oh boy, did I ever. I would have taken that job—I didn’t realize. The more I realized what it was about—it was also you helped people, you weren’t just a cop. You went in, you know, people made claims and you could go in and help them. So it wasn’t all punitive. You were checking to make sure they really were living with their kids and blah blah. But you were also saying, “This person has five kids and should be getting more money.” I guess I was trying to rationalize taking a job like that. But it sounded like at least it was useful, and if I found it oppressive I could always quit. But when I got the teaching license, I went and—so I taught mainly as a substitute teacher because I was taking courses, though I did teach full time for a while, right in my own junior high school, to my amazement.

06:00:22:54

Lage: In your old junior high school?

06:00:22:57

Levine: Yes, well the one I went to. Mainly I taught in Harlem, I taught all over Harlem. And like everything else, they send young people into the toughest schools because the older people with seniority try to get out of them if they can. I taught tough kids. “Tough kids” is unfair. I taught kids who had problems in the world, but then I did myself when I was in school. If there’s justice in the world, I was being paid back. But I was fascinated. I never was negative about this, I was fascinated by it and pretty engaged in it. The one nice thing about being a substitute teacher is you don’t have to prepare very much, but you have to be good or you’re going to be destroyed. So I did some full-time teaching, and then I met this woman at PS—I think it was, a junior high school, was it junior high school? Yes, it must have been. It was 129; it

was on 129<sup>th</sup> Street. She was the clerk. It was her job to get substitute teachers. She said to me, "Look, you tell me the days in any semester," —she understood I was going for my PhD—she said, "You tell me the days you want to teach, and I will guarantee you jobs on those days. If I haven't got a job for you, I will call around. People know to call me because I have teachers, and people from other schools, and I'll get you jobs. You will never be without a job on the days you want." What a good deal that was. So I agreed, and I did a lot of my teaching in her school, but I also did a lot of teaching all over New York City. I didn't go out of the borough of Manhattan, I said that was my limit. She knew everybody, and they would say, "Hey Ruth," —I don't remember her name—another clerk would call, "Hey Ruth, we need someone."

06:00:24:49

Lage: Was it history always?

06:00:24:50

Levine: Oh no. You'll be happy to know I taught hat-making millinery, it was called millinery. I substituted for a millinery teacher. But no scissors, we had to do it with our hands. Actually, we didn't do millinery when I was in that class. I engaged the kids. I talked to them about things I thought would interest them, including millinery. I asked them about hats and things. They could do things with their fingers. The worst athlete in the world, that's me, I taught physical training, PT. That was easy. "Okay boys, basketball!" I made sure there were no fights. [laughter] But mainly I did teach history, and mainly I taught things that I was competent to teach. But I taught everything. I went in and substituted for science teachers. When I did those things I tried to let the kids tell me what they were learning, and there were books around. My main job was to keep order, and I basically learned to do that. Sometimes the kids were helpful. I walked into one class that was very difficult; I couldn't get them quiet. There was a little kid in the front row who said, "Hey, pick up the yard stick, pick up the yard stick." [whispering] The yard stick, you know, a three-foot ruler, on the desk—he keeps telling me this, the little snitch. [laughter] I picked up the yard stick—it was like Pavlov. I slammed it once on the table, and they all took their seats. That's how the teacher who I later met—and I substituted for him later for about a month. See, when a job like that came up, five days a week, it was very good money. I was making, once I got my MA from Columbia, I was making \$23 a day. That was good dough!

06:00:26:35

Lage: It was very good.

06:00:26:36

Levine: I could make \$69 a week by teaching three days, and I paid my tuition at Columbia, which was high, compared to nothing at City College. I think it was \$25 a point, \$75 a course; that was money. I was making \$60, \$70 a week when I taught three days. If something intense happened, I called my friend

and I said, "I'm going to take the next two weeks off." And she said. "Fine." It was a great job.

06:00:27:04

Lage: So what did you learn from it? It increased self-confidence, I'm guessing, from the way you're talking about it.

06:00:27:10

Levine: Well, it did, it increased self-confidence. I often did teach American history, and I could do that. Then I taught these periods where I would teach for three or four weeks at a time, or a month, so then I was doing lesson plans and preparing classes. I learned I could talk in front of a class, I learned I could keep order, and that was important. I learned an affection for these kids. The main way I kept order was by trying to understand them. I had a very interesting incident that happened very early. I think it happened in my old junior high school. They had, which we happily didn't have, they had intercom systems and the principal got on. Every morning they did the pledge of allegiance through the intercom system. My first day of teaching this class—I taught this group of kids a lot—"Everybody up!" says the intercom system. The kids are sitting in their chairs with their feet up on their desks. The pledge of allegiance, which has changed since then, we now have God in it, under God, "one nation under God." When I did the pledge of allegiance as a kid I would say "invisible" because I didn't know what "indivisible" meant. I never knew what "one nation invisible" meant. Nor did I ever ask. That was one of the things that bugged me, and I had no one to ask. My parents wouldn't have known what it meant, and no one knew what it meant. "One nation invisible with liberty and justice for all." I thought that the pledge of allegiance—in retrospect I thought it was not a very intelligent thing to do, I have to admit. But I wasn't going to reform the schools. However, here I was faced with a bunch of kids who wouldn't get up for the pledge of allegiance, and who wouldn't do anything. This was no political protest; they just thought it was a crock. They were sitting around. These were black kids and Spanish kids, Puerto Rican kids, and some Italian and other kids. The first time this happened, I yelled at them, I said, "Get up! Get up!" I went around the room and I made them get up, and I made them pledge. They were very resentful, and I had a lot of trouble with them after that. I thought I was going to teach these kids for a while, and I went home—this was probably a full time job for a while—I went home, and I thought a lot about this. I said, "I don't really believe in the pledge of allegiance, I don't think it's a very meaningful thing." It wasn't meaningful for me, I didn't know what I was doing as a kid, and I don't think it's a way of showing anything. I think you show—I won't go through my whole spiel, but you know what I'm saying.

06:00:29:47

Lage: Yes.

06:00:29:49

Levine: So I decided that I wasn't going to make them do it, because I had other things I wanted to do with them. If I was going to start every day alienating them—because it was hard to get them to stand up; they thought it was junk. They didn't want to do it. They didn't want to pledge allegiance. They didn't understand it, and they didn't want to understand it. So I made a deal with them, quite illegally I'm sure! [laughter] I wasn't supposed to do this. I said, "Look, I'm not going to bug you about the pledge of allegiance. When it's being recited, you can sit in your seats, and we won't do anything. And when it's over, you've got to cooperate with me." They thought that was a good deal. They didn't want to be yelled at and screamed at and made to stand up every morning any more than I wanted to do it. So we did it.

So what did I learn? I learned that you had to evaluate the rules. I already knew that, but now I was entering the world of teaching, and you had to evaluate the rules. I guess I can tell a little story now. When I was teaching at City College, Ed Rosen, my old professor—I don't know if I told this story, maybe I did. Ed Rosen invited me to have lunch with him. Two days a week we had lunch together. I think I did tell you this story. We sat and ate lunch, and I would tell him about my exciting days as a college teacher at City College. I took a cigarette break halfway through this long class; I said, "Let's take ten minutes for break," because I was a heavy smoker. And it was good to break, it wasn't just my smoking that made me break. He'd say, "It's against the rules," and he kept telling me, "It's against the rules." I finally said to him, "You know, Professor Rosen," which I still called him, I said, "You know, Professor Rosen, I admired you so much when I took your classes because you had almost been purged as a Communist in the early days. I admired you for standing up for what you believed in. And now you're telling me to obey these silly rules." He said, "Levine, you might as well learn this now as later. If you want to break the big rules, obey the little ones."

06:00:31:53

Lage: You didn't tell that. [laughter]

06:00:31:55

Levine: That's a great story. I was breaking the little rules, though maybe people would think this was a big rule, the pledge of allegiance. But I reached these kids, and we had this kind of tacit agreement. I actually was able to work with them in the morning on things that were of interest. I learned to love those kids. But then a lot of things were happening simultaneously. You have to understand, I grew up in a house which worshipped teachers. It was so ironic because I was such a bad student. My father thought they were wonderful. I told you the story where he gave them the 15 percent discount.

06:00:32:34

Lage: Right. So he was happy you were teaching.

06:00:32:38

Levine: Oh boy, was he ever. They just wanted me to be a high school teacher, and they were very happy. I expected teachers to be something special. But I learned that they were just ordinary human beings. I'd go into the teachers' room during a break. You had one break, you had one free period a day. There was a teachers' room in most schools and you went into the teachers' room, and when I first began I went in there expecting heady talk, about books and thoughts, you know. I met a lot of underpaid, harassed people who were teaching in difficult schools and who had mortgages, and who would talk about their problems. They talked about their mortgages, they talked about the way they were being treated by the board of education. They talked about the blankety-blank kids and the difficulties, and the crappy textbooks they were given, and the facilities which weren't very good. They played pinochle, and I wasn't getting this heady talk at all. And this is not to denigrate these people, they are wonderful; they're humans, some of them weren't wonderful, some of them were. I joined their union and I went on strike once with them, all of that. The United Federation of Teachers. But I began to realize that if I wanted this heady talk, I got a little enough of it even in college, and if I wanted time to read books as part of a job and everything, this wasn't the place for me. It took me a couple of years.

06:00:34:11

Lage: Because you probably were still thinking maybe you'd end up—

06:00:34:14

Levine: Oh absolutely. I liked to teach, because I loved the students. I really felt I was helping them, what a wonderful—see, my father was right in one sense—what a wonderful way to spend your time, working with the young people and helping them. And I was able to communicate, they liked me. I was able to communicate with them. My accent helped there, you see? [laughter] They didn't say, "Oh, you say mudder!"

06:00:34:37

Lage: But you had reformed, after all.

06:00:34:39

Levine: Well, only for the teaching test. But I learned how to do it. But it wasn't my accent that got these kids. It was who I was, I was one of them in a way. So it was difficult, but I realized that I really wanted to write, and I wanted to read. Professors were paid to read and write, and I feared that high school teachers were not. The teaching load is high, and the conditions are less than ideal. More and more I realized—and of course going on at the same time was my increasing confidence at Columbia University, which we will speak about later. I was more and more beginning to realize I could do this, I wasn't so terrible. I knew I could write. I began to say, "I can pass tests, I can do graduate work, I can get A's in graduate school." So all of that is happening simultaneously. The decision was made maybe a couple of years into this. I then used teaching—the whole time I was at Columbia I taught, except for one

year, I forget what year it was, I think it was 1959, when I got a fellowship, \$2,500 which paid my tuition and even some of my groceries. Up until 1959 I was still living at home, still kind of seeing some of my friends, but less and less. I had a full time—

06:00:36:09

Lage:

You still hadn't left the neighborhood, which is different.

06:00:36:12

Levine:

No. But in the summer of 1959 I went to do research on my doctoral dissertation. I went to Washington. I will get back to that later. And I met a young woman who was from Utah and was doing a PhD at the University of Chicago, and I fell in love. She was coming, as luck would have it, to Brooklyn College to teach. She was writing her dissertation, I was researching mine, and I was going to City College, that's the beginning of my career as a teacher at City College, 1959. I was, by then, finished with—I said I taught in the public schools throughout my Columbia career. Wrong.

06:00:36:58

Lage:

Well, almost.

06:00:36:59

Levine:

Well, to 1959. Then I got my first college teaching job at City College. She came to New York and she had a little apartment with two other women in the Village. I really was in love, and I decided I wanted my own place. Not that she was going to live with me. She lived in her place and I lived in mine, but we had privacy. She had two roommates, I also had two roommates, two guys I knew from the neighborhood but hadn't been close to, but I knew who they were all my life. One of them was a teacher in the public high school, taught in a good high school, I forget which one. The other was a young dentist just beginning. They remain friends to this day. Well, one of them especially, the dentist, he's my friend to this day.

06:00:37:48

Lage:

Where did you live? What neighborhood?

06:00:37:49

Levine:

We got a wonderful apartment on 106<sup>th</sup> Street between West End Avenue and Riverside Drive. It was a great apartment and we had it for years. It was a wonderful place. So I finally left, and it wasn't easy. I was twenty-six years old.

06:00:38:09

Lage:

When you say it wasn't easy, you mean not easy on your parents? Or on you?

06:00:38:12

Levine:

Not easy on my parents. My sister got married that year and I left. My sister getting married was good, my leaving was not. They came from a culture where you stayed at home—my father stayed at home until he was thirty-three when he got married; he lived with his mother and some siblings until then.

He left when he got married. I was leaving before, and my father was shocked. They were both hurt, and it wasn't easy. But I needed to do this. Living in the Columbia area was terrific. You know, I wasn't part of that culture. As I say, you leave the culture. I didn't think young people should stay home until they got married. What if they never got married? So I left. My father was pretty sure there was a woman involved, and there was, but she was a catalyst for something I should have done already. I should have left earlier. However, there was also a financial thing.

06:00:39:14

Lage: Now he would have disapproved of the woman?

06:00:39:16

Levine: Well, I brought her home and they did disapprove of her because she was a Mormon from Utah. But I wasn't listening to anyone about who I should date and ultimately who I should marry, obviously I married someone who wasn't Jewish. So those years were good years. I roomed with two very nice guys who I liked a lot and who introduced me to two worlds I didn't know. These two guys introduced me to opera and ballet, which remain two of my great passions. They introduced me, they would take me—they would say, "Let's go to the opera." Well, I had never been to an opera; well, once on a date I saw *La Bohème* in the Village in a tiny little theater where they passed an envelope around and you put anything you could afford in the envelope. I thought *Bohème* was paradise. I love *Bohème*, Puccini's opera. These guys were serious, and they knew their music, and they really introduced me. That was an important part of my education, living with them. I was living in another culture now.

06:00:40:24

Lage: But you said they were actually from your neighborhood.

06:00:40:26

Levine: They were. They were two guys who went to college and learned music.

06:00:40:30

Lage: They broadened their horizons.

06:00:40:32

Levine: They broadened their horizons. Just like me, they came from Jewish homes. But they already were into this world of ballet and opera, and they introduced me to it and I remain in it. We have total subscriptions to the opera and the ballet.

06:00:40:50

Lage: Oh, you do.

06:00:40:50

Levine: Yes, we do. Though we are gone for much of the opera, alas. Well, not alas, it's good that we're gone, but we miss the opera. We missed a lot of it, because we were in Washington during the fall season. But the ballet

season—anyway, so there was a lot going on in my life. I moved, I had my first apartment. It was a great apartment, and I loved the Columbia area, though it's much posher now than it was. I was back recently. It had bookstores in it, bars in it, restaurants. I had a whole bunch of friends. That's where I really made the break with my old neighborhood friends. I had a whole new set of friends, including two guys who had come from the neighborhood, but I had a whole new set of Columbia friends. Because now I was living down there, and I went to their homes and they came to mine, and we ate together in the evenings, and it was good. It was a very important time in my life. Until 1959 I stayed in the schools, and then in 1959 I got my first terribly-paid job teaching, \$6 an hour. That didn't include—yes, so you got \$18 a course.

06:00:42:00

Lage: This was at City College?

06:00:42:01

Levine: Yes.

06:00:42:03

Lage: So you were a lecturer.

06:00:42:04

Levine: I was earning \$23 a day at this school. [laughter] But it was wonderful to teach college students. I taught in the evening session the first year, and then they liked me and they gave me—the second year they brought me into the full-time day session. I had a regular job; my title was Lecturer.

06:00:42:25

Lage: Still for \$6 an hour?

06:00:42:26

Levine: \$6,000 a year.

06:00:42:27

Lage: Oh, you got a regular job.

06:00:42:28

Levine: I got a regular job.

06:00:42:31

Lage: And you're finishing your dissertation.

06:00:42:33

Levine: Yes, I am. This is the teaching thing. Let me talk about teaching at City College and then I'll go back to my dissertation.

06:00:42:46

Lage: But—

- 06:00:42:46  
Levine: No? We're finished. [laughter] We'll never get through my life!
- 06:00:42:52  
Lage: Well, I know, but I think we have to save Columbia for the next time, a real discussion of Columbia, your teachers there, your seminars.
- 06:00:42:59  
Levine: Should we just talk about teaching at City College?
- 06:00:43:01  
Lage: Yes, let's do that.
- 06:00:43:02  
Levine: Then we'll end it. You're right, let's start.
- 06:00:43:05  
Lage: And we'll start the Columbia story—
- 06:00:43:07  
Levine: Columbia, but if you think I'm talking about too much trivia—
- 06:00:42:59  
Lage: No, no, I think it's not trivia at all. I think you're giving us a good picture—it's a broader story than just you, I can tell. Don't you think?
- 06:00:43:17  
Levine: Well, I'm not so interesting.
- 06:00:43:18  
Lage: It is just you but it's also—
- 06:00:43:20  
Levine: Yes, I'm not so—quite frankly, a lot of my students and friends have said, "God, you've made such changes in your life, you ought to write your autobiography." I say, "I've lived a very dull life, actually!" [laughter] I have no autobiography to write." But this is fun, doing this.
- 06:00:43:37  
Lage: Yes, this is fun, and it helps—
- 06:00:43:38  
Levine: This is a kind of autobiography. And I'm about to go off and teach autobiography.
- 06:00:43:43  
Lage: Oh you are?
- 06:00:43:43  
Levine: Yes, I'm teaching a course on autobiography. And I'm going to bring this in and tell them about it, you and me and the things we're doing here, into the tape recorder.

06:00:43:53

Lage: This should be interesting. You can reflect on this oral history sort of. It's different, you know, doing an oral history with a cultural historian. [laughter] I mean there are many layers here.

06:00:44:03

Levine: Yes, that's true.

06:00:44:04

Lage: It's not like you're a naïve informant.

06:00:44:07

Levine: I'm not going to say a lot about City College teaching, so I could pick it up next time if you want.

06:00:44:13

Lage: To be honest, I'm supposed to be at a meeting at noon. Why don't we do that?

### Interview 4: April 13, 2005

[Audio File 7]

7-00:00:00

Lage: We are recording, and today is April 13<sup>th</sup>, 2005 and we're starting up after a long hiatus, so we've had a lot of discussion about what we've covered and what's next. I just want to say that the plan we developed last time was to talk about your various teaching experiences before we got into depth about [grad school at] Columbia. And you had talked about teaching at the yeshiva and then the public schools, and then you said OK, now next we'll talk about going back and teaching at City College, and then we'll go on to Columbia.

So tell me what it was like to go back to City College as a teacher?

7-00:00:58

Levine: Well, it was thrilling. I can't even express it. I was thinking about this last night because I knew you were coming today, and I can't express how thrilling it was, and scary. Everything was scary. That should be a given. Everything I did in those years was scary because I really wasn't a student until I went to City College, and I think I understood, though I was really going to learn it with a jolt at Columbia, that I had gotten by with rote learning at City College. I memorized the pharaohs and the kings of England and the presidents. You can get a long way with that, and I was suddenly in another world for how to explain things. And I probably had to explain things as a college student, too, but I do remember all the hours I put into rote learning, and I needed that also.

Anyway, City College was a challenge, teaching there, but it was a thrill to go back. I graduated in January '55. I was a semester late because of my back injury, and Columbia allowed you to enter in the middle of the year in those days, so I entered Columbia immediately, and then I taught in the junior high schools. I spoke about that, I believe. I taught in the junior high schools, and then I got my first college teaching job just four years after I graduated, which was kind of thrilling. You could do that, in those days.

7-00:02:26

Lage: Was that unusual, though?

7-00:02:29

Levine: City College was full of people like me. They were a fount of jobs—you know, we were still—maybe I should say this now, this has to do with the job market, and I wasn't seriously on the job market yet. It was just that City College was on 139<sup>th</sup> Street and Convent Avenue, which was only a block or two from Broadway, and Columbia was 116<sup>th</sup> Street and Broadway. Get this; you could walk between the two. So to get a job at City College while you were an advanced graduate student at Columbia was a great boon, and City College, of course, filled its ranks—they didn't have TAs or anything there—

they filled their ranks with young people like me, who were virtual TAs, but who had complete authority in their classrooms. We taught many of the basic courses. So there was a wonderful interchange between the two institutions.

There was also the problem, which didn't weigh heavily on me because I was still pre-professional, but there was a problem of Jews getting jobs, and City College hired Jews. And they didn't hire just Jews. But it wasn't held you against you, for being a Jew.

7-00:03:39

Lage:

Now, was this something that you were very aware of at the time?

7-00:03:42

Levine:

Well, Columbia made you aware of it. Bill Leuchtenburg, William Leuchtenburg, who was not a Jew—that's a German name. William Leuchtenburg, who I will speak about when I talk about my Columbia days and who remains alive and still a friend, Bill Leuchtenburg was a young professor at Columbia and he was the placement officer in charge of helping us get jobs. I remember a meeting he called somewhere in the very late fifties to tell us that Columbia had a problem, and the problem was placing Jewish students. And probably half the PhD students in history at Columbia were Jews. They were local people. In fact, the whole problem was to get them out of there because they were living at home, they were around their own town, and you can extend graduate school. And he talked about this problem that a lot of colleges that asked Columbia for faculty, asked the religion of the candidate, and Columbia would say, "We don't know the religion of our candidates. That is not part of our information. We don't ask them what their religion is." And he said that some colleges then stopped coming to Columbia. They weren't interested in hiring from Columbia if they didn't know in advance what the religion was. So he did talk about the fact—he is a very circumspect man, Bill, but he did talk about the fact that this was a problem.

7-00:05:18

Lage:

Did he talk about which schools?

7-00:05:20

Levine:

Well, we all knew that there weren't a lot of schools. We all knew that the city colleges, and of course there were a number of them, Brooklyn College, Queens College—there weren't as many of them as there are now—Hunter College, which was for women before the total integration. The integration was happening when I was a student there. There were a lot of women. But in the beginning, all the women went to Hunter College, blah, blah. So you had a number of city colleges, and they hired. There were doubtless other places, but Columbia itself didn't have a lot of Jewish people. Dick Hofstadter was half-Jewish. And Richard Morris, the colonialist there who taught at City College for many years and published many books before he was hired at Columbia, he was a Jew. But I think that was it. Maybe there was another one, but the Department of History at Columbia didn't have many Jews. And

Berkeley didn't have, I later learned. Jews were just beginning to enter the profession.

Look, it's very interesting. This is off the subject but not unrelated to my career and my interests in American culture. It is interesting that Jews could break into certain professions early, and it took them a long time to break into others. I mean within the academe. There were Jewish anthropologists. In fact, two of the great anthropologists in the formative days of anthropology were Franz Boas and Melville Herskovits, I believe. And two of the other great founding members of anthropology were Ruth Benedict and Margaret Meade. You get two women and two Jews, among others, but you don't find that in literature. And, of course, the sciences were full of Jews. There's no question about that. They were allowed in the sciences. They were allowed in a new field like anthropology, which didn't seem to be very crucial to America. But in the fields which dealt with American culture, history, the collective memory of the United States, and literature—you know, the lore, the spirit—Jews were not part of those fields. They were not allowed into those.

7-00:07:42

Lage:

Was some of it self-selective, like they didn't study in those fields?

7-00:07:46

Levine:

Well, you know, if you were smarter than I was, you knew the fields that you couldn't get jobs in. There was a professor at Columbia, Carleton Fisk, who was later accused of being an anti-Semite, but I think probably unfairly—but he wasn't there when I was there. But Carleton Fisk was known for telling his Jewish graduate students, and there probably weren't a lot of them, that they would have to get jobs at the city colleges in New York because they wouldn't get jobs elsewhere. So it was not an unknown thing.

7-00:08:18

Lage:

Well, how did Leuchtenburg handle it when he sort of called people together about this?

7-00:08:22

Levine:

He just wanted us to know that this was a problem. This is the late fifties; we were on the cusp of this collapsing. But you know, if you were at Columbia, there was Lionel Trilling—a very famous man. Now Lionel Trilling, in my eyes, was as white Anglo-Saxon Protestant as you could get. His name, his demeanor, everything about him, pipe-smoking—WASP. But he was a Jew and God knows he had none of the characteristics that are usually demeaned, but he was a Jew and he paid a price for that I'm told, and I've read about this, at Columbia. So it's a very interesting thing. It was one of those things that you knew about. But I was, in my whole career, as I think about it, I was very un-job-oriented. I didn't think about these things. I don't now. That was probably naïve on my part.

7-00:09:13

Lage: It didn't turn out to be, though.

7-00:09:16

Levine: Well, it didn't, so it's probably better not to think about them. So I got a job at City College. As I say, it wasn't a very hard thing to do. There's an interesting story attached to this. In 1959 I was hired at City College. It wasn't a job that had any future, I knew that, and it was not a bad paid job. Six thousand dollars a year, which was more than my old man, my father, ever made in his life, and he himself was shocked that his son, still wet behind the ears, was earning more than he ever had, for *reading books!*

7-00:09:50

Lage: But you had said how much he admired teachers.

7-00:09:52

Levine: Well, he was also proud, he was also proud. So he did admire teachers, but you know, when it came right down to it I spent an awful lot of time sitting at my desk, reading, and I mean teachers were out there, working an honest day's work. He wondered about what I was doing, exactly, because we spend a lot of time at our desks. College teachers don't teach the way high school teachers do. They don't do a nine-to-five, or three, whatever it is.

Well, I got the job, and then I come home. Let's say, I'll make this up [details of the dates], on a Monday I agree to go to City College. On a Thursday, I get a letter in the mail, hiring me at Columbia as an instructor. Columbia didn't have TAs, which was our problem. That's why they couldn't support their graduate students. They didn't use TAs. But they hired me as an instructor. So I was just taking my orals, or I had taken my orals, so I was now an ABD [all but dissertation]. I got the job at City College as an ABD. They probably wouldn't have hired me before I took my orals. Because I took my orals in April, and these jobs came, and then I got the job at Columbia. So I called Richard Hofstadter and I told him—I knew what he would say. See, if I'd really wanted to do things I wasn't capable of doing, I would've simply called City College. It was only three days later and they would've had no problem replacing me, and I wasn't exactly the result of a long, hard search on their part. I walked there, I heard about the jobs, I went up there. It was all in the neighborhood. And they hired me. They talked to me, they got some letters, I don't know. But I couldn't do that. I couldn't call them and say, "I'm not going to come; something came up, thank you." So I asked Dick Hofstadter and he said, "Let me get this straight." This, by the way, was the only time I called Richard Hofstadter in my entire student career. I *actually called* him. And he said, "Let me get this straight, you said 'yes' to City College?" And I said, "Yes, I did." And he said, "I don't think you have any decision to make, do you?" I knew he would say that, and that's the way I felt too, but I wanted to see. So I said I guess not, so I went to City College and not Columbia.

7-00:12:15

Lage: With some regret, or not?

7-00:12:19

Levine: Well, with ambivalence. It was a thrill to go to City College, where I'd been a student, but what a thing to have my graduate school want me to teach. You know, I would've taught the undergraduate classes. So it was with some ambivalence, but you know, in the long run it's interesting. If I had been at Columbia as a kind of junior colleague to Dick Hofstadter and, when three years later the Berkeley job came up, I wonder if he would've thought to recommend me. Whereas, since I was not at Columbia, I was teaching at Princeton, and they asked Dick Hofstadter who was hot for the Berkeley job, he recommended me. I'm sure he recommended others, too.

7-00:12:59

Lage: So he might not have recommended you out of a job at Columbia?

7-00:13:02

Levine: Who knows? But those jobs at Columbia were very finite. They were five years, and you could hang around, but there was no question this was an ephemeral job. It was true at City College, as well. So teaching at City College—

7-00:13:16

Lage: Did you make changes from the curriculum? We talked about the curriculum there and how, looking back, it was kind of narrow. Did you do anything different?

7-00:13:25

Levine: No, I taught that curriculum. Well, you see, it was very hard to do anything different. You were told what textbook to use. There was a committee for the courses. History—I forget the number for these courses now—let's say History 1, History 2. A committee met and chose the textbook that would be used. Actually, it was to my benefit because they never chose the best textbook, because the best textbooks always had points of view that alienated some people in the committee, so they always chose a middling textbook, which left the best textbooks for us.

7-00:13:59

Lage: So you could be one step ahead of them?

7-00:14:02

Levine: Exactly. Now, the first year I taught American history. There was a course in American history which did the whole thing in one semester, and that was a hard course to teach, but I knew that stuff. I mean, I knew it well enough. I had been reading it and studying it. So my first year at City College, a very important year for me, I taught US history. It was one preparation. Once I prepared that course, I could then make it better in the second semester, but I knew the material. It was less of a challenge than the next year, it was going to prove. I did well. It was very important for me.

I'm going to get back to this because, again, the problem of linear thought. My problem, which I never had to really grapple with at City College as a student, was I was not a very articulate guy. People look at me today, because I am a very articulate guy, and they just kind of laugh, but it's true. I had no experience articulating in a classroom, and I had a lot of insecurities. At City College most of the classes were these small classes of thirty to forty students. They were kind of small lecture courses. You could ask questions. You could talk a little bit, but I didn't have the seminar experience, and the one time—I think I talked about this—the one time I did, in German and Russian Literature in Translation, a seminar, a true seminar with twelve or fifteen of us, the guy saw such a gap between my verbal and my written that he thought I hadn't written it. I talked about that.

So I had a problem and here I was, 1959, and two great events. One of them was my orals, and I'll talk about that later, which I was sure I was going to fail because I had such bad experiences trying to talk in class, and the other was having to get up in front of a college class. Now, I had done it in junior high school, so I should've realized I can do it. But until I did it in college, I didn't fully realize it. This was after my orals, I started in the fall of '59. But it was a very important experience for me, to realize I could get up in front of a class of forty college kids. I had four classes. That was the load at City College in that day. They had just cut it from five classes, which is a big load.

7-00:16:28

Lage:

Four classes and writing your dissertation. Did you get up with notes? Had you prepared the lecture?

7-00:16:35

Levine:

Oh yes. Well, you know, you didn't have to lecture there because there were forty students, and you could call on them. So I did have notes and an outline, and I followed it. So that first year was US history, and I learned a lot about teaching. The kids were wonderful. They were very bright, even though their older professors kept telling them how dumb they were and how smart the kids were in the thirties. Now, they told us that when I was a student there, and here, just a few years later, professors were still telling the kids that kind of stuff. But, in fact they were bright and articulate and they were just like me, a lot of them—first generation college students whose parents had never gone to college, and they were fun to teach.

The second year, because I had done well the first year, they gave me western civ, and western civ had two courses. I forget the numbers, but let's call them 1 and 2. Maybe those were the numbers, in fact. They were very basic courses. Everyone had to take them, and the first course went from the beginning of time; you literally, you know, you began with primitive man to the Middle Ages. And the second one from the Middle Ages to the present.

Lage:

It was all western?

Levine: It was all western European history, really. Of course, western European somehow encompassed Greece and Rome; don't ask me how they explain that. Western civ made the Greeks and Romans western, and the northern Africans and Egyptians. They all became part of western history. These are very interesting problems which I did not confront at the time. Now, a merciful group of older professors at City College, taking an Americanist like me, would have said, "Let's have the guy teach History 1 the first semester and History 2 the second semester." But they didn't do that. So I taught three classes of History 1 and one class of History 2, so I had to prepare the whole thing the first semester, while writing the dissertation at Columbia University. And—I must say when I think back upon it; I don't quite understand any of this—while having an active social life. I had girlfriends, I had male friends, I went to parties, I entertained in my own apartment. I now have an apartment, as well, at Columbia. I went out, went to movies, went to plays, discovered the opera, discovered ballet, all while I was teaching this impossible course twice, the first semester, and two different halves of it. I guess I just had a great capacity, as young people do, for endless work.

7-00:19:23

Lage: Had you had a fair amount of western European history?

7-00:19:30

Levine: I took History 1 and 2. When I was an undergraduate I took these very courses.

7-00:19:35

Lage: But what about at Columbia?

7-00:19:37

Levine: Oh no, I took one European history course at Columbia, German history.

7-00:19:40

Lage: So you didn't have to have a preparation—?

7-00:19:43

Levine: No, I did take a couple of upper division courses at City College. I took Hans Kohn's course on European intellectual history, I took a course on European nationalism, but I wasn't prepared to teach this course. I'll give you a very good example of what happened to me. I shouldn't make this too public. There was a committee of examiners who came into our classes *unannounced*. They'd come in one at a time, so you could get five of them in one semester. You'd walk into the class and there was this person in the back row.

Well, I was preparing this course, and we got to the Greek philosophers, the Greek thinkers. I decided to talk about Socrates. I just couldn't do them all, so I did Socrates. I read a lot about Socrates. Not only other textbooks, I actually read a book about Socrates. I brought in a little illustration of his cave, handed it out, and I taught a class on Socrates. It went brilliantly well. The students were turned on, hands went up. I went out in the hall, had a cigarette. I was a

heavy smoker in those days, I had a cigarette. And my next class was the same, another group of kids, forty kids—that's how you taught at City College—and we'd do Socrates again. I walk in and there's a professor sitting in the back row, but I'm feeling pretty good because I had just had a wonderful class. And I handed out my little illustrations of the cave—nothing. The students were just flat. This happened a lot. What worked in one class didn't work in another class, and you realized it wasn't just you. It was also a lack of synergy, chemistry. They were just flat. My problem was not only that it wasn't a very exciting class, but I was running out of material *quickly*, because I did not have Aristotle set up. I didn't know. This was not my field, and I'm looking at my watch and I'm realizing –

7-00:21:50

Lage:

Oh, so if they don't talk, you have nothing else to say.

7-00:21:53

Levine:

I have nothing else to say. I'm going to have to end the class thirty minutes early or twenty-five minutes early, and I'm really beginning to panic a little. I don't know what to do. The kids are not responding. They're listening, they're taking notes, but they're not—I ask questions, flat answers. Time is shooting out the window. This guy's in the back, this professor taking notes, and I'm not sure what to do.

Then—I was in the middle of my research for my doctoral dissertation, and Walter Lippmann, who had been a socialist, began to move away from his earlier beliefs, and one of the things that helped stimulate the change was the Scopes trial, the anti-evolution movement. He got very upset about what the potential of democracy was when it reached into education and intellectuality and the like, and he wrote a Socratic dialogue, which I had recently read, a wonderful Socratic dialogue between Socrates, Jefferson, and William Jennings Bryan, in which Socrates pretends, as he often does, not to understand. He says, "Well, let me see, I think I'm beginning to understand your fundamental principles. So let me ask you a question. What would you do if the majority of the American people voted that America should become a Buddhist state, Mr. Bryan?" And Bryan says, "Well, I would migrate to a Christian country." And he says, "Mr. Jefferson?" Jefferson says, "I would invoke the sacred right of revolution. What would you do, Socrates?" And Socrates says, "I would rethink my fundamental principles." Very funny and very telling.

I thought of that, so I said, "Well, let's go to a modern usage of the Socratic dialogue," and I tell that story and they become alive. Hands shoot up, they're just alive and they start to talk, and I can relate this back to ancient Greece. And the class ends. I walk out to the elevator, and there's the professor standing at the elevator waiting for it, and I walk up, and he looks at me and says, "I don't really know if you can justify spending a whole hour on Socrates in this course, but that was a lecture in depth."

So, you know, life is funny. It was a very exciting thing for me to teach there, and I learned a lot. One of the things—and I'm going to say this about my graduate career at Columbia as well—one of the things it did is it validated me and verified that I was in the right profession. What my experience teaching at City College did was it taught me that this was a good choice for me, that I could do this. I still didn't know if I—I could talk, I could teach. It sounds immodest to say this, but let me say it anyway. I have met people, not a lot of people, but you don't need a lot of people—I have met several people who were in those classes and who are now academics. I've met them and they've come up to me; of course they're in different fields. One of them is in the history of science, European science, and he didn't do well in my course. He was a scientist who had a contempt for history, and I remember he was an enormously articulate young man who was sure of himself, and I helped shatter that a little bit. He came up to me at a convention; he's done this twice, he said, "You know what? I went into your class a physicist and came out a historian."

7-00:25:31

Lage: That's quite a compliment.

7-00:25:33

Levine: And he's a historian. Yeah. I've met a couple people like that. But let me tell another quick story. I was teaching on Marx. I felt much more comfortable doing this, and paperbacks were just coming out. We had a textbook class. Our classes were textbooks. The introductory classes were all textbooks, and the upper division classes—I was teaching the introductory—the upper division classes were a textbook and two book reviews. You'd go to the library, the professor would give you a list of books. You'd pick one, two, of those books; you'd read them and write book reviews. I was not prepared for what was coming at Columbia, but that's what we did. So these classes were just textbooks, and as I said, I had a better textbook. But on a subject like Marx, which I had read about a bit, I brought in an armload of paperbacks, because they were now available. You could walk into a store, and you could buy the writings of Marx and different books Marx wrote and books about Marx and Engels.

So I brought in this load, and I held them up to the class, because I believe in this, the touching of the object. I believe in osmosis, intellectual. I would hold each one of these books up. These are kids who, most of them, came from homes without books, as I did. So you know, I held them up and then I made a joke which I was sorry I made the minute I made it. I do that sometimes. I said it really would behoove you to buy some of these books so when the revolution comes, you'll have them in your library. They laughed, but I was ashamed. And many years later, a young woman comes into my office at Berkeley—in fact I know the year, it was the year of the Free Speech Movement, it was 1964—she comes into my office, and she says, "Remember me?" Her name, in fact, was something like Leslie Freeman. I did remember

her; she was a terrific student. She's at Berkeley doing graduate work in English, going for a PhD in English. And I did remember her fondly. She said, "You know your course is so wonderful, and that course you taught in European history I'll never forget it. I'll never forget it. I still remember," and she repeated that terrible joke. And I thought all these years later—it's five years later—and she still remembered that terrible joke.

7-00:28:02

Lage: Now, why were you so embarrassed about telling it?

7-00:28:05

Levine: Oh, it's just a bad joke. I wasn't embarrassed.

7-00:28:10

Lage: Did you think it was inappropriate?

7-00:28:11

Levine: No, no, it was just a lousy joke. I thought it was a trivial joke, and it came out of my mouth; I hadn't prepared it. I didn't do it in any of my other classes. I happened to do it in that one and I remembered it. The students thought it was funny, but I thought –

7-00:28:26

Lage: What was the feeling about Marx and potential revolution and all that in the fifties?

7-00:28:31

Levine: Oh, this was the McCarthy period, but I paid no attention to that. Well, a little after.

7-00:28:36

Lage: But was that a risky thing to say?

7-00:28:41

Levine: Risk never was a factor in my mind. I was very pre-professional in the sense that I didn't think about getting tenure. I really didn't. I know it sounds a little bravado to say that, but it just didn't occur to me that I was taking risks at this or that. I thought Marx was very important for them to understand. He's one of the great thinkers like Freud and the like, and I had teachers at City College who helped me see that, courses in European intellectual history and the like. For them Marx was a thinker, he wasn't a revolutionary. He was a thinker who was revolutionary in his thought, and that thought was part and parcel of our thought. I mean we're all Marxists in a way. None of us can deny Freud's basic discoveries about the unconscious and all of that and what dreams mean and that sexuality is an important element in our lives. It's not just a dirty thing we have to do to produce children. And no one can really deny a lot of the stuff that Marx said. His prophecies, his visions may well have been wrong, and it looks like they were, but his understanding of the way societies work, and economies work, and revolutions work, they were pretty good. So I

felt that at the time; I was taught that. I had a good education and I wanted to share it with these students.

7-00:30:11

Lage:

You mentioned about how slavery and reconstruction were taught or not taught the way you'd hoped they would be. Did you change any of that in the way you dealt with them?

7-00:30:21

Levine:

Well, I didn't know it then. I mean I didn't know enough about it then. I was not taught this stuff at Columbia because we were—well, I was in a way. Kenneth Stampp's book, his very important book, *The Peculiar Institution*, came out, if I am correct, in 1957. It is true and I probably incorporated some of that into my 1959, 1960 course in US history. I'm sure I did. But he wasn't part of a great movement yet. You know, it's very interesting. David Donald, in my colloquium at Columbia, assigned that book. I'm skipping a little bit, but all of this stuff is happening at the same time. David Donald assigned that book, and it had just come out. It was a hardback, and I was shocked that I had to buy a hardback because we read a book a week for David Donald, and we were all poor. I went down, I remember, to the Fourth Street Book Store to see if I could get a cheaper copy because they often had review copies, and indeed I found one. The book cost \$7.50, that was a lot of money, and paperbacks cost 25 cents, 50 cents, 75 cents. So I bought a copy of Ken's book and it was a beautiful day—I've told this to Ken Stampp a couple of times, but he just gets embarrassed. I was near Union Square Park, and I went down there. I sat, I was a graduate student, I was free, I had this book, I had to read. I sat in the sun in this little park in downtown Manhattan, and I began to read the book. It just had an enormous impact on me. He was treating slaves as human beings. I had never seen that done before, and he was treating them as people who did not like the institution they were in, and I had not read that before.

Although there were some books, [William E. B.] DuBois—I hadn't read DuBois yet—and Herbert Aptheker, but I hadn't read him. But Ken's book was amazing and it just opened up worlds for me. Now, when we discussed that book—David Donald was the best teacher I had at Columbia, though in ideological terms he was not at one with me or most of his students, which pleased him, and he *loved* to confound his students, especially at the end of class. So this is the way—I'll never forget this—he ended his class on Ken Stampp's book. We had a great discussion on it, and he facilitated a great discussion. He was a very good teacher, but he was a very good *graduate* teacher, because if you tell a graduate student that white is black and he believes you, then he's a bad student. If you tell an undergraduate that white is black, then you've got some problems there because the undergraduates don't read beyond what you give them to read, and if what you give them to read leads to believe that—but graduate students should be beyond that, you shouldn't be able to fool them. This is how David, who has been very kind to me in my career, this is the way David ended his course; he used to sum up,

perversely often, at the end of the class. He said, "Well, as I understand it, you're telling me that Kenneth Stampp is William Lloyd Garrison with footnotes. Good night, ladies and gentlemen." And he walked out of the room. [laughs] We sat there, mouths agape.

7-00:34:06

Lage:

But he was saying that you were telling him that?

7-00:34:09

Levine:

Well, that's the way he did it. He'd listened to our discussion, the things we liked about the book. Well, of course we liked its principles, its ideology. Kenneth Stampp said, in the beginning of the book, he paid a price for this. It was a very honest statement, and I'm paraphrasing it, that as far as he was concerned, black men were simply white men with black skin. In other words, what he was trying to say—though it was misunderstood by more than a few people, white and black—what he was trying to say in the beginning of the book was that these are human beings and, using Shakespeare's terms, "If you prick them, do they not bleed? If you starve them do they not"—and the like, and I took it that way. These are people, and we can relate to them. They're not some kind of species beyond our ken.

7-00:35:00

Lage:

Well, the way he phrased that wouldn't have become questionable for several more years, would it?

7-00:35:07

Levine:

Oh, I think Ken's book was questionable.

7-00:35:10

Lage:

But the phrasing of that statement about black people are only white people with black skins, was that as offensive to liberal-minded people as it became later, during black power?

7-00:35:25

Levine:

Well, it bothered some people. C. Vann Woodward later commented on it and the like, but that's a comment he makes in the beginning of the book. The book, itself, deals with—in those days, neither Ken nor anyone else—I shouldn't say anyone else. There were a few anthropologists around and there was DuBois. There were some people around who understood that these were Africans. But for the most part, people assumed that when they came to America, they lost their African-ness. Now, I don't know why they assumed that—I've written a whole book about this, about black culture and black consciousness. But that was an assumption, and Ken made that assumption. So culturally there are—to say mistakes would be a mistake itself, because no one was talking about these things. Ken was part of the flow, but he was beyond the flow when it came to the inequities of slavery and the fact that these people suffered under slavery. In terms of culture, he did say that African Americans were in a cultural limbo. They had lost their African culture and they had not taken on American culture, and they were in a limbo.

Well, when I wrote my work, I decided there was no such thing as cultural limbo. We all have culture. That's what makes us human beings.

7-00:36:46

Lage: Did you discuss this with Ken?

7-00:36:49

Levine: I wrote about it, and Ken read it. I wrote an essay called—my first essay on this was called “Slave Songs and Slave Consciousness.” I gave it to Ken, and I think he took some umbrage at this, but I didn’t confront Ken in the essay. I just confronted the issue. I did say, in the essay, that there was no such thing as cultural limbo, without quoting Ken necessarily. But he understood what I was saying. I asked him many years later—here I was, a young guy who’s hired as a twentieth-century historian at Berkeley, whose book is on William Jennings Bryan, and who looks like a political historian, and whose first work after getting tenure has to do with slave songs. And I think it shocked everybody. They didn’t expect that. Nor did I, as a matter of fact. It shocked me.

I asked Ken many years later. Ken, I should tell you, is a man for whom I have unbelievable admiration as a scholar and as a human being. But I did ask Ken many years later, and I would’ve had to have admiration to ask him this—this was long after my book was out—but I said, “What did you think when I gave you—?”. I gave him a second essay shortly after that on slave tales. But it was the first essay in which I confronted culture issues, the essay on slave songs which I wrote in 1969, just two years after I got tenure. Getting tenure had nothing to do with it. I mean, I thought I was writing a book—I’ll get to all this later. So I said, “What did you think when I gave you that essay on slave songs, because I knew it surprised everyone. And Ken said, “You want to know what I thought?” I said yes. He said, “I thought, ‘who does this guy think he is?’” [laughter]

The thing I should say now, and then we’ll get back to City College, is that this change from what they thought was twentieth-century political history to something else—that to a lot of professors didn’t look like history at all, songs and dance and the like—never hurt me at Berkeley. I was promoted quickly and I wrote that essay in ’69, my second essay in ’70, and on the basis of those two essays, they promoted me to full professor in 1970. So as shocked as they may have been, as unsure that this was history as some of them were, they understood I was doing what I was supposed to do. I was doing research and writing.

7-00:39:29

Lage: Oh, I want to come back to that when we get to Berkeley, because it seems like really an important thing.

7-00:39:35

Levine: Well, as I said before, I'm amazed at all the things I was able to do when I was teaching at City College and going to Columbia and the like. I made some good friends at City College, a guy named Manny Chill, another guy named Solomon Wank. And perhaps I ought to tell the story now about how I left City College, and then I'll go to my graduate days at Columbia. But in 1961 I was offered the job at Princeton, and I was really very happy at City College. It was my alma mater, and I loved New York City, and I had no desire to leave either of those places—City College or New York City. So I went to my chairman, Joseph Wisan, who was a Columbia PhD too, like many of the professors at City College. And Joe Wisan lived in Brooklyn, and he had written an important book once, his doctoral dissertation under Allan Nevins on the sensationalist press and the coming of the Spanish-American war. He argued, and it was a telling argument for many years, that Pulitzer and Hearst caused that war.

7-00:40:50

Lage: I must've read that book because I've thought that ever since.

7-00:40:53

Levine: Yeah, sure. But he didn't write any more books after that, and he settled in like a bureaucrat, really. He was the permanent chairman of the History Department, and I went into his office. I said, "Professor Wisan, I want to ask you a question. I've been offered a job at Princeton but I'm very happy here." I wasn't asking anything about staying there permanently, nor was the Princeton job—it was an instructorship—permanent; my title at City College was Lecturer. I said, "I would like to know if I could count on staying for a few more years here? I thought that—because I could only stay at Princeton for a few years, get my book out, and then see what was necessary. He said, "Princeton! I have a nephew who went to Princeton. He was a student there. He had a very strange time." And he told me about the nephew. He said, "No, Princeton's a very strange place. I would be very careful if I were you. Remember, it's a very strange place." And he dismissed me, so I left.

7-00:41:55

Lage: He didn't answer your question.

7-00:41:57

Levine: He never answered my question. Two, three days later my friend, Solomon Wank, who was a tall guy like me, also, and who was in Austrian history, had accepted a job at Franklin and Marshall College in Lancaster, PA. He had just been offered that job, and he took it, and that job was a regular tenure track job, and Sol was one of my good friends at City College. He spent his career there—he's now retired—he spent his career at Franklin and Marshall College. He went in three days later and said, "Professor Wisan, I just want you to know that I've just accepted a job at Franklin and Marshall College, so I won't be coming back next fall." And Wisan looked at him and said, "My God, man, just the other day you told me you were going to Princeton!"

[laughter] So that was the end of my career at City College. I realized I had no career at City College, and I left.

7-00:42:51

Lage: So truthfully you saw the light.

7-00:42:54

Levine: Well, the guy didn't know who I was, so I couldn't even count on getting a job the next year, and Princeton was offering me a job, so I took it. These were very tenuous jobs. They hired you early. I still hadn't finished my dissertation even when I took the job at Princeton. I was still writing my dissertation. It was much more common then to hire ABD's because they didn't expect you to stay, and Princeton probably didn't either. Though that's another story, and I will get to that later, how I left Princeton to go to Berkeley. So while these things were happening, while this amazing little career at City College was happening, which was so important in teaching me that I had chosen the right profession and I could at least do the teaching part of it, because I recognized that I was a pretty good teacher. While this was happening—I was a graduate student through all of this, so we ought to go back.

7-00:43:53

Lage: We have to go way back. You entered in '55. Did you ever think of going anywhere else besides Columbia? Was that an option? Or how did you choose Columbia?

7-00:44:05

Levine: Well, I chose Columbia because it was up the hill, or down the hill, up the hill, whatever. It was very close to City College, it was in New York. It never occurred to me to go anywhere else, and I got into Columbia. Would I get in today to Columbia? You know, what I had at City College was a B average. You know, it is true that grades are higher now. I don't derive the same unresearched findings from that fact that a lot of my colleagues do, that we have grade inflation, and things are bad, and these are dummkopfs. In fact, I don't know if that's true at all, but it is true that grades are higher than they used to be.

7-00:44:42

Lage: A B meant more then than it means now.

7-00:44:44

Levine: It did. You know, as long as I mention this subject, let me tell you quickly; we may or may not ever get back to it. I think students are brighter now and work harder now. You know, I said that at City College we had to, for an upper division course, read a textbook and do two book reviews. My students, in upper division courses, even at George Mason University, and especially at Berkeley had to do two and a half, three times as much as that. We simply demand more of students. We demand a more sophisticated understanding of

the past. So do they deserve those higher grades? I suspect many of them do. But that's another story.

I had a B average, and when I was riding to my graduation at City College on the bus—I went to my graduation because my parents wanted me to, and I went early so I took the bus; well they probably took the bus too for that matter, but I went earlier—and I was reading the *New York Times*. And the *New York Times* mentioned the City College graduation, and it said that 10 percent of the graduating class was graduating with honors. Now, I was *cum laude*, which was the least of the three honors. What is it, *summa* and *magna*, or *magna* and *summa*. Get this, now. To get honors at City College, to graduate *cum laude*, you had to have a B average. To graduate from City College, you had to have a C average. So 90 percent of the graduating class are between a C and a B average because only 10 percent have honors. That's quite amazing, and that meant that grades were much lower. But I did have a B average, and maybe today I would've had a higher average. But I got into Columbia.

7-00:46:27

Lage: Did you have SATs?

7-00:46:29

Levine: No, thank God. I don't do those well. We had no Graduate Record Exam; that didn't exist then. I had to take nothing at all. I applied, I had a very good record, I got Phi Beta Kappa, I graduated *cum laude*, my professors probably wrote nice letters for me, and I got into Columbia with no trouble at all.

7-00:46:49

Lage: And were you planning to be an Americanist at this point?

7-00:46:54

Levine: Yes, I suppose so, because that's what I did. Yes. If you ask me what careful thought went into this, none. But since you asked the question, it took me two and a half years to get my master's degree.

7-00:47:14

Lage: Was that longer than the norm?

7-00:47:15

Levine: Oh yes, it was, and I'll talk about why that was, later. So when I got my master's degree, there had been some people—I think I mentioned, I don't know if I did—I was dating a young woman whose uncle, her mother's brother, was a professor at Dartmouth, a well-known guy, a Jewish guy with an un-Jewish name. In fact, their family—I mentioned all this. His advice to me was to get out of New York City. A number of people told me, "No, no, stay at Columbia for your PhD. You've got your MA." So I did—but I can't remember the details—I did apply to a few schools, Wisconsin; don't ask me why I applied to the schools I applied to, but people told me they had good history departments. So I applied to the University of Wisconsin and I applied

to Northwestern. I got into both of them, but Wisconsin without any money, Northwestern with a teaching assistantship. And I had to think about this. I couldn't go to Wisconsin without any money. I mean, I had to pay tuition, out-of-state tuition, whatever. Northwestern was offering me a teaching assistantship. I thought about it, and I stayed at Columbia. But that was my only—I really loved New York, and I had, by then, a community of friends at Columbia. So I stayed there.

Let me go back, however; let me jump back to my first impressions, and it's hard to believe. Columbia was twenty-three blocks from City College. That's around a mile, it's around a mile, but it was a whole other world. The first day I walked onto the Columbia campus, which now looks like a postage stamp to me, well, but it is a campus. City College now has another campus because they absorbed another college. When I went back to teach at City College, they'd absorbed Manhattanville College. Manhattanville College was a woman's Catholic college which moved to Westchester County because their neighborhood was a little dangerous, they thought, and they sold the college to City College. So when I went back to teach in '59, City College had a campus. But when I was a student there, it had four or five buildings, and you walked from one building to another, and there were a few trees here and there, but it wasn't what you'd call a campus. You couldn't get lost on it.

I got lost on the Columbia campus, which was not very big either. I'm a little surprised now that I did, but I did get lost. It seemed quite huge to me. Everything about it seemed challenging, the famous professors. At City College there were a few famous professors, Hans Kohn and others, but Columbia was full of famous professors, just in the History Department, and it was true of all departments. So there were these eminences, there was the fact that it was a big place, and right away, immediately there was a difference in the workload. Well, it was graduate school, it's true, but the difference was immense. You just had to read a lot of books.

7-00:50:19

Lage: And take numerous courses?

7-00:50:23

Levine: Well, I took as few as I could. Even at City College, I should quickly say, I took the minimum number of credits you could take and be a full time student. I took twelve credits rather than fifteen, because I couldn't have hacked fifteen.

7-00:50:38

Lage: Well, you were teaching on the side.

7-00:50:39

Levine: Yeah, I was. When I went to City College I wasn't. I was working in my old man's fruit store. When I went to City College I wasn't. When I went to Columbia I worked right through. So I took two courses at a time. Henry

Steele Commager would give you—he once said to us, I remember this, he held up John Fiske's book *The Critical Period [The Critical Period of American History, 1783-1789]* and he said, "Now, take this book," and this was a book of 200 to 300 pages. "There's no reason why any intelligent person"—I'm paraphrasing here, but this is what he said—"can't go into a quiet study and in one hour have read this book sufficiently to write a book review of it." I said, "I can't do that." I still can't do that, by the way. An hour? Commager could do that, and you know what? Henry Steele Commager, from whom I learned a lot, reviewed my first book. And I realized he'd only spent a short time with it. It was a very positive review, but there were things in the book he got a little wrong; I forget the details. He read very quickly and he was an intimidating guy, there's no question about it. I learned a lot from him. I took two courses with him. But he was all business. He would come in, he'd do his thing, he'd walk out.

7-00:52:10

Lage: Were these lecture courses?

7-00:52:13

Levine: These were lecture courses. Columbia had this strange thing called graduate lecture courses. I didn't take a small group course from Henry Steele Commager. I took a lecture course from Allan Nevins, another very famous man who was, I found, cold. I mean I couldn't warm up to these guys, and they were intimidating. They knew so much, there was a distance.

7-00:52:35

Lage: Were they intimidating on purpose?

7-00:52:38

Levine: Well, they were who they were. They were hard workers. They spent all their time writing and working and doing their important things. I mean Commager may have been a wonderful mentor. People have told me Nevins was a good mentor. I didn't have him for that. Remember, I took no lecture courses at City College at all, so I wasn't used to lecture courses, and these guys were distant. They were on a podium, we were sitting down. There were a lot of students.

7-00:53:04

Lage: Well, how many graduate students were there?

7-00:53:06

Levine: Oh, Columbia had a huge number of grad students, and they made money on these lecture courses because they could pile a lot of people into the room.

7-00:53:13

Lage: But they were all graduate students.

7-00:53:16

Levine: They were all graduate students, they were all graduate students. You could take a certain number of courses at Columbia for what was called H credit,

which means attendance credit. So I took some of these courses without getting grades in them, I just got H's, which means you attended. That was a, shall we call it genteelly, a racket? Columbia was extorting money from us.

7-00:53:38

Lage: You paid by the credit, I'm assuming.

7-00:53:41

Levine: Oh yeah, we did. I can't remember how much we paid. Was it \$25 a credit? I think so, which seemed like a lot of money in those days. When I graduated I think it was \$75 a credit. It had gone up quite a bit.

So I remember Allan Nevins. I'll tell an Allan Nevins anecdote. He was a short guy who stood on a podium, and he held his notes in front of him, and you could hardly ever see his face, you know, and you listen to these dry lectures—it was a course in American historiography. But there was one moment in the course where down came the notes, and he was talking about Charles Beard. We got up to Charles Beard; it was toward the end of the course. Charles Beard, I should say by way of preparation for this story, was opposed to our entry into World War II. He had World War I very much on his mind, and he was a great opponent to the war. So Allan Nevins, who in the thirties was a journalist and never got a PhD and wrote books in history, and his first book was *The American States during and after the Revolution*. A very good book, I read it later. When he was writing that book as a journalist, he went to Charles Beard—he told us this story right then and there, while he was lecturing about Charles Beard; he told us this story—"I went to Charles Beard, who gave me the only good advice I've ever gotten from anyone at Columbia University. He said, "He helped me write that book, and I have a great feeling of indebtedness to Charles Beard." His face was beginning to turn red and his hand was pumping up and down on the podium. "But," he said, "he would've let even England go down!"

That was a very interesting experience for me because it was clear here that there were ideological things getting in his way of judging Beard as a historian. Even I could see that, as a young graduate student. It was very interesting to me. This cold, very meticulous historian, who worked his way intellectually through all the American historians, because Columbia was big on historiography. We all read historians you've never heard of, Hildreth Rhodes. Well, maybe you've heard of Rhodes. Bancroft, Channing, Columbia was big on that. We were not trained in monographs because there were many fewer monographs then. But we were trained in historiography really meticulously. So this course was an important course, and he was very good. He went through all these guys dryly, I should say, but thoroughly. And when he got to Beard, the dryness disappeared, the emotion came, the redness in the face, the pumping hand. I learned something from that, that it's not effective to do that. Though he was honest with us, and that was important, and that was effective.

7-00:56:36

Lage: But that was the only thing he showed any passion about.

7-00:56:40

Levine: And that was the only thing that I remembered from the course, to be honest with you, though I'm sure that his notes helped me get through. We had a written prelim to the orals. Before we could take our orals we had to pass a preliminary, and that prelim was very, very heavily historiographical at Columbia, so it helped a lot that I had taken his course. It was a wise course to take. And then in that course I met someone who was to become one of my closest friends, Robert Dallek, the current star biographer of many people. He just wrote Kennedy's biography, and before that Lyndon Johnson's. He's now retired in Washington, so we see each other, and he's writing lots of books. His current work is on Nixon and Kissinger.

So we had the space; that was a little intimidating. All those old buildings—City College had old buildings too, but there was something about Columbia. Did I tell you that my grandfather painted the classrooms of City College? I did tell you that story, very interesting. Because City College was built, as I recall, out of the blocks of granite or whatever it was, whatever stone—Manhattan's on stone. When they dug the 8<sup>th</sup> Avenue subway in the early twentieth century [actually the IRT subway]—my grandfather came here in 1905—they dug up that stone, and they used that stone to build the City College on 139<sup>th</sup> Street, and he painted the classrooms.

7-00:58:21

Lage: And he told you this?

7-00:58:23

Levine: Oh, he was very proud. When I was a student there he would say, "You're not the only one who went to City College." He used to say that to me. My grandfather could've been a professor. He was smart as you can be, no education at all. I don't think he had any education at all.

The other intimidating thing to me, when I entered City College was—well, maybe I should stay on professors.

7-00:58:53

Lage: Well, you mentioned these two professors being intimidating.

7-00:58:58

Levine: And then there was David Donald. Now, I already said David Donald was the best teacher I had. I think that's clear. As a teacher qua teacher. He was a brilliant teacher. His classes were well planned, and he knew how to stimulate conversation. I had him both for one of these lecture courses, two semesters, but I took those for H-credit. Yeah, I think I took those for H-credit, but I took a year-long colloquium he taught.

7-00:59:26

Lage: In these early years? Or later?

7-00:59:28

Levine: Yeah, no, very early. I entered in January of '55, so I did the spring semester, and then in the fall and spring semesters of the next year, '55-'56, I was in David Donald's year-long course for which I read Ken Stampp. It was '56-'57.

7-00:59:45

Lage: Did this focus on the civil war and reconstruction?

7-00:59:49

Levine: No, no, one semester was important books in American history, and one semester was important people in American history, where we read the writings of Calhoun and Jefferson and—it was a very good course. Again, always with that little twist at the end. He'd put his finger up, figured out where his students were, and he took an opposite point of view, at the end of the course, with graduate students. But I never did well with him. I loved his courses, I got good grades in them, I learned enormously from him, and I got two B's, the only two B's I got in my entire career in Columbia. You know, that's the lowest passing grade you can get in graduate school, as you know. So I didn't do well with David.

7-00:60:27

Lage: Then why didn't do you well? Was it the writing? Was it the performance in class?

7-00:60:32

Levine: I think it was the performance in class. I wrote well; my papers were okay. I mean, we just had to write something, but I was a mess when it came to talking in class. Maybe I should stay on this theme and then get back to the more comforting professors later, though David was an important guy intellectually in my career. I learned a lot about teaching from him, but not about dealing with students. It was in David's class that a third intimidating professor—he was one of those professors I found a little bit intimidating, though I took him, because I learned a lot from him. But I just didn't articulate well in class, and this is what I want to say. In my first year in Columbia, sitting in classes like David's, in fact in David's, specifically, I encountered people like Ann Lane, who remains a very good friend of mine; she's a professor at the University of Virginia. And Ann Lane was then married to Gene Genovese. And she was phenomenal. I just sat there, and when she opened her mouth the first time, I said to myself, literally—I've told this to Ann, who blushes, but she's much more worried about the fact that I tell people she was in graduate school in 1955. Ann Lane, and there were other people in the class, but I remember Ann, she was so smart, so articulate, so theoretical that I said to myself, "What are you doing here, Levine? You can't operate with these people." And I couldn't. I couldn't, and that's why I got

B's, though I didn't get B's in Hofstadter's class or Leuchtenburg's, so the whole thing is a funny business.

7-00:62:26

Lage: What did you mean by she was so theoretical?

7-00:62:28

Levine: Well, I mean Ann saw things theoretically. She didn't just say, "Here are the facts." She tried to put them together. And you know, she was married to a leading young Marxist thinker, and I had none of that, though I had read Marx. I was even going to be teaching Marx, but I wasn't able to—at least I thought I wasn't. Look, I did take essay questions in City College and I got A's, and my professors wrote nice letters to Columbia, so I must've said something in those essays besides Buchanan was President, followed by Pierce, or whatever. I must've said something, had some notion of ideas, but I was not very hip when it came to—let me give you an example. I think I may have said this. When I was an undergraduate at City College, I read Hemingway's,—I forget the name of his book, one of his early books, in which he has an emasculated GI falling in love with Brett Ashley, and they go to bull fights and everything. It's one of his really important books and a very good novel, and I called it a travelogue in my review, I remember. And the poor young professor, who was like me later—he was probably a lecturer finishing his own dissertation—he gave me a B because he recognized that it was just beyond me to understand that book at that moment. And he was nice to me. He gave me a B on the paper. I think I did better in the course. So I was at that stage in which—I didn't grow up among books, I didn't grow up among bookish people. I knew no intellectuals.

7-00:64:14

Lage: You didn't grow up discussing things in this way.

7-00:64:17

Levine: No, absolutely not, whereas Ann did and then she was married to Gene and she was in a different world.

7-00:64:26

Lage: So that was intimidating.

7-00:64:28

Levine: It was. Not that she meant to be intimidating. Look, a lot of people I met in those years were intimidating, articulate, incredible people. One of the guys I went to City College with, who's still a good friend of mine, who's a professor at UCLA to this day, Richard Weiss, was so articulate, I mean *so articulate*. He could live in that world, and I had trouble with that world and I had to learn. Teaching in the public schools probably was very good for me. Certainly when I went to teach at City College it helped a lot, but this was my problem at Columbia.

7-00:65:05

Lage: Was David Donald—did you have ideological differences? You say he was just challenging his graduate students, but he reviewed Ken Stampp's book that way. He said it was a garrison of modern day abolitionism.

7-00:65:19

Levine: I think he disagreed with Ken about those things. David's come a long way himself. I mean, he admires my work and tried to hire me at Harvard in 1980, so he himself changed. That's what this is all about. We read things, we change our views. But yeah, in those years I think he was a bit hostile to this; he saw it as ideological. Look, his own teachers—he's from Mississippi and he went to Illinois for his PhD, and he was a student of James G. Randall—I think that's the right name—who was an important professor of reconstruction and was part of that whole business about reconstruction being unnecessary and cruel, and the Civil War a stumbling—David taught that himself: a bumbling generation stumbled over its own emotions into war. That was a standard revisionist view of history when I was a graduate student, that the Civil War was a big mistake, that it was not fought for slavery, that the slaves were not particularly unhappy. That's why Ken's book was such a miracle. He showed how angry the slaves were, and it bothered people.

You know, when Richard Hofstadter wrote *The Age of Reform*, William B. Hesseltine from Wisconsin, a progressive fellow who loved the populous and everything—and Hofstadter was a bit negative about populism and saw it as a Tory kind of thing—Hesseltine wrote a review either in the *Journal of American History* or the *American Historical Review*, saying this is the kind of history we expect from Columbia University. There was a lot of it. It was a period of ferment. People were beginning to break free of the old constructions, and they were beginning to build new ones. It took me a while to understand that Hofstadter was my man, here.

So that leads us, now, to the professors at Columbia I had no problem with from the beginning. One of them was Dumas Malone, an old southern gentleman who was the great Jefferson biographer and was toiling away on his multi-volume biography of Jefferson. I had never met a southern gentleman before, and Dumas Malone was just an incredible guy for me. I just didn't believe—he was so gentle and so sweet and so kind.

7-00:67:45

Lage: How old a man?

7-00:67:46

Levine: He was probably in his sixties when I knew him because before I left Columbia, he was forced to retire. And he only had two or three volumes of the biography done and we all said, "Well, he'll never finish up." We used to make jokes that he goes out every day and throws stones at the Hamilton. We were in Hamilton Hall, the History Department, and that kind of joking. He loved Jefferson and he was, in many ways, a very old fashioned guy. I

remember he assigned Hofstadter's essay in *The American Political Tradition* on John Calhoun, John C. Calhoun, the Marx of the master class. And he said to us, "Now you've got to read that essay, and all of you will have to read it twice. Some of you will have to read it three times. That is a very complex piece." In the early sixties, Dick Hofstadter told me that his book, *The American Political Tradition*—in 1962 he told me that it had just sold 80,000 copies the year before because high schools were using it, and he was so proud. Not long before, Malone was telling graduate students they had to read one of the essays three times. There was some truth about the complexities of his essays. I asked Malone once about Daniel Boorstin's book on Thomas Jefferson. He wrote a strange book on Thomas Jefferson. I can't remember the title of it. *The Lost World of Thomas Jefferson*. I didn't fully understand that book, and I went to Malone, who was the great scholar, and asked him. He says "Oh, I don't read books about the subject I'm writing on." It was a beautiful old-fashioned notion, he didn't want to be influenced by—but he was an oasis of calm in the world of the Commagers and Nevinses, who were hyped up people. He was this calm guy who did things in his own pace, spoke slowly, and had time to talk to students, and was very gentle.

7-00:69:48

Lage: And he was encouraging?

7-00:69:50

Levine: Well, I never had him in a small-group course. I took his lecture course, two of them, and he wasn't one of my professors I worked with in a sense of research or anything like that. I just found him approachable, gentle, sweet, a man from whom I learned a lot. Gene Genovese had Dumas Malone as his mentor, and when Malone left before Gene finished his dissertation, which was on the world of the slaveholders, Malone was in Virginia and Gene sent it to him. Malone said—this is all according to Gene, of course—"I have never read anything that pained me more," and refused to come up to New York for the defense and said, "I really can't serve as your mentor." So Gene had to go to David Donald, and David Donald and the board threw out every chapter but one. Gene had to write a new dissertation.

7-00:70:49

Lage: Now, was this ideological?

7-00:70:53

Levine: Well, I think Malone just found a lot of Gene was writing revisionist history about the South and he had an economic interpretation. I mean I could go and tell you some fascinating stories about Gene's book, but it's probably not appropriate for this interview.

7-00:71:11

Lage: Say something about Columbia at that time.

7-00:71:14

Levine: Columbia had—Hofstadter was an innovator. I'm not sure there were—you know, I don't know about European history, so I can't speak about that, though I thought I was going to take a second field in European history. I took a course in German history with Fritz Stern who became a very famous German historian. That convinced me. It was a good course, but that convinced me I really didn't have the foundations to do it. I would have to work so hard, and I was working hard enough learning American history.

7-00:71:48

Lage: And you didn't have to have a second field?

7-00:71:49

Levine: Oh, you did.

7-00:71:51

Lage: So what did you do your second field in?

7-00:71:53

Levine: I did a second field in American literature. And David Donald told me that that wasn't a valid thing to do, but Hofstadter had no problems with it and he was my professor. But on the orals, I should tell you, and I had a very famous guy—I didn't know he was a very famous guy—I went to Richard Chase who was a very famous guy, and Professor Chase, of course, was on my orals. David Donald was on my orals, Hofstadter was in England that year, so Bill Leuchtenburg chaired my orals, and when it came time for Richard Chase to question me, David Donald picked a book up—we were in a beautiful seminar room with a library—and he picked a book up, turned his back and read it. David Donald let you know what he was thinking at all moments.

7-00:72:39

Lage: Is that because he didn't respect Richard Chase?

7-00:72:41

Levine: Oh no, he respected Richard Chase. I'm sure he did. He didn't respect that as a second field. So he was letting me know that he didn't think this was. But Bill Leuchtenburg was all enthused. And Richard Chase—I had a very good thing with Richard Chase. So everyone didn't approve of this, but it was valid and legal, and this was my theory. It was very pragmatic, but it had a great impact on me. You know, you do things for one reason and they have other –

7-00:73:11

Lage: Say this in a minute or less, or else we have to change the tape.

7-00:73:13

Levine: I thought that instead of reading history books all the time, I could get into bed at night with a novel or a book of poetry and that would be wonderful and I could prepare this field in a totally different way. And it was true. It worked.

7-00:73:29

Lage: And maybe it connected with your openness to other sources.

7-00:73:32

Levine: Well, it did, and it helped, probably, make me a cultural historian, yeah.

[Audio File 8]

08-00:00:00

Levine: Yeah. I just wanted to say that I worked very hard at Columbia. Because I was way behind. I had been a poor high school student. I made up for that at City College. But there are things you never make up for. There are books I should have read by the time I was, you know, nineteen, twenty, twenty-one, twenty-two, that I hadn't read. And that helped me prepare the field for Richard Chase. I mean, that was another consequence. I was reading novels, and I probably—well, that someone growing up in a more educated milieu would have read already. And I was encountering lines that, again, someone would have encountered earlier in a different milieu. So that was very good.

08-00:00:44

Lage: But you were encountering them as you were studying history, which I would think would—

08-00:00:47

Levine: Well, I wasn't encountering Walt Whitman. That's not the kind of history that was taught at Columbia, really. I wasn't encountering Walt Whitman and e.e. cummings and people like that. They were mentioned. But here I was actually reading them. And it was very exciting. Let me say one thing about my qualities. I did have one important quality, which I still have, though as I get older I don't have as much of it. And that is what the Jews call *sitzfleisch*.

08-00:01:18

Lage: You can spell that.

08-00:01:18

Levine: Well, I think—I hope I can. I think it's—what *sitzfleisch* means is "sitting flesh."

08-00:01:26

Lage: Oh.

08-00:01:26

Levine: It means your backside. But it means more than that. I would imagine it's like S-I-T-Z-fleisch-F-L-E-I-S-C-H.

08-00:01:35

Lage: Ability to sit?

08-00:01:37

Levine: Ability to sit still. And do what you have to do. I had that. I really had that. I could stay at my desk for endless hours and read endless materials and write.

I've had that all my career. And I've always had to have it. I'm not a natural—[laughs] I have to work hard to do what I do. I have to prepare my classes very hard. I have to work very hard to write my books. I do nothing easily. And, you know, as I get older, of course, teaching comes more easily. And, first of all, I have a confidence I can do it. I have a lot of knowledge by now of certain things. And I no longer stumble articulately.

08-00:02:19

Lage: [laughs]

08-00:02:20

Levine: I have learned to speak. And I have some confidence in my ability to speak. And I also have learned to be natural. I have a sense of humor. That's natural. And I can use that in my class. I also care about human beings, you just allow that to come out, and not worry all the time about what you may be saying to students when it comes out. I show them compassion, even when I give some of the low grades. And, though—

08-00:02:51

Lage: This is for your own good.

08-00:02:52

Levine: Yes. [laughs] Well, I try very hard to be, you know, a positive presence. But sometimes, yeah. The hardest thing about teaching is judging people. I don't like that. I never liked it, grading papers and writing judgments. But it's part of the job, and you do it. So I worked very hard at Columbia. And that's part of my amazement, looking back at all the things I was doing, how hard I had to work to prepare my classes, to write my dissertation, and even to ask girls for dates.

08-00:03:22

Lage: That was hard? [laughter]

08-00:03:24

Levine: That was hard too. But I was somehow doing all those things in those years. And you have a lot of energy. There was a community of—I'll get back, well, maybe; let me just say this now, since I just thought of—there was a community at Columbia. And what was interesting to me—that some of these students who I found unbelievably bright and articulate seemed to like to hang around me. And that gave me some confidence. They obviously didn't find they were talking to a nothing. And they were—you know, I was communicating with them. They found things to like and admire in me, just as I did in them. And that gave me some confidence. I was part of a community of people at Columbia I really respected and learned enormously from. And what I have learned—you know, we had lunches together. And I spent—when I wasn't teaching, or even when I was teaching—see, Dick Hofstadter taught at 3:00 in the afternoon. David Donald taught on Saturday morning—on Saturdays. And Bill Leuchtenburg taught his lecture course at 7:00 in the

evening. So I could teach and then go to Columbia and do classes. That was kind of wonderful. And Columbia was just geared for me.

08-00:04:35

Lage: Were they doing that on purpose—

08-00:04:38

Levine: I don't know—

08-00:04:38

Lage: —because they had working students?

08-00:04:38

Levine: I have no idea why they were doing that. I never asked them. I still could ask Bill. He's around. No, I have no idea why they did that. But—and when Jacques Barzun later became the Provost he stopped it. He thought that those hours lent themselves to hangers on, like me. Well, I wasn't "a hanger on."

08-00:04:56

Lage: And you were not a hanger on.

08-00:04:57

Levine: I was a very serious guy. But there were hangers on. I'd say, well, every good school, Berkeley, Columbia, Harvard, people who think they could never live, you know, ten miles away from [laughs] the center of this place. So we had a real community. And we studied together. We had, oh, study workshops for the orals. We read books. We shared books. I'd read a book, someone else would read another book, and we'd share the ideas, and I'd take notes. And, you know, that was unbelievably important to me.

08-00:05:27

Lage: We haven't talked about your becoming a Hofstadter student.

08-00:05:30

Levine: No.

08-00:05:31

Lage: But was this community mainly Hofstadter students?

08-00:05:33

Levine: No. No. All kinds of students, all kinds of students. But a lot of them were Hofstadter students. So, becoming a Hofstadter student. I haven't—well, I've decided to be totally frank about this part of my life.

08-00:05:45

Lage: Oh, you should be. Yeah.

08-00:05:46

Levine: I'm going to hold back later. No. [laughs] I'm going to be totally frank about this part of my life. I don't know why I took Hofstadter's seminar, partly because it was 3:00 in the afternoon and partly because he was *so* famous, and

people said, "You've got to work with Richard Hofstadter." I did not cotton to him, very early on.

08-00:06:07

Lage: His books or him personally?

08-00:06:08

Levine: Oh, I loved his books. But as a person he was not—excuse me—a particularly wonderful teacher, in class. He did not prepare very well. You know, he always started the class with—if you had read Samuel Bemis' book on John Adams and American diplomacy, his first question—you knew what his first question was going to be: "So, what did you think about Bemis' book?"

08-00:06:31

Lage: This is in the seminar.

08-00:06:32

Levine: Yeah. Well, I make a distinction between colloquia and seminars. Seminars lead to written work, and colloquia lead to discussing books, though there may be written work too, but it's not research. So in that distinction—I don't know if Columbia made it; I think they did—I took both colloquia and seminars from Dick Hofstadter. And found him not to be a well-prepared teacher. He wasn't. I was once complaining to somebody about this, and he said, "Well, are you kidding? I had Richard Hofstadter when he was a young man teaching CC," which was the Contemporary Civilization, the Western civ course at Columbia, which they used a lot of young people to teach. And he said he'd come into class and say, "What'd you think about Aristotle?" So that was Dick's preparation. He didn't prepare. And he wasn't a particularly warm, outward personality, the way someone like Leuchtenburg was—even Donald was, though I was much closer to Richard Hofstadter's values, I think, than Donald's. But what Richard Hofstadter did do in class, and which I appreciated increasingly with time, was that he was just so smart. And he had so many things to say. They weren't prepared.

Let me give you one instance. We were talking about Puritan law in one of his—we read some book. And we were talking about Puritan law. And I believe it was—you know, there were very dire penalties for disobedience to parents, maybe even the death penalty; I think it was. And in some law. So at that point, when we were discussing Puritan law, Hofstadter looked out the window of his office—he sat behind a desk, and we sat arrayed around him in a circle of seats, and so there was always the desk between us and him, because we did this in his office. And he looked out the window and said, "What do I see? I see cars double parked. I see people jaywalking. I see—." And he named other things, infractions of the law. And then he said to us, "So what does that tell us?" And, of course, what it told us, which he wrung out of us, was that you've got to look at behavior as well as legislation. And he did this constantly, this kind of thing, these kind of homey little acts he put on [laughs] to—he was just very smart. And in that sense, he was a very good

teacher because it was almost a Socratic method to it. I don't want to go too far. Because I won't say he was a good teacher in class. But he was a very bright guy. And that was one thing that attracted me to him. And another thing that attracted me to him profoundly, ultimately, was he wanted you to be your own person. He did not—David Donald was an enormously directive person. He told his students how to dress.

08-00:09:37

Lage: [laughs]

08-00:09:37

Levine: He criticized some of his students for wearing large earrings, you know. And I know that; students told me things. And he told me, "What will they think of me?" Well, it was someone—you know, "If I wear jewelry like this when I go for a job." Someone in his class.

08-00:09:51

Lage: We're talking about women that —

08-00:09:53

Levine: Yeah, we're talking—there weren't a hell of a lot of them. But there were women graduate students. There were no women on the faculty. One of his students handed in a paper fifteen minutes after the class ended. David went to his office. The student came rushing in with a paper. David said to him—a student told me this—"Well, you know, someday I am going to have to write a letter for you to a prospective employer. And what shall I say, that this young man is totally irresponsible, does not meet his obligations?" So that—Dick Hofstadter would never have done anything like that. David tried to get himself into your life. I could never have worked with David. Though, as I say, I learned enormously from him. I would vote for him as the best teacher at Columbia. He was my colleague at Princeton when I taught there. And he had an influence on me. No doubt about that. And later actually tried to hire me at Harvard and has always been kind to me. I say all that.

But Dick Hofstadter took time. It took time, for me. So let me tell you a story. I shouldn't tell this story, but I'm going to tell it. I was finishing my master's essay. And that's another story, which I will tell you. I was finishing my master's essay with Richard Hofstadter and had decided that I really wanted to work with Bill Leuchtenburg, who was young—not that much younger than Dick Hofstadter. I think he was only—

08-00:11:20

Lage: Hofstadter was only forty—

08-00:11:22

Levine: Yeah, Hofstadter was—

08-00:11:22

Lage: —when you saw him?

08-00:11:23

Levine: —born in 1916, and Leuchtenburg was born in 1922. But he looked younger. And he was six years younger and was closer to our age. But he was more open. And, I don't know, he taught—though I must say I was much more, I realize in retrospect, a Hofstadter student than a Leuchtenburg student. I was much more simpatico with Hofstadter's method. Leuchtenburg had a more narrative method, a more political orientation and legal orientation. His lecture courses were great—very narrow. They were very political, very constitutional. He taught me a lot. But at the time, I just felt comfortable with Bill Leuchtenburg, and I could see writing a dissertation with him. So I went to him. Now he was a junior man. He may have had tenure, but he was still a junior man in that department. And I said, "Could I write my dissertation with you?" He said, "I think Dick thinks you're going to write your dissertation with him." I was just writing my master's essay with Hofstadter. I said, "I don't really know that Professor Hofstadter knows my name." He said, "Oh, he knows your name. And I think—let me go check on this." So a couple of days later he comes back and says to me, "No, Dick thinks you're working with him on your dissertation. Look, Larry, I'll be your second reader. I'll do everything. I'll—" And good as his word, he did exactly that. He worked with me. But at the time, I was a —

08-00:12:50

Lage: Did he feel you were better off with Hofstadter?

08-00:12:53

Levine: No, I think he didn't want to steal a Hofstadter student.

08-00:12:55

Lage: Oh, he didn't want to challenge—because he was the junior man.

08-00:12:57

Levine: Yeah, I think that's what it was. And I was a little annoyed at this. I said, you know, "Why didn't he just say, 'Look, he wants to work with me.'" I would have told Hofstadter that. But he didn't. He did me a big favor, I said. But I don't know that he intended to do me a big favor. He was a little nervous about this. I understand it. I mean, it's true. If a student of a friend of mine comes and says, "I want to work with you," I don't want my friend to think I'm stealing his or her students. And this is a problem. And he had the junior-senior. Maybe that wasn't the issue at all. Maybe it was just this issue, the collegial issue. But whatever it was, there I was trapped!

08-00:13:32

Lage: [laughs]

08-00:13:33

Levine: And then I'll tell you—

08-00:13:34

Lage: And you didn't want to do your—

- 08-00:13:36  
Levine: I didn't think I did.
- 08-00:13:37  
Lage: Because of personal relations or in—?
- 08-00:13:39  
Levine: Because I didn't have a personal relationship with Dick. And—
- 08-00:13:41  
Lage: You wanted to be comfortable
- 08-00:13:42  
Levine: I wanted to be comfortable. I think it's crucial to be comfortable. Meanwhile, I'm writing my master's essay. It's taking me two and a half years to finish it. And I finally did finish it. And so I—I have to back up here, tell you how I found the topic. Hofstadter was my MA advisor. And I was in his class. And I went to him.
- 08-00:14:05  
Lage: This was a seminar or a colloquium?
- 08-00:14:08  
Levine: I was in his seminar and his colloquium. But I was in his research seminar. And I went to him to find an MA topic. And—by the way, I always knew I was working with a very important guy. But I was also looking for a guy I had human relations with. That was the whole thing with Leuchtenburg. So I kept going to Dick to find the topic. And I had no idea that the topic was important. This was only an MA essay, so. And I suggested a topic on slavery. He said, "No good." And I suggested—and he didn't just say, "No good." He explained to me why it was a problem.
- 08-00:14:42  
Lage: The topic itself—
- 08-00:14:43  
Levine: Yeah, the topic itself.
- 08-00:14:44  
Lage: —not slavery.
- 08-00:14:45  
Levine: No, the topic itself. And I brought a to—so I was all over the map. I had no specialty.
- 08-00:14:50  
Lage: What other ideas—?
- 08-00:14:50  
Levine: I can't remember them now. But I know that there was even one in colonial history. And he would have worked on anything. Because Dick Hofstadter

didn't have field. He ranged across the whole of the US. And then one day I came to him, in desperation. And I kind of liked William Jennings Bryan. I found him an interesting character. And he was a reformer. So I said, "How about a master's essay on the political, social, and economic philosophy of William James Bryan?" And Hofstadter said, "Look, William James Bryan had no—." He was wrong, I think, but that's what he said. "He had no great philosophy that's worth writing an essay on. But if you're interested in Bryan, there is a very interesting subject here." And he said, "Have you ever read C. Vann Woodward's book on Tom Watson?" Now C. Vann Woodward wrote—yeah, I believe it was his own doctoral dissertation. That's a great book. I hadn't read it.

08-00:15:46

Lage:

You went out and got it quickly. [laughs]:

08-00:15:48

Levine:

Yes. On how Tom Watson shifted from a progressive populist candidate to a racial bigot, in his late years. And so I read it. And Hofstadter said to me, "There is a dissertation topic here on why Bryan switched from being a progressive to being a —"

08-00:16:08

Lage:

A Scopes trial. [laughs]

08-00:16:08

Levine:

"— conservative." Yeah, against evolution, against the immigrant populations, against the urban populations, for Prohibition. So I thought, "Wow!" And I read Woodward's book, and I thought it was great. He also told me to read a book by Albert Jay Nock. I believe it's N-O-C-K. Albert Jay Nock—J-A-Y. On Jefferson. But I didn't see the relevance of that book, nor did I ask Hofstadter. But I saw the relevance of the Woodward book immediately. And so I took that topic on. And I didn't go to Washington—because you didn't do that for an MA thesis—and read Bryan's papers or anything, but I—Bryan published out the years, and he had a weekly and then later a monthly paper called *The Commoner*, and the New York Public Library had that. I spent days and evenings in the New York—they closed at 10:00, I believe, or 9:00. And I'd just sit there. And this thing was fragile, and there were always piles [laughs] of yellow newspaper. They finally put it on microfilm because students like me were wearing it out. And I'd go across the street to the Horn and Hardart's Automat, and for twenty-five cents you could get a bowl of stew—

08-00:17:16

Lage:

[laughs]

08-00:17:16

Levine:

— which I loved, things like that. And I worked very hard.

08-00:17:20

A You did a lot of sitting, then.

08-00:17:21

Levine: A lot of sitting. And I wrote this 250-page master's essay. Now, let me tell you a story.

08-00:17:28

Lage: Now that was more ambitious, was it not, than most people?

08-00:17:30

Levine: Yeah, but I've got to back up here again. Because something happened some time before this which gave me some willies, some doubts. I was in Hofstadter's office, and he was in a funny mood, and he said to me, "See what's in front of you?" And I was sitting on, yeah, one end of his desk. He was at the other. Between us—

08-00:17:55

Lage: You always have the desk between you.

08-00:17:57

Levine: Always have the desk. Between us there were two black binders, the kind of things you put dissertations, and, you know, these black, spring binders. There were two fat ones. And he said, "Open the first one. How many pages?" "700," I said, something like that. And he said, "And the second one, how many pages?" I said, "800." He said, "*1,500 pages*. There's this man—I haven't seen him in a decade. I thought he had dropped out. He came into my office last week, said, 'Hello, Professor Hofstadter,' and dumped these two on my desk and said, 'Here's my dissertation.' And I did what you just did. I opened the first one. I opened the second one. I added them together. And it's 1,500 pages. He wrote a 1,500-page dissertation. I said to him, 'Which volume would you like me to read?'" [laughter] So this story was in my mind when I walked into—most master's essays were 70 to 100 pages.

08-00:18:53

Lage: Oh, no.

08-00:18:54

Levine: I walked into Hofstadter's office, and I gave him a 250-page essay on William Jennings Bryan's last decade.

08-00:19:00

Lage: Now do you give him—excuse me for just —

08-00:19:02

Levine: Yeah.

08-00:19:02

Lage: Along the way, were you giving him chapters?

08-00:19:04

Levine: I didn't.

08-00:19:05

Lage: Did you just—?

08-00:19:05

Levine: I should have but did not. Though I did write a chapter of this for Bill Leuchtenburg's research seminar, and he liked it. I may have even written a chapter of it for Hofstadter's research seminar, and he liked it. But here was the whole thing put together. And it was huge. And I gave it to him. And he said to me, "I'm not going to read this. Who's ever heard of a 250-page master's essay? They're 100 pages at most." Most of them were in the seventies page range. And "this is impossible. I'm not going to read it." So there I am, all my fears coming true. And I said something which was quite unusual for me and quite daring. I said, "Well, Professor Hofstadter, you have to read it." And he looked at me and said, "Why?" I was improvising wildly here. He said, "Why?" But partly I believed what I was saying. I said, "Well, Professor Hofstadter, you gave me this topic. I don't know anything. You gave me this topic. I thought it was a great topic. I went off and did it. It took me 250 pages to do it. If you read this and tell me it should have taken me seventy pages to do the same thing I've done here, I'll apologize to you. But I think it took 250 pages to do what you thought was a good master's essay." And he looked at me and said, "Come back," whenever. And he didn't reject it. And when I came back—this is very interesting—I walked into his office, Dick Hofstadter did something that—by now he was outside the desk; he was sitting in a chair, and I was sitting in a chair. He actually slapped his knee, which was not—and he said, "You know that you've almost finished your dissertation. You have to go to Washington and do work in the Bryan papers. But this is more than half of a dissertation. This is wonderful!" So I had no notion in the world of doing it. I was, in fact, looking for a dissertation topic. And here he tells me I've got my dissertation half written. So I became a Hofstadter student very quickly. [laughter] And it was a wonderful moment for me. Well, it took me forever to write that master's essay. And it was a good master's essay. But he saw another book. And he saw a dissertation in it. And he didn't have to convince me. So I —

08-00:21:14

Lage: And you were enough engaged that you didn't mind putting another year—?

08-00:21:17

Levine: Oh, no. I thought it was a terrific subject. And as long as he did, I mean—and it was at this point—we're now through with classes and with—it was at this point that he became my mentor. And I realized how smart it was for me to work with him. Because he was a man who was very smart. He was a model for me. He allowed you to do your own thing. And you could even come in—you couldn't have done this with David Donald, I don't believe, and with many other people. You could even come in and write something that disputed his

own thought, and he wouldn't have a second thought. Hofstadter believed in the mind, the life of the mind. And the life of the mind. He never understood why anyone got angry at anyone else for ideas. He just—I can understand that. And I think, on some level, he must have been able to.

I'll give you another example. There was a young man named—named—named—I'm going to block his name. But we'll find it for the record so no one will know how absent-minded I am. I knew him, he was a graduate student at Harvard. And when Hofstadter's *Age of Reform* came out in 1959, he wrote, for Oscar Handlin, who was a professor of his at Harvard, he wrote an essay on [laughs] Hofstadter's—a very angry—he wrote his doctoral dissertation on the populists. He believed in the populists. He thought they were Marxist and radical. And—Norman Pollack, his name was, I believe, and Norman was furious with Hofstadter's book, which was kind of anti-populist or had doubts about the populists and the true progressivism of the populists. So Norman took his—Handlin hated the essay, but Norman took that essay and sent it to *The Journal of Southern History*, which printed it. And it was a very angry essay. So one day Dick Hofstadter says to me, "Do you know Norman Pollack?" And I said, "I do." He said, "Well, maybe you can explain to me why he's so angry." He didn't understand—well, professed, at least, not to understand—why Norman Pollack was so angry. Because these were just ideas. But I can't quite believe that Dick Hofstadter, who's an intellectual historian, didn't understand —

08-00:23:34

Lage:

The power of idea. [laughs]

08-00:23:35

Levine:

The power of ideas. Hofstadter had a real impact. And there's no question. You know, we rethought a lot of the stuff about populism because of his book. In any case, he turned out to be a great mentor. You know, the fact that some of my stuff on Bryan—I admired Bryan far more than he did; a lot of the stuff in my dissertation kind of contradicted some of the stuff in his essay. One of the essays in *The American Political Tradition* is on Bryan, a very disparaging essay. And mine was more positive. He didn't have a second's problem with any of this.

08-00:24:09

Lage:

Were you reluctant to challenge him?

08-00:24:13

Levine:

Never.

08-00:24:13

Lage:

Was that difficult?

08-00:24:14

Levine:

Never, never.

08-00:24:15

Lage: When you wrote that.

08-00:24:15

Levine: Never, never. That's why I realized he was the right guy for me to work with. And he was also a model for me.

08-00:24:21

Lage: But you didn't go in and discuss it with him. You didn't —

08-00:24:24

Levine: Oh, well, I —

08-00:24:25

Lage: When you were coming to get your ideas together about Bryan, and you saw they were different from Hofstadter's, you didn't go in and—?

08-00:24:31

Levine: Dick Hofstadter was not the kind of guy you dropped in to discuss things with. In that sense, he—you know, I try to do this with my students, but very few people at Columbia did this with me. I take my students—I used to take my students here—and I do it at George Mason—for beers. I took them to the faculty club. We sat around drinking beer, and I discussed their—no one did that with me at Columbia. Hofstadter took me to lunch once. And that was after I successfully defended my dissertation, which he helped a lot with. That's another story. And he took me to lunch and was very proud of me. And there's no question about that. Never did I—was I invited to his home or—you know, I never entered his home, never met his wife. It was his second wife. His first wife, Felice Swados, died when she was twenty-six years old. But later on he certainly visited my home. He used to come to California a fair amount and would stay with us, sent his son, Danny, when he graduated [laughs] from college, sent Danny to stay with me. He was a little worried about Danny. And Danny stayed a little bit with us in our house, and our many kids. And so we were becoming friends. And Dick Hofstadter was at—He was a very close friend of Ken Stampp's. They taught at the University of Maryland together. And once Ken had a party for Hofstadter, and I was there. Hofstadter's brother-in-law, I believe it was, was with him, who lived in LA, one of the reasons Hofstadter came out was because he had family. And Hofstadter introduced me to his brother-in-law. He said, "This is my student, Lawrence Levine," or, "Larry Levine." And then he shyly put his hand on my shoulder and said, "You don't mind me calling you my student, do you?" Of course, I was very proud. I have students who call themselves Richard Hofstadter's grandchildren.

08-00:26:20

Lage: [laughs]

08-00:26:20

Levine: Isn't that cute?

- 08-00:26:21  
Lage: That's great!
- 08-00:26:22  
Levine: Yeah. Well, he's a very famous man.
- 08-00:26:24  
Lage: So that says something, though, about sort of a genealogy of—
- 08-00:26:29  
Levine: Yeah.
- 08-00:26:30  
Lage: —intellectual tradition—
- 08-00:26:30  
Levine: Yeah, I think it does.
- 08-00:26:31  
Lage: —that your students would see—
- 08-00:26:34  
Levine: Oh! They're very proud—
- 08-00:26:35  
Lage: —this grandfather relationship.
- 08-00:26:36  
Levine: Yes! They're very proud—you know, Dick died so young. He was fifty-four. So, you know, he was cut off quickly. And I've often thought—I do think, sometimes—Because he'd be what, today? He'd be eighty—
- 08-00:26:53  
Lage: Born in '16.
- 08-00:26:54  
Levine: In '16.
- 08-00:26:55  
Lage: Almost 90.
- 08-00:26:55  
Levine: So he'd—yeah, almost ninety. That's right. He'd be eighty-nine years old. He'd be eighty-nine years old. And Arthur Schlesinger Jr. is still alive. And they were about the same age. And Schlesinger, on certain issues, and not on politics—he's still good on politics—but on the issue of teaching ethnicity and the like, he's turned quite conservative. And others have. And I just wonder where Dick would have turned. It's not clear. He might have. He never saw anything from my *Black Culture and Black Con*—. Because he died—the first piece was published the year he died, 1970. So he never saw anything. And I'm kind of sorry about that. Of course, that's—I put—

08-00:27:38

Lage: It would have been a big departure from the kind of history he did.

08-00:27:41

Levine: Yeah. Well, I think he—you know, it's interesting. He was just starting his final book, a three-volume work on an intellectual history of American politics. And the first volume was published, posthumously and incompletely, called *America in 1750*. He was such a fast worker. But while he was thinking about this and while he was writing that volume, he was in my home in Berkeley and said, "Larry, Herskovits was wrong, wasn't he?" [Melville J.] Herskovits wrote a book—this is me talking now—called *The Myth of the Negro Past*, in which he argued—he was one of the first ones to do this—that Africanisms, African culture had an enormous impact on American slaves. And he used some silly examples, I say in retrospect, baptisms and river cults and razors and swords, you know, and little daggers and machete, whatever.

08-00:28:40

Lage: And material culture.

08-00:28:41

Levine: Yeah, he was using those kinds of things as—but he was right. He was a genius, that guy, Herskovits. And he was correct. Hofstadter had just read the book because he was writing about the colonial period, and was rejecting. So I said, "You know, Dick, I'm reading this stuff for my book, and I'm coming to the conclusion he was right." But I couldn't defend it. I couldn't quite defend it to change Hofstadter's mind. Later I was, you know, definitely—the first essay I wrote, "Slave Songs and Slave Consciousness," was in fact on this very issue of the Africanisms. The slaves were culturally African. And they were creating a hybrid, African-American culture. I think he would have agreed with that book. But who knows? I like to think that. So it was a great experience to work with Dick Hofstadter, very important for me. I've talked about the community. I—

08-00:29:40

Lage: Now somewhere I have in my notes—

08-00:29:44

Levine: Yes.

08-00:29:44

Lage: —that the Hofstadter seminar was "a galaxy of people who became stars." Is that right. Can you talk about that a little?

08-00:29:51

Levine: He did have a lot of students who became stars. They weren't all in my seminar. But Charles Rosenberg, who's a very important historian of American medicine and a professor at Harvard now. And his wife, Drew [Gilpin] Faust is head of the Radcliffe Institute. Charlie, who is a friend of mine, was in that seminar. Robert Dallek, one of the premier biographers and diplomatic historians, was in that seminar. I can't remember who was in that

seminar or not. And my friend, Richard Weiss, at UCLA was in that seminar. But I can't remember others. But he's had a whole host of—Dorothy Ross. He's had a whole host of—like Christopher Lasch. He's had a whole—Eric Foner. He's had a whole host. They weren't in that seminar.

08-00:30:45

Lage: They weren't in there with you.

08-00:30:45

Levine: Eric was younger than me. But he had a whole host of famous students. You know, he was the guy you wanted to work with. And I was probably one of the few people who thought I didn't want to work with him. But I was wrong about that. It was a great favor Bill Leuchtenburg did me. And because he was the right guy for me to work with both in his—oh, I could have written that dissertation with Leuchtenburg too. There's no doubt about it. And Leuchtenburg, in a book he wrote on the Supreme Court, listed all of his students. And there were a huge number of them. And I was listed as one of them. [laughs] But I think he listed the students whose dissertations he was on. Let me give you another example of Dick Hofstadter. This is very interesting. And it was on my defense. Bill Leuchtenburg, the year of my defense, was away, just as Hofstadter had been away the year of my orals. So I was assigned John Garraty as a —

08-00:31:43

Lage: Who was John Garraty?

08-00:31:44

Levine: He was a professor at Columbia. Jack Garraty was a professor at Columbia who did work all over the map. He, like Hofstadter, had no field. And I think there was a rivalry there, in Garraty's mind, not in Hofstadter's. I don't quite know. But Garraty gave me some troubles that surprised me. But I had no way of putting them into context. For instance, in my dissertation—which he did read and gave me some good thoughts about—in my dissertation I quote Jefferson at one point. And I thought it was even noble of me to have a footnote for that. It was a quote from the second inaugural. And I had a book at home, which I owned, from the Government Printing Office, *The Inaugural Addresses of the American Presidents*. And I cited that. Garraty said, "You can't cite that. Professional historians don't cite things like that! You have to go to Jefferson's papers." He meant the printed versions. And there was a very old—the new version wasn't finished yet. But there was a very old, difficult version of Jefferson's papers in the library. And I said, "Professor Garraty,"—this is like by the way—I said, "I thought I didn't even need a footnote for this." It was as Jefferson thought, you know, kind of stuff. Garraty was un—and he had a number of things like this. You know, he sent me into the library. And I wasted time finding this quote. I was a little annoyed. On my orals—Hofstadter was prepared for this, but I wasn't—he was a raging opponent of mine. Though he could have told me these things when I saw him. He said to me, "How come you don't write about Catholicism? You don't say anything

about Catholicism and anti-evolution. What were the Catholics' views?" Well, I honestly didn't know. And I didn't because Bryan was a Protestant, and the movement was largely Protestant. But Dick Hofstadter had a young man—and I'm going to block his name—a very nice man, who later became the president of Queens College and then of the University of Virginia, really nice guy—and he was a young professor at Columbia, who came after I left. And his first book was on liberal Catholicism. So this guy said, "Well, Jack, maybe I should talk about that, since I—." And so he —

08-00:33:57

Lage: So Dick Hofstadter said —

08-00:33:59

Levine: No, this was this young guy who had written on liberal Catholicism. He answered the question for me. Hofstadter intervened a few times. And there was a young political scientist there who was *obviously*—of course, there were about seven or eight people on my defense. People who didn't know me were brought in. That was the Columbia way. And this guy was so obviously awed being in a room with Richard Hofstadter. He was a young political scientist. And he said, "Professor Hofstadter, I'm awfully sorry, but I'm going to have to leave at noon. I hope you won't mind." And Hofstadter said, "Oh, we'll all be gone by then." In fact—I didn't know this—but he had table reserved in the faculty club for me and him at noon.

08-00:34:40

Lage: So how long did that make your defense?

08-00:34:41

Levine: Well, it was two hours. But he took no nonsense at all. He just rammed this thing through. Because he somehow expected Garraty to do what he did. It seemed to me he was ready for it. And I was an innocent there. I didn't know anything. I've had nice relations with Jack Garraty since. We've talked. He's a guy who's published a million books, a lot of books. I don't know what this was all about. But it clearly was not about me. Because I wrote a good dissertation. [laughs] And I should have had no troubles.

08-00:35:12

Lage: And who else was no the committee?

08-00:35:14

Levine: Well, it was Garraty—I'm so embarrassed that I can't remember the Catholic historian. It's a historian of Catholicism. He wasn't a Catholic. And Dick. Those were the three historians. And then there was a very famous sociologist and this political scientist. So maybe there were five people.

08-00:35:34

Lage: So they —

08-00:35:35

Levine: Yeah. And two of them I didn't know. Columbia always did that. On my orals there was a Wallace Sayre, S-A-Y-R-E, who is a very famous political scientist. And when the whole oral was over, finished, done—oh, I have to tell you an oral story. My goodness, I forgot. When the whole oral was over, Bill Leuchtenburg, who was the chair, turns to Sayre and says, "Do you have any questions, Professor Sayre?" I had gotten through the oral, all parts of it. I felt strongly I had passed. And I'm tired. And Wallace Sayre, who's just there to make sure this is a kosher operation, you know —

08-00:36:12

Lage: [laughs]

08-00:36:12

Levine: That's what Columbia did. Wallace Sayre says, "Would you say, Mr. Levine, that legislative experience is a good prerequisite for executive responsibility in America?"

08-00:36:26

Lage: [laughs]

08-00:36:27

Levine: [makes a choking sound] This is terrible. And what he was asking me is, do congressmen make good presidents, an interesting question. So I swallowed my resentment that—this difficult question at the end of my orals. And I quickly come to the conclusion—I quickly think about this, and I say "No." I say, "There were very few congressman that made very effective presidents." And I go on with this a little bit. And though Jefferson had served in Congress and blah blah, but—and David Donald says, "Oh? How about James K. Polk? Wasn't he an effective president?" So—I talk about him as an important member of Congress. And I say, "No." [laughter] And then I defended it. And the oral ended. And all was well. But that —

08-00:37:16

Lage: And did you believe it, or you just wanted to—?

08-00:37:18

Levine: No, I made a good case. Well, Polk came—see, what Donald says is Polk fulfilled every one of his promises. And I said, "Yes," and I showed how disastrous fulfilling those promises was. Which I think was a good case. You can make a good case that Polk did carry out—and they—this is the first question in my orals. I have to tell you this. This is a wonderful story. John Higham was—[tone] Oh, I think this thing—

08-00:37:49

Lage: Oh, that's your—

08-00:37:51

Levine: It's through. I'll turn it off. I'm learning how much this takes and doesn't take.

08-00:37:58

Lage: Well, it's now seventy-four minutes plus about thirty more.

08-00:38:01

Levine: So you don't know who's going to be on your orals at Columbia. You know your mentor will be on them. And my mentor was gone, so my second mentor, Leuchtenburg, was—and you know your outside person, if it's from another department. Because you can't study with someone and not have anyone else. So I knew Richard Chase would be on my orals, and I knew Bill Leuchtenburg. But I didn't know anyone else. So, I mean, that's really scary. I don't know if Columbia still does that. So I walked in. The first face I see is David Donald, which worried me a little bit because I hadn't done well in his classes, though, as I say, I learned a lot from him and admire him. David Donald was there. And this Wallace Sayre fellow, who I was introduced to, was there as the outside guy. And there isn't a third American historian. And then suddenly John Higham comes running in. I—

08-00:38:58

Lage: Had you studied with him?

08-00:38:58

Levine: Well, I had—what I did—because he was a well-known guy. He was teaching at Rutgers. And they hire them for the year at Columbia, and hoped to hire him, but he didn't come, he turned them down. He didn't want to move his family to New York, and he didn't come to Columbia. So he comes in. And since he was—well, Leuchtenburg was going to question me on the twentieth century and Donald on the nineteenth. And since Higham was an intellectual historian who did the whole shmeer—Right? He did the whole thing. Leuchtenburg said, "You'll question, Mr. Levine, on colonial history." Which meant he would question me first. So he says, "Oh, well, let me think about that."

08-00:39:36

Lage: He might not have been ready!

08-00:39:37

Levine: And he puts his head down on the table and thinks. So Leuchtenburg says, "Well, while John is thinking, Larry, why don't you tell us about your dissertation." So I did. And then Higham pops up and says, "I'm ready." So the first question is, "Go as far back into seventeenth century Virginia as you can, to the very beginning if you can, and start talking about it." And I said to myself, "He had to think about that question?" So I start. Actually, I was not uncomfortable with that question. I had been told that you can only say you don't know a couple of times. Don't waste that. And so, happily, I didn't have to say it here. I went right back to the founding of Virginia and started to talk. And after I talked a little bit, Higham said, "What were the major seaports?" And I didn't know. And I should have said, "I don't know." But I thought, "Gee, it's so early in my orals, and I don't know what's coming. And I know some major seaports in Virginia." So I named them. And, of course, the

answer to that—it was a trick question. There were no seaports in early seventeenth century Virginia. The plantations were built—and I knew that, the plantations were built close to rivers and there were wharves, and they'd put their stuff right on boats, which would take them on.

08-00:40:56

Lage:

So they were river ports. And that was a trick question.

08-00:40:59

L

No, they were plantation ports is what they were. Yeah, it was a trick question. And I said to myself, "Well, you can take this again." You could take your orals twice. I thought I was through. Here, at the very first three minutes of my orals, I'm shown to be an ignoramus, who is making up stuff to boot. I thought, "It's all over." But it wasn't all over. Higham then asked reasonable questions, didn't do that again. No one did that again. And I passed. But I've thought of that moment a lot, and in framing my own questions. It wasn't the nicest thing he ever did. Though, again, John Higham ended up being a very nice factor in my career. He was very kind to me always. And even was nice to me on that oral. But, boy, that was a rocky beginning. And one of my first—

08-00:41:44

Lage:

And the way he'd been put on the spot, [laughs] he was taking it out on you!

08-00:41:48

Levine:

Well, in a way. He was just improvising. And he thought of that question and—there were trick questions in orals. I've heard many of them in my day. I can't imagine how many hundreds of orals I've been on. And there are people who ask trick questions on these orals. But I shouldn't have fallen—and I tell that to my students. I should have said, "I don't know what the major seaports were." That's not saying, "I don't know," to a big question. That's a very specific thing. And you probably can say, "I don't know"; you don't even have to use those words. "Gee, I can't quite think of them." You know. Whatever you say. [laughter] It would have been a much better answer than what I did. Because I actually named seaports that didn't exist at the time. And that looked bad. Anything else I want to say about Columbia?

08-00:42:38

Lage:

Did you depart from Hofstadter in your use of sources and your use of explaining people's behavior?

08-00:42:44

Levine:

In the orals?

08-00:42:47

Lage:

No, in your—

08-00:42:47

Levine:

Oh, absolutely.

08-00:42:47

Lage: —writing of your dissertation.

08-00:42:48

Levine: I felt absolutely no need to stick to any line. Let me tell you a story. In 1961 I was interviewed for a job, as I've said, at Princeton University. And it was a huge interview. There were lots of people there. And I was surprised at how many people were in that room. And I was interviewed at a number of places in '61, and Princeton was one of them. Bill Leuchtenburg suggested me for that job, as he later told me. I got that job, as you know, and I went there, as you know. And a man I later identified as Robert Lively—I'm sure I was introduced to him, but I didn't know his name at the time because there were too many people in the room—someone asked me to talk about my dissertation, and I did, and Robert Lively, who later became my colleague and a friend, Bob Lively said, "Oh, you're in the Hofstadter school." I thought that was an interesting comment, so when I went to Hofstadter's office sometime later, I told him this remark. And Hofstadter banged his table, his chair, whatever it was. He banged his hand on the chair and said, "There is no Hofstadter school!" And he's right. There was no Hofstadter school. He went out of his way not to—first of all, I think he didn't like the idea. And second of all, I think he understood that we couldn't do what he did. Hofstadter broke all the rules. He didn't have a field. His field was all of America. He didn't do—except for—he never did archival research. Never. He was an intellectual historian. So his first book, his dissertation, published dissertation, on Social Darwinism, was done from published books. After all, that's perfectly legitimate. That is the primary research of many intellectual historians. They read the published works of people and write about them.

I have a cute story to tell about Hofstadter. When we were living in California, and he was working on his very good book called *The Progressive Historians*, he comes up to visit us. And he says, "Do you know what I've been doing?" And I said, "No." And he said, "I've been doing archival research." I think it was the first time. He was down at the Huntington Library reading the Turner papers. Frederick Jackson Turner was one of the historians in the *Progressive Historian* book. There were three. I think it was Beard, Turner, and—I'm blocking now who it was. But in any case, it was one of the three. And he said, "Do you know, it was very interesting, they wheel these papers to you on carts," he said. [laughter] It was so cute. He had never done that kind of research before.

08-00:45:25

Lage: He never had done it.

08-00:45:26

Levine: And then he told me it was all a waste of time. He kept discovering that Turner took notes on little three-by-fives, little three-by-five cards, and he would read books and take notes like this—whatever the name of—let's say Stevenson, say, is the author of the book: "Page 16, Indian Wars on Ohio

River. Page 18 —." He said, "He wasn't taking notes. He was kind of doing an index, you know." And Hofstadter said, "I learned nothing from that."

08-00:45:53

Lage: So he learned from reading Turner's books and thinking.

08-00:45:56

Levine: That's right. But not from these papers. He professed to have learned nothing from this kind—But at the time I was finishing my dissertation, Dick Hofstadter sat in his office and said—I was preparing for my defense—he said, "Now, have you looked at all of the possible archival sources you can look at?" And I said, "No." I said, "Look, he knew everyone. He knew everyone. He knew every member of Congress, this guy. He wrote to them all. I can't read his letters in all of the—he doubtless repeated himself." I said, "I've read some of the leading congressmen. And I've read the Wilson papers, and I've done other things." I said, " I found letters from him to congressmen. But I can't read the letters of every congressman and every important Democratic politician." This guy was a writing machine. He wrote to everybody. He was a Democratic candidate for three times; that's unusual. He got the nomination three times. He wrote to politicians *all* over the country. There's probably *no* politician he doesn't have letters in the papers of. And so—

08-00:46:56

Lage: And don't you say he wasn't really an original thinker? So—[laughs]

08-00:46:59

Levine: Yeah. Well, Hofstadter, I think, didn't understand the nature of that problem. But that wasn't—you know, Hofstadter didn't have to help me with archival research. He helped me with the heavy stuff. And he didn't—so he understood. His students were different than he; he never had aspirations to build a school, and he didn't. And if you look at all his students, they've done very different kinds of work. Linda Kerber was one of his students. She's just been elected president of the American Historical Association. She was president of the Organization of American Historians. He's produced—I don't know if "produced" is the right word—he has aided and mentored a lot of historians. And he died young.

08-00:47:40

Lage: Yeah, he died really young.

08-00:47:42

Levine: Yeah.

08-00:47:43

Lage: How were women, well, treated? That's not really the word I want. But was there a different attitude towards the women students? Or did they have a different self-perception?

08-00:47:53

Levine: Columbia did have women students. And a number of the ones I was with got their PhD's, and some of them didn't. I don't think—I think that what a woman needed in those days—they needed two things. And at Columbia I think they got part of one of them. The thing I don't think they got was an understanding and special kind of—a special kind of understanding—I'm having trouble finding the words here. The profession was geared against women, just as it was geared against Jews. And I don't think Columbia was aware of that. And I don't think they helped their women, in that sense. I don't think they understood that women had a burden men didn't have. The very fact that they took women and, as far as I could see, treated them fairly equally—though I'm sure there's a lot I didn't see. But that very fact was fulfilling one thing women needed. The other thing was that women had particular problems in the profession, scary things on the job market. Though it was all about to open up and—look, Berkeley never truly understood that, for better or worse, women are the bearers of children, which interrupts their career flow. They bear more of the burden of raising and bear—well, they bear all of the burden of bearing, and more of the bearing of raising, nurturing children than men do. I don't think that ever entered—I don't know whether it does now. I think it does because there are maternity leaves now and things like that. But I don't remember those things in Berkeley when—

08-00:49:34

Lage: But there wasn't even hiring, really.

08-00:49:35

Levine: No,—

08-00:49:35

Lage: I mean, that comes later—

08-00:49:36

Levine: —there wasn't hiring.

08-00:49:36

Lage: —the concern about raising a family.

08-00:49:38

Levine: Exactly. And I don't think Columbia really—and I may be wrong—but I don't think Bill Leuchtenburg ever held a meeting with women to tell them about prejudice in the job market. By the way, he simply told us about something we knew. A lot—But he was doing his job. He was telling us that he gets these kinds of things from schools. They're wanting—and clearly he thought it meant they didn't want Jews, when they asked this, because Columbia produced a lot of Jewish scholars. It's very interesting. Allowing—you know, the—tell me to shut up any time you want. I —

08-00:50:11

Lage: Well, we're winding up, I think.

- 08-00:50:12  
Levine: Yeah. It wasn't long after this, when I got to Berkeley, that Carl Bridenbaugh—did I speak about Carl Bridenbaugh's speech, his famous speech about the—?
- 08-00:50:23  
Lage: I've read what you've said about it—
- 08-00:50:25  
Levine: Yeah. Yeah.
- 08-00:50:25  
Lage: —but I can't remember. If you'd just —
- 08-00:50:27  
Levine: B-R-I-D-E-N-B-A-U-G-H. Carl Bridenbaugh was at Berkeley until I arrived. He left just the year before I came. So we missed each other. But in December of 1962, which is my first year at Berkeley, he gave the presidential address to the American Historical Association and talked about the fact that many young historians—he lamented for the future of history because so many young historians were coming from urban immigrant homes, and they could not understand the American past. It wasn't their fault. They simply couldn't. And he went on and on about that. Now he didn't specifically talk about women, but he could have talked about women in the same way.
- 08-00:51:05  
Lage: He didn't need to probably—
- 08-00:51:07  
Levine: He didn't need to.
- 08-00:51:07  
Lage: —because they weren't challenging—
- 08-00:51:08  
Levine: Yeah, exactly.
- 08-00:51:09  
Lage: —an entry to the profession.
- 08-00:51:11  
Levine: And he was called an anti-Semite and an anti-this and an anti-that. And whether or not he was those things is not important to me. What he was was right. And he was right in this sense: that the young Jews and Italians, the East Europeans, the Slavs, the Catholics, and the women and the blacks and the Hispanics, et cetera, who came into the profession, were not going to see the American past the way he saw it—
- 08-00:51:34  
Lage: Right.

08-00:51:34

Levine:

—and his generation saw it and prior generations saw it. He was right about that. They saw a different American past. This, of course, has been true for a long time. Bridenbaugh pretended to be in the same footsteps as Henry Adams and those people. But, of course, he wasn't. But nonetheless he saw himself that way. And Beard. Let me tell you a very brief story. It has to do with my—but it fits here ideologically. It has to do with my teaching at Princeton, which I will get to next time. There were very few Jews in the Princeton department, maybe one or two. And they were very assimilated Jews, on the surface. I couldn't tell whether they were Jews. Because I had a very bad template for who was a Jew. A Jew was someone from Eastern Europe who came from an immigrant family. And that's not true of many Jews.

08-00:52:23

Lage:

Yeah.

08-00:52:24

Levine:

But there were probably a couple of Jews. And then there was Eric Goldman, who was one of the famous people in the Princeton History Department, who had his own television show, *The Open Mind*. And Eric was a half-Jew. His father had been a Jewish grocer in Baltimore. And Eric paid a price for this. And Eric befriended two of us in the History Department, maybe more than two of us, but he befriended me and a young man named Bennett Hill, who was black. And Bennett and I happened to live in the same establishment. We had separate apartments in a rundown, horrible place, where the bathrooms were in the hall. I rented a place there—I don't know why Bennett did—but I rented a place there because I wanted to keep my apartment in New York.

08-00:53:05

Lage:

Oh, so you rented a place there and kept your apartment.

08-00:53:07

Levine:

Yes, it was crucial to me, to keep my—I was a normal young man, and there were no women in Princeton.

08-00:53:13

Lage:

[laughs]

08-00:53:13

Levine:

It was an all-male community. You know, I mean, and there were no women faculty members, and there were no women graduate students or undergraduate students. And it was a pretty male world. So I got there on Monday morning and left Friday afternoon and spent my weekends in New York City, where there were women.

08-00:53:31

Lage:

[laughs]

08-00:53:31

Levine: And some of them who knew me, in fact. But Bennett Hill and I got to know each other pretty well. Both of us felt a little bit outside the spectrum of the department, he even more than me, even, but both of us. And we lived in the same place, and we saw a lot of each other, standing in the hall waiting for the bathroom and things like that.

08-00:53:51

Lage: Your students from Princeton would probably have been horrified.

08-00:53:54

Levine: Horrified. And Eric Goldman would take us regularly—he'd say, "Let's have coffee," or something like that. And we'd go. This young black guy and me would go with Eric. Eric had a special thing. And he'd talk to us, and we felt quite privileged and good. Eric was not universally admired in the department. He had a TV show, and they talked about that. He wrote articles for *Harper's Magazine*, \$3,000 an article. Unbelievable—I was earning \$6,000 a year! I mean, that was an *unbelievable* amount of money, you know. And Eric was a famous man, though not loved in his own department. But he was an outsider, and I didn't fully understand that.

And then one day he said this—this is pre-Bridenbaugh, now, and very different than Bridenbaugh. But listen to it. It's so interesting. Bennett and I are sitting there, having coffee with him late one afternoon in the student cafeteria or whatever it was, and Eric says, "You know," he said, "more and more people like you are going to be coming into the profession," meaning blacks and Jews, I guess. And, "more and more." "And it's going to be a terrible thing for the profession." So we looked at each other. This guy had been so nice to us. And we said, "Why, Eric?" He said, "Well, you see—" See, he was really talking about himself as much as anyone else. But this is so interesting. He said, "In the old days there were people like Charles Beard, you know, and when the people at Columbia got oppressive during World War I, Charles Beard just told them to go jump in the lake." I think Eric was stronger than that. "Just told them to go to hell. And quit his job. See, Charles Beard was an independent guy. And they were independent, those guys. They felt themselves as beings; they didn't kowtow to institutions. They didn't bend with fear before famous professors, you know. They were people, and they stood up for what they believed. But what's going to happen to you is you won't. You won't be able to. You'll be outsiders in the profession, and you'll do what you're told to do, and you will be afraid to take stands." And he went on this way. And I'm thinking—and, no, Eric Goldman became Lyndon Johnson's Arthur Schlesinger, Jr. He became the—you know, Kennedy had Arthur Schlesinger, Jr.; Lyndon Johnson got Eric Goldman as his guy in the White House. So Eric Goldman was a, you know, pretty—He hadn't done that yet, but he was going to do it. And he was a pretty famous guy. And he's half Jewish. And he's probably talking about himself as much as anyone. But the two of us just sat there—agape is the word—at his telling us this. Because neither one of believed this was going to be true. And it wasn't true, in fact.

08-00:56:36

Lage: Did you challenge him?

08-00:56:37

Levine: Well, we couldn't challenge him because he told us what we were going to do, and we didn't know what we were going to do. [laughter] Well, you know, I think we talked about it. But, you know, we were a little—we were, after all, not equals to Eric Goldman, so, you know, we were deferential to him. But I remember we went away and talked about this at some length, the two of us. And we both said, "That's not going to be true of us. We're not going to do that." But it was Eric's exaggerated notion of Charles Beard and those guys, as if they didn't have their devils, and they didn't have their gods to whom they kowtowed. Of course they did. But it was his way of assessing his own puniness. I suspect he was talking about Eric Goldman more than Bennett Hill and Larry Levine. But it was interesting.

08-00:57:20

Lage: Just to maybe stay on the subject, how do you think the fact that you came from this sort of religiously conservative Jewish background, and from that very urban area—?

08-00:57:33

Levine: Yeah.

08-00:57:34

Lage: How did it affect how you understood William Jennings Bryan?

08-00:57:40

Levine: Oh, I think—maybe we ought to save this for the book, but I think it had a great effect on it because it affected a lot of my history. I grew up in a folk milieu. I mean, it was full of folk—superstitions is a bad word to use, but superstitions—folk beliefs is a better word to use, more neutral. There was folk medicine—I mean, we all have them, but I recognized it as such. They would boast about how they could deal with diseases better than the doctors. They had a kind of anti-institutional thing. They had all kinds of folk beliefs. When my little sister was born, and my mother saw me walk over her, my mother grabbed me and made me walk backwards over her and said, "Don't you ever do that again! They don't grow if you walk over them when they're growing up."

08-00:58:32

Lage: You mean like step over?

08-00:58:32

Levine: I stepped over her. She was on the floor, and I just stepped over her. I was six-and-a-half years older than her. I was a little boy. And she was a crawling infant, so I was seven, seven-and-a-half. I just stepped over her very nicely. I didn't step on her. But to my mother that signified lack of growth. She would never grow. So I had to step back. And I lived in a family that had all kinds of beliefs like this. So when I read the black beliefs, I had no problem at all

believing that these things were a folk—a good example: New England schoolteachers: 5,000 New England schoolteachers came down to the South at the end of the Civil War to help raise up the Negroes, as they were called. They were going to be freedmen. They were going to raise them up. Because their whole notion was that these people were our equals. They shouldn't have been slaves. And now they were going to show it. They were going to prove it. And they have wonderful letters and diaries. And there's one from a terrific woman who writes home, and she says, "I was walking in the street the other day, and a young boy, bursting with health, a young Negro boy, bursting with health, passes me. And I say, 'Hello, Ruben,' and he says, 'Howdy, ma'am.' And I say, 'How are you this morning, this lovely morning?' And he says, 'Just tolerable, ma'am, just tolerable.'" And she says, "Now can you imagine these people?" she writes in her letter. "Just tolerable? He's bursting with health! What is he talking about? He's not—." She didn't understand it. But I understood it instantly. You don't ever say you're fine, or you're great because there are spirits around who will say, "Oh, you think so?" Pow! [laughter]

And my mother—when I came home after Joshua, who you met today, was born, I happened to hear my wife on the phone saying—of course she grew up in a very different atmosphere; she grew up—her father was a PhD, and her parents—she comes from a very educated family. And she was on the phone saying, "He's so beautiful. He's so healthy. He's so wonderful." And my heart's dropping in me. And I'm saying, "*Don't say those things!*" You know, "You'll jinx him. The spirits will get him." I grew up so differently than my wife. But that stuff, you know, I have overcome that, with my great intellect; well, but there's no question that that helped me. That and it helped me with Bryan. Because my people would not have agreed with William Jennings Bryan, but they would have known what he meant when he said—one of his many good quotes—that the Rock of Ages is more important than the ages of rocks—than the age of rocks. "The Rock of Ages is more important than the age of rocks." Religion is more important than the ephemeral things we do, the fundamental truths and beliefs. Now, they wouldn't have liked what he did politically, if they knew what he did politically. They'd never heard of William Jennings Bryan, even though they lived through—some of them lived through these years. They never heard of the guy, really. And would they have liked—?

08-01:01:35

Lage:

But in a way you could understand him better than the cultivated WASP [laughs] historian.

08-01:01:41

Levine:

In a way, I could. And I felt for him. I understood. He was coming from a culture that was under siege and, in his eyes, disappearing and less influential than it had once been. And he was trying very hard—. Look, the whole question I asked at the beginning of the book—now we're talking about my book.—the whole question I asked—. When Hofstadter said, "Why don't you trace his progression," or whatever he said, "his move from the left to the

right," I immediately had a title: "The Decline of William Jennings Bryan as a Progressive." And, in fact, my book found out something different, that he was as progressive as he had ever been, but now he was fighting—at the height of his career he was fighting for the economic sanctity of his region. And he was fighting against economic incursions by the East and the moneyed powers, as he would have called them, and the like. He was defending his people, economically. And that made him a progressive. He was now, after World War I, defending them culturally. And that made him a conservative. It's very interesting. But he was still doing what he had always done, defending his people. But in economic terms he was moving to the left. He was now for the ownership of railroads, municipal ownership of power lines. All transportation in cities should be owned by the city. All utilities, anything that was a natural monopoly, should be owned by the people, not by private interests for profit. And he had played with that as an active politician but had been afraid to do it because it made him look too radical. Now he was for all this stuff. He wasn't running for president any more. And so he was moving to the left politically, but very rightwing culturally. He was moving, you know—he was afraid to denounce the Klan, though he didn't like the Klan, but too many of his people belonged to the Klan. He never spoke up for black rights because he had his problems with that issue. He was for Prohibition and stuff like that because he believed in—they were fighting for cultural legitimacy. That's what all this was about. That's what I ended up writing a dissertation about, and that's what my first book was about, about the struggle of these people for cultural legitimacy.

And the only way they could do that—they didn't even care if these laws were passed. Look, we have laws today against drug use. You and I live around Berkeley, where there's a lot of marijuana being smoked. No one even tries to enforce that law. But try to repeal that law and you'll have a lot of trouble. Because the law legitimates one side and de-legitimizes the other, even if the law's not enforced. And that's what this whole thing was about. Partly, it was a symbolic struggle for legitimacy. Whose culture was the legitimate culture? We're engaged in that struggle again today. And so we should really be able to understand. Because the twenties was a foretaste of what we're experiencing now. Christian Americans were rising up and saying, "You're traducing our culture. You're laughing at our principles. You're creating a country that is an anomaly, and we cannot live in such a country."

Americans—I'm talking now—I learned this from John Higham, in that very lecture course I took from him way back then, in 1958-9. He talked about how Americans had an intolerance for error and how a lot of the Puritans came to this country not because they were being exploited or discriminated against in England so much as they were living with error, and they couldn't do that. The Anglican Church was an error. It was not Christian. It did not adhere to the Old Testament, which the Puritans went back to, pure Christianity. And they came to the New World. And they stayed. Even though they said, "Oh, we're going back"—except for the separatist group, which went to Plymouth—the

Puritans who went to Massachusetts kept saying, you know, "We're not here permanently." But, of course, they were. And then he even extended that notion to the Civil War. Slavery was error. And he's saying people—William Lloyd Garrison, indeed, my wife's family in New England were rabid abolitionists. Whether they believed blacks were their equal or not, slavery was an error. It was an error in biblical terms. It was an error in democratic terms. And so error is an important thing in America. And we have a whole group of people now who think we're living in error. Abortion's in error and all of that. And they have no tolerance for it. And they have to squeeze out—sexuality is an error. It's wrong. It doesn't fit the notion of the good life. It's very interesting. So I got into that world. And Hofstadter had great sympathy for it, even though it—it didn't excuse Bryan, but it explained Bryan in different terms.

08-01:06:39

Lage: He had sympathy for your interpretation?

08-01:06:40

Levine: I think he did. I think he did. I think he did. And indeed, the profession turned out to—I was, after all, given tenure. [laughter]

08-01:06:47

Lage: Okay, that's a good place to stop for now.

08-01:06:48

Levine: A good place to stop. But did I deserve it? [laughs]

### Interview 5: April 26, 2005

[Audio File 9]

09-09-00:00:00

Lage: We are now recording, and today is April 26th, 2005. This is the fifth session of our oral history with Larry Levine. We just had a little conversation on what we've covered and the fact that there are inevitable repetitions as we go along, but we'll try to minimize them.

09-00:00:24

Levine: Good.

09-00:00:26

Lage: So we're still a little bit more on graduate school, and then on the intellectual dilemmas as you wrote your thesis.

09-00:00:34

Levine: Right.

09-00:00:35

Lage: Your dissertation. So why don't you start with—

09-00:00:38

Levine: Well, I just wanted to stay to put the Columbia years in perspective; I may have said this already, but it doesn't hurt. Redundancy, I always like to say, is the heart of education. [laughter] I tell my students that when I repeat myself. I was never a full-time student at Columbia in a weird way because it was so hard to get a PhD, it's very hard. A lot of classes and all kinds of exams along the way, including leading up to that difficult oral, and then just when you think, "Well, I've done it. I've got the past oral," you've got a dissertation to write. [laughter] I happily had a good part of that completed, as I explained last night, once I took my orals. But I was always teaching except for one year. I believe it was the year '57-'58, I may have mentioned this, I had a fellowship, paid \$2,500 and I did a little teaching, substitute teaching to pad that. Well, \$2,500 was quite decent in those days, it was quite good. And so I had a whole year, and that's the year I studied for my orals—it was either '57-'58 or '58-'59—I spent the whole year in the library reading books.

09-00:01:59

Lage: And taking notes?

09-00:02:00

Levine: Oh yes, taking notes. And I belonged to a study group, as I think I said. There was a very tight community of people at Columbia. But unlike a tight community of people in college in the undergraduate days, where you do things with them—dates, belong to groups, whatever—I didn't do that with this group at Columbia, for the most part. There were some people who were social friends who I went out with on the weekends and the like, but for the

most part it was a Columbia community. We studied together, very valuable, studied for the orals together.

09-00:03:21

Lage: [tape break] Okay. Here we go.

09-00:03:22

Levine: And we're on again.

09-00:03:23

Lage: After a couple false starts, here we go.

09-00:03:25

Levine: Yes.

09-00:03:25

Lage: You were telling about the community of graduate students.

09-00:03:28

Levine: Yes, so there was this community of graduate students.

09-00:03:30

Lage: What kind of backgrounds?

09-00:03:32

Levine: A lot of them were people like me. Not all of them; when I say not all of them I simply mean that I would guess about half the students at Columbia in the graduate history program were Jewish New Yorkers, and there were some non-Jewish New Yorkers. So there were very few people who weren't from New York, though some people had come to New York for school, so I guess that means they weren't from New York, but almost all of them were New Yorkers. But there were some non-Jewish New Yorkers, so the community was mixed in that sense, though I would guess it was largely Jewish and largely people from comprehensible backgrounds to me, people who came from backgrounds like myself. Some were from more affluent backgrounds, but they had more middle-class backgrounds. I really grew up in a very lower middle-class family, working class in its culture really. Though, you know, in America that's a very hard line to draw. Because working class people try very hard to be middle class, and everyone thinks they're middle class.

So there was this community, and I was part of it. But because I was teaching, and because I was living at home till 1959, I was not fully integrated completely, and my life did not revolve around Columbia. And nor—even after I moved, I was still teaching outside of Columbia. See, you couldn't live a complete universe at Columbia because they didn't have TAs, and they couldn't support you, so you always had to look elsewhere. Except for that one year, that was the one year—

09-00:05:13

Lage: Was that a coup to get that fellowship? Was it common?

09-00:05:16

Levine: It was for me. Oh no, it wasn't common. I think that was—we should call that the Richard Hofstadter Fellowship. It had a name. No, I think he got me that fellowship. By then I think he thought I was okay.

09-00:05:31

Lage: Was this after you got the master's?

09-00:05:35

Levine: Oh yes. Oh yes. This was the year I was studying for my oral exams. He had seen the master's, declared it a half PhD, and I think from that point on he was in my corner.

09-00:05:46

Lage: He saw you had promise.

09-00:05:47

Levine: He saw I had promise.

09-00:05:48

Lage: I was struck that you didn't have a very close relationship. I had the feeling that, you know, you would go in and talk to your professor, your major professor and discuss the progress of your research. That didn't seem to happen.

09-00:06:05

Levine: No, you didn't do that. There may have been some people who had mentors like that. I didn't know any. You didn't do that with people—well, maybe Bill Leuchtenburg's students could do that in those days. I don't know what happened to Bill later when he, like Hofstadter, became inundated with students. Hofstadter's problem was he had—a lot of people wanted to work with him. He had a lot of students. And he was very sparing with the time he gave you. He held a life—I don't want to say this definitively; my memory which is subject to revision, my memory tells me he held one office hour a week, and I would go to see him occasionally. I used to see him in class and after class, and then I would make an appointment with him to come in and bring my—often I did that during his office hours, and there were always lines. You know, there were always people hanging.

09-00:07:03

Lage: And undergraduates as well as graduate.

09-00:07:05

Levine: No, he didn't teach undergraduates during those days.

09-00:07:06

Lage: Oh, he didn't.

09-00:07:08

Levine: He just taught graduate students. He went back to undergraduate teaching later; he told me proudly once we were friends and I was teaching at Berkeley,

he told me, "You know I'm teaching an undergraduate class now", he said. And I said, "Oh.". He said—and it was because he was getting too many PhD students, so he stopped.

09-00:07:27

Lage: Too time-consuming.

09-00:07:28

Levine: Oh they're very time-consuming. PhD students are time-consuming even if you're on leave they're time-consuming. Though I have a different relationship with my PhD students than he had, I mean so I'm much more—they phone me at home, they come over here, they bring me things. [laughter] One didn't tend to do that with Dick Hofstadter, though, you know, when I had a crisis about the job I described, when I was offered a job at Columbia and I already accepted one at City College I did call him at home and he was very nice about it. He talked to me, told me what he thought I had to do, which is what I thought I had to do. So we were in concert, and I did it. But he was—you know, memory is a hard thing. I saw enough of Dick Hofstadter to have gotten a sense of him, to have talked to him, but you didn't go in there and say, "Here's my dilemma with my dissertation." Or, which is what my students do all the time; you just didn't do that at that time.

09-00:08:32

Lage: Did you do it with this community of graduate students?

09-00:08:35

Levine: When I was writing my dissertation I was no longer part of a community of grad students.

09-00:05:38

Lage: Oh, I see.

09-00:05:39

Levine: I was teaching. By the time I was writing my dissertation I was teaching college, and I wasn't around Columbia that much. I had taught for three years at City College and one year at Princeton. Especially the year I taught at Princeton, where I was living four days a week in Princeton, New Jersey.

09-00:08:55

Lage: Yeah. So you're pretty much on your own.

09-00:08:58

Levine: Yeah. So I just wanted to say that about—and then there's another thing. I still had ties to the fruit store. I remember very, very vividly that right after I passed my orals—the miracle of Columbia University, of Morningside Heights—my father had scheduled a hernia operation, and my father and mother—he had that operation. In those days it was a bigger thing than it seems now where you walk in and walk out of the doctor offices for surgery. He was in the hospital for a while, and then he got out, and then he and my mother went away for a week.

09-00:09:45

Lage: That was probably unusual for them.

09-00:09:47

Levine: Oh, very. But he needed to recuperate. He was a very tired man at that point, though he was only fifty-nine years old, but I think that was older then, especially for a guy like my father who worked, physically, so hard. So I took over the fruit store for two weeks. So there I was having just passed my oral exams, getting my last extended taste of a working class life. Working with my body, because the fruit store is not a grocery store. You don't open up and stand behind a counter waiting for customers; you opened the doors at 6:00 a.m. and you have to lift all those stands out—the doors themselves came off and went in the back—and then you had an open front. You lifted the stands up, and built your stands and then lifted crates of lettuce and stuff and built, and you know, of course, we had stands out in the street; you would put all that out and all day long filled it in as it emptied, and at night carried the whole darn thing in and then put the doors on and locked up. It was a lot of physical work.

So there I was, at the age of twenty-six getting my last full taste. I remember one of my uncles drove up one night, at nine o'clock at night as I was closing the store. It was also very long hours. 6:00 a.m. to 9:00 p.m., and I was working it alone. My uncle drove up and said, "Larry, you're such a good boy. Look at you, you're almost a doctor and you're helping daddy—" you know, that kind of thing. So I was still tied to the old life. The old life didn't really end, though you carry the life with you, of course. But it didn't really end materially until I came to Berkeley.

Princeton was a big break. That was a big break. I've already told that joke, right? About crossing the Hudson River into America?

09-00:11:38

Lage: No. We haven't really talked about Princeton.

09-00:11:42

Levine: Well, that was—my joke was crossing the Hudson River to America, because it was my first time out of New York and out of the Jewish ambience of Washington Heights and even Columbia and City College. So I just wanted to point out that my years at Columbia were still very connected to who I was, where I came from. The teaching was a revelation, the fact that I could get into a class at a junior high school room and interest kids and add somehow in my young body enough authority—though you don't realize how much older you are to these kids and how old you look to them—to control the class, enough authority to control a class, as I was saying way back. And that was wonderful. That was a very great learning experience to me, to understand. And I think I said last time that that convinced me that I was in the right profession. And once I taught at City College I was convinced of it. I could do

this, and I liked doing this, you know, it was fun. And I had a good feeling about the worth of what I was doing.

09-00:12:47

Lage: And you were thinking about teaching. This may not be the place to talk about it, but one thing I hope you will talk about is you mentioned in the essay you wrote on the culture gap—

09-00:12:58

Levine: Yes.

09-00:12:59

Lage: —that a key thing was that you developed the values and viewpoint of the professional historian, and that that's where the gap between the historian and the subject of their history comes, more so than being Jewish or being whatever.

09-00:13:17

Levine: I thought so.

09-00:13:17

Lage: Now, can you talk about that process?

09-00:13:21

Levine: I think I would rather hold that off for my first year at Berkeley when that whole thing—look, one of the things I wonder about, my students are holding a big conference in my honor, a conference on the state of cultural history, at George Mason University in September. It's a two-day conference, and the first day really revolves around me. The second day is really about cultural history. But I'm supposed to give a talk on my career. So I'm thinking I'm going to have to write this talk. I'm thinking about I've written about this—indeed the very essay that you've just mentioned, the Historian of the Culture Gap.

09-00:14:07

Lage: Which you wrote in '69, I think.

09-00:14:09

Levine: Yes. It was a very early statement—well, that's an interesting story. I wrote it in '69 because Perry Curtis, my colleague at Berkeley who had been my colleague at Princeton—L. Perry Curtis—wanted to do a volume of essays by the leading historians in the United States about their work and found out he couldn't get the leading historians. And not just of US History, but in the United States of all kinds of history. Britain too, I guess. But they were very wary of writing this kind of essay. He used to talk—because we knew each other at Princeton—he would talk to me about the book. And I'd say, "Great. What a great idea. Yeah, we'd learn so much from knowing—." But he couldn't get many of them to do it. He told me they'd say, "Who else is in the volume?" And it was either a good thing or a bad thing. So he ultimately had to come to me and other junior people, though there were also senior people in

it. And that's the first time I thought about the relationship of my career to who I was and what I was, what I had been brought up being. And now I find myself rethinking that again. So that's a kind of interesting motif to put through this, and I will maybe hold off on elaborating that essay until I get to that point. Unless you think this is a good time to do it. That is, at that time—

09-00:15:40

Lage:

Well, you implied that as you were writing the dissertation that that had already happened.

09-00:15:47

Levine:

Yes, but not consciously. I never thought when I was writing the dissertation, ever, that there was a gap between me and Bryan that had to do with me being Jewish. Ever, did I—

09-00:16:01

Lage:

But what about had to do with your being a professional historian and thinking like it.

09-00:16:04

Levine:

Yes, and had to be, with being an urban person, and a liberal Democrat, in a different age than he was, which included for instance race, and was beginning—though I didn't think of it then—but was beginning to include gender. Whereas in Bryan's day progressivism did *not* include racism. The Socialist Party was not a particularly progressive party on race, the Democratic Party, of course, was, alas, worse than the Republican Party on race. So race was not part of progressivism, and Bryan was a progressive then, and I was a progressive decades later. So I understood that, but it was not until Carl Bridenbaugh. I think we're getting ahead of the game here.

09-00:16:47

Lage:

You've talked about Carl Bridenbaugh.

09-00:16:50

Levine:

Yeah, it was not until—did I already talk about? Well, it wasn't until Carl Bridenbaugh raised the specific issue of whether—a silly issue, but it was one that he probably did a service in bringing to the surface—whether people from immigrant, working-class backgrounds could ever understand America. This is a very, very interesting issue. But it never occurred to me that I couldn't understand America or that there was even a question about that. I was an American, I grew up an American, I loved this country, I care about its history, I was willing to devote my career to it. So the notion that because my parents weren't from this country, and my family spoke another language and were immigrants, that seemed to me such an American thing, that this country was composed of people like that, it was built by people like that. Until he raised it, I didn't really understand it, how—and we will elaborate this as we go along.

09-00:17:58

Lage: It's a theme of our study.

09-00:18:00

Levine: But I came to the conclusion many years after—no, I think I even said that in the essay that I wrote in 1969—that Carl Bridenbaugh was not wrong in one way. That is, these groups were going to see a different America than he saw. They were going to see an America that included black people, and red people, and women, and other kinds of people because they themselves have that marginality. And, you know, it's like Du Bois looking at the past; he saw blacks in the American past. To this day, people talk about America being a white country. In 1800, one out of every five Americans was black. So how could we talk about America being a white country? And what's interesting is that this was not a kind of hypocritical lie these people thought; they really saw America that way, as a white country. When you look at the demographics, it's *stunning* how many black people were in this country, what a large percentage of the country they were, and how culturally potent they were as well, as we now are beginning to understand. But it was easy for earlier generations to not see that at all, to just not see it.

And it's still easy because there are still people who talk that way. You hear some of these—I don't know what to call them; they're really not conservatives at all. They're people who want to go back to an America that never was. But they keep talking about how America was once a white version of England. Of course it was never that either. It was full of Germans; Germans were becoming one of the largest, they were the largest single immigrant group until Hispanics. The English didn't even compete with the Germans in terms of—so the bulk of a European America came from Germany, not from England. I mean the majority of them, ultimately. So we were never a pale copy of England, but nor were we even a pale copy of Northern Europe. In 1800, as I say, 20 percent of the country was black. And then you began to have all these other people by the end of the nineteenth century coming in from southern and eastern Europe. And America was a very—.

So, I never, ever, ever felt handicapped. I did realize that to understand Bryan I was going to have to make some historical leap. Now we get to my dissertation. But then if I was writing about Louis Brandeis, the late nineteenth, twentieth-century American Jew who came from an incomprehensibly different background than I did, though we were both technically from the same group; what we were was we were both Jews. Judaism is a culture, it's true, but it has many branches like any culture has. And he came from a different branch, and he came from the German rather than east European. He came from a much more upward segment of the population than I did. But to understand Louis Brandeis I would've had to make a leap no more difficult, I think, than the leap I had to make for Bryan. That's what I felt at that time. And Bridenbaugh said no. And—although he

was excoriated, distanced, people were upset. What he said, for the record, was that people who came from—that he grieved for the future of American history, because so many young practitioners of American history were coming from urban immigrant, lower working-class families. They could never understand the American past, it is not their fault—this is almost a direct quote—it is not their fault; they simply cannot understand. So while people distanced themselves from Bridenbaugh, claims of anti-Semitism were heard in the air. I never took it as anti-Semitism; I took it as something else. I took it as the lament of a man who was entering—he was from a farming background and he was entering what he thought was a gentleman's profession at a time when patently no gentlemen were entering it. Not only in behavior but in gender. And it was a different time, and so what he had hoped to achieve wasn't achieved. And not only that, but he was one of the two candidates for the job at Harvard. He was teaching at Brown at the time and the job at Harvard—Samuel L. Morrison retired, and it went to Bernard Bailyn, a Jew. Now this is not anti-Semitism.

Lage: He made the speech just after that happened?

09-00:22:45

Levine: Well, some years after that happened. Because when he didn't get the job at Harvard, he left Brown and came to Berkeley. So he had been here for some years.

09-00:22:55

Lage: But he had left Berkeley when he—

09-00:22:58

Levine: When he made the speech he had just left Berkeley, but when he didn't get the job at Harvard I think he was teaching at Brown, if I'm not mistaken. The first time. He taught at Brown twice. He came to Berkeley from Brown, and left Berkeley *to* Brown.

09-00:23:11

Lage: And at Berkeley he kept trying to make Berkeley into a Harvard, apparently.

09-00:23:15

Levine: He did, he did a very good job. And lots of people—he built a department and then he discovered he couldn't control the department he built. This is always frustrating. If you succeed—it's the old joke about “be wary of what you hope for.” He wanted a first-rate department. A first-rate department is composed of people who are often quite independent. And you build it, and you find these people doing things that you deplore, and you wonder how did this happen? Don't they understand? “I built this department, I created this department.” And so he had a problem. I never met the man, because he left the year I was hired. And when I got here he had already gone. He had problems with—we're probably skipping too far. Let's go back to Columbia.

09-00:24:02

Lage: Right. Columbia and your dissertation.

09-00:24:04

Levine: My dissertation. So here I was, doing what Bridenbaugh had warned about. I had to understand the guy, and I started the dissertation in a way Hofstadter had outlined for me, which excited me. I was going to describe the decline of a left—the transformation of a left-wing gentleman into a right-wing gentleman. Which is something that bothered me. I had seen a lot of cases of it. I read [John] Dos Passos with great admiration, only to find that after the Depression Dos Passos turned so far to the right in my own day. He lived until 1970, so he was still alive during all these years writing books that were very conservative, supporting McCarthy, Goldwater. He found Goldwater an inspiring figure. This is the left-wing Dos Passos from the thirties and twenties.

09-00:24:57

Lage: Whom you'd probably read and admired.

09-00:24:58

Levine: Oh, yes. Yes, I did. And so I was wondering, you know, and I saw other cases that were—by the way, it still goes on. Two of my old friends, Gene Genovese and David Horowitz have made this transformation from the left of the left, the left fringes of the left, to the right. I mean in David Horowitz' case it's to the right fringes of the right. So it's still an interesting thing that I don't understand. And that's how my dissertation began. I had a title: "The Decline of William Jennings Bryan as a Progressive." And I went to work, and I'm going to not do this at great length, but I find it a very interesting thing to think about, and it was an interesting thing to live through. I think I was a good historian from even when I was young. I think I was a good historian, I had a sense of—a feel for it. So I wasn't shocked when going through—remember, I began this as an MA essay, and then turned it into a doctoral dissertation. And I sat in the New York Public Library reading Bryan's writings. They were published, but this is all primary stuff. And I read his newspaper, went through it very carefully. It was by 1915, when I began to get interested, when I got into this life. In 1915 he was 55 years old. It had gone from a weekly to a monthly. I went through every issue from 1915 to 1923, when he stopped it. That's a lot of issues. And to my interest, but not shock, he was still quite progressive. In fact, in some ways he pushed to the left. He was now for government ownership of railroads, and telegraphs and the like, and municipal stuff, and waterworks, and municipal transportation. He thought the government ought to own all this. Anything that was a natural monopoly ought to be owned by the federal government. I think he would've said that of radio and television as well. You don't give those things into private hands for profit. He hadn't said that as a presidential candidate, so that was interesting. But I didn't expect perfect symmetry. That's where I thought I was a good historian. Oh yeah, oh sure, nothing is perfect, nothing is whole. Yeah, of course on some issues, but my pile of progressive stuff on the left

kept getting bigger and bigger and bigger. And I finally could not deny—even at the MA level before I got into his papers for the PhD—I couldn't deny that this guy did not make a transfer. He was as far left as he had ever been. So the question—

09-00:27:47

Lage: On his economic issues.

09-00:27:48

Levine: On economic issues. And when I got into his papers—maybe I ought to take a break here or simply say that when I passed my orals, I'm now quite dedicated to turning the MA essay into a doctoral dissertation—I did my first true archival work. I am not a traditional archival historian because I work on radio, I work on popular culture. But those are archives too, and when I'm watching a film I'm in the archives. But it's a different kind of archives. So the only book I've written which was truly an archival book was the dissertation, where I went down to Washington DC, where the Bryan papers were, and I went through his letters. I loved it, I just loved it. It was so exciting to feel the stuff, to touch it, to be part of that past. It's a thrill that you don't get from printed materials or even movies, which in a very visual way transport you right back into the past. Somehow there's the people, the dress, everything is. And yet, you're not touching this stuff. So it was very exciting to read those letters. His letters to his wife, his letters to his friends, his comments. I went through his papers, I went through the papers of many congressman he wrote to. I went through the Woodrow Wilson papers. In those days Mrs. Wilson, the second Mrs. Wilson, was still alive, and you had to leave your notes every night ostensibly for her to look at. I'm sure she didn't look at them, but the archivists, the librarians, must've looked at them, and they gave them back to you a few days later.

09-00:29:21

Lage: Did they ever censor or—?

09-00:29:23

Levine: Never, but I did develop some codes [laughs] to make it difficult for them to know. But no, they never did. And I read the Robert Lansing papers, which I think were also closed, and he succeeded Bryan as Secretary of State. So I read—I did that kind of work. And the work just documented what I already had discovered in his printed materials, that this guy remained in every sense a left-wing Democrat. Politically, economically. He ridiculed the trickle-down notion, you know, which is still with us.

09-00:30:06

Lage: We can use him now. [laughter]

09-00:30:08

Levine: We can use him now. So the dilemma I had then was, what made him do the things he did? Why'd he alter his cultural politics, which were decidedly not progressive. He wasn't an anti-immigration person, but he wasn't a pro-

immigration person. He was not a bigot in the sense—well, he was part of a bigoted age, and he had certain assumptions about blacks'—.

09-00:30:37

Lage: But you say he wasn't a bigot about—

09-00:30:39

Levine: —inferiority, but he wasn't a guy who railed against blacks; he never used that as an issue. But he wouldn't get upset with the southern allies he had who did those things, any more than Franklin Roosevelt would. He needed these people for his economic programs. But he needed them for something else as well. And that is, something was happening—it took me a long time to figure this out, and this is what's interesting, and this is what I learned from writing that dissertation, MA thesis, dissertation, and book; it was a three-pronged—

09-00:31:14

Lage: Over a long period of time.

09-00:31:15

Levine: Over a long period of time. I started working on it in '55 or '56. It was published as a book in '65. So it was an eight-, nine-year project, really; it took a lot of my time. Fascinating project it was. And what I learned and have never forgotten, and have tried to communicate to my students, is that you got to listen to the people you're writing about. You got to listen to them. And we weren't listening to Mr. Bryan; we were laughing at Mr. Bryan. He had become an object of ridicule for intellectuals. You know, he said things like, "And not only does Darwin have man descending from monkeys, but old-world monkeys, not new-world monkeys." And so on. And he ridiculed the process of evolution. He had lots of little jokes he used which antagonized the intelligentsia. He knew how to antagonize them. "I'll print a card with my degrees." He had many, many degrees. He had his own BA, and then he must've been awarded—because he was a very famous politician—dozens and dozens of honorary degrees. So he was willing to stack his degrees up against any "son of an ape," as he called them. He was very, very upset with that. Do we have a little, neat, little, scientific soviet that will tell us what we must teach in schools?

09-00:32:38

Lage: He said that kind of thing?

09-00:32:39

Levine: Yes, he did. And I think I talked earlier about the first report I gave in a biology class on Bryan and evolution where I was—I think I spoke about that, didn't I? I'm pretty sure. I gave an oral report in my biology class as an undergraduate. And I spoke about the Scopes trial. Of course it was more interesting to me than paramecia. My professor—and I just excoriated Bryan for the Scopes trial—and my professor in the back of the room, clearly a man who believed in biology and believed in evolution, nevertheless he was a good pedagogue, and he said, "Well, that was very interesting, Mr. Levine. And tell

me, however, one thing I do wonder about," he said, "if the people of a school district don't have the right to determine what their children are learning in a democracy, who should determine that?" And I didn't have a good answer for my teacher. I had cant.

But even I recognized even as an undergraduate that it's a real issue and that's an issue that is still very much with us. It has never gone away, it was with us for instance in the civil rights years. When parents in Harlem and other places in New York City where minorities, you know, were the dominant group, demanded certain curricula for their kids that they thought their kids needed. It goes on all over the country to this day, and it has always gone on. What is the relationship of the parents to the educational process of their children? Very interesting issue in a democracy, especially a decentralized democracy. In France, they have a centralized education system. They used to pride themselves that on Wednesday, October 12<sup>th</sup>, every kid in the—whatever they called it—the fifth form is reading the same book. We've never had that in the United States. We've had a very decentralized educational system. All kinds of attempts, interestingly coming from "conservative"—I use conservative with quotation marks around it—Republicans wanting to—not that it's wrong what they want, but the process is difficult. It's coming from Republicans now. They want tests, they want kids to be on the same page, know the same things, you know. It's interesting that it's even coming from people who were supposed to be against state intervention in these things. So that is a real issue.

And I gave this talk—and so this man raised the issue, and it was raised again for me doing my own work. Bryan was watching an America which he didn't like. And he first didn't like it economically. Power was becoming entrenched, it was becoming entrenched in the cities, it was becoming entrenched in the hands of people who to him did not look like he wanted the controls of America to look. They were bankers, they were industrialists, they were Carnegies, and Mellons, and DuPonts.

09-00:35:37

Lage: It wasn't a race, gender thing?

09-00:35:39

Levine: Absolutely not.

09-00:35:39

Lage: It was class.

09-00:35:40

Levine: It was the class thing. He didn't like these people and didn't think they should have the power they had. After World War I he was watching an America which troubled him culturally. For some reason, for lots of reasons, politics was not the big issue in the twenties. Culture was the big issue after the war, and he was watching a struggle culturally. In the churches, between what were called modernists, those people who wanted to modernize the Bible, to bring

the Bible closer to science so kids could believe in the Bible. The Bible said lots of things that were just ridiculous, in the eyes of scientists. About the world being created in seven days, about Joshua making the sun stand still, about a whale swallowing Jonah, all of this stuff. So there were fights within the Presbyterian churches on church. There were fights within many of the churches over how liberal the church's theology should be. How modern—that's what modernists meant—how modern to make theology. There was that, and they were very defensive in those days, these people. And there was the fact this was a period in which high schools began. You see, we had a state college system before we had a national high school system. The Morrill Act, the Land Grant Act of 1861 or '62 gave states federal lands to build state colleges. So you had a whole apparatus, and the state colleges became obvious for increasing the high schools. Once you do that—and it would've happened anyway because America was becoming an industrial country which needed an educated population—once you do that, your kids—you've prolonged the educational years of your children, and you've put them longer into the hands of people who don't necessarily come from your community or share your community's value. And these people start to teach them strange things, foreign things. Like evolution. And some of them do so arrogantly. I mean there's no question; Bryan got many letters from people saying, "Throw away everything"—from professors in colleges saying, "Throw away everything you learned in Sunday school class." You know, like my biology class and geology class, and the kids would come home and say—

09-00:38:01

Lage:

So you saw this in the archives. You were learning this as you did your—

09-00:38:04

Levine:

Oh yes. Because Bryan got letters from people saying, "Oh my God, my children are in the hands of infidels. Kids are coming home telling us 'that's all nonsense.'" You know, students do that. They go home and they torture their parents. And so they *were* coming home from these colleges. Bryan had a big problem. I'm going to not go into my whole book, but let me just—the dilemma is interesting. World War I was a dilemma for him, and I didn't realize what a dilemma it was for a lot of people until I read Bryan's letters and stuff. He lived, in his mind, in a progressive world. It was a world that was becoming more Christian all the time, but World War I was retrograde. It wasn't pagans killing pagans, or Christians killing Pagans as in the good old Crusades. It was Christians killing Christians. That was not called for in this scenario where Christianity was bringing a better, more loving world, where the principles of Christ were being adopted on earth. It was a world of barbarism, and there were Christian barbarians killing other Christians. And he couldn't understand that. Either his theology was wrong or something was interfering with it. And he decided that that something that was interfering with it were people, philosophers like Friedrich Nietzsche, who were influenced by scientists like Darwin. And what Nietzsche learned from Darwin is that we're just animals, and therefore the strong *should*—why

should the weak control? In fact, Nietzsche denounced Christianity as a religion of the weak. When you're weak, of course you develop a religion that says the weak shall prevail, but *in fact* that's wrong. The strong should prevail, and this comes at a time when Darwinian evolution is teaching about animals that are strong and the fit to survive do survive and others die out. So Bryan was putting all this together, and he saw Nietzsche as a product of Darwin. Darwin had taught that: the strong survive, those who were better adapted to the world shall survive. He had played right into his hands Social Darwinism, which in fact said many of those things, you know? Rockefeller's son gave an address at Brown when he was a student, and he said, "To create one beautiful rose, many rosebuds must die." You know, that kind of stuff. And it began to make sense to Bryan. "Yes, we have been deflected from the true Christian faith by science, and the worst sinner is Darwin, who has told us that we're just animals." You know, it's very ironic since Darwin was a very religious man, but nevertheless. And so Bryan needed an explanation of this retrograde period, and that was his explanation. It was science taking us away. You know, I think I quoted this last time: "Better to believe in the Rock of Ages than the ages of rocks." You know, that kind of stuff.

09-00:41:11

Lage:

As you tell me this, I wish we would focus a little bit less on Bryan, and more on you.

09-00:41:17

Levine:

Oh me, yeah. Okay.

09-00:41:19

Lage:

What transformations did you go through?

09-00:41:21

Levine:

Well, one transformation I went through was that we can't laugh at historical figures. If we're going to seriously treat them, we have to listen to them. And Bryan was telling us this. I was at a dilemma; I had these notes saying he was still a progressive, and notes saying he was becoming a reactionary, I couldn't put them together, I didn't understand it. And all I had to do was listen to him. Because he explained it, he talked about it. He said, "I'm no different than I ever was. I'm carrying a shotgun. A double-barreled shot gun, with the one barrel aimed at the elephant as it tries to crawl into the treasury, and the other at the monkey as it tries to crawl into the classroom." He saw what he was doing as of a piece, he understood what people were telling him, he understood that people said, "You're becoming reactionary." He never saw that, he never understood it. He was fighting the old fight, that in order to have progressive politics you had to have progressive religion. A religion that taught you that man was saved by being good, doing unto others what you would have them do unto you was the only basis for progressive politics. If you didn't believe in that, if you didn't believe that there was a real reward for being good, why should you be good? Why shouldn't you just be strong? Why shouldn't you be what the animals are, because they have no religion. So he

saw the two as totally connected. You have to have a moral basis for reform. The moral basis was Christianity. Now, what I was learning was, you got to listen to this guy. People were laughing, he's no intellectual. No, he wasn't.

09-00:43:05

Lage: He did seem to read.

09-00:43:06

Levine: He read a lot.

09-00:43:07

Lage: Nietzsche and—

09-00:43:09

Levine: Yes, he did. He read Darwin and criticized Darwin. He counted the number of “perhapses” and “maybes” in Darwin and said, “The eminent scientist was guessing.” He did write books, he wrote a lot of books. He wrote three to four books a year, this guy. He wrote dozens of speeches. I gained a great admiration for him even when I disagreed with him. And that's another thing I learned about myself that, though I don't carry it into the present day politics, I have to admit I'm a historian and then I'm a human being who lives in the present. And I'm not a good historian of the present. But I am of the past and you have to open yourself to Bryan. Now, there are people I wouldn't study because it would pain me too much to open myself to them and understand them. Adolf Hitler doesn't interest me to understand, but if I was going to write on Hitler I'd have to understand him as a human being, not as some kind of demonic force, which is what we reduce people we don't like to. Bryan was reduced to that, and the minute I listened to him, the minute I read his speeches, I realized he was telling me the answer to my problem. And I have found that works at everything I ever done.

Listen to the slaves, listen to their songs. They're not intellectuals, but you can do intellectual history. And what I learned from my colleague Joseph Levinson, who taught at Berkeley until he drowned in 1970 [1969] and was not a friend of mine but someone I admired enormously. Joe Levinson wrote in an early book that intellectual history is the history not of thought, but of man thinking. I like to think he would have said of *people* thinking today, but it doesn't matter, he meant man in a generic sense. And I read that and quote that in my dissertation, in my first book. That's exactly right. It's the history of thought, and Bryan was thinking, whether we like his thought not. And so did the slaves; they were thinking, they were using religion, and they were thinking through it. And Bryan was doing that. So what Bryan had taught me, and it sounds trite, but it really isn't trite because not all historians do it is you got to take the people you deal with very seriously.

I had a student who is now a professor at Santa Barbara who was a very religious guy, and on his orals which he clearly had—by the time he got to this outside field on his orals, he clearly had passed his orals. So I was

relaxed. David Potter, an anthropologist, was his outside man, and David Potter, a Berkeley anthropologist, was going through—like many anthropologists—going through a period of self-incrimination. “Oh, what have we done? We've looked at these indigenous populations, we've opened them up to exploitation.” There was a lot of that kind of flagellation going on. And because I was relaxed because my student Paul had passed his orals I thought pretty well, I was kidding. So when David was asking Paul, “How can you justify our doing this,” I said, “You know, Paul, you don't have to feel his guilt because you don't do this.” I said, “If David's is guilty, that's his problem; you don't do this.” And Paul said, “No, I think we do it because they go into living populations and don't understand them, and we go into former populations and don't understand them. We do the same thing they do historically. We go in, we laugh at people, we belittle them, we don't take their culture seriously, we don't understand them.” I had nothing to criticize on that statement; it's absolutely right. That's one of the sins historians commit.

So if you're going to go in and do a biography, to do a biography to make fun of the person is, you know, fun, but it doesn't teach us a hell of a lot except about you. You have to kind of lose yourself in them, and then you have this interesting dilemma. You also have to remain you, because if you become them then you're writing an autobiography. So you have to be able to understand them, and you have to also be you. And then you have the interesting question of judgment. John Higham, at the time I was writing Bryan—John Higham was an intellectual historian then teaching, I suppose, at John Hopkins or Michigan, one of them, he ended up at Johns Hopkins—Higham wrote something about the historian—I'm paraphrasing here—he's not a judge; he is a participant in the affairs of the people he writes about. And I think that's right. So I tried to become a participant in the Bryan book; I tried to understand the world through his eyes.

And to go back to a point you raised a long time ago, being who I was, coming from the culture I came from, made the leap not so hard for me. Because I understood what it was to battle for your faith in the world that didn't encourage it, to be surrounded by forces that helped diminish the things you believed in, that made it harder to believe. It was very hard for Orthodox Jews to remain Orthodox Jews in America. And my father and mother really in their years became less Orthodox. My father had to work Saturdays. He simply couldn't earn a living if he didn't, so he did. We lived in a Jewish neighborhood, but the majority of those Jews were not Orthodox and they shopped on Saturday, and that kind of stuff. Rabbis came into my father's store and denounced him. He felt fury at that. He was a hard-working man, he was doing the best for his family, and they came in and called him a heretic and things like that. And of course they pushed him further away from orthodoxy, though we were made orthodox in the *shul* we went to and everything else. I saw all that happening in my own life. What did Walter Lippmann—he used a phrase in a book he wrote in the 1920s which struck me

very strongly when I did Bryan. And that was, he used the term “the acids of modernity,” and that’s very good. Modernity acts as an acid toward certain kinds of beliefs. It’s very hard. And we have a country up in arms right now, large numbers of people are up in arms about that. But none of them defensively, they were up in arms in an offensive way. That is they want to spread this.

09-00:49:51

Lage: It seems like a return to the Bryan point of view in many ways.

09-00:49:54

Levine: Well, then it really was, but yeah.

09-00:49:58

Lage: Now let me just ask you about you and Hofstadter.

09-00:50:00

Levine: Yes.

09-00:50:01

Lage: I would assume that Hofstadter was less accepting or generous.

09-00:50:09

Levine: Yes.

09-00:50:10

Lage: About Bryan.

09-00:50:12

Levine: He was.

09-00:50:13

Lage: And wasn’t his style of writing a little more critical and ironic, and maybe even dismissive?

09-00:50:19

Levine: Absolutely. All of that is true.

09-00:50:21

Lage: How did this—?

09-00:50:21

Levine: So, that’s what Hofstadter had to teach me, how to be a professor. He respected what I was doing even when he didn’t agree with it. He thought my research was good, he thought I was thinking well, he thought I was making a good case—not a case he accepted necessarily—he respected all that and *never, ever* tried to interfere with me, never. Remember, he read this as a dissertation. I didn’t give him the book because I didn’t want to burden him, but I did give him the dissertation. Of course, I had to. And he never had a problem. And I learned that—

09-00:50:56

Lage: Did he ever indicate maybe he'd learned something?

09-00:50:59

Levine: He thought I made a very good case. You know, when I came to Berkeley to talk about the job, Charlie Sellers, Charles Sellers picked me up at the airport, and he said something very nice to me in the car. He said, "I didn't think anyone could write as positive a book about Bryan as you have managed to do and still remain credible." So that was nice. And I think Hofstadter felt that himself, that it was a credible book. I made a good case. It's not a case you had to agree with, but I made a good case for a guy working out through his faith, through his culture, coming to a position not as a reactionary but as a guy trying to save his culture from the acids of modernity.

09-00:51:46

Lage: Let me ask you another question. Did you see Bryan as a way to understand the culture, a representative of the culture?

09-00:51:55

Levine: Yes, and this troubled me. When I finished the whole project and was turning it into a book, I was very troubled by the fact that I was making generalizations about a complex society on the basis of a political representative of that society. In other words, he represented his society, he spoke for it. The society liked him and voted in large numbers for him. But could you do that? Could you go from the individual to the society? And I really didn't think you could. And I was trying to figure out how—maybe I shouldn't publish this the way it was. Or maybe I should do some more research on this. And my friends—thank God for my friends—told me don't be a jerk, that's another book. You want to write another book? Write another book. But that's not the book you've written here. You've written about Bryan. And if you make generalizations, it's okay. They'll know that.

09-00:52:54

Lage: You also had all those letters to Bryan.

09-00:52:56

Levine: I did. I did.

09-00:52:57

Lage: Which seemed to verify him as a representative.

09-00:53:00

Levine: I had a lot of letters. Absolutely. Bryan got a lot of positive letters. Letters that were—now that's an interesting question because at the end of his life when he died—I mean after his life—I think two of his children—he had three children—wanted his wife to burn those letters, to burn the letters from people who were illiterate. "Now, this will just confirm the world's impression of Daddy as the representative of illiterate people." And his wife went to Josephus Daniels, who was an editor from North Carolina and later was

Roosevelt's—anyway, he served in the Roosevelt administration—Josephus Daniels said that would be a very big mistake. Those are his—that's the testimonial that will make his reputation. That these people loved him and wrote to him. So thank the Lord Mrs. Bryan did not destroy those letters, and those letters are—it's always a mistake to destroy things because you don't know how they're going to be taken by people. Those letters are his testament. People loved this guy. And you know they wrote some embarrassing letters. “You are my king, I will follow you anywhere, I wish I could come and kiss your feet.” You know, in a very religious sense he was—but they also wrote him very thoughtful and lovely letters, and they took hope from him. That a person like Bryan could exist. There were people who laughed at him of course, and they still laugh at Bryan. A lot of the books about him laugh at him, you know, he's not one of us. But he was a man who thought. Now the book I wrote seemed to me to be a book of politics. Berkeley thought it was. They read my dissertation, and they hired me as a twentieth-century political historian. But now looking at the book I realize it was really a book that fits into what I'd become, and that's a cultural historian.

09-00:54:51

Lage:

And was there a term “cultural historian” then?

09-00:54:53

Levine:

No, I don't think so.

09-00:54:54

Lage:

You were political or you could've been intellectual?

09-00:54:57

Levine:

I think it was invented somewhere in the sixties, seventies, and I think it was invented to accommodate work like mine and others. Not just mine, there was a lot of work being done like this because I was part—unbeknownst to myself—I was part of a movement of people beginning to look at culture. And actually what we were looking at was thought. And so in one sense we were really intellectual historians, but I like the term “cultural historian.” But I think it was invented to somehow take care of us because if they said they're all intellectual historians, then they're changing all the terms of intellectual history.

09-00:55:41

Lage:

Except that phrase of Levinson. Man thinking, people thinking.

09-00:55:45

Levine:

And if you look at the work—did I tell you the story when—well, it was much later, but when one of my books was nominated for a prize in intellectual history; *Black Culture and Black Consciousness*. Henry May was the chairman of this committee of the Organization of American Historians came to me, my colleague, Henry May said, "Do you think your book is intellectual history?" And I had to say, "Well, you know, Henry, that's your problem and

not mine, but in the subtitle it does say ‘Afro-American *Thought* from Slavery to Freedom.’” But they didn’t think it was intellectual history, as it turns out. Now what’s interesting to me is that Henry May himself is an intellectual historian who often did things that were not, strictly speaking, intellectual history. He studied churches, he studied churches in industrial America; he was interested in that. These were not necessarily intellectuals who were writing, but they were—you know. But on the whole I guess he did study intellectuals, people who were conscious thinkers who thought along certain kinds of lines. Whereas I guess I have been—I’ve devoted my career to writing about people who were not acting as thinkers, but were thinking as part of their acting. Because we all do that, and I find that fascinating. I don’t care what it’s called, and I don’t think anyone else cares. I like the term “cultural historian.” But if you want to get right down to it, I do not do dress, I do not do cuisine, I do not do how people decorate their homes. That’s culture I don’t really write about a lot of that stuff that what we call cultural history.

09-00:57:21

Lage:

Do you think it’s important?

09-00:57:22

Levine:

I do think it’s very important and there are people beginning to write about it, yes. I write about—not how people accouter to themselves by how they accouter to their minds. How they see the world, through what prism they see it, and how that changes them and the world. Because the way people saw Darwin, even if it was wrong, affected Darwin, affected Darwinian evolution as it is now. Darwinian evolution—you see, the mistake the anti-evolutionists made then and the mistake they’re not making now, is passing legislation. That was a mistake, it’s always a mistake to pass that kind of bold legislation outlawing a stream of thought. They applied community pressure, and they were enormously successful in that. Scopes himself—the state of Tennessee taught evolution in the textbooks they adopted because it was very hard to find textbooks that didn’t in those days—but Scopes didn’t teach it, because his whole school district was against teaching it. So they ignored that part of the textbook. That was the most effective thing they could do. Passing a law was a very *ineffective* thing, because that got everyone riled up, the American Civil Liberties Union. These are interesting things that—

09-00:58:37

Lage:

Are we talking about then or now?

09-00:58:39

Levine:

No, we’re talking about then, but *now* they’re not passing laws. They are not passing laws. They are trying to influence textbooks, but not through legislation. They’re trying to influence schools, but not through legislation. Kansas did it, and they were ridiculed, and they had to stop it. The Kansas state board of education threw evolution out of the curriculum, and the state of Kansas became an object of ridicule. And that’s not the way to do this. The

way to do it is through community pressure, and Bryan understood that. He was not a friend of laws.

So I learned—you know, you learn a lot through this stuff. It's not just old stuff, it's stuff because it deals with human beings. It deals with things that are very central to our lives. I have been able to dichotomize my life a bit. I don't want to understand—I have to admit this—I don't want to understand Jerry Falwell. Though I do understand him, but I don't vote on that. I don't like what he wants to do, I'm against it. I would've been against Bryan in the twenties. Someday some historian will write a great book about Jerry Falwell and those guys, because they're interesting people. I think their social program is deplorable. But they're interesting because they come out of a certain matrix of American thought, they're living in a time which is not necessarily friendly to that thought, and the interaction is fascinating. It's also very upsetting. So that living now, I am passionately against that. Studying the twenties, I can be dispassionate, but I don't think you become a eunuch as a historian, I think you can, and I do I think—I think most historians do—I have a point of view. I understood the slaves, and I think I could, and even did, understand the slaveholders. But you could still come with—you can understand slaveholders all you want; they were wrong. They were wrong in holding human beings as cattle and treating them as animals. They were wrong. But you can understand why they did it and why they defended it, not only because it was economically advantageous, but because it was the foundation of their culture. And to remove that prop, they might've been able to and could've existed economically without slavery. But they weren't at all sure, and they were probably right that they couldn't continue to exist culturally without slavery. Because it was one of the foundations of their culture. And you know, the fact that—you see, this is one of the problems we have. Can I talk this way? Is this okay?

09-00:61:22

Lage:

Sure. Sure. I'd want to get back to one thing about your book.

09-00:61:25

Levine:

Exactly.

09-00:61:25

Lage:

But finish this thought.

09-00:61:26

Levine:

One of the problems we have, as a cultural historian, and it's a distinction Hofstadter made and Seymour Martin Lipset the sociologist made. And that is the distinction between interest politics, they called it, and status politics. Interest politics had to do with your interests. And therefore, in a way they elevated it to the realm of reality: when you're fighting for your income and you're fighting for your—. Status politics had to do with where you stood in the eyes of your contemporaries.

09-00:62:00

Lage: Or where you thought you stood.

09-00:62:02

Levine: Yes. And they saw that as somehow psychological and not real, but of course they were wrong about that. That is very real. That is very real. Your cultural legitimacy is as real as your economic viability, for a lot of people. And when we don't understand why people vote for a politician who is obviously, patently not for their economic interest, we can't understand it; we call them fools, jerks, dupes. In fact they're voting for the politician because the politician represents other things important to them which may be even more important than their economic interest. And we scholars—as intellectuals—have a lot of trouble with that. But we shouldn't.

09-00:62:45

Lage: You must—despite how much you might deplore the last election, you must understand it.

09-00:62:52

Levine: Well, yeah, I do.

09-00:62:53

Lage: Because you just described what happened.

09-00:62:54

Levine: Yeah. I do. I think that's right. You said you had something you wanted to—

09-00:62:57

Lage: Well, you had mentioned in one of your essays the influence of John William Ward on how you—maybe some methodological questions on this man.

09-00:63:09

Levine: Well, now we're getting into Princeton. Have we been to Princeton?

09-00:62:13

Lage: No, we haven't been to Princeton.

09-00:62:14

Levine: Okay. Well, he was an associate professor at Princeton. And through John William Ward and through a school of thought he represented, which was American Studies, he was a student of Henry Nash Smith, who, interestingly, taught at Berkeley. But when he was a student of Smith, Smith was a professor at the University of Minnesota. And Bill Ward was a Harvard undergraduate who finished his undergraduate degree, as many people did in those days, after World War II. He went into the war and then came back as an older guy, more mature guy, and did his PhD—did his BA, and then he went to Minnesota to do his PhD. And there were two people at Minnesota, Henry Nash Smith and Leo Marx; Leo Marx and Henry Smith were there, and

they influenced Bill Ward, who influenced me. And through Bill Ward I discovered Leo Marx and Henry Nash Smith.

09-00:64:20

Lage: And this was kind of the root of American Studies there?

09-00:64:23

Levine: Yes. They really looked at popular thought. You know, Bill Ward, for instance, in trying to understand Jacksonian America, went to its music, went to its songs, went to its popular writings. And that just opened worlds to me, reading that stuff. I was thrilled.

09-00:64:43

Lage: Had you read Smith and Marx in graduate school?

09-00:64:45

Levine: Well, Marx didn't really publish until I was a faculty member. He never published, he was a late publisher. Leo hasn't published a lot. But I read Smith. I don't remember if I read it in graduate—

09-00:65:00

Lage: *The Virgin Land.*

09-00:65:01

Levine: *The Virgin Land.* I don't remember when I read Henry Smith. He published *The Virgin Land* in 1950 or something like that. I probably read him as a graduate student, and I read Bill Ward as a graduate student and then met Bill Ward. And for some reason, which I can't fully understand, ever; he took me into his family. Bachelors are interesting things. I found myself being taken in as a young bachelor at Berkeley too—Gene Brucker and Pat Brucker took me into their family and I spent a lot of time in their home. And I spent a lot of time in the home of Bill and Barbara Ward. An amazing thing. I had never known anyone like Bill Ward close. He was a Boston Catholic and a very, very lovely, complicated guy.

09-00:65:54

Lage: How old would he have been at this time?

09-00:65:55

Levine: He was about eight years older than me. So when I went to Princeton, I was thirty—1960, I was about twenty-eight, twenty-nine.

09-00:66:08

Lage: So he was close to forty.

09-00:66:09

Levine: No, he was about thirty-six. Yeah, yeah, you're right. He was in his late thirties, exactly right. And we remained friends even though I only spent one year at Princeton, and then came 3,000 miles away. Bill and I somehow remained very close.

09-00:66:24

Lage: Did that influence your writing of the Bryan book, or did it influence your later—?

09-00:66:27

Levine: That whole method influenced me. The notion that—though I didn't know it consciously then. It was only in my *Black* book that I got conscious about it. In the Bryan book, after all, I was dealing with a politician. I was trying to understand a politician, so I tried to see him through the eyes of those who were his constituents and through the eyes of newspapers and the like. It was when I was doing black history with no written records from blacks that I realized that, yeah, if you're going to do it, you had to do it through the oral history. Through popular culture, folk culture, and the like. And then I got conscious about it. I wasn't conscious before.

09-00:67:07

Lage: But Ward had done that in his *Age of Jackson*. Was it *Age of Jackson*?

09-00:67:10

Levine: No.

09-00:67:13

Lage: *Andrew Jackson: Symbol for an Age*.

09-00:67:15

Levine: *Symbol for an Age*, rather than “of an age.” He argues Jackson was used by the people of this time to symbolize certain things they needed symbolized. Even though Jackson himself—and so he uses Jackson as a way of getting into—he doesn't care about the real Jackson. Only to show you that the people created a Jackson they needed, rather than the Jackson who existed. And he begins with this telling thing about the songs about the Battle of New Orleans. And the songs about the Battle of New Orleans captured a popular mythology of the battle. Where trusty rusty people from the soil, frontiersmen, took their antiquated guns and defeated the Redcoats. Because of their sharp-shooting abilities gleaned from hunting and the like. In fact he shows—Bill discusses the fact that there was so much cannon smoke at the Battle of New Orleans that you couldn't see anything anyway, and being able to be a sharpshooter was not a great help at all. So he poses reality against the—well, two realities against one another. Because the reality of the songs becomes the reality. I learned that in school, that Jackson and his frontiersmen, because of their great abilities at shooting, defeated the British in the Battle of New Orleans. All of that is very interesting. He tries to get at what the people thought about at the time, and then how that's transmitted to us, to what forms. And Henry Smith does that about the West. Fascinating, it was just absolutely fascinating. Those guys were my Darwin and Marx. They set me going on how to do history. Now, they're not in fashion anymore, which I don't fully understand.

09-00:69:08

Lage: Should we talk about that? I want to be sure and come back to that.

09-00:69:11

Levine: Well, I don't fully understand it. But maybe we ought to get to that. Whatever you want.

09-00:69:15

Lage: We'll come back to it. Unless you want to talk about it right now. If you're thinking along those lines, go ahead. Why aren't they in fashion? And why do you say they're not in fashion?

09-00:69:27

Levine: Because they're not. Are we on?

09-00:69:30

Lage: Yes, five more minutes.

09-00:69:32

Levine: This is what happens. I'll give you a good example of what I think happens. Really new ways of thinking about things, which are never the product of one person; it's got to be in the air. You see, Darwin—you know it's like people have argued about the Oedipus thing. It is existed long—after all, Sophocles wrote *Oedipus*.

09-00:69:55

Lage: Yes, we mustn't forget that.

09-00:69:58

Levine: We mustn't forget that. So Freud is a genius, there's no question about that. But the world has to be ready to accept that genius. It has to be ready to accept those things. And at the time, Freud was codifying all that stuff. Other people were beginning to work and the same thing is true of Darwin. I mean it's been pointed out that others were thinking Darwinian thoughts. You have to—it has to be at a time. And if it's at the right time for people to accept it, there are going to be several people doing it. Well, once it's done—unless you're a genius like Freud or Darwin or Einstein or whatever—once it's done it becomes common thought. So I used to say to my students in class, I used to kid them about this because it's interesting. When I was an older historian, still am, someone would say to me, "So how come you're well known?" So I say, "Well, I'm well known because I wrote a book in 1977 called *Black Culture and Black Consciousness*." "Well, what did the book say, Professor?" And I say, "Well, the book said that black people in slavery were still Africans. That they came over here with a lot of African culture and that African culture was not wiped out and eradicated completely, but it amalgamated with the culture they came into to form an African-American culture, which kept them distinct but also part of the societal body. And that through that they can influence that body, and through that American culture change, and the like. And through that process they also had effect. They were not just things. That's why I'm well known." "You're well known for *that*? Doesn't everybody know *that*?" See, and everybody does know that. Not many people would dispute that.

- 09-00:71:49  
Lage: Yeah. Not necessarily because they've read your book, but it's just gone into the—
- 09-00:71:53  
Levine: It's gone into the—
- 09-00:71:54  
Lage: —popular culture.
- 09-00:71:55  
Levine: —the teaching of—see, we hear a lot about—can I give little sermons occasionally? Is it okay?
- 09-00:72:01  
Lage: Yeah.
- 09-00:72:03  
Levine: That's how the reader will get to know me.
- 09-00:72:07  
Lage: That you like to give sermons.
- 09-00:72:09  
Levine: That we learn from these things. That the truth is—intellectuals like to say, “Well, there was a time when there were popular intellectuals. People who wrote for all these little magazines and like—Walter Lippmann and that whole group and Herbert Croly—and had an impact. But now intellectuals go into the academe, they're swallowed up, they're uniformized or whatever—well, that's not a word. But they just become bureaucrats.” Well, the truth is, intellectuals do go into the academe now; the whole academe creates a home for intellectuals that did not in the nineteen-teens and twenties, and 1890s, it's true. But they have the American people in the university now in ways they didn't have in the early twentieth century. Because they're a much more selective group of people. They have the American *people* there. And when Litwack gives a lecture, he's lecturing to 700 kids who come from America, not just from one little slice of America. That's true of George Mason. Which, you know, 40 percent of the students are minority and foreign born students. You've got the people there, and you're influencing them through the textbooks you write, through the lectures you give, through books you give them to read. That's not that they come out as some kind of product. They don't. In fact most of us bemoan how—
- 09-00:73:35  
Lage: That they don't listen to you enough.
- 09-00:73:37  
Levine: But, so yes. I forgot the question regarding the—no.

09-00:73:42

Lage: It was how this has come into the public consciousness, while your point of view of it at the time was new and challenging.

09-00:73:48

Levine: That's right. So partly the things that Henry Nash Smith and Bill Ward say in their books and the methods they use, which are very literary, not social sciencey. Because they come from a literature tradition. So American Studies, which was an amalgam of history and literature, had very little social science in it. And they use literary metaphors, they did deep reading but they did their deep reading of speeches, political speeches and songs.

09-00:74:25

Lage: Got to stop here for a minute.

### [Audio File 10]

10-00:00:00

Lage: We're back on, and we were going to try to clear up what was maybe a misunderstanding on my part.

10-00:00:18

Levine: I don't think it's the method. Well, Bill Ward, Leo Marx, Henry Nash Smith, when I use them in class, don't create the kinds of rockets in the air. Students saying, "Oh, wow." And that would be silly to think that that could go on forever, that they did when I read them. Because when I read them, it was a very new methodology. Right now, I think—first of all, many of the truths that they were pioneering have been accepted, so they were a successful movement, successful revolutionary—if that's the right word—successful movement.

10-00:00:55

Lage: The truth is that you can look at popular culture.

10-00:00:58

Levine: The truth is that you can find out about the culture by looking at all aspects of it. Not just the intelligentsia and not just the politicians, but—Ward used the folk song about the Battle of New Orleans to show what people were thinking. That excited me a lot at the time. Well, now, it's pretty common. It wasn't even common when I was writing in 1977. But it's become much more common. Students are not thrilled by that. Yeah, you can do that. You can look at music. You can look at songs. That's part of the panoply of the historian.

10-00:01:37

Lage: So what is in decline? What were you telling me was in decline?

10-00:01:40

Levine: Bill Ward—just what I said, that they don't seem to excite students the way they excited me when I read them. That's what I said. I think that American

Studies has changed. I think that American Studies approach that Ward, Smith and Marx used, which was very literary and did not incorporate social science, that approach had an enormous impact on many of us. But by now, American Studies has embodied more anthropology, sociology; cultural studies has had its impact. All of that gets mixed together. I think it's true that cultural history does as well, so that you use all kinds of stuff. But we learned that you could use all kinds of stuff from those guys.

10-00:02:31

Lage: Okay, that helps.

10-00:02:32

Levine: I guess it's silly to think any book—I mean Charles Beard, when he wrote his *Economic Interpretation of the Constitution* had an *immense* impact. It taught a lot of people, "Oh wow, yeah." And it infuriated a lot of others. Nicholas Murray Butler, the President of Columbia College, where Beard taught—someone said, "Have you read Professor Beard's last book?" He said, "I certainly hope so." [laughter] There was real anger at Beard. When you read it today, when students read it today, they are not thrilled. If you get them to read it today, it's because it's an important thing to understand, that this is a building block of the way we see things. This is one of the early books of economic interpretation of American history, which we now have melded into many other approaches.

So it would be silly to say, and I want—so when I'm saying they don't excite students the way they did—that's like saying it rained yesterday but it doesn't matter today. They don't. I use their books, and I'm always a little surprised that people don't see them as exciting. I still find them exciting because they remind me of how much they taught me. That's okay. That's the way things go. They shouldn't. A book that was groundbreaking 100 years ago, if it's still groundbreaking today, means that it has had no impact.

10-00:04:01

Lage: Absolutely. That's a good point. Let's talk about, unless you want to continue along these lines, let's talk about teaching at Princeton, kind of the social and cultural environment there.

10-00:04:13

Levine: My little joke was more than a joke, as jokes always are, good ones. I did cross the Hudson River into America; it was a whole new scene for me. It was a whole new scene not just because there weren't a whole lot of Jews around but because it wasn't New York, where, after all, Jews are still a minority. It was a different place. It was much closer to America.

10-00:04:39

Lage: Did you see it that way then? Because so many New Yorkers think *that* is America.

10-00:04:48

Levine: No, I did see it then. I mean, I understood that there was a whole world out there that I had never entered and I wasn't sure that I did want to enter right away. But I knew it was out there. I don't know if Princeton was it. But Princeton was my first taste of that world, a world in which there were very few Jews, very few immigrants, very few of anything.

10-00:05:06

Lage: Very few women.

10-00:05:10

Levine: No women. There wasn't a woman on the history faculty. There were some women, but not a heck of a lot of them. There were no women students. There was the Choir College, and since I was a bachelor, I was interested in that.

10-00:05:23

Lage: What was that?

10-00:05:27

Levine: There's a Choir College at Princeton, a very good place. It teaches music. It's a very, very interesting place. I was told by some of my married colleagues, "You ought to go over to the Choir College."

10-00:05:35

Lage: Because they had women.

10-00:05:37

Levine: They surely did. Very pretty ones too. But I never had a way to meet those women, so I didn't. So I quickly resolved that for my social life—and I always did have a social life—for my social life I would have to go back to New York. I kept my apartment. That is, I was a one-third owner—not owner, but renter—of an apartment. I shared an apartment with two good friends and I continued to share it. I paid my rent, which meant that I had to rent very foul things in Princeton. And I lived in Princeton Monday, Tuesday, Wednesday, Thursday nights. I got there Monday morning, I left Friday. So I spent Friday, Saturday and Sunday nights in New York. And it was good. It worked well enough for me, and I had a social life. There was no social life in Princeton. Which also meant that I was never there on the weekends for invitations. Because I was a bachelor; people invited me during the week and I went to people's homes and formed a really nice coterie of friends there. They made it hard for me to leave. But not one of those people stayed at Princeton. Not one of them.

10-00:06:45

Lage: Who were they? Anybody you want to mention? John William Ward, you mentioned.

10-00:06:48

Levine: Well, Bill Catton, who was the son of Bruce Catton, the famous—I don't know that names matter. I'm now blacking; I'm having a little trouble.

10-00:06:55

Lage: Bill Ward's name—

10-00:06:58

Levine: Bill Ward was the only guy who had tenure of that group of people that I became very friendly with. Julian Franklin was another one who ended up at Columbia. Bill Catton ended up at Middlebury College. Ray Grew, Raymond Grew, an Italian historian, ended up at Michigan. None of them got tenure. Bill *had* tenure, but Bill was up for full professor. He got offers from Amherst and Stanford, and Princeton said "congratulations" and didn't promote him to full professor.

10-00:07:29

Lage: Now, was that their deliberate way of running their faculty?

10-00:07:31

Levine: See, Bill Ward was in the History Department because he wanted to be in the History Department. He had been in the English Department. He was a historian, but he was an American Studies historian. And I think a lot of people in the History Department—I wasn't there, and I wasn't part of the people who made that mistake of letting him go—but I think they thought that he wasn't a historian. Whereas the people in the English Department would have thought he wasn't a—they don't have a word. Isn't that interesting? Littérateur, they called it in England. He wasn't a man of letters. So I think he would have had trouble in those departments. That's one of the reasons why American Studies departments were created for some people like that, who were neither fish nor fowl. So a lot of my friends—if I had stayed for my friends, they were all gone within a few years and that would have been interesting. I learned that you never stay for friends, because your friends don't stay for you. That's not a reason to stay at an institution, because people move. Especially when they're young and don't have tenure they move.

10-00:08:34

Lage: And you weren't on a tenure track.

10-00:08:37

Levine: No, they didn't have tenure tracks at Princeton. They didn't have that. They occasionally kept some of the young people. Princeton's attitude was very simple: "Of course he was very good, and if we gave every person who was very good—we hire very good people—and if we gave them all tenure, our departments would be exploding with people, too many people." So their whole attitude was "everyone we hire probably deserves tenure, but we can't give it to them." You know, years and years and years later, after I won a MacArthur award, shortly after I won a MacArthur Award, 1980, twenty years after I was at Princeton, I was walking—more than twenty years—in the streets of Washington, and met Jerry Blum, Jerome Blum, who was the chairman of the department, he was a Russian historian. He was the chairman. A guy I never got close to, but he was my chairman. When I went to him and told him Berkeley had offered me a job, he said, "We match it." Without a

department meeting, I was very impressed because it wasn't a tenure decision or anything like that, at *either* place. So Jerry Blum met me and I said, "Hi, Professor Blum,"—I never called him Jerry—I said, "You may not remember me, I was in your department briefly back twenty some-odd years ago, Larry Levine." He said, "Larry Levine, oh yes, yes, I do remember you. You went to Berkeley." I said, "That's right." "And haven't you just won a MacArthur Award?" I said, "Yes, I have." He said, "I knew how to pick faculty, didn't I?" [laughter] So Princeton had that sense that they didn't have to give tenure. I think they still are one of the schools who do that. Berkeley had a tenure track. "Now it's up to you to show us why we shouldn't keep you. You have to do the things we think you're capable of doing."

But you know, that's not why I left Princeton. On the one hand, I'm a modest guy who doesn't seem to care much about these things. I ultimately wanted to get tenure. But on the other hand I may have enormous hubris, and say, "Oh, I probably could have gotten tenure at Princeton." [laughter] Who knows? I mean, I don't know which one—I'll tell you the truth. I got to Berkeley, really liked it here after a little bit, I married a woman going for her PhD, and assumed instantly that after I get married I would have to leave Berkeley, and it didn't cause any big problems or earthquakes in me. I assumed she'd get her PhD and we'd both go on the job market somewhere—

10-00:11:19

Lage: Because of her.

10-00:11:20

Levine: Sure. We both had to get jobs. That seemed to me to be the way it was going to be, and that was okay with me. The first two months after we got married, we drove across the country so that I could introduce my wife to my family, and we stopped at universities everywhere. I would say, "Let's take a look at the campus here and this campus there." We stopped at Illinois and Wisconsin. We stopped at lots of universities.

10-00:11:49

Lage: Did you stop and meet people in your departments?

10-00:11:53

Levine: I didn't know how to do that. No, we just walked around the campus. I wanted a visual sense. I always assumed that I'd have to leave Berkeley. I never thought, "Oh God, I found Mecca." I think that's probably the New Yorker in me. There was no Mecca. I left Mecca. [laughter] So I never was strongly driven by a place. I think once I left the place, that was my thought then. It wasn't even conscious. I made the big decision to leave the place to live in America, so all other places are interchangeable.

10-00:12:32

Lage: You did talk, in this interview you had with Lisa, which I don't think we will incorporate into this, about sort of the social gulf between you and the

Princeton students. [an interview by Lisa Rubens for the Regional Oral History Office Free Speech Movement Project]

10-00:12:46

Levine:

Well, there's no question there. The way I began to see Princeton—I would have in a way—if I could rewrite my life, there's very little that I'd rewrite and this isn't serious, I'm playing here—but in a way, I would get to Berkeley roughly two years later and I'd spend another two years at Princeton. I think going to Berkeley was very smart, but I would have liked another couple of years at Princeton.

10-00:13:10

Lage:

Why was that?

10-00:13:13

Levine:

Just to understand it better because it was a place I had never been before. It's the only time I've touched my toe into the Ivy League, and that's a very particular kind of Ivy League school. It was an all-male school. I mean, if there had been women there—which there are now—if there had been women there—which the alumni fought like hell against. You know, Bill Ward ended up as President of Amherst, John William Ward, he went to Amherst. When Princeton wouldn't promote him he had a choice of Amherst and Stanford, and Amherst was more in his area. He was a Bostonian. He went to Amherst, became President of Amherst, and he was the guy who made Amherst coed, and that ended his presidency. He was driven out of there because the alumni hated it. There were other reasons, too, sure. He was President for ten years, which seems—

10-00:14:06

Lage:

That's about the right time. [laughter]

10-00:14:09

Levine:

—about the right time. So if there had been women at Princeton, it might have been a different environment, it would have been a different environment. Nevertheless, I would have enjoyed getting to know it a little better than I did. My sense of it was this, that they didn't just have the Frelinghuysens—that's an old New Jersey family, and their kids were there and have always been there—they didn't just have the Frelinghuysens, and you'll have to figure out the spelling yourself on that one. They also had the Morettis, Italian kids from high schools in New York. But the Morettis looked like the Frelinghuysens. You couldn't tell. Princeton had a very interesting democratic dress code. They all wore sweaters. Some of the sweaters may have been \$100 cashmere sweaters, and some may have been five-dollar sweaters from my mother's favorite stores in New York. But they all wore sweaters and chinos, and they weren't allowed to own cars. But they could drink. The myth was that they had to make a choice some time earlier about whether this was a drinking campus or a driving campus. So the students could not own cars in those days. So a lot of the symbols of wealth were banned from the Princeton campus.

You couldn't tell. But it was clear who was setting the tone at that place, the old families, the old cultures, kids fit right into that, even if they were kids from immigrant families.

10-00:15:46

Lage: Did a lot of them go to the posh private schools?

10-00:15:49

Levine: A lot of them did go to the posh private schools. Though I had kids like this; for instance one student in my class, I was working on the Bryan dissertation, I was finishing my dissertation while I was at Princeton. I had a young kid, I think his name was Patten, but I'm not sure so we don't have to worry about it, one of his relatives, maybe his father, his father was a member of the Tennessee state legislature. The Scopes law was still on the books. His father was trying to get it off the books. I forget, he told me about this because I naturally talked to my students about my interest in the Scopes Trial and everything.

So there were all kinds of kids there. A lot of southern kids that had always had been to school with southern—where southerners sent their children. A lot of southern kids were there. But they were very nice young men and they were very smart. But like young men of that age they did not make eye contact. They looked away from you, they looked down, they didn't show emotion. But they read, and they discussed, you could get them to discuss things, they were naturally interested. But they never discussed things with great emotion. At City College, I didn't teach seminars at City College. But my young women would raise their hands and jump in their seats and—a lot of the men did that too. At Princeton, no one did that, and that was a little off-putting for me. When I got to Berkeley and taught my first small group undergraduate classes, it was the women again, and not the men who got all excited and laughed and cried and raised their hands and waved their hands so I would recognize them because they had things to say. When I mentioned this to some of my colleagues at Berkeley, they said, "Female overachievers." But that's another story.

10-00:17:31

Lage: We'll come back to that.

10-00:17:36

Levine: We didn't have female overachievers at Princeton. [laughter] We had young men, and they were a pleasure to teach. They wrote very well and they were good students. They wouldn't have been at Princeton if they weren't pretty good students. And I have no doubt that there were occasional George Bushes who were admitted for family reasons. But I had very few students who weren't good. They weren't always intellectually engaged. Engagement wasn't the big thing at Princeton.

10-00:18:04

Lage: Well, that was sort of the time, it seems to me.

10-00:18:06

Levine: Yeah.

10-00:18:09

Lage: Well, being cool was better than showing much emotion.

10-00:18:11

Levine: That's right. Especially if you were male. Men have trouble showing emotions, because that's female stuff. But I had a very good time teaching at Princeton. I taught mainly, largely, all preceptorials, I didn't lecture at Princeton, that was for the old heads. Though I gave some guest lectures for friends of mine, who said, "Hey, Larry, I got to go blah, blah, will you come in and lecture for me." They didn't know. I gave three lectures for Bill Ward, in his intellectual history course, and they did not know how much work that was for me.

10-00:18:47

Lage: [laughter] You didn't have them all prepared and ready to go.

10-00:18:50

Levine: No. And it was scary to lecture. It wasn't easy because the kids don't make eye contact. I'm probably generalizing wildly, but my sense was that they didn't make eye contact with you. You weren't looking at an audience that was fixed on you. But they were listening to every word you said. They were very good about that. They would come into class—so the way it worked at Princeton was you would take a lecture course—Woodrow Wilson set this system up, it was called the preceptorial system. The students took a lecture course, and then the precepts were taught by other faculty members. So David Donald was a preceptor for Eric Goldman, for instance. But they also brought in young people like me who basically taught precepts, ten students. And the alumni magazine went wild because it used to be eight. And—

10-00:19:37

Lage: This is different from a section taught by a TA, I'm assuming.

10-00:19:43

Levine: Yeah, these were taught by faculty rather than TAs, that's right. The kids would come in and I'd attend some of the lectures myself. But I didn't attend David Donald's lectures because I had—

10-00:19:54

Lage: He was there? Did he move from Columbia?

10-00:19:56

Levine: He had moved from Columbia and then I followed him.

10-00:19:59

Lage: So you didn't attend his; you had already attended them.

10-00:20:01

Levine: Because I knew those lectures and the kids were very good. Of course, I knew and they would tell me—I had a very interesting—David Donald used to give a lecture to us on—and it was standard revisionist thought about the Civil War, how the Dred Scott decision really didn't change very much; that was standard revisionist stuff. It was just a symbol, and the North and South stumbled over it into this bloody war and things like that. So my students came in and I said, "So, what did Professor Donald have to say about the Dred Scott decision," I said to them. They said, "Well," and they told me what he said, which is what he told us. See, I think it's okay to teach that to graduate students, but it's not okay to teach it to undergraduates. Because unless you give them things to read—

10-00:20:50

Lage: Which may contradict—

10-00:20:52

Levine: Yeah, but he didn't. So they said, "He told us this about the Dred Scott decision." I said, "Anyone have any problems with that?" No one in the group did. So I gave them—which I did rarely—I gave them a little lecture, in which I listed all of the things that the Dred Scott decision really changed quite significantly. And when it was over one of the students raised his hand and said, "Sir,"—that's what they called you—"Sir, have you ever told Professor Donald that?" [laughter]

10-00:21:22

Lage: [laughter] And what did you say?

10-00:21:24

Levine: I said, "He knows that." I said, "He was just challenging you guys." That's what he was doing. He was giving you a theory. He knows everything I said. He may not give it the same weight I do, but—so I found—

10-00:21:38

Lage: So you didn't feel that you were challenging Donald's view?

10-00:21:40

Levine: I was challenging him.

10-00:21:41

Lage: You were.

Levine:

See, I don't think—I've never taught that way. I'm not going to criticize David Donald, who was a brilliant teacher, brilliant for the students too. I think if you give undergraduates a theory as fact, which he was doing, and don't give them anything to make them put that in perspective—maybe he knew his

preceptors were, but I don't think so, because our preceptors would be scared to do that; who knows with young people—then what you're doing—see, a graduate student's fine. If a graduate student is stupid enough to listen to that and not—because a graduate student is supposed to be devouring the literature for his or her orals. But these kids, that may be the only history course that they take.

10-00:22:29

Lage: And they may feel like they have to parrot that back in the exam.

10-00:22:33

Levine: Exactly, they do feel that. So I think there's a problem there. Am I totally innocent of that? I'm sure not. I don't think any of us are totally innocent of that. But David made it the fulcrum of his teaching. That's why he got people so excited. But when he did that to us in graduate school, when he said things like "Ken Stampp is simply William Lloyd Garrison with footnotes,"—I used that last time—we were big boys and girls. We didn't say, "Oh!" Whereas he'd do that with undergraduates, who are never going to read another book on slavery, many of them. That's a problem, and I have tried not to do that, but I'm sure I've failed. We all fail with—

10-00:23:16

Lage: But you've had it in mind at least. Anything else along the lines of—you mentioned that they called you "sir."

10-00:23:23

Levine: Yeah, they did.

10-00:23:25

Lage: Were there any other social differences? We're at a time on the brink of the sixties; you're in the sixties.

10-00:23:35

Levine: Let me give you a couple—I'll give you one story. I had a young man named Diamond, his last name was Diamond, who did a senior thesis with me. He brought the topic to me. I would never have necessarily given him that topic, but he brought it to me. He wanted to do the Committee for Soviet-American Friendship. This was a committee created, I think, during the war. Eleanor Roosevelt was the head of this committee and by 1962, that's a touchy subject, the Committee of Soviet-American Friendship. But I thought, "How exciting." And he was very excited about it. I don't even know where he got the topic, I forgot now. During the course—I had some friends who knew a lot about this and one of the them on the faculty, I think was Julian Franklin, who taught political science and ended up at Columbia University. I was very close to Julian, a fellow New Yorker. Julian said, "You know X?" I forgot the name. "He's still alive and living in New York, and he was the head of this after Eleanor Roosevelt was." I said, "Wow." Julian said, "You can find him." Maybe I had a phone number, I don't know what it was, or an address. So I said to Mr. Diamond, "Hey," and I gave it to him. Mr. Diamond was much

smarter than I was in *every* way. He didn't say to me, "Sir, I'm not about to contact a communist. I'm a Princeton boy, and I have a world in front of me that could be severely hurt by doing this." He didn't say that at all. I would have been interested if he had said that, and I would have been negative about it. But he said, "Thank you sir, that's very kind of you," and had no intention of ever calling that guy. I didn't realize that. I asked him several times. No intention. I didn't understand this until one day, two gentlemen show up to my office. They are army Secret Service men or something like that. They're federals. They come in. This is not the first time this happened. There was a guy—

10-00:25:40

Lage: Not the first time?

10-00:25:43

Levine: No, at Princeton, you get that all the time. Because these kids go into high jobs in the government and other things and the army. This young man wanted to go and become an officer in the army. These two guys come, and they sat down in my office. They asked me some general questions about him. I had learned from a friend of mine who taught there, but I'm blocking his name, an older guy. He said, "Why don't you come in the office—I commented to him once—see, I made a lot of friends at Princeton—I commented once to him about these guys coming into my office; I had never seen that at City College. He said, "Take out a piece of paper, Levine, and ask them for their names and numbers. That's always good to do. It puts them a little bit on the defensive." So I did that with these guys. I had their names. After a few general questions, one of them says to me, "Why do you think he's writing a piece on the Committee for Soviet-American Friendship?" I said, "For the same reason that the bear went over the mountain, to see what's on the other side." I said, "You know that old song, that's what we do." "But why that subject?" I said, "Well, isn't that a very interesting subject—there was once a Committee for Soviet-American Friendship, and now we're at war with the Soviet Union ideologically—to study that time and those people."

10-00:27:05

Lage: They didn't get it?

10-00:27:07

Levine: They shook their heads. Then they leave, and then I get contacted and they want a copy of his—by now I have a draft copy. In those pre-computer, pre-Xerox days, it was hard to make copies of things. It turned out that I had his only full draft copy, and I wouldn't give it to them. He comes into my office and says, "Sir, I really wish you'd give them that." I said, "I don't want to give them this, it's none of their business." He said, "Sir, it is their business, I'm trying to go into the army and I want to become an officer." He was very upset. So I figured it's his life, not mine, so I give it to them. And then I sit down and I write an angry letter to the dean saying, "It's one thing for people to come and do checks, but when they start interfering with the intellectual

purity of what people are doing, saying 'Can we dare make someone an officer who's writing on communism?' then they're interfering with the educational process, and we ought to stop it." At the end of the semester, the dean writes me a letter and says, "I understand, Professor Levine, your concern. You will be glad that this had a happy ending. They were so impressed with his thesis that they are putting him into army intelligence."

So that was part of that world. These were young men, on the make, in whatever sense; some of them were on the make in the academe, some in business, some in the government. But they were coming from a very good place to get well placed and they did get well placed and they had that on their minds. They knew who they were. Did I talk to you about visiting the eating clubs?

10-00:28:50

Lage: No.

10-00:28:51

Levine: I'm going to give you three experiences, this is one. The second experience was visiting the eating clubs. Princeton kids did not have fraternities. They had eating clubs. They did not live at the clubs, they ate at the eating clubs. They lived in dormitories. If you did not get into an eating club at Princeton, you were in trouble, and people didn't get in. Either some did not want to get in, or did not get in; they were all called "weenies."

10-00:29:15

Lage: The ones who didn't get in?

10-00:29:16

Levine: The ones who didn't get in, all weenies. The ones who didn't get in for ideological reasons or the ones who couldn't get in, fat kids, stuttering kids, Communist kids, jerky kids, whatever. Effeminate kids.

10-00:29:32

Lage: Were they Jewish kids?

10-00:29:33

Levine: Some of them were Jewish kids.

10-00:29:37

Lage: But were there Jewish kids in the eating club?

10-00:29:38

Levine: Oh sure, there must have been. Black kids, there were probably black kids. In fact, President Goheen of Princeton was so upset about this that he created a Princeton Eating Club in the building, in one of the buildings. They had a separate dining room, and kids could join. Of course, before going into that, they had to eat on the avenue, and since kids all belonged to eating clubs it wasn't a big eating avenue. Or they had to use the not-so-good student cafeteria. So there was a problem, there's no question, that he tried to solve by

creating a Princeton Eating Club. So you'd get an invitation to eating clubs; it was a sign that the kids liked you. So you go there and I wore—

10-00:30:22

Lage: How were you dressed? Did you have short hair at the time?

10-00:30:30

Levine: I had short hair by our standards now. But by those standards—but when I got to Berkeley, one of my friends' kids said, [whispers] "Why doesn't he get a haircut?" It was Bob Middlekauff's son, "Why doesn't he get a haircut? Shh-shh." [laughter] So my hair was a little long for those days, which meant it grew a little over the ears, but it was not long like this. The Beatles shocked me as much as they shocked anyone else with their hairstyles. No, I had normal hair, and I wore a jacket and I wore a tie. I did that the first year or two at Berkeley, too. That's what you did. I had my suit, I was a very skinny kid, young man.

So I went to the eating club. I learned a lot of things about myself at Princeton, I could talk to these people, which is interesting, I didn't know that. So I went, and these kids were so well-spoken, most of them. But this is what got me—it was very nice, I enjoyed myself, I had a nice meal. They always had a few professors at the eating club on any given evening. Maybe there were evenings in which you could invite professors. The meal was served—now, who was serving the meal? Well, sometimes there were black, or Hispanic, Puerto Rican, people from the community, but sometimes maybe other students who didn't have money. I don't fully understand that process. That's what I would have liked to learn more about. Then after your eating adventure—these were beautiful buildings, the eating clubs, paneled rooms.

10-00:32:03

Lage: Places you hadn't really been.

10-00:32:04

Levine: Yeah. They looked like bankers would—but that's what these kids were preparing for, that world, wherever it would be. Many of them—I don't mean to be cruel to them because they were nice kids. Then I went out into some room, the foyer or whatever, and a little drink was given to me. There was wine with the meal, this was a wet campus, and then a little drink of some after dinner stuff. I didn't know anything about that. And I sipped it with them. We had nice conversations. Even then I was a pretty good conversationalist, and they were very good. They were good. Then someone would say, "Well, sir,"—the watch came out—"Well, sir,"—it was like nine o'clock—"We know how very busy you are, we'll take no more of your time, thank you so much." They were getting up while they were doing this. They were dismissing me. I sat there amazed at that social—

10-00:32:56

Lage: You continued to sit?

10-00:33:00

Levine: No, I left. I was preparing classes, I was a busy guy.

10-00:33:03

Lage: You were busy, in truth.

10-00:33:06

Levine: But what got me, I'm always awkward about doing that. If someone comes to my house, I often decide to—when I invite someone to this house, it's hard to send them away. They have to make the move. You can't say, "It's time for you to leave now." But some people can do that, but they were doing that. They were telling me in the politest possible way that it was time for me to leave by telling me that they had only my interests at heart. And I thought, "Wow, they're preparing themselves for a world in which you have to do those things and you can do those things."

10-00:33:36

Lage: And they were prepared as children.

10-00:33:37

Levine: Yes, they saw it. They learned how to do it. They were enormously polite, and it scared me to death.

10-00:33:45

Lage: That must have been awkward, for you. Didn't that feel strange?

10-00:33:52

Levine: Well, I didn't realize that I was a proto-anthropologist. I'm very anthropological. Once I began to read those guys and gals at Berkeley and use them in my book on African-American history, I realized that that was a method very amenable to me. I liked it.

10-00:34:12

Lage: We're going to get to that next time. That's important.

10-00:34:17

Levine: I was doing a little anthropological work here, without knowing it. I was learning about another culture, and I was quite interested.

10-00:34:26

Lage: They didn't call you "sir" at City College?

10-00:34:28

Levine: They called you professor, even when you weren't. Or "mister." They didn't call you "sir" at City College.

10-00:34:32

Lage: But they didn't call you "Larry."

10-00:34:35

Levine:

No. Because I didn't teach seniors; I taught mainly juniors and sophomores in these introductory courses and no, they weren't about to do that. It's hard to get students to call you—and now, it's almost impossible because I'm so old, that they see me as now their grandfather. Anyway, so that's a second story of Princeton.

A third story of Princeton—all of this has to do with what a different world it was. Arno Mayer, a professor of European history, student of Carl Schorske's, who later helped bring Carl to Princeton and got that second book out of Carl. He's a very vigorous—he's still alive—he's a very vigorous guy, a very assertive guy, a very smart guy, and who, it turns out, came from Luxembourg, was a Jew, had to leave, and his family had to leave. He was very young, of course. They had money. I knew none of this. This is a story about parochial Larry, but you had to get into some other world at some point of your life unless you lived in New York only. Arno invites me to his home. Very sweet—I was invited to the home of Bob Palmer, Robert Palmer, the famous French historian. Talk about manners. He invited me to his home, I knocked on the door, he came to the door, and he said, "I'm so pleased you're here. My friends call me Bob; what do your friends call you?" And again, I was agog at this. This is Robert Palmer, now, the most famous historian in America at the moment on the French Revolution. His books were sold by the Book-of-the-Month Club. Bob was very famous and a very nice man, a Midwestern guy, "Well!" [Midwestern accent] "Well, my friends call me Bob; what do your friends call you?"

10-00:36:22

Lage:

So it was a different tone of voice than the Eastern establishment?

10-00:36:24

Levine:

Yes, and also it was a different—at City College, I called them all professor, they called me Larry. Here, this guy was telling me to call him Bob and doing it in such a smooth way; like students dismissing me, he was welcoming me and it was the same kind—if I had stayed at Princeton, I would have learned how to do that too, I have no doubt.

So I go to Arno Mayer's house, and I look in and it's a glass door. There's a staircase. I think it's an apartment building, I've never seen anything so big, and I ring the bell. A black woman in a white uniform comes to the door. Then I realize that at the bottom of the staircase, there's Arno and his wife and a couple of other people, and I said to myself, "Well, isn't that sweet? They've come down from their apartment to greet me." Well, that's what I said to myself. The black woman, who is a maid in their house, I thought she was like a doorman in this apartment building. She opens the door and says, "Welcome," and she's very nice and I walk over in there, and a drink is put in my hand, and I realize that we're in their foyer. And there's a dining room we're about to go into and we're standing around talking, waiting for everyone to come. And it's a private home. And now if I looked at it, it probably

wouldn't even be a big private home. I'm struck again and again by how many homes I went into in those days thinking they were palatial, which I have revisited twenty years later and realized they were small.

10-00:38:03

Lage: Well, you were used to the New York apartment.

10-00:38:05

Levine: That's right, the little apartments in New York. So anyway, that's a story about me and another world. I'd like to end the Princeton thing before we quit so we can go to Berkeley.

10-00:38:16

Lage: Right. I think so too.

10-00:38:17

Levine: So, let me—did I tell you the Eric Goldman story yet?

10-00:38:23

Lage: You did, last time.

10-00:38:26

Levine: About Jews and blacks? Yes, right. Okay, so we don't need this. Is there any other—?

10-00:38:32

Lage: The only thing we don't have—and maybe this should come later—is politics. Your interest and the interest on campuses.

10-00:38:39

Levine: Okay. The stuff I did in New York—you see, I lived two lives. That's what I was trying to say before; until I got to Berkeley I lived un-integrated lives. Columbia graduate student but a Columbia teacher. Friends at Columbia but I also still had friends in my own neighborhood. And it was my own neighborhood. After all, until '59—I entered Columbia in '55, so the first half of my Columbia years—I was still living in Washington Heights, still all of that stuff. The fruit store was still in my life though not as completely as it had been. I hadn't made a break with that life. When I went to Princeton, I made a break, but I still had two worlds because I left every Friday and went to New York, and spent Friday night, Saturday night, and Sunday night in New York. I had girlfriends, dates, heartbreaks, all the stuff you have, back in New York during that year. My parents came one Sunday to visit me. I brought—

10-00:39:38

Lage: To visit your apartment?

10-00:38:41

Levine: No, to visit me at Princeton. They had never been in that—they were very proud. You see, my father called all his sisters—and he had many siblings—called them to tell them Larry's at Princeton. Every one of them knew what

that meant. He was so proud. When I went to Berkeley, none of them knew what that meant. None of them. And then Berkeley became famous for riots, as they called them in my family, "Why are you staying at that place, with all of the riots? Can't you get a job?" That kind of stuff. So Princeton was a good moment.

10-00:40:11

Lage: Yeah, in the family.

10-00:40:15

Levine: So, maybe I don't have other stories. I've told about living in that little place with Bennett Hill. I mean, Bennett Hill was in it too.

10-00:40:24

Lage: And waiting for the common bathroom.

10-00:40:28

Levine: And the Princeton students were too male for me, I have to confess, but they were good. They were good students. The thing that amazed me about them was how parochial they were in some sense. Or maybe class-parochial is what I mean. There were a lot of outbursts over the weekend. In fact, I lived on a street opposite a lot of the dormitories where the students lived, and my little house was opposite of the dormitories. People would say, "When you walk home on Friday night, walk on your side of the street, not their side of the street because you never know what's going to come out at you." And it is true. The students would have outbursts. The students staying there.

Now many of the students went on dates. They would date girls at Bryn Mawr and girls at Smith and the like. I would talk to some of the students who didn't have dates, and they'd say, "Yeah, sir, it's very expensive to go up there." I said, "You know, just a spitting's distance from here, a twenty-minute bus ride from here is Douglas College. It's a woman's college." Douglas College is the women's college in Rutgers. Like many of these women's colleges I think it's not heard of so much, like Radcliffe. But Douglas College was the women's college at Rutgers University in New Brunswick, a half an hour bus ride away. And there was a good bus service to New Brunswick. I went home that way. I took the bus to New York, we went through New Brunswick, so I know it. Lots of people from Rutgers got on the bus, faculty going to New York, or students, for the weekend or for the day. So it was a very easy ride. The bus was right on the main street of Princeton, it took you to the main street of New Brunswick. They wouldn't take a date with Douglas girls. Douglas was a state university; you know, Rutgers was a state university. I thought that was too bad. That bothered me a lot.

So they were preparing to enter a world, and they came from a world, or they were making this new world their world, even if they didn't come from the world. Princeton was a complicated place. It was certainly educating them. The courses were good and the History Department was superb, superb

History Department. Great teachers, they took teaching seriously. I admired that a lot. But these students lived in a world that was very, very—more different from mine than the Berkeley students were to live in. But it was very good for me to be there. And as I say, I would have liked a little more time. Let me simply say that the faculty *could not have been nicer* to me than it was. I was invited to homes—I'm talking now about the senior faculty. I made good, good friends among the junior faculty. It lasted too short a time.

10-00:43:16

Lage: Only what, a year?

10-00:43:17

Levine: I was only there a year. I got a letter—we can end on this—I got a letter from Berkeley saying that I had been recommended by Dick Hofstadter for a job in twentieth-century history and would I come to speak at the convention, which was going to be in Washington, the American Historical Convention, which was held in those days between Christmas and New Year's. If it had been in any place that I had to travel a long distance, I wouldn't have gone. I was perfectly okay with where I was. I wasn't—Berkeley was just a name to me. I wasn't anxious to go 3,000 miles away, and I wouldn't have gone. But it was in Washington, and quite a few people were going to the AHR from Princeton, and they were driving down, I got a ride. So I went. It was a lark. Had it been in Minnesota, I swear I wouldn't have gone. Had it been somewhere else, you know, had it been on the West Coast, I wouldn't have dreamed of going. But there were guys in my department saying, "Hey, I'm going down there, Larry. Drive with me, and we'll share a hotel room," and that kind of stuff. So down I went and that changed my life.

10-00:44:32

Lage: That's a good place to break off and start up with next time.

10-00:44:35

Levine: I think so.

10-00:44:37

Lage: We're actually getting to Berkeley after five sessions. [laughter] But we've gotten a lot of—we've gotten more than just those years, I think.

10-00:44:53

Levine: We have. We could cut some of this out. This is going to be a big fat book.

10-00:44:56

Lage: Don't talk like that!

10-00:44:59

Levine: Maybe I have less to say about Berkeley than you think.

10-00:45:01

Lage: [laughter]

## Interview 6: May 10, 2005

[Audio File 11]

11:00:00:00

Lage: This is May 10<sup>th</sup>, 2005. And this is the sixth interview with Larry Levine, for our oral history on the History Department. Last time we had you right on the brink of coming to Berkeley. You had been invited to interview down in Washington, DC. So let's start with that, how you were hired, and how you decided to come to Berkeley, and what that meant.

11:00:00:33

Levine: Okay. I received a letter inviting me to come to the—it must have been early December of my first semester at Princeton—I received a letter, addressed to my home address in New York City, because I had kept my apartment there with a couple of friends. And I was invited to come to interview for a job at Berkeley. I had *really* no interest in interviewing for a job anywhere. I was just beginning the job at Princeton College, they just notified me. I was on a—because I was an instructor, and because I hadn't yet finished my dissertation, I was in the process of doing that. I was on a one-year contract at Princeton, but they were very—the Princeton people were very good. They told me before the convention, in December, before I got this invitation, that they were rehiring me for the next year. And once I finished my dissertation, then they give you three-, four-, five-year contracts, something like that. It's a different system at Berkeley, where you have an open contract, because you're tenure track. Anyway, I had no intention, you know, I had no desire to leave. I was set up nicely, and I was having an experience that was different at Princeton, and it was prestigious and all of that. But the AHA, American Historical Association, was in Washington. I had a friend who came over from Princeton, who was driving down there. So I said, "Okay, I'll go." So I told Berkeley I would be there. And my experience was a strange one, and maybe worth memorializing.

11:00:02:15

Lage: Okay. Especially if it tells us something about Berkeley at that point.

11:00:02:18

Levine: Well, it tells us what Berkeley was doing. I didn't know this. Berkeley was hiring massively, young people. One of the things that had just happened was that Clark Kerr had put a moratorium on the hiring at tenure, not *to* tenure but *at* tenure, for Berkeley, UC Berkeley and UCLA. So, because he wanted to build up—in other words, they could only hire non-tenured people. They could then give them tenure, and promote them and all of that. But that was to save money. They could only—of course, it was porous, as all these things are. But it was a crisis for the two big universities in the system. Clark Kerr was trying to build up the smaller campuses, and he was trying to save money, to put the money into hiring professors for places like UC Santa Cruz, and UC Santa Barbara, and he had just built that new system, and he decided to —

11-00:03:16

Lage: This was '62.

11-00:03:18

Levine: Yes. Whenever that came up, but by '62, Berkeley knew about it. And therefore they were hiring at the lowest level. Many years later, Bill Bouwsma told me that when—he had come to Berkeley not that many years before; he came with tenure to Berkeley from Illinois—he told me that he thought this moratorium on hiring at tenure for full professors and associate professors who had already made their mark, was going to kill the department, the university. And he said—of course he was saying this to someone who benefited from that moratorium—he said to me, “I think in fact it’s made the department. We hired so many bright young people and helped them develop, and most of them got tenure.”

11-00:04:04

Lage: It gives a different feel to a department, I would think.

11-00:04:07

Levine: George Mason University, where I teach now, is doing exactly this. I mean, it is hiring a lot of bright young people. It’s a very good feeling in the department.

11-00:04:17

Lage: I would think—tell me if this is right or wrong—when you hire young people with the expectation that they’ll get tenure—I mean, you don’t hire twenty and only expect five to stay—does it lead to more fostering of the young people by the older ones, or more collegiality?

11-00:04:38

Levine: It may lead to that. But it also leads to being very careful who you hire, because you put a terrific investment in the hiring. I mean, it takes so much time. You’re not just saying, “Okay, yeah, you look all right.” See, Princeton didn’t put much investment in my hiring; no one read my dissertation when I was hired at Princeton. I showed up at an interview, and I couldn’t have been that impressive. There were a lot of people —

11-00:05:02

Lage: Well, you hadn’t finished your dissertation

11-00:05:05

Levine: I hadn’t, but I talked about it. So they basically hired me on Bill Leuchtenburg’s letter, it turned out. Hofstadter was away; it was Leuchtenburg who recommended me. And they had no—they had not that much to lose. If I turned out to be a lemon it was one year. Lemon, this for me, and then they would let me go. Berkeley was hiring someone for up to seven years. They could let them go earlier, if they didn’t do the things they had to do, and therefore they put—and if that person was hopefully a tenured person; they wouldn’t have to go through the process again. So these places put a lot of energy into it. I mean, I know that from my own years at Berkeley,

and from my years now at George Mason. We work very hard to hire someone. George Mason has a bigger problem than Berkeley, because George Mason loses them more easily; they're not Berkeley, and off they go.

Anyway, I went down to the interview, and the first thing I had was a time slot to be interviewed. I turned out to be interviewed by Charles Sellers, a professor of early nineteenth century history. I got to his door at the given time, and he comes out and says, "I'm running late, come back in half an hour." So I did that, I came back in half an hour. And he and I had—we talked in his room. I had been through some of these. The year I was hired at Princeton. One—I think I described it—one unpleasant one at Yale, I don't know if I did or not. But it was an unpleasant interview. The Princeton interview was really impersonal.

Charlie and I sat in a room together, and he interviewed me and then said, "We're having a"—I can't remember if he said party or gathering—at such and such an hour. I said okay. He said, "It would be good if you came to that. You'll meet some of the faculty, and they'll meet you," and I said okay. And I showed up at that hour, and I walk into the Berkeley suite, and there's a guy running around. It turns out he later became a friend of mine, and he was already a good friend of the woman I was ultimately to marry. Tom Angress, who had just that year been told he was not getting tenure. He was a German historian. So he was at the convention, both as a Berkeley faculty member and as a guy on the job market. Though he had one more year, and it was that year we overlapped, that I got to know him. But I didn't know him then, and he was running around the room. He's a frenetic fellow, Tom, still quite alive. I said, "Hi, I'm Larry Levine." He says, "Oh, hi." I say, "I'm here for the gathering," for whatever the word I was using that was used to me. And he said, "Oh, oh, I don't know anything about that." He introduced himself, he said he's a historian at the university. And he was leaving the room, he had to go somewhere—he said, "Feel free to sit down." So I sat down on the couch. I mean, there was an array of bottles in front of me, you know, and then about five minutes later, another young guy comes in. And he, just like I, kind of pokes his head in and says, "Hi, is this where the Berkeley gathering is?" And I say, "Well, I think so. Come on in." I felt like pouring him a scotch. [laughter] And so, before we know it, we have three or four of us, sitting on the couch.

11-00:08:39

Lage:

You're all on the market.

11-00:08:41

Levine:

We're all invited to this gathering; we also have obviously seen Charles Sellers. And then Charles Sellers comes into the room, and says, "I made a terrible mistake. The gathering is not now," and he gives us a time, some evening, at the same room. Well, I'm getting a kind of crummy impression here.

11-00:09:03

Lage: Did you have a good impression of him from your talk, Charles Sellers?

11-00:09:05

Levine: Oh yeah. Charles—you have to get to know Charlie Sellers, he's a quiet guy. But he asked me intelligent questions, and was polite, and there was nothing nasty about it at all. It was pleasant. Yeah. But you remember, he put me off a half an hour where I had to roam the halls, and then he invites me to an un-gathering. So I'm getting the sense that this place is a little discombobulated. But I come back, when the time comes, to this gathering. And I didn't know it then, but they were having three of these. They had one for twentieth-century historians, they had one for colonial historians, for which Bob Middlekauff was ultimately hired, and they had one for, I guess, western historians, for which Gunther Barth was ultimately hired. So they were running three of these marathons, with interviews, with gatherings, because Bob Middlekauff was set up—he was in a cocktail party gathering, and so was Gunther.

So my committee chose a different kind of gathering, as I discovered. I walked in, and there were three professors. The chairman of the department, Delmer Brown, was one of them. They were very polite and nice, and before—and they sat on the couch. And they had a series, I think ten chairs arrayed in a semi-circle around the couch. And as we walked in, they invited us to take a chair. And by the time we all arrived, there were ten of us, give or take one or two. There were ten of us arrayed around the three professors, and we started at one end. I was kind of near the left—as you face it, I was kind of near the right as they—their right hand. And the first—and they were all males—the first guy, they said, "Would you, Mr. Smith, Jones, Brown, would you give a précis of your dissertation?" And so he did.

11-00:10:55

Lage: And here you have no—you have no preparation.

11-00:11:00

Levine: Well, I could give a précis of my dissertation. But I'm not sure I wanted to hear my rivals give précis of their dissertation. I thought this was a really awkward thing. And we get to me, and I give mine, and then we keep going around. It takes quite a while to get—and we finish. So it's been quite—you know, everyone's got five to ten minutes, there are ten of us, that's a long process. We all give—so I'm already wondering about this. Then the bantering begins, and some people down at the other end are telling little jokes, and the professors are laughing. And I'm saying, "What am I doing here?" "This is demeaning," I say to myself. It's really demeaning, and it's unnecessary. I don't have to hear—I don't want to meet those guys, and they shouldn't need to meet me either. So I decide to opt out of this. I have a job, and this whole Berkeley thing was a lark anyway, because if it hadn't been close, if it had been on the other coast, or if it had been in Denver, I wouldn't have gone.

So I get up, and I walk over—right in the middle of this—I walk from the semi-circle, in to the couch, and I say to Delmer Brown, “Thank you so much, Professor Brown. I appreciate your having me here, but I’ve got to go.” I needed to get out of that room. He was shocked. He said, “What do you mean, you have to go?” I said, “Well, I feel I do have to go. Thank you so much for your hospitality.” I waved goodbye to the crowd and walked out of the room. And proceeded to tell stories about this place that invites ten rivals into the same room, has them all describe—it turns out this was not typical. Though Bob Middlekauff had some criticisms himself, going to a cocktail party, full of his rivals, for the job, you know, full of other young people, all were being looked at for the same job; he felt was an awkward thing. But not as awkward as this kind of joint interview. Though I had already been interviewed. Anyway, I told the story to everyone I knew and—

11-00:13:00

Lage: At that meeting?

11-00:13:02

Levine: Sure. I met people, I said, “I was just in there”—because I had been in interviews; I knew about interviews—and I said, “I had the craziest interview at Berkeley.” And then I went back to New York, and I regaled my friends in New York. And I remember—we gave great New Year’s Eve parties, my roommates and I, and on our New Year’s Eve party, I was telling everyone who was interested about these crazy Berkeley folk, and in January or February of 1962—this was December ’61—I get a letter from Berkeley saying they were very interested, very impressed, and would I send my dissertation. And I am really shocked—it must have been January—I was shocked at this. “Impressed?” I walked out.

11-00:13:46

Lage: Maybe that’s what impressed them.

11-00:13:49

Levine: I think it was Charlie. I think this gathering had very little to do with anything. I think Charlie made up his mind whose dissertations he wanted the committee to read. And I sent mine. And I got—the months are not clear to me, whether it was February or March—I got a letter from Berkeley telling me they were willing to hire me. And I had an assistant professorship. It was \$7,700 a year which—I was earning \$6,000 at Princeton—which was more money than my father ever earned in his life. This was a minor crisis for my father. His young boy, who didn’t seem to work but just read books, though he was very proud at the same time, but he wondered why they were paying me so much money so young. He never earned more than \$5,000 a year in his life. So it was good pay. And it set up a real conflict for me.

11-00:14:22

Lage: What did Berkeley mean to you, as a university?

11-00:14:44

Levine:

Nothing. Nothing. I mean, it was a good university. I had once been in Berkeley in 1957, I think it was, could've been '58. I drove across the country with some friends. I had never been west of the Allegheny Mountains. Someone had a car, the three of us piled in the car, and we drove across the country, and we got to Berkeley. And one of the guys had a brother, who was a graduate student at Berkeley, and he put us up. So I saw Berkeley, but by 1961-2 it was a blur. We had been so many places. Berkeley was a very nice college town. It wasn't New York.

And so I was giving up New York because Princeton—I ultimately, I already realized that I was going to cut the schizophrenic life I was living at Princeton. I was going to just move to New York and come in. It was an easy way, there was a bus that took an hour. Whatever, that's what I decided to do. I think I would've done that, and ultimately people did begin to do that. Princeton frowned upon that, and I probably wouldn't have done it too quickly. Nevertheless, I spent four nights in Princeton, and three nights in New York. I had New York, I had that life in New York I liked, friends, and there were a lot of young women in New York, and I didn't know about Berkeley, and certainly there were none in Princeton, which was an all-male place. And then I had my family.

So Berkeley was a very big move. Now, I wasn't thinking of permanence. It seemed to me I would spend a few years in Berkeley. The whole tenure thing had never been—I don't say this with any bravado; I say it, in fact, with some embarrassment. I just didn't realize what tenure meant. I thought, "Yeah, I'll go to Berkeley, spend a few years, it will be an adventure on the western frontier, and I'll come back. I'll publish my book, and I'll get a job somewhere else." It just never occurred to me that I'd stay there. But even leaving to go there was—and of course Princeton meant a lot to my parents, who were not people who understood the system at all, but they certainly had heard of Princeton. They had never heard of Berkeley. So I was in a genuine conundrum. I mean, I had a problem, a genuine dilemma.

Added to this dilemma was another problem. Berkeley was hiring me to replace, in a way—who knows at that level?—but they were replacing a guy named Richard Drinnon, who had not gotten tenure. Richard Drinnon—who I later got to know—Richard Drinnon went through the whole tenure process at Berkeley, and the year I was hired, or the year before I was hired, was told he had one more year to go. So I never met him on the faculty or anything. By the time I got to Berkeley, he was gone. He was a twentieth-century historian. He wrote a dissertation and a book on Emma Goldman. And I had two problems. One was Richard Drinnon. There was a young sociologist who—there was a kind of a group of left-wing faculty at Princeton, I got into it instantly because there weren't a hell of a lot of us. And one of the guys in that group was a man, whose name I'm blocking, who had gotten his PhD in the Sociology Department in Berkeley, and he just came the year I came, and

he said, "Well, you'll be a scab if you go. Drinnon was a radical and they fired him, and you don't want to get in that." So that was one problem. That was a big problem for me.

The other problem was the loyalty oath. Into my humble office in Princeton marched several Princeton full professors who I had never met, and who had never met me, and somehow they heard that this young guy at Princeton, in his first year, had been offered a job at Berkeley. And they came into my office, serially, to tell me I shouldn't go to Berkeley, because I'd have to sign a loyalty oath, whereas here at Princeton, there was no such thing.

11-00:19:02

Lage: And who were they?

11-00:19:04

Levine: Well, I can't remember their names. There was a full professor of English, and a full professor of—some scientist, all people who had left Berkeley.

11-00:19:09

Lage: They had left Berkeley.

11-00:19:10

Levine: Rather than sign a loyalty oath. Yes, yes, they had. And they were just flabbergasted. I had very mixed feelings about that, and I tried to explain part of those mixed feelings to them, and I think it may be worth saying it here. I was not a virgin; when I taught at City College, I signed what was a much worse loyalty oath. The Berkeley loyalty oath was a kind of—it was a serious thing, and they were right to protest it and to ultimately get it rescinded. But it was, as loyalty oaths go, a kind of toothless one.

11-00:19:44

Lage: Well, you were signing something that had replaced what they fought against.

11-00:19:49

Levine: Well, no, it just had been made universal. It hadn't replaced it at all. It now wasn't only directed at Berkeley professors, it was now directed at all civil service. So—I think, this could be wrong, but I don't think so—I think what they had succeeded in doing in their initial protest was getting it applied across the board. Which was good, hit as many people as you can with this nonsense. The nonsense was that you said that you had not in the last—I'm making the number of years up—ten years—there was a finite number of years—in the last ten years you had not belonged to any political organization that advocated the violent overthrow of the government of the United States of America, or the State of California. I guess it was okay to overthrow Utah. [laughter] So why I think this is a toothless oath is, I didn't know that many Communists, but I knew some. And I didn't know anyone who either presently or previously belonged to the Communist Party, who felt that the Communist Party fit that description. It did not advocate the violent overthrow of the United States government, or the State of California's government. It

did not, so there were people in Berkeley who had belonged to the Communist Party who signed that oath with a good conscience. Whether that would've stood up in court, their good conscience, I don't know. But they did. The New York oath was a book. They gave it to you, and it was a list of myriad organizations, down to things like the Book Find Club, a book club, a left-wing book club. And you had to say whether you had belonged to any of those, whether you had subscribed to any of those. And it was quite a massive list. That was a much more serious kind of thing.

11-00:21:35

Lage: And you had signed it.

11-00:21:36

Levine: And I had signed it. Yes, I had. So I didn't find the Berkeley—okay, that's what I told those guys, whose contempt for me increased, obviously. [laughter] What I didn't tell them, but which was probably more important—though I had not yet really been to Berkeley except for that little frivolous trip I took with some friends—but what I really told them, because I knew enough about Berkeley, is that I thought there was probably a lot more freedom at Berkeley than there was at Princeton. It was Berkeley that was a more diverse place—it's ultimately why I left Princeton—Berkeley was a more diverse place with a more diverse student body. They had women, for instance. Not to mention other types, and with less of a sense of itself as, you know, as the most important thing in the world, or one of the most, said I. And I felt this very strongly. So, I had, then, the specific problem of leaving New York and my family and my life. And the general problem of whether this was against my political principles to take this job at this place. So that—

11-00:22:46

Lage: Did that come up in the interviews at all?

11-00:22:50

Levine: Well, it ultimately came up. It didn't come up in the interviews. I didn't know about this in the interviews. Only when I was offered the job was I told I needed this by people who were not at Berkeley but who knew about Berkeley, or who had been at Berkeley. So I went to Dick Hofstadter. The only time—no, I guess, it was the—actually, I went to his office hours. I phoned him once about that job offer at Columbia, but I went to his office hours. And Dick Hofstadter of course was a rock of reason, as he always was. He said to me, "Have you read this fellow Drinnon's book?" I said, "No." He said, "Well, I'd begin there." It was the Drinnon thing that bothered me. So I went and I read his book on Emma Goldman, and I thought it was okay. I didn't think it was a great book, I didn't think it was a bad book. I went back to Hofstadter and I said, "I think he could've gotten tenure with that book," but, I know, but I was just using my own standards. If you were going to give tenure on a book, would that book be tenurable? Yes, it could be. And yes, I could see not giving someone tenure. There were problems with the book, I won't go into them now. But there were also virtues that the book had. It

wasn't a slam dunk, it never is a slam dunk. It rarely is. And then Hofstadter said something which did affect me. He said, "I don't believe a department with"—and I hope I have the right names here; I have the right names, I don't have all of them—"Kenneth Stampp, Charles Sellers, Carl Schorske, Henry May,"—he named a few people—"would have fired a person for political reasons, and that we would not have heard about it. Because I don't think those people would've gone along with it, and I think we would've heard about it." And he said, "So I don't believe that's why they fired him." That helped, and—

11-00:24:43

Lage: And he knew Ken Stampp well.

11-00:24:44

Levine: Oh, they were very close friends, Ken Stampp and Dick Hofstadter. Very, very close friends. And he knew a lot of these people. So, I still couldn't make my mind up. I had a lot of things going here against Berkeley. But the Drinon thing I didn't worry about too much after that, because I kind of agreed with Hofstadter about this. I had a feeling it wasn't political, the firing of Drinon. But I was having a lot of trouble. So I called Delmer Brown, the chair. He was in his last year, as a five-year chairmanship. He later came back when I was there, served three more years. He was a good chairman. I phoned Delmer Brown, I said, "Can I have another week?" I don't know what I was asking for another week for." [laughter] It was just to put it off. And Princeton was getting edgy here. Princeton was saying, "Hey, hey. You know, if you're going to leave us, we have to hire somebody." And Delmer Brown said to me, "You're having trouble making up your mind." I said, "Yes." He said, "Would you like to come out here? Have you ever been here?" I said, "Well, once as a tourist." He said, "Would you like to come out here for a few days?" So I said, "Yes." And out I went. And they were very—

11-00:25:55

Lage: So you flew out.

11-00:25:56

Levine: I flew out. I was picked up at the airport by Charles Sellers, which was very sweet of him. I've been to a lot of universities to give a lot of talks, and you're not always picked up at the airport, I can tell you. He picked me up at the airport, and we got into his car, and he said to me, he said two things to me. One is—by the first time I saw him in the hotel in Washington, he had not read my dissertation, and the second time, this time, he had, which impressed me. Princeton had never read my dissertation, and even when they rehired me, you know, when I—well, that's to come. So, I'm in the car with Charlie, and Charlie says to me, "I want to say that I don't think it is possible to have written a fairer, more meaningful dissertation about William Jennings Bryan than you did," which was nice. And then he—that was my first review. [laughter] And then he said, "Why are you here?" I said, "Okay, I'll tell you why I'm here. I think I'm here," I said, "I have a lot of reasons that make it

hard for me to leave the East." But I said, "What troubles me is what I've heard about the firing of Richard Drinnon"—or they're not rehiring Richard Drinnon, which is more accurate, they're not giving tenure to Richard Drinnon—"and I guess I wanted to find out more about that." I hadn't planned to do this, but since Charlie asked me, I decided to level with him. And he said, "Richard Drinnon was a very close friend of mine." I don't know if I should be saying all this on tape, but I will. "Richard Drinnon was a very close friend of mine, and he was a very close friend of Ken Stampp's," and it's true, he was a friend of those people. And Charlie said, "We voted against him because we didn't think his work was what it should've been."

And that—and you know, this on top of Hofstadter's statement, on top of my reading of the book, made it easier for me. As it turns out, it's not completely clear I was replacing Richard Drinnon, because at Berkeley was Richard Abrams, who had been hired the year before me. So the year I went out there was his first year, and he—for reasons I do not understand and never asked about—he didn't quite have a tenure track position yet or whatever. But he was there teaching twentieth-century history in Drinnon's absence. It wasn't a clean swap. In fact, they ended up hiring two people to do twentieth century, because the Berkeley department was expanding, wildly. And nevertheless, that was an issue, and I thought it was an interesting issue. So I went there, and they gave me lunches and dinners. And Charlie took me out on the town that night, and people were as nice to me as they could be. I met a lot of the faculty. I don't remember meeting a lot of junior faculty, but I probably did. It's a blur; you know, I was there for two and a half days. You meet people galore.

11-00:28:47

Lage:

Were you looking at the place as well?

11-00:28:48

Levine:

I really was, and that's really what made my mind up. I remember the moment. It was noon, probably the next day. I arrive one day, and the next day, it was at noon, and they were giving me a lunch. I mean, how sweet, they were giving this guy who was just finishing his dissertation, or I *had* just finished the dissertation, a lunch, and they gave me a dinner. So that's wooing someone for sure. But I stood under Sather Gate. I was getting ready to go to this lunch. I was all alone on the campus, and you know what happens at noon; the campus suddenly goes from quiet to multitudinous. There were a *sea* of students. And I was standing just on the Telegraph side of Sather Gate, and there were a sea of students, coming from the buildings, walking out to Telegraph Avenue. There were no tables in those days, except four little ones. We'll get to that in detail. And I just stood there, and I felt for a moment like I was on Fifth Avenue. There was a sea of humanity, interesting humanity. Though Berkeley was a much more homogenous place than it was—

11-00:30:00

Lage:

But it had women.

11-00:30:01

Levine: But it had women. And I don't know, it was just a good feeling. I felt at home, 3,000 miles away. I said to myself, and this is of course not true, what I'm about to say, but it's what I said to myself. I said, "Well, I think I'm closer to New York here than I was at Princeton." And of course that's just not true. I was closer to a spirit, but Princeton was —

11-00:30:26

Lage: Much closer to New York.

11-00:30:28

Levine: It was an hour away by bus. So, but that had a very big impact on me. And the last day I was there, I had breakfast with a few people. I then took my bag into San Francisco. That was part of my agenda too. And in those days, there was a downtown air terminal from—you could get a bus or shuttle to the airport, and they had lockers, in those pre-bombing days. And I just put my—it was somewhere around Union Square—I put my bag into a locker, and had the day to roam around, to the late afternoon, anyway. To roam around San Francisco, which I did. And I like to tell this quick story about—I was on the street corner, waiting to cross Geary, or one of those streets in downtown San Francisco, and I was standing next to a Japanese-American guy, not a heck of a lot older than me. And there was a long line of traffic, and we got to chatting, and we chat as we cross the street, and he said, "So you're a tourist." He was from San Francisco, and it was clear I was not. I said, "Not really, I came out here for a job interview," which was putting it simply. And he said, "Oh, where?" I said, "UC Berkeley." He said, "What do you do?" I said, "I'm a historian." And this friendly fellow suddenly turned a little cold. And he said, "You're a historian; I know one thing you won't teach." And I said, "What is that?" He said, "You won't teach what they did to *us* in the war." This is 1962, so it's not—seventeen years after the war. "You won't teach what they did to us in the war," and then he kind of walked away.

11-00:32:10

Lage: Like a challenge.

11-00:32:11

Levine: Yeah, it was. I guess I had asked him what they did, and he told me, and then he walked away. I must say, there I was, twenty-nine years old, with a PhD—I had finished my dissertation by my Berkeley trip—and I hadn't known anything about—really, about that. You know, if you had lived in the West Coast, you would have. But in New York, I didn't. Nor was I taught about it in my courses. I don't remember ever reading about it. And I said to myself, "I damn well will teach about that." [laughter] And I did. There were two books on it at that time, and—matter of fact, there was Jacobus—Jacobus tenBroek, in the Speech Department, was in fact writing a book about it, though I didn't know that. I don't think he had published his book yet. But there was a book or two. I got them out, I read them, and it became part of my first lectures at Berkeley.

So I went home that evening, and very much in turmoil, but I think Berkeley was smart to fly me out. Because I think if they hadn't, I wouldn't have gone. Having seen it, having experienced it, I realized—and San Francisco was so beautiful. But the whole place was beautiful. I decided it would be a nice thing for me to do. It would be a change in my life. I still was convinced the only place you could live was New York, but—so I did decide to go to Berkeley to the—

11-00:33:41

Lage: But without thinking of permanence.

11-00:33:42

Levine: Without thinking of permanence, absolutely not. In fact, if someone had said to me, if you come to Berkeley, you'll live the rest of your adult life here, I would've stayed at Princeton. It was incomprehensible to me to separate myself from New York. But it was an adventure; I was twenty-nine years old, and a guy who hadn't been anywhere, so this was a very exciting thought, to live somewhere else. I'm on my own. You know, there was also—I talk about—one never knows the motives. I came from a very warm and nurturing family, a very large family; my father had eight siblings, my mother had three. There were many cousins and great-uncles, and that kind of thing. And grandparents, and it was a warm family, which is very important in my life, because I think I got some of those attributes myself. Full of laughter and touching, and kissing. It was very European in that sense, it wasn't American at all. And so I keep talking about the difficulty of leaving that family.

But a cousin of mine said to me, many years ago, but long after I left, that maybe that was one of the reasons why I left, in order to gain some independence. Because, you know, lovely, nurturing families are also lovely, smothering families. [laughter] In their own way, they don't mean to be, or maybe they do. You have to account to an awful lot of people for what you're doing. And this was a chance, for a few years of total independence. To go somewhere that was not only beautiful, that not only harbored a great city and a great university, but that was where you knew *nobody*. I mean, that was an adventure. I knew *nobody* on the West Coast, *nobody*. I had one friend who lived in Long View, Washington. That was the closest; I think he had just moved to LA. I grew up with this guy, and the first Thanksgiving, I in fact did go see him for the first Thanksgiving, and his wife.

11-00:35:47

Lage: Well, talk about what it was like coming to Berkeley, and then your first —

11-00:35:51

Levine: Well, before—can I just say a couple things about when I went back. This kind of amazed me. Well, before I went to Berkeley—I just found this so interesting—when I got the Berkeley offer, \$7,700, I went into my chairman's office and said, "I was just offered"—Princeton chairman Jerome Bloom—"I was just offered a job \$7,700 a year, assistant professorship at Berkeley." And

he said, "We match it." I was amazed at that. No department meeting, nothing. I guess—

11-00:36:34

Lage: No reading of your dissertation.

11-00:36:36

Levine: And no reading of my dissertation. And that was a fact that Berkeley had read my dissertation. Charlie Sellers—I don't know who else read it, but he certainly had, and discussed it with me, and *no one* at Princeton had. Well, Berkeley was hiring me for a tenure job. If I didn't mess up, and if my book was good, I was going to get a permanent job. None of this sunk very deeply with me. Princeton was hiring me on a contract for three or four or five years, and they could let me go. Princeton's whole attitude is, "Yes, all the young people we hire are good. Of course they're good, or we wouldn't hire them, and "No, we can't keep them all." And so a lot of people who the department recommends for tenure are not given tenure by the administration. That's a very common syndrome at Princeton, though some get tenure.

At Princeton—I think I mentioned this—Princeton put up—let me say this too: after I got the offer—because once I went to Berkeley, I made my mind up—but after I got the offer in the weeks before I went to Berkeley, I was wined and dined by the Princeton faculty, and by very important Princeton faculty who were very flattering. They would take me to lunch on the avenue with a martini, and they would tell me how important my staying would be to Princeton. And, of course, you know, inevitably we got around to—"We hope you like it here Larry, but you have to understand, you have an opportunity to educate people who are going to be very important people in the world. They're going to have very important jobs in industry, in business, in the government, in the military, and you will have the chance to influence them." That turned me off, I have to tell you, that turned me off. Except for the one year in Princeton, I never—though it wasn't a matter of principle with me, but I never taught in a non-public institution. City College, Berkeley, now George Mason, they're all state universities, or city universities. And I didn't realize it at the time how important that was to me, in a way. I owed public education a lot. But that wasn't a factor, or at least not a conscious one. And so I went.

And a side note: I had read a letter—when I was doing research in Washington to finish my dissertation—I read a letter from Bryan which said something like, "As important as human beings are, friendships can never stand in the way of principle." It was a great quote, and I didn't take it. So I went back on—I got in my car, the summer of 1962, and I drove to Washington, and spent a month in the papers of Bryan looking for that letter. [laughter]

11-00:39:23

Lage: Looking for that one letter?

11-00:39:25

Levine: Well, I was looking for other things too, but that letter was—and never found it. Just never found it. So that's a note to the importance of taking it—if it looks good, take it. Don't let it—don't let it go. And then two friends came to Washington to meet me, and the three of us drove across the country, and —

11-00:39:45

Lage: Oh, that's how you got out here.

11-00:39:47

Levine: Well, I wanted a car. I had a car—you know, I was a bachelor, I didn't have a hell of a lot of stuff. They were willing to move me, but I didn't have much to move. Almost everything I had was in the back of my Peugeot. And we drove across the country, the three of us. And my first night in the Bay Area, as a resident, was we got here too late to the key to the little house I rented.

11-00:40:11

Lage: Had you rented it long distance?

11-00:40:13

Levine: Yeah. Janet Purcell, who was the—P-U-R-C-E-L-L—who was the administrator of the History Department, got me a little house on a street called Buena Street in West Berkeley that was owned by a secretary who was going with Tom Kuhn to Scandinavia, where Kuhn was doing some project, and she was his secretary, and she was going with him. So she rented me her little house. You know, it was a little two-bedroom house. It was a nice first

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11-00:40:43

Lage: Venture.

11-00:40:43

Levine: I'm going to just stop a moment. So this [referring to his own audio recorder] begins to warn you at four minutes, but I can keep going, and I'll just watch it. That's what this means.

I was in Berkeley. I was in Berkeley, California. My friends left about a week later. I drove them to the Oakland Airport, which was then a Quonset hut. It was a midnight flight. I took it myself, more than once. There was a midnight flight to New York from the Oakland Airport for \$99.

11-00:41:17

Lage: So it wasn't that hard to go back East.

11-00:41:20

Levine: No, it wasn't, it was a —

11-00:41:21

Lage: Not quite like not, but —

11-00:41:23

Levine: It was a jet prop; it took 12 hours or so.

11-00:41:24

Lage: Yeah, long flight.

11-00:41:24

Levine: And off they went, and I remember driving away from that airport, driving up University Avenue, and I got off the freeway from Oakland, and thinking, "I'm alone." I knew nobody. The two guys from New York were gone, and I was all alone.

11-00:41:39

Lage: It's a little frightening. [pause tape] Do you want to talk about how you kind of got acculturated and made friends, or do you want to—there's several strands here.

11-00:42:38

Levine: Yeah, there are many things here. Let me talk about that for a moment, because that's a good thing. I only felt all alone—it's a cute little story. I drove up University Avenue, and it wasn't midnight yet. The flight left at midnight, but I got them there early, and then I drove up. And Jay Vee Liquors was open. My goodness, I mean, in New York, you'd have liquor stores open this late. And I walked into the Jay Vee Liquors—it's not there anymore, on University Avenue. In fact, Jay Vee Liquors is becoming—the building that Jay Vee Liquors is in is becoming a synagogue. [laughter] I walked in, and there were shopping carts. I'd never seen anything like that. So I bought myself a bottle of scotch, and I went home and had a couple of scotches, and felt miserable about—"I'm lonely," I did feel lonely. The term hadn't begun yet, and I wasn't really in the —

11-00:43:33

Lage: Was it August then, August '62?

11-00:43:35

Levine: It was, August '62. I remember going to Co-op, to shop, and I saw something that looked like bagels in a bag in the Co-op on Shattuck Avenue. I said, "Bagels," because bagels were not a universal food then. It was a kind of a Jewish food from the big cities. And I picked up the bag, and the bag said something on it. It said, "When is a seagull not a seagull? When it's a Bay gull." I put the bag right back.

11-00:44:07

Lage: You know they weren't New York bagels.

11-00:44:10

Levine: I knew nothing, like that could be good. And, but—acculturation. Well, one of the things that made it easier to acculturate was that there were some young people there, and young people seek each other out. They're all insecure.

11-00:44:27

Lage: In the department, or on campus?

11-00:44:28

Levine: In the department. The inundation was to come, the next year, Reggie Zelnik and Irv Scheiner came, and Gerry Feldman came. But this year, there was Bob Middlekauff, there was Gunther Barth, there was Tom Metcalf. I became friendly with all of them. Richard Abrams was already entering his second year. So there was that. There was the very interesting dinner party. My first dinner party I was invited to by Roger and Ellie Hahn. Roger Hahn was in his second year. He was a historian of science. French-born, he was Jewish, and the family had to leave France during the war. So Roger grew up in the United States, and Ellie was an American. And her father was the first, or had been the first, violinist in the Boston Symphony Orchestra, so they came, both of them, from very cultured backgrounds. And they invited me to dinner. And it was my first Berkeley dinner. And they were young people.

And it was a big dinner table, and there were more forks and knives on that dinner table than I had ever seen in my life. And I said, "Well, I'll just watch other people." I'll watch them, and I'll just do what they do. But then the first dish came out, and it was an artichoke. Now, my father sold artichokes in his little fruit store, and he was absolutely uninquisitive about foods that he saw that he didn't know. He just didn't care about them. There was that whole Jewish thing, "there are the Gentiles and there are us," and they do things we don't do. And that's okay. See, among the religions, the Jewish religion—though there are wings of the Jewish religion that would refute what I'm about to say—but in general Jews are among those religious who are not afraid of living alongside error. They have no desire to wipe error out; they just want to stay error-free. So that they have laws of kosher and the like.

But one day, in an absolutely uncharacteristic act of curiosity, my father asked one of his customers—I was still living at home, I was younger, this was many years earlier—he asked her, how do you cook an artichoke, and how do you eat an artichoke, it's such an odd-looking thing. And she told him. And he brought a bag of artichokes up, for dinner, and he said to my mother, "You boil them, and then we just pick off the leaves, and eat the flesh." So my mother did what he told her. We each got an artichoke on our plate. And we picked off a leaf, and we ate the flesh. There was nothing told to my father, or if it had been told to my father he forgot it, about dipping them in anything. [laughter] So we did that, we put it down. Then we took another one and put it down, and then a third and fourth. And then my father pushed his plate away from him, and said, "*Goyishe naches*." *Goyishe* means Gentile, or *goy* is a gentile. It's not a pejorative term, it's a descriptive term. "He is a gentile, he's not one of us." *Goyishe* means gentile adjective; *naches* means pleasure. [laughter] "Gentiles get pleasure from." [laughter] We can't understand this, and we all pushed our plates away. So the first dish I'm served is an artichoke, and my memory of which was tasteless cardboard, you

know. And so I'm really up to—I'm looking around, my antennae are out. And people pull out the leaf, but they dip it into a yellow fluid, which turned out to be butter, and it was *good*.

11-00:48:15

Lage: The butter has a lot of qualities that add to it.

11-00:48:17

Levine: Yes, of course. But I have since learned to eat artichokes with just a little salt on them too. They're good.

11-00:48:20

Lage: You like artichokes?

11-00:48:23

Levine: I like them, yes. In fact, I don't understand anyone who doesn't like them. And then of course you get to the surgical part, which I had to watch very carefully. When all the leaves are off and you cut away the fuzzy stuff from the heart. So that was an experience for me, the first of many. I was discovering the non-New York Jewish world, even though my hosts were both Jews, as it turned out. But from a different class. But they were young people to be friendly with, and I must say the older people in the department were very nice. There was a nice feeling in the department, there was no doubt. But I expected this—I don't know. There were hierarchies, there were full professors who did things. One of the hierarchical things that outraged me, though I was quiet about it—though I found myself not being very quiet, and I don't understand where I got this from. I was, though I am a very talkative, articulate guy, he said modestly, I was a very shy kid growing up. I was talkative in my family, I told jokes and laughed a lot, my family was a very warm place. But I was talkative with my friends, among my friends too. But the minute I left those worlds, I was quiet. And I had problems at City College which I described, because of this. So I expected to be mute at Berkeley, and yet there I was talking at departmental meetings, proposing things.

11-00:49:59

Lage: Well, it must have given you a feeling that you could talk up.

11-00:50:04

Levine: I think so. I think, because I didn't do that at Princeton. It did give me a feeling. I felt like I was a member of the board here, and it was okay.

11-00:50:12

Lage: But what were the hierarchies? Were you about to tell me—?

11-00:50:16

Levine: Well, all I meant was that they were full professors, and chairs, and—

11-00:50:20

Lage: But did they make you feel that they were of a different sort?

11-00:50:24

Levine: They just were. They understood things I didn't understand. They acted—they had a realm of activity I didn't have. I did mention “outrageous”; I ought to go back to that. My powers of parenthetical talking. The one thing that outraged me at Berkeley—as inexperienced as I was, I knew this was wrong—was that assistant professors taught one more course than tenured professors. At George Mason, where I now teach, assistant professors teach one course less than tenured professors, which is humane and intelligent and a realistic thing to do. But at Berkeley, it was the opposite. Carl Schorske was in his first year as chair. And he killed that. But the rationale was that tenured professors sat on committees and assistant professors did not. And that was true. But what was happening is the department was hiring so many assistant professors, and was growing so quickly, that it was impossible to keep the assistant professors and untenured people off committees. And so that rationale died. And then my second or third year, that discrepancy ended. But that was the only thing that really got me angry. Other than that, I found Berkeley a very fair, decent place then; people were nice to me.

My first semester I taught two small-group courses; I didn't give a lecture course until the second semester. That was a scary thing, the lecture course, because I had never really taught a big lecture course to hundreds of kids. But I taught something called a 103, and courses like that. I taught my first graduate course, which was a little scary too.

11-00:51:55

Lage: Right away, which is—

11-00:52:00

Levine: Well, maybe the second semester. So I remember going around, running around the halls, asking the experienced people what a 103 was. I asked four or five people, I got four or five different answers. And that made me feel good; I realized that 103 was what you made it. It was a small group course, and there were parameters, and it wasn't supposed to be original research, though some people asked for research papers, others taught it as a colloquium, which is what I did. Books, discussing books and things like that. And with short papers. And I felt my way, and it was—I had a good feeling about it. And I spoke up at meetings, and I did discover—Adrienne Koch, K-O-C-H, was in the department then, I will tell that story later.

11-00:52:46

Lage: And that's the one woman

11-00:52:47

Levine: The one woman, and she was a full professor. And a woman whose work I knew, because she had written accessible books on Jefferson. And I remember once saying to the department, proposing in my first year—imagine—a change. And Adrienne Koch said, “Isn't that interesting. Professor Levine, thank you for that suggestion. I propose that we create a committee with

Professor Levine as chair, to [laughter] investigate." So that taught me something, that was very smart of her.

11-00:53:18

Lage: You had your antennae up about—you know, getting reaction from people.

11-00:53:23

Levine: Well, I was just interested in that. They never did create the committee, they never made me chairman. But it—she was telling me, "Buddy, put your money where your mouth is," you know, and that's interesting too. But it started a long history, in my thirty-two years at Berkeley, of my constantly proposing changes. And I think—I think I began to annoy people ultimately with this, but I was seeking, as young people do—I'll tell a story, which is a story for later, but in my first years, I proposed a change in the graduate program, and God knows what it was now. But it was accepted, and we changed the graduate program.

11-00:54:04

Lage: Was this a major change?

11-00:54:05

Levine: It was a visible change.

11-00:54:08

Lage: I wish you could remember what it was.

11-00:54:10

Levine: It was probably not important, and I'll tell you why it's not important. Many, many years later, Tom Laqueur, who was then a young guy, assistant professor, and I was an older, full professor, or a middle-aged full professor, Tom Lequeur came to me in the hall, in the early part of his career at Berkeley—a guy I liked a lot—and said, "Larry, you're interested in graduate education. This is what I want to do, and I'd love it if you could get to the meeting and speak in favor of it." And he proposed a reform that put us right back where it was before my reform many years earlier, which he wasn't around to see. Change to the now-status quo. So the status quo was the Levine reforms, and Tom's reform would bring us back to the status quo ante. And I looked at him, and he was so excited, and I realized—I had been so excited twenty years earlier, or fifteen years earlier—I realized the important thing was not what the change was so much as you had faculty who care about change, who cared about improving, who were looking for perfection. And I said to him, "I will." And I did.

11-00:55:17

Lage: So—and did it—did it?

11-00:55:21

Levine: It passed. [laughter] And we went right back—and so that's why I'm saying: I don't know how important these things are. I think the important thing is to

have people who want to do it. The important thing is to have some ferment and dialogue.

11-00:55:32

Lage: Did you find that? Because we're talking about the early years, because we're trying to set of scene for what—

11-00:55:36

Levine: I found an environment in which you could have then. That is, no one stopped me from speaking at meetings. I was—

11-00:55:43

Lage: Did other people speak up? Or—

11-00:55:46

Levine: Some did, some did. I was shocked that I was one of them. But there I was, "I'm doing it." So, there were young people in the department I became friendly with; I became very, very close to Bob Middlekauff. And George Stocking was in the department, he was in the second or third year, and I became very close with George Stocking and his family. He had four—soon to be five—children. And Wilhelmina, Mina Stocking, his wife, and George and I became—it was one of those friendships that I thought could never, ever die. But friendships do. I don't know, they just somehow have their organic life sometimes, and they come and go. But I was very close. And one or two—one especially—senior people adopted me. Gene Brucker and Pat Brucker, who was then Gene's wife, invited me to their home all the time. And I got to know their kids well, they had three lovely children, and one of whom owns one of the good restaurants in Berkeley, Rivoli. Wendy Brucker, I still see Wendy. And that was just very important to me. So there was that, there was that.

And then I did something, which turned out to be important. I almost immediately found out that there was a Berkeley branch of CORE, the Congress of Racial Equality. I had belonged to the New York, or the Manhattan—I forget how it was organized—branch of CORE, and had picketed Woolworth's and other places that were not hiring. I spent a fair amount of time doing that in New York. I don't know how I did all the things that I did.

11-00:57:24

Lage: Right. That we didn't cover at all, but just the fact that you did it, I don't think we have to do details.

11-00:57:29

Levine: Yeah, I did it. And I look back now on all the things I managed to do as a young person. I managed to write a dissertation, and then a book, to teach courses for the first time, to teach at City College courses far from my area of expertise. And had an active social life, I dated young women. I had a lot of friends and—

11-00:57:54

Lage: And still picket.

11-00:57:56

Levine: And still picketed. [laughter] God knows how. I had to cook dinner once a week in my New York apartment, and shop once a week.

11-00:58:04

Lage: Well, how—no, go ahead. No, I was just responding to what you said about joining CORE here.

11-00:58:08

Levine: Yeah, so it was partly—it was largely a principled act. But it was also an act of familiarity. And CORE sent me out almost immediately. So, while I was adapting to the department, I was learning about the area. One interesting story is, there used to be, on Fruitvale Avenue, I think it was, there was a big Montgomery Ward, which isn't there any longer. I guess Montgomery Ward's not there anymore. It was a big one, and we were picketing it. CORE was picketing Montgomery Ward for hiring practices. And the police relegated us to the parking lot, so we were marching around the parking lot, which was adjacent to the store, of course. And people would—and we would march around, and then when cars were coming in, we would stop. And cars came by. And once I was right on the verge of the part of one of the entrances to the parking lot—well, more than once—and people in the car would call out—some of them, not all of them—would call out things like, "Nigger lover."

11-00:59:25

Lage: You hadn't experienced it in New York?

11-00:59:26

Levine: Not really, no, though I had experienced prejudice in New York. I think I told the story of the redhead, black dishwasher I worked with, who I'm walking around New York with, and we had some problems there. But, here, it was clear. And what surprised me was that some of these insults were hurled at us with a Southern accent. And only later did I realize that many of these were probably Okies and Arkies who had settled in. Southern whites, and of course, many Southern blacks, are from exactly the same places. So, and I did a lot for CORE. I don't know if this is the time to talk about it. I'll just give another thing I did. I got to know the community too when I worked for CORE. Charlie Sellers was, I think, President of the Berkeley CORE, and Charlie was very active in civil rights. And I got to know him well through that.

11-00:60:23

Lage: Was a lot of the leadership from the university?

11-00:60:26

Levine: Well, the Berkeley CORE was largely academics, graduate students. Very few undergraduates. That's an interesting story too. But I just wanted to give one example of the things I did in the first years I was at Berkeley. I was sent out—I was a bachelor—I was sent out, for instance, to Mason McDuffie, who

sold houses, but they also had rental properties. And I'd walk into a Mason McDuffie in downtown Berkeley, and I'd say I was looking for an apartment, two bedrooms, whatever, for a single guy. And they'd give me a list of things to look at. And then, an hour later a black man my age would walk in and ask exactly the same profile. I would get twelve possibilities. He never got any. He'd get no possibilities. Or I'd walk in—I remember one incident very well, because it stays in my mind. They were above Act One and Two [cinemas on Telegraph Avenue], or right near it, there's an apartment on the second story—there were apartments. I went to rent one of those. And this is the second thing. So sometimes I went in, or a black member of CORE would go in first, and then I would, or I'd go in first, and then he would try to rent. And we'd try to do profiles exactly alike, same age, same education if they knew that. They even asked education on one. Same income, we gave the same.

11-00:61:55

Lage: And you'd dress in similar fashion?

11-00:61:59

Levine: Yeah, casual neat. I would go look at an apartment and, if it was available, I would say, "I like this apartment, I want to rent this apartment. But can I just run and get my wife, and have her look at it?" And they would say, "Yes." And then I would bring a black woman in with me. And we never got an apartment, even after the Rumford Act was passed, fair housing. They never rented—I never rented an apartment. And the reason I remember the one above Act One and Act Two is because the woman was furious at us and began to throw things and said, "You're a liar!" And she was right. You see, the one thing that troubled me is I was brought up in a very firm morality; many of us are. You don't lie. Of course we all lie a little bit, but you don't tell egregious lies. You know, if someone says, "Do you like my hat," you can lie. But you're not supposed to lie to people. And we were carrying on a total deception. I was not looking for an apartment, this was not my wife. But they were breaking the law, and the heck with it.

11-00:63:07

Lage: But before the Rumford Act passed were they breaking the law?

11-00:63:11

Levine: No, but we did it anyway. To gather info that you couldn't hire a place if—a mixed couple couldn't hire places, and blacks were not treated the way whites were. I thought this was—I also—I thought this was very important work, and I was delighted to do it.

11-00:63:30

Lage: Was Rumford involved at all? Rumford was the local assemblyman, I believe, here in Berkeley.

11-00:63:34

Levine: Yeah, I think so. Yeah, he was.

11-00:63:36

Lage: But did you have any—?

11-00:63:39

Levine: I never met him, no. Well, there was another—I don't know, maybe we're getting ahead of the game, but maybe not. In the summer of '63, there was a Rumford Act, and it was being bottled up in the committee of Senator Burns, B-U-R-N-S, Senator Hugh Burns.

11-00:63:55

Lage: Hugh Burns, he was a famous one.

11-00:64:57

Levine: Very conservative fellow. And he had the act bottled up in committee and was going to kill it. And CORE decided to have a sleep-in in the rotunda at the State Capitol, and we spent the whole summer of 1963 doing that. We would come and go, I'd spend a few days and leave and then come back. We slept in sleeping bags in the rotunda. And Governor Brown, Pat Brown, Jerry Brown's father, who was then Governor, didn't really know what to do with us, so he left us alone. We were a conundrum to him, and he left us alone. And he left us so alone, in the sense that there was no attempt to remove us, that Charlie began to worry about ineffectuality, *though* tourists saw us—we were in the rotunda of the State Capitol with sleeping bags—and tourists saw us. We would be reading books and talking, and our bags were there, and we were seen by tourists, we were seen by reporters. But Charlie then proposed we escalate and chain ourselves to the bumpers of the senators' cars in the parking lot. And I said, "Not me, Charlie." I didn't trust those guys at all. We had a big debate about this; that was very typical Charlie Sellers. And what we ended up doing is throwing our bodies down in the entrances to the Senate, to prevent the senators from leaving. And we were arrested, but not—nothing happened. They didn't follow up. We were just—

11-00:65:35

Lage: You were arrested.

11-00:65:36

Levine: Well, no, we were being removed. I think we were arrested at that point. They took our names and everything, but we never—

11-00:65:41

Lage: Were you worried about your job with that?

11-00:65:43

Levine: Never. Never. I mean, maybe I was naïve—

11-00:65:46

Lage: Were there any repercussions for that kind of thing?

11-00:65:50

Levine: Never. But the only person in the department who did it besides me was Charlie. We had some graduate students, and as long as I'm on this—because it's an interesting point in my life, which happened in the early years at Berkeley—is we decided in the winter of '63—this is getting awfully close to '64 and all; we're talking about December of '63.

11-00:66:15

Lage: We keep holding off, what happened in '64.

11-00:66:19

Levine: I'll tell this and then we'll get back to the academic side. But we decided—I say we, I don't know that I had anything to do with making these decisions; I was a foot soldier. But the decision was made to picket Berkeley stores during the winter, during the Christmas rush, during the Christmas shopping season, because only one store in all of downtown Berkeley, the Éclair Bakery, which was owned then by a German-Jewish refugee, hired a black. Hired blacks.

11-00:66:48

Lage: That's really incredible.

11-00:66:50

Levine: It was then in downtown Berkeley, and now there still is an Éclair on Telegraph Avenue. I think it's owned by a Vietnamese family or something. They sold the store many years earlier. So, in those days it's hard for—you'll remember this, the Palmer's Drug Store, do you remember Palmer's? There was a drug store on Shattuck Square where Shattuck comes into University. And Shattuck, at that place Shattuck is divided.

11-00:67:18

Lage: Right. It used to be the transportation hub, for the bus.

11-00:67:21

Levine: And this is pre-BART. All the buses were there, so it was a very active place. When BART came, and that no longer became the hub for the buses, I think Palmer's Drug Store had died. But Palmer's Drug Store was an important institution, and it was resolutely segregated. Mr. Palmer threw us out of his store more than once when we went in to talk to people, and tried to tell him to—try to get him to hire black people. So that was the place—we had so much trouble. Our vision was we would blanket Shattuck Avenue with hundreds of picketers. We were after all, a university of 30,000 students. And we never got more than 100 pickets at any point. And I must say Ken Stampf picketed. It was good, but it was futile. So we concentrated on Palmer's Drug Store. So that's the kind of stuff I did.

11-00:68:19

Lage: Did you recruit students on campus?

11-00:68:20

Levine: We had trouble recruiting students on campus. But I think I'll—

11-00:60:21

Lage: You didn't have those tables.

11-00:68:23

Levine: No, we wanted students, we couldn't have a table. We weren't recruiting students. And the students had their own civil rights movement just—they just followed this unsuccessful picketing of ours, the students. But I think I'll hold that off as a pre-FSM story. And we'll get back to the academe.

11-00:68:42

Lage: Let me ask you one other question about CORE though. Was this before there was the change in CORE to emphasize black leadership, so this was—were whites more—?

11-00:68:53

Levine: Absolutely. Whites were very welcome. And I was active in it. That was one familiar thing, and that gave me—and I met people that way—but it gave me a sense of being a resident of this area. You know, I cared about the area, I was fighting for it. The other thing I did, with less success, was petitions. I forget what the—well, like petitions for the Rumford Act, I'm sure. And I'd go around my neighborhood, and I would—the first year, I lived in this little house on Buena Street, which is in the flats, near McKinley and Jefferson and those streets. And in the second year I rented a loft above a garage, a private residence, had a two-bedroom loft, above—I guess it wasn't a loft, it was a kind of apartment, but it was very nice. And it was above their garage. Nice couple rented it to me, on Acton Street, right near Gilman and whatever the streets are there. So I lived in the west part of Berkeley, and I went around my neighborhood to get petitions, and I was often told, "Go to the pink hills. Go to the pink hills and get"—that's kind of interesting. I knew some faculty who lived in the hills, but I didn't live there, and I didn't know much about the hills, and I always got lost when I drove up to the hills. So Berkeley was not—maybe I ought to say this—Berkeley was not a very liberal community.

11-00:70:26

Lage: No, it didn't have liberal leadership.

11-00:70:28

Levine: No, it didn't have liberal leadership, and it had a quite reactionary newspaper. There was a daily newspaper, the *Berkeley Gazette*, the editor of which said once, in these years, that he did not belong to a political party, was not a member of a political party. He felt he shouldn't as editor. But if he was, it would be the John Birch Society. And that's exactly what the whole tone of the *Berkeley Gazette* was. The *Oakland Tribune*, which was another close neighborhood newspaper, a big one in those days, the *Oakland Tribune* was owned by William Knowland, who had been a conservative Republican senator, and tried to become Governor and failed, was defeated. So, the papers—and the *Chronicle* wasn't exactly the epitome of a liberal paper either. The de Young family still owned it. I didn't find this a liberal area, and going around—the real estate agencies were bigoted, and going around in my flats,

going around to the whites—I lived in the white part of the flats—going around to my neighbors, I found them pretty unmoved by the plight of minorities—

11-00:71:35

Lage: They were working-class, was it a working-class neighborhood?

11-00:71:39

Levine: They were working class. Working class or clerks, like that. Yeah, I think they were working class, absolutely. Lower-middle class. Living very differently than lower-middle class people lived in New York, I would say. I was amazed. My father and mother came, December of 1963 to visit me there. They had never been to California, they had never been anywhere, really. They had never been to California. And they just—my father said to me, I was—that's when I was renting this little house on Buena Street. "Well, you'll never have to go on vacation." [laughter] He had never seen anything so beautiful.

11-00:72:16

Lage: To have your own house?

11-00:72:18

Levine: Yeah, to rent a little house. And my father, who had been a country boy in Lithuania—well, he lived in a *shtetl* which was full of orchards and things like that—but who became thoroughly urban in New York, and was sitting in the backyard of this little house one day, he comes into the house and says, "You know, you have vipers back there." I said, "What?" He says, "You have vipers." I went in the back with him and they were snails. He had never seen a snail before. We did have a lot of snails; there seem to be less in Berkeley now. So, it was a beautiful place. My father and mother went off for a little walk one day, and discovered Monterey Market, which was much smaller then. It hadn't moved in, the place that he's in now, it was a supermarket then. And he came home—my father spent his life as a fruit and vegetable guy. He knew the stuff well, he came home with bags of fruits and vegetables. There were only three of us, and he said, "I've never seen stuff that beautiful before."

11-00:73:16

Lage: Oh, that's a wonderful story.

11-00:73:19

Levine: Well, California does have beautiful stuff. There's no question. Especially then. So, that was my life in Berkeley, and to go on just for a moment —

11-00:73:26

Lage: But let's stop here and change, because you're—

## [Audio File 12]

12-00:00:055

Lage: Now we're recording on the next tape, still May 10<sup>th</sup>. Okay. You were just getting into the academic scene

12-00:00:12

Levine: I entered the Berkeley scene in those limited ways. I was active politically in terms of the Congress of Racial Equality, and I met some people outside the academe, but almost all the people I knew were inside the academe, and the academe was my life. A young professor, my book was not yet finished, though I had my degree; I was a doctor—I got a letter from my mother saying her sister said I wasn't a real doctor. [laughter] It's true; I wasn't; I couldn't tell you what the pain was from—I immediately loved my classes. I taught small classes the first semester and just kind of loved them.

12-00:01: 07

Lage: Did you—how did you like the students?

Levine:

I liked the students a lot and noted—see, I had taught young women and young men at City College; at Princeton they were all young men—I noted to some of my colleagues, and this was interesting, that in the small group classes—and I did teach a graduate course right away; I do remember; I taught a 103, which was a senior colloquium for undergraduates, and I taught a whatever it was called, a 200-something, a graduate discussion class, also a colloquium. I used to teach—

12-00:01: 41

Lage: On twentieth century?

12-00:01: 44

Levine: Probably some aspect of, yes. I was hired as a twentieth-century historian and thought of myself as a twentieth-century historian. I was working on the problem of Bryan and his changes; I still had to do that book, but the book was basically done, actually. I put it in a drawer for a while and prepared my classes. The first semester wasn't as hard as it might have been, though the graduate class was a little scary, but I think it went okay. I wasn't a great graduate teacher right away. I was a very, very good undergraduate teacher as it turns out—this is a very immodest thing to say—but I was. I was a successful undergraduate teacher, and to become a successful graduate teacher took a while.

12-00:02: 33

Lage: Is there something to say about why?

12-00:02: 34

Levine: Well, I think I had to mature—I think I had to learn how to treat graduate students.

12-00:02: 40

Lage: How to stop being one and—

12-00:02: 41

Levine: Yes, and I think I had just learned a lot about—though, you know, I will say—this is going to sound immodest too—but, I think it's interesting, because I would tell you objectively right now that I was not a good graduate teacher as a young teacher; I was not good. And I'm a little embarrassed when I think back on those early graduate classes. But I have met two people, one of whom I've known for years; he was an Englishman who came here with his wife and he was on some kind of big fellowship for two years, I forget. For two years he was a graduate student at Berkeley. He ended up being an English journalist, and his wife—as impressive as he was—worked for KPFA, KPFA or KQED, the radio station—

12-00:03: 36

Lage: Well, the local Berkeley one was KPFA.

12-00:03: 38

Levine: The local—yeah, yeah, the KPFA. And they were both very impressive people, and he was in my graduate class, and he told me many years later, "You're out of your mind. That was a great class." And I met at a MacArthur meeting a new MacArthur fellow, who got it for an institute he has, a center he has, a reform center he has in Washington, and they gave him—he fights for poor people—and they gave him a MacArthur for his work. At the first meeting, when my wife and I met him, he turned around and said—he had me my second year of teaching graduate school—and he said, "This was the best teacher I ever had." So—

12-00:04: 18

Lage: So maybe your self-perception is not correct.

12-00:04: 20

Levine: Yeah, that's what—I said to my wife, "Isn't that interesting? I would have said I was a lousy graduate teacher, and he says I was the best teacher." So, you never know. It's hard to judge yourself. But, nevertheless, the *feeling* I had was that my real virtues were in the undergraduate phases at that point. I began to worry about the undergraduate class I had to teach, the big one in the spring, and I even thought maybe I ought to start preparing those lectures, but I discovered something about myself. I sat down to write a lecture, and I took weeks to write one lecture and I go, "See, I can't take weeks to write one lecture, this is—I have to give three lectures a week." So, I decided that what I would do is read for the lectures, but actually write them when I was teaching the class because I realized I couldn't actually write a lecture in a day unless it was the day before I had to give it. But, what I did was—it was a very good way of preparing. I read, I read widely, took notes on subjects I thought I would lecture on.

12-00:05: 22

Lage: Did you pattern after any other lectures that you had yourself sat in on, taken?

12-00:05: 29

Levine: Probably, to a certain extent. Bill Leuchtenburg, he taught a course in twentieth century, a graduate lecture course, which, as I said, Columbia had, and he was a very successful lecturer. He was more political than I was, even in those days. Bill was a very political historian, and, I realized I wasn't, though I didn't fully understand it, but I was less interested in pure politics. But my lectures were pretty political because I didn't know much else then. I was very happy. I went back to my—to go back to what I began to say about these small classes; I found that the women were very much more expressive, very much more prone to show emotion and wonder and things like that. The young men—this was true at City College, it was very true at Princeton, and it was true at Berkeley as well—the young men were more reticent, more guarded, less willing to give exclamations of joy or disgust or anything else, and I said to a few people in the department how marked the difference was between the young women and the young men in terms of their performance in the class, because these were classes in which the students talked. And I got my first taste of what was unintended sexism—I don't think they knew it was sexism; generally we don't know—people would say things to me like, "Oh, yes, those female overachievers," even people who were very active in the civil rights movement. It was something—it was a puzzlement to me how these two things—

12-00:07: 17

Lage: So, it struck you at the time as being—

12-00:07: 19

Levine: Well—

12-00:07: 20

Lage: I mean we didn't talk sexism in those days.

12-00:07: 22

Levine: Oh, well, but I—have I said on tape my story about my education in sexism with the young woman I was dating? And it doesn't—

12-00:07: 32

Lage: I think you mentioned it.

12-00:07: 33

Levine: Well, it's just that I was close to a woman who gave me a primer, because she talked freely about her feelings, and she made me see that things I saw as maybe bad manners were, in fact—she didn't use the word sexism—but were, in fact, sexism, that she was being berated for being a woman, or whatever, and—

12-00:07: 58

Lage: So your consciousness was raised, even in these early days.

12-00:08: 00

Levine:

My consciousness was raised by a friend, who—a woman friend who I had a romantic relationship with for several years, and, yes, it was raised a lot, although I have no doubt that it needed a lot more raising, and I got it in those years. But, yes. So, I did see this as a very strange—

12-00:08: 22

Lage:

Would you challenge the men who said that to you?

12-00:08: 26

Levine:

Well, I did challenge it only in the sense—I certainly wasn't—I challenged it only in the sense that I asked how you could be an overachiever; I didn't understand the concept. If you could achieve this, then you achieved it. And today—to this day, people will say, "Oh, yeah, overachiever." They don't say, "female overachiever." They'll say, "Oh, that term makes a lot of sense," but I'm not sure. It seems to me that what they're describing is anyone who achieves: they devote a lot of their time to this *thing*, they prepare themselves, they care about it, and they achieve. To call that "overachievement," it seems to me, is not a word that's meaningful.

12-00:09: 08

Lage:

It's seems to be denigrating achievement.

12-00:09: 09

Levine:

It's not a word that's meaningful. There *are* people who can achieve in areas that they don't particularly prepare in, it's true, but most of us have to. God knows, if I was a good teacher it's because I overachieved, if you want to use the term that way. I worked very hard, I've worked very hard for everything. The hours I had to put in—most people do—to give a class, to mark a paper, to prepare myself for the things I had to do; I was young; I was just really becoming a historian. I mean—you know, Hofstadter used to say to me, "What's your next book?" and I'd say, "I don't know." He'd say, "What do you mean you don't know? How can you not know what you're going to write?" In my early years at Berkeley I became a historian. I suddenly saw problems I wanted to solve, things I had to do. To this day, you know, I have books in my head that are greater than the time I have to write them; I will not write these books, but—that's where Hofstadter was when he was my teacher, and that's what I became. But I wasn't there yet when I first came to Berkeley. I had written a dissertation which was pretty close to a book; I didn't have to do too much to it. I just took time—

12-00:10: 19

Lage:

And you put it in the drawer, so you really weren't working on your research.

12-00:10: 24

Levine:

I took it out again in the summer of '63, but then I was very active in CORE. But I did begin to work on it, and I realized that I didn't really have to change it very much, and the changes I wanted to make were impossible to make without writing another book; I've described that. So, I published this book

with just some changes; there weren't many. I had done a little more research that summer before I came, looking for the quote, but finding other things as well. I inserted some of those, but on the whole my dissertation was pretty good, and it made a decent first book. It was a very limited first book.

So, I found the teaching situation here wonderful. I met some very nice graduate students; ultimately one of them became my wife—

12-00:11: 06

Lage: Oh, she was your graduate student.

12-00:11: 08

Levine: Well, she was a graduate student; she never was my grad—but she was in German history. But, I will tell that story, how we met. That's the second year. So, the first year I was here was really a very pleasant year. I worked very hard; I liked the place; I liked the people.

12-00:11: 23

Lage: Was your lecture course the 17B or the upper division?

12-00:11: 26

Levine: No, it was—what was the number then? It was 174, which they've now changed to 124, but it was 174B. I lectured on—I was amazed; I guess I haven't said this yet. They asked me to teach a lecture course, it was John Hicks' old lecture course; Richard Abrams taught the first half of it, from Populism through the twenties, and then I was supposed to teach from 1929 to the present. The *present* was—well, I guess it was '63 then; it was the spring semester of my first year, which was January '63. From '29 to '63 is what, forty—thirty-four years. I was supposed to give forty-five lectures on thirty-four years; it just stunned me. I just didn't know what they were talking about. I said, "How am I going to do this?" And these were years that were not really covered. Bill Leuchtenburg did teach a course in twentieth century where he gave lectures, but I hadn't read much about these years; it was my lifetime. You know, the problem always is seeing the events of your lifetime as history, especially in those days; I think it's easier now. It was my lifetime; I was born in '33—

12-00:12: 51

Lage: Oh, that is very interesting, teaching your lifetime as a young man, as history.

12-00:12: 56

Levine: So I hit upon one—I thought a lot about what I was going to do, and I told the students that we can't really begin in 1929 because we have to understand the twenties. I said, "Those of you who've taken Professor Abrams' class," —and there weren't that many who took both halves—"know a considerable amount about the twenties, but those of you who haven't don't, and at the risk of going over some things that some of you know, I'm going to start this with"—I did that 'cause I knew the twenties well and that gave me time. I could lecture on the twenties while figuring out what to do with the rest of these years, and I

spent a lot of time on the thirties because I knew something about that, I had read books on the thirties. The post-thirties was a problem for me; I had to read books—there weren't a lot of great history books on this period, there weren't even a lot of great history books on—studies, scholarly studies of—the thirties yet. It was 1963.

12-00:13: 55

Lage: And what about World War II?

12-00:13: 56

Levine: There were some, but not many.

12-00:14: 00

Lage: Was this any kind of history, social, political?

12-00:14: 03

Levine: Well, yes, but, I think it was assumed—it was not—it was an overall course, you know; it was a year's course in social history and a year's course in intellectual history that other people gave. I followed the political contours, but I found myself getting increasingly interested as this course went on, and in the years after it, getting more and more interested in the culture, getting fascinated by the culture, and it was in those courses that I really began to experiment with using film and assigning novels to them and things like that and using all kinds of materials, talking about machines and housekeeping and, you know, that kind of thing. Reading books on social history.

12-00:14: 53

Lage: You can do a lot if you're only doing forty years.

12-00:14: 55

Levine: Well, the course, of course, grows. And then we ended up changing the way the courses were taught, so I ended up teaching—the course that I ended up teaching was a course that went from the 1870s to the end of the Depression. I taught a course on modernity: "American Culture and Modernity." What happens to an agrarian culture in the age of industrialization? That's the way I taught the course.

12-00:15: 26

Lage: Oh, that's interesting. That kind of takes you back to your Bryan.

12-00:15: 29

Levine: The course is in the—and I went through the Depression and it ended—I ended at the end of the Depression, of course, so the course went from—and then Richard Abrams picked up with World War II and took it to the present; so we did a switcheroo, Abrams and I. This was the result of the quarter system, where this two-semester course became a three-quarter course, so we changed the parameters, and when we reshuffled, when we went back to the semester system, I ended up with the first half of it, which pleased me a lot, because I was becoming, really, a nineteenth-century and early twentieth-century historian; I wrote a book on black culture in slavery; I wrote a book

on high-brow, low-brow Shakespeare and other things in the nineteenth century, so I was moving backwards in a way and, so, I was pleased to teach the first half of the course, ultimately.

12-00:16: 18

Lage:

In those first years, did you get very much into race or gender?

12-00:16: 29

Levine:

Well, race, of course; I was always interested in race. I talked about the Suffrage Movement, I talked about things like that, but I wasn't into gender the way I got into it later. And, you know, when you don't know a great deal about the subject, when it's a subject that is not the subject you're doing research on, you follow the literature, and there weren't a lot of books when I began teaching this course on women in these periods. I had to learn that, as I had to learn a lot of things. I went through graduate school, I went through years of teaching knowing nothing about Native American History, and I still know much too little about it. I do teach a few books in the period. That's the kind of stuff that you needed scholarship to catch up with before you could really—however, saying that you didn't teach it and saying that you didn't have a sensibility about it is another thing, and I think that I did get a sensibility about these problems early on.

So, Berkeley was an all-male department with one exception, Adrienne Koch. That's interesting too in that it was all male—it was not unusual in those days—except for Adrienne, and she was resented. Though, as far as I could see, she did nothing other than what the men did, the men with power. She was one of the guys with power, but she was a gal. You know, she used her power the way—but—the way others did.

12-00:18: 02

Lage:

Other full professors.

12-00:18: 04

Levine:

But I think it was harder for the other full professors and members of the department in general to take it from her. She also had a dilemma—"dilemmar," that's my New York accent; you add R's at the end of words that end with vowels—she had a dilemma that I learned, again from my friend, that is, living in a male world, and doing things that women are not expected to do in the ordinary world, some of these women—[tape break] I think women often felt the need to be feminine, so Adrienne wore loud colors, you know, reds and oranges and all that, and she wore bracelets that sometimes you could—and high heels. My friend did things like this too, just to reassert her femininity, though neither one of them probably had to do that; certainly my friend didn't, she was very much a woman. But, it's hard in this world, being a graduate student where you're in the minority, being on a faculty where you're the only woman.

I think I picked that up because of my own consciousness from my association with a young woman who was starting her teaching at Brooklyn College just when I was starting my teaching. She had put herself through the University of Chicago, my friend Betty, as a stewardess. She was a stewardess and she tried to work the red-eye specials because she had time to read on those flights; people went to bed, and she could sit in the back of the plane and read books for her orals; she was in political science. Then she came to New York—I met her in Washington—she came to New York; she came to teach at Brooklyn College; that was her first job. That same year I became a teacher at City College. Because we had met in Washington, we knew each other, and here she was coming to New York, so I really got to know her well and the dilemmas that she had teaching in a—again, she was teaching in a pretty male department; I think there was another woman in her department.

So, these things are interesting, and I began to observe them and be annoyed by them. That took a little more time, but I was annoyed by the attitude towards women. On the part of very nice people. See, if you could demonize the people who had these attitudes, and say, "Well, they're conservative bastards," you know—but no, they weren't. Some of them were very, very attuned to civil rights, some of them were just generally generous, decent, kind people who said things that they didn't even understand the implications of, I think. Maybe they did. When Adrienne left, a lot of nice people said, "That'll be the last woman we hire for a long time." She was called a "bitch," you know, that kind of—and it seemed to me that she didn't do anything the men didn't do; but it's one thing coming from a male; it's another coming from a female. And this is that kind of that subconscious stuff; this was such a nice group of people.

I really enjoyed being in this department and learned a lot from it. And I learned about tolerance from it in a strange way. When I began my big change from being the student of Bryan to the student of black culture and began to become, overtly, a guy who cared about music, studied it, and introduced it into his classes and things like that, they didn't count on that; they didn't expect me to write nineteenth-century books about slavery and Shakespeare and the like. There was never a word said, I was totally accepted, they couldn't have been nicer about it. I taught the courses they hired me to teach. But my small courses began to change their nature and I began—I never felt any prejudice, and even though some of my colleagues probably wondered about what the hell I was really doing, "what is this?"

12-00:22: 01

Lage: This new kind of history.

12-00:22: 02

Levine: Is that history? I mean Uncle Remus tales and folk tales and sermons, is that really history? I was promoted fast, they saw my work innovation, and they rewarded it. So I have nothing—I did get angry at Berkeley more than once,

but I have nothing but gratitude for the tolerance and openness that I was shown as a young scholar. I was allowed to become myself, I was allowed to grow, I was allowed to change. I would have anyway, I'm sure, but I didn't pay a price for it, and that was very exciting. It was very nice, and I feel terrific—and I'm a little angry at Berkeley for another reason, but—

12-00:22: 47

Lage: Well, we'll get to that I'm sure.

12-00:22: 48

Levine: But I feel enormous gratitude—well, I'm really not angry at Berkeley. I feel tremendous admiration for this institution and gratitude for its openness.

12-00:23: 01

Lage: Do you feel that across the board, or are you talking particularly about the History Department?

12-00:23: 04

Levine: Well, I'm talking about the History Department. I didn't think—there are other departments—there were other departments, I'll mention the Political Science Department, which I didn't think were open at all, I think cloned themselves. There were exceptions: Mike Rogin—I'm blocking names now. Mike was a friend of mine, but there were other people: Hannah Pitkin, there were people—but you saw them because they stuck out, they were different from the thrust of the department. No, I think History was a wonderful department in that sense, and ultimately became an eclectic department, but they had to get over the woman thing. They did, but it was painful and it took—

So, my first year at Berkeley was a success; I enjoyed it. I had a social life; I met—which you couldn't do at Princeton—I met young women; I dated; I enjoyed myself a lot, made friends, liked the community. Nevertheless, let me say that I was never under the illusion that I was living in a cosmopolitan, urban space. I saw Berkeley as a college town. San Francisco I didn't really know and have never really gotten to know as I should of, alas, but it was an urban space. I always felt that if Berkeley didn't have San Francisco, it would be a very unattractive place in many ways. It would be a college town with some coffee shops and some good movies, foreign movies—in those days we thought of, you know, you had movie houses that showed foreign pictures; Berkeley had one right on, you must remember this, on—

12-00:24: 49

Lage: On Telegraph.

12-00:24: 51

Levine: On Telegraph with Pauline Kael being one of the owners, and writing the little blurbs for the movies.

12-00:24: 57

Lage: Getting her apprenticeship for the *New Yorker*.

12-00:25: 01

Levine: Indeed she did. So, I did miss New York—I still miss New York—in those days. I still had the illusion I'd go back, but this was a great interlude, and I enjoyed it and was pleased to be here. And the climate was great; I love this climate, to not be too hot or too cold was a great advantage. So, I had a happy transition to Berkeley, and I'm not sure there's much else to be said about that first year, as I say—and then the second year, in the summer after the first year, the summer of '63, a very busy summer for me, I sat in the rotunda of the State Capitol, my parents came out for two weeks, and a whole bunch of people began to come: Gerry Feldman came; we became very close.

12-00:25: 53

Lage: Came to Berkeley as professors, yes.

12-00:25: 56

Levine: As young professors, assistant professors; Irv Scheiner in Japanese history, Gerry was in German history. Reggie Zelnik, with whom I became very close, walked into my office and said, "Hi, I'm Reggie Zelnik, we have mutual friends." We knew some of the same people back East. But these guys were very important, and there were suddenly—because these were New Yorkers, all three of these guys happened to be Jewish, but they were, more importantly, New Yorkers, and they—I taught a course—

12-00:26: 30

Lage: And was that new, this sort of—?

12-00:26: 32

Levine: There weren't a heck of a lot of people from New York here; Richie Abrams had come from New York.

12-00:26: 36

Lage: And were they New York Jewish from the same background as you?

12-00:26: 41

Levine: That's an interesting question; let me think about this. Reggie came from a more elevated background; his father was an architect; he went to—

12-00:26: 51

Lage: Stanford.

12-00:26: 53

Levine: Yes, and he went to—I think he went to a private school in Riverdale and things like that. Irv Scheiner came from exactly—his father was a grocer, and Gerry Feldman, his father was an upholsterer, I believe. Yeah, I think they came from—though Gerry went to better schools than I did. Nevertheless, yeah, they were recognizable people, not that I needed that; I also enjoyed—you know, I got very close to Gene Brucker; I got very close to—

12-00:27: 16

Lage: From Indiana.

12-00:27: 17

Levine:

He was a farm boy from Illinois. George Stocking was the son of an economist, a professor, with whom I bonded instantly, so it didn't take a—yeah, I was confused; let me talk about this, since we're on this issue. I was confused at Berkeley because, to me—my model of Jew was the New York Jew, and the New York Jew was—well, of course, from my immediate environment, eastern European, but there were German Jews in New York too. But that was my model of Jew. So, when I had young people in my classes, young men and women, and I'd say to them—this was in the first few years I was at Berkeley—I'd say, "Where are you going for the vacation," or "Where are you going this summer; what are you doing this summer?" And they'd say, "I thought I'd go to a kibbutz." Israel was "hero nation" in those days. I'd come home and say to my wife, "Well, isn't that nice? This young gentile kid is going to a kibbutz in Israel." Well, of course, this was not a young gentile kid; it took me a while to realize that. This was a Los Angeles Jew with a name that didn't appear to me to be Jewish. Barton, let's say Barton, who spoke in a totally unrecognizable accent, spoke like a Californian, which, to me, sounded like no accent at all. So, I still carried around a very parochial notion of this—

12-00:28: 50

Lage:

Right, because I've noticed as we talked that you had a very keen ability to identify people who were Jewish: actors who'd changed their names, this and—but you lost that ability when you came to California.

12-00:29: 03

Levine:

I lost that ability, and I realized that I was parochial. That I did realize, and I began, by the way—see, this is probably an interesting transition—I began to get angry at eastern attitudes when I'd lived here for a few years. You know, I ended up marrying, in my second year at Berkeley—at the end of my second year I got married. And I married a woman getting her PhD. My assumption, though we never spoke about it, was that she'd get her PhD and she'd go on the job market and I'd have to go on the job market again, and we'd have to get jobs close together.

12-00:29: 49

Lage:

Which wasn't that common in those days.

12-00:29: 50

Levine:

Which wasn't that common. When we drove across the country in the summer of 1964—we got married in May, the end of May—and in July, we drove across the country so I could introduce her to my parents. We stopped and looked at universities. I remember saying—that was our little thing; we'd stop and look at universities. It was always my assumption that we'd have to leave Berkeley; that we'd have to go out into the broad world and find a job together. It never troubled me; I was never tied to an institution. I am an uninstitutional guy; institutions don't get my loyalty, people do, but institutions don't really. However, am I filled with admiration for the jobs

some institutions do? City College, absolutely. I'm in love with that institution, the institution that educated me. I'm less in love with Columbia, which was very good to me too, and God knows I got a good education at Columbia, but I see it as an elite institution for certain people who can get into it, and I got into it, and I don't feel the same thing about it as I feel about City College. I feel about Berkeley that way. Berkeley, because —

12-00:31: 06

Lage: Which way?

12-00:31: 07

Levine: I mean, like—more like City College. It's a big state university; it educates a wide spectrum of the population, a wider spectrum as the years went by and it got a larger hunk of people. I feel that way about George Mason University, which has a much higher percentage than Berkeley of first-generation college students, people who have never—from families where no one had gone to college. Forty percent of the students at George Mason are either foreign born—themselves foreign-born—or come from minority groups. We have a very high percentage of people like this, and a lot of the people from the 60 percent are also first generation. So, I feel very good about institutions that do that; I understand you need all kinds of institutions, but I'm pleased I've been lucky enough to work—spend my life working—at such institutions. So, in that sense, I recognize differences in institutions, but I'm just—something in me refuses to be institutional. I don't believe in the institution; I don't find myself giving money to institutions; I give money to causes, and charities, and things like that. It's just the way I am.

So, I came to Berkeley, I like Berkeley, but I could have left Berkeley. I did not believe—if I hadn't gotten tenure, it would have been a personal slap, I would have wondered about my ability, but I wouldn't have died because I couldn't stay at Berkeley; that wouldn't have been the issue. The issue would have been, "Am I any good? Are they right?" That would have been the issue, but not that, "Oh, God, now I can't spend my life at Berkeley." I just never felt that way and was always threatening to leave this place—I mean, not threatening them, but threatening my poor wife and kids. I got job offers and I'd say, "Wouldn't it be interesting to go to this place or that place," and—

12-00:32: 57

Lage: They would say no?

12-00:32: 58

Levine: They would—my wife was very tolerant of me—I didn't do this a lot, but I found myself being antsy, ready to go somewhere else, and ready to do something else, and, ultimately, in 1994, I did the exact thing—

12-00:33: 09

Lage: Well, you did. Should we—we're probably—we shouldn't launch into a totally new subject now, but—

12-00:33: 17

Levine: Well, let me—no. Let me perhaps talk about—Okay, no.

12-00:33: 24

Lage: We have Cornelia.

12-00:33: 25

Levine: Let me talk about my—about getting married.

12-00:33: 27

Lage: Your marriage and what that meant, your family reaction and—

12-00:33: 28

Levine: Yeah, should I just—yeah, should I just—

12-00:33: 30

Lage: Yeah, I think that's a good thing, yeah. I think that's a good thing to talk about.

12-00:33: 34

Levine: Carl Schorske was a great chair, I thought. He only served for two years or so; he got ill and he had to leave the chairmanship. I think he served for two years, my first two years here. I had great admiration for Carl Schorske. He asked me, in the spring of my first year, if I would teach History 101 the following year. Carl also, I think, at that moment, cut out this business of our teaching an extra course; it was either that moment or the next year, but I think it was then. He asked me if I'd teach, as a favor to him, he said—101 is the historiography course, a course where people learn historiography, and learn about how to write a paper. History majors have to take it; it's a very hard course. In those days, there was a lecture—that no longer existed some years later—all the students in the class would come to the lecture. I was in charge of the class, and I gave the lectures, and then they were broken up into small groups with TAs, and they wrote their papers. So I had fifteen, sixteen, seventeen TAs, and they were of all fields, because we taught this course in every field; so that those who were so minded could write German history or Middle Eastern history or whatever. That's where I met my wife; she was a TA in that course along with a host of others. We had weekly meetings in that nice little building behind Dwinelle Hall that's now the Dramatic Arts. We used to have offices in that building, and there was a nice meeting room, and we used to meet once a week, and they all came to my—and the TAs took notes in my—so Carl asked me to teach that course; that's a hard course to teach for a young man who's just feeling his way.

I quickly decided to teach the course with the help of my colleagues. I thought, "Am I going to really—in a course where a lot of the students are writing papers in other fields—am I really going to just give lectures on American history, the historiography of the United States, for fifteen weeks? So I asked a lot of my colleagues to come in. Woodrow Borah came in and talked about Latin American history; Gene Brucker came in and talked about Renaissance Italian history, the historiography of and the problems in the field

that historians have to understand and grapple with. It was great. I gave three or four of the lectures, but the rest of them were given by my colleagues, I went around and I asked them. I don't know what the undergraduates thought of these lectures; the graduate students thought they were manna from Heaven. They were all thinking—The undergraduates were pragmatic; they understood that, basically, they were going to be judged on their paper, and we did cut those lectures out, ultimately, but it was an experience for me, and I learned a lot from that course, and I met my wife.

12-00:36: 38

Lage:

Were there many women TAs? Many women graduate students in general?

12-00:36: 42

Levine:

There were always a fair number of female graduate students; yeah, there were women. But they've grown in number, I think; I've never done a statistical thing, but there were. It wasn't unusual, and it wasn't at Columbia either. I think a lot of them suffered from the insensitivity, unknown insensitivity, unconscious insensitivity of males, I think so, from their fellow graduate students. Some of these guys looked down on these women, and some of the professors wondered what they were doing; they weren't going to—it was still in that part of our history of the academe where men thought—some men thought that they were wasting their time educating women because they were going to get married and become housewives and all that education would go to hell. A woman on the faculty here, a woman of my generation in another department—I'm not mentioning her name because I don't think it's important to, and she told me this story and I'm not sure she wants it out; let her tell it—but she told me she had been a graduate student here; she got her PhD here in another field, not history, and as a graduate student she got a big fellowship, and she then got engaged and she wore an engagement ring, and when her professor saw the engagement ring, he took the fellowship away from her. That's the—that was the Zeitgeist of this place, of *most* places. There was a lot of ambivalence about the place of women in the academe. I never felt that about the women undergraduates, even in spite of that remark about female overachievers, but, I think, once you got to the graduate side of it, and the faculty side of it, there was a lot of ambivalence. It was a male preserve.

Look, I was in a group that had just broken into this preserve. The only reason that I mention Jews is because they were few and far between in the academe, and suddenly here they were being hired. This was the break, in the 1960s; Jews were making their way, eastern European Jews many of them. You see, what we have here is a—if they were English Jews or they—but a lot of these came from eastern European backgrounds. What you got coming into the academe was not just white people but Italian Catholics were coming in, Gene Genovese, my good buddy from Columbia was coming in, people like that were coming into the academe, they had never been in the academe. That was

a very, very important change. When Carl Bridenbaugh gave his famous speech, and he said that he—that was during my first year of Berkeley—

12-00:39: 38

Lage:

Yeah, we—now we did talk about Carl Bridenbaugh so—

12-00:39.41

Levine:

We did, but I just wanted to say Bridenbaugh was right when he said these people can't understand the past. What he really meant is, "They can't understand it the way I do," and they didn't. They began to pay attention to immigration, because they came from families, and they saw these families as American as I did. They began to talk about other kinds of religions; they began to talk about blacks, and women, and the like. So, it did change, and this was the break, and that's the only reason that I mention this. There were also little islands of familiarity. I didn't like them all, and I did like a lot of the people who had been here when I got here. I was also growing; I was learning; I was meeting other people; I was touching other cultures; that was very, very exciting.

So, my wife, who was a German immigrant who lived in Germany during World War II; we grew up on the other side, we were enemies. We were almost exactly the same age; I was born in February of '33 and she was born in May—today is her birthday—May 10, 1933. So, we were a few months apart in age and we went through similar experiences. We were both in war-torn countries, though my country was less war-torn than hers. My granddaughter, who is sixteen, a sophomore in high school, just had us come to her high school in Orinda to talk about our experiences in World War II; she'd just studied World War II, and Cornelia talked about what it was like to grow up in Germany during World War II and I talked about what it was like to grow up in—

12-00:41: 21

Lage:

How interesting!

12-00:41: 22

Levine:

—the United States during World War. Yeah, interesting.

12-00:41: 24

Lage:

But your family probably didn't think it was too interesting.

12-00:41: 27

Levine:

No. My family would have been very opposed to it if I had given them the opportunity, but I didn't. I decided very early on that this really had to be my decision, and the fact that there were 3,000 miles between us made it much easier. If I had met Cornelia in New York it would have been a bigger problem. I had brought home my friend Betty, for instance; I brought her home and my mother was—my parents were not amused by this. My parents were very open, decent, and they treated her very kindly, but they didn't want me marrying out of the religion, certainly not. So, when I fell in love and

decided that I wanted to get married to Cornelia, I didn't tell my family until it was too late to do the wrong thing; I told them a few days before the marriage. I can't remember how soon my mother said "but"—my wife had a child by a previous marriage and he was eight years old when we got married, so my mother played on that, not on my wife's religion or ethnicity. The fact that she was a German and lived in Germany may have been a problem, but I don't think it was. That she was Protestant was. That she had been married before and divorced probably was, also. There was too much against my wife, and, therefore, I decided not to give them the chance to do or say things they would regret and that might cause problems. It was the smartest thing I ever did because, when I brought her home in the summer of '64, I brought her home to love. There was just openness and love to her and our son—

12-00:43: 01

Lage: Oh, that's wonderful!

12-00:43: 01

Levine: I suddenly brought home an eight year old. There was nothing but kindness and love, and I knew that. I knew that; I knew my family; I knew that that's how it would be.

12-00:43: 11

Lage: You gave them a year, did you, to get used to that, or did you go home right away?

12-00:43: 14

Levine: No, no, no, no. We got married in May and we went home in June and July. We had to wait for the term to stop and for us to find a place to live and all that. No, no. We drove back with an eight year old.

12-00:43: 30

Lage: You learned to be a father rather quickly!

12-00:43: 32

Levine: Yeah, I did. I was—yeah, I did. A big education. Anyway, that worked out very nicely, and I met my wife and—

12-00:43: 41

Lage: Were there any problems with your marrying a graduate student, as far as the department was concerned? Any eyebrows raised over that?

12-00:43: 47

Levine: Oh, well, yeah, there were, there were. We got married in May, and she took her orals in December or November of 1964—we got married in May of 1964—and there were complaints. I won't mention the names because, you know, but the complaints, were, "What are we supposed to do? Fail your wife?" I said, "Yeah. If she deserves to fail, fail her. There's no problem. She'll accept it and I'll accept it. Fail her. I have total faith in your ability to judge my wife." One guy, who was on her orals, came and talked to me about it; he was upset. I said, "Fail her. She'll shake your hand, and so will I. If she

deserves, don't"—she passed; I knew she was going to pass her orals. She's a very smart woman. She worked like hell for them the way I did for mine. I knew she was going to pass.

Yeah, there was some discomfort. I think that discomfort—Berkeley has not been good about things like—and that was one of the sore points that in fact led me to leave in 1994; I just got tired of fighting a fight that maybe I was not even right on, but I wanted Berkeley in the 1990s to be more open to spousal appointments. There is not one in the Berkeley department; we have three or four at George Mason. That is, we hire the spouse of a member of the department for lots of reasons, but the spouse has to meet our standards, but is this a good thing to do? Well, yes, it's a good thing to do because it keeps both people in the department. You've added a good person and you've kept the first person. The problem is that the first person's often a male, so it can be seen as catering to them, but it's hiring women. George Mason does that without blinking an eye, and Berkeley still blinks. Berkeley learns slowly; they learned slowly at hiring women, and they learned slowly at hiring minorities; it's still not a paradigm of minority hiring, though there are more—there are now one, two, three [counts] three or four African-American—well, one's an African, but there are two or three African Americans and one African in the department—no, there are two African Americans, and I think there are going to be two Africans; something like that. And that's a big step forward for Berkeley. It took a long time for those things to happen. And, again, not out of overt, conscious racism, out of—I'll tell you what it is. I didn't understand this until I got to George Mason and I saw the difference. Berkeley is one of those "keepers of the flame" institutions; they are a very, very important institution, even the *New York Times*—I said that I began to get annoyed at New York attitudes early on—

12-00:46: 41

Lage:

But you didn't finish that thought.

12-00:46: 43

Levine:

Well, the thought is the *New York Times*—they have nothing but contempt for the West Coast, for places outside. They make jokes about it; they don't cover the sports here very well; because it's not really very important. and began to be a little outraged at this New York chauvinism and began to realize that it was New York chauvinism. So, how'd I get into this though? I just forgot how we got into the—

12-00:47: 09

Lage:

Berkeley being sort of smug. I don't know if you'd use that word—"keeper of the flame"—

12-00:47: 12

Levine:

Oh yeah, so Berkeley. Even the *New York Times* considers Berkeley one of the important institutions. It's constantly talking about UC Berkeley. Yeah, and it's got to keep the flame burning brightly. If it makes a mistake, the flame

of Harvard, Yale, Princeton, all those places—the flame may flicker, and that bring a conservatism to a lot of things, like hiring new kinds of people, teaching new kinds of courses, though, in that sense, Berkeley was wonderful to me; I have to say that quickly, they always supported me when I started to teach different courses and the like. But there was this conservatism that troubled me, and I think it goes with the kind of institution—I go to George Mason, which is just trying to build this big, 30,000 student campus in Northern Virginia—a state university, the first state university in Northern Virginia—and they don't have this problem at all. They know the flame won't flicker because they—

12-00:48: 08

Lage:

They don't have—

12-00:48: 09

Levine:

That frees them to make minority appointments; it frees them to make spousal appointments; it frees them to experiment. I thought that was refreshing. That's not to take away anything from Berkeley, but it's one of the problems endemic—you see Harvard now and its president making remarks about women and genetics and all that silliness; that goes with the institution. There's a kind of maleness—Berkeley had that maleness, that white-maleness, and that Northern European white-maleness; they had it without really thinking about it; it was part of their heritage without even thinking about it. I mean, even left-wing guys in the department would mention Harvard with reverence. That's what I mean by institutional; I never had that. One of the reasons I turned Harvard down when I got a job offer in 1980 was that I had no reverence for the place. But Harvard stole a lot of people from us who did have reverence for the place and just thought it would be the capstone of their lives to teach at—

12-00:49: 12

Lage:

Let me—we'll just finish with Cornelia and then I think we should get into the real—

12-00:49: 18

Levine:

Well, I think we're finished. We were married and we lived happily ever after.

12-00:49: 19

Lage:

But you expected that you would have to go elsewhere and she would look for work elsewhere and what happened?

12-00:49: 27

Levine:

She didn't finish her dissertation. She's an ABD.

12-00:49: 31

Lage:

Because she got involved with motherhood and—?

12-00:49: 34

Levine:

Yeah, two more kids, so we have three altogether, and she wanted to be a good mother, but I don't think that's—she should speak for herself on this—

but I don't think that's the only reason, because the kids, after all, grew. Berkeley has a very lenient policy about finishing your dissertation; you can finish it—she could still finish it and get her—

12-00:49: 55

Lage: Really?

12-00:49: 56

Levine: Oh yeah. Berkeley's very good about that. So, when the kids were all in school, I said—I wanted her to finish, and it took me a while to realize that she didn't really want to, but she was—but I was like Jiminy Cricket, her conscience, Larry Cricket. I kept saying, "You should go back to that dissertation," so she did go back to it when the kids were in school, and then she left it. Then, when the kids were all grown and out of the house, I said, "Look, this is a perfect time. Write it as a book. You did all this work, it's such a good subject, do it." And, she went back, and I suddenly realized that she didn't—

12-00:50: 34

Lage: Didn't have the passion for it.

12-00:50: 35

Levine: Want to do it.

12-00:50: 36

Lage: What was her subject?

12-00:50: 37

Levine: She was doing the "Stab-in-the-Back" legend in Weimar, Germany. When the Germans lost World War I, they started right away that "We were stabbed in the back." After all, the war never got to German soil, they signed the Armistice when they were still on French soil, and they said, "We were stabbed in the back; the army was stabbed in the back," and that had many ramifications throughout the Weimar period, and then Hitler picked it up, and Hitler was "it was the Jews who stabbed us in the back." With the leftists, it was "the capitalists, the industrialists," it was an open legend, the *Dolchstoss*, and Cornelia was writing a book on it. It's a great subject. There was an East German book on it while she was doing her dissertation, but that was predictable, it was a predictable East German, Communist German book blaming the capitalists and the like, and big business; it's a much more open problem. I thought she was doing great work; she had great ideas; I really wanted her to publish that book. But that's what happened, so we never faced that.

By the way, I also wanted to say that we never spoke about it. I never said to Cornelia, "Okay, I've married you, and now I'm going to have to leave Berkeley"; that never was articulated. I just assumed it, that when she got her degree we'd go off and teach together somewhere, and I knew that before I

married her. I assumed that was part of the deal and it was a small price to pay, I thought. I'm not even sure I thought of it as a price to pay; I was—

12-00:52: 11

Lage: You were ready to do it.

12-00:52: 12

Levine: I was willing to do it, and I was willing to leave nirvana.

12-00:52: 15

Lage: OK, well, let's end today, and we'll pick up next time talking about the *real* sixties.

12-00:52: 22

Levine: Yes. That's right.

**Interview 7: May 17, 2005**

[Audio File 13]

13-00:00:14

Lage: Today's May 17, 2005, this is our seventh session with Larry Levine, and we have got you introduced to Berkeley, settled in, married, and now we're hoping to get into what you might call the real sixties, the beginning of the campus unrest and the Free Speech Movement. So, I wondered what you want to start with.

13-00:00:42

Levine: Well, I tell you, I have talked already about my own civil rights activities in Berkeley, and I would like to begin the Free Speech Movement with a tale of myopia and how hard it is to understand the present, because it is very hard. Now, a number of historians, beginning with Mark Bloch or perhaps even antedating Mark Bloch, I'm sure, but Mark Bloch said "it is harder to understand what happened yesterday than to understand what happened in ancient Greece." I think that's right, I mean I think it is very hard to understand. So, there we were in the middle of all of this civil rights activity. I talked about the fact that in the winter of '63, which is getting very close to '64—the winter of '63, you know, November, December of 1963, and then going into January '64, so we're very close here—we could not, we had that plan to blanket Shattuck Avenue with pickets for hiring of African Americans, and we never got more than 100 pickets in a community of 30,000 students. We couldn't get the undergraduates to come over and do it, and we ended up just picketing one big store, Palmer's Drug Store, and we failed even there.

So, if you were to ask me—you know, I was very, very low on Berkeley as a place of activity, I mean it seemed to me to be a very conservative place; I've talked about some of that, the whites who say go up in the pink hills, the bigoted real estate agencies, the virtual segregation, the conservative newspaper. There was some activity on the part of the students; there was SLATE, which was a student reform organization that ran for office; they worked within the system, but they were on the left. There were some left-wing students; there was a general liberal atmosphere to this place, to the university. But it looked to me dead, and really looked—I've talked about my being caught in a panty raid, didn't I?

13-00:02:54

Lage: Well, you didn't, but you wrote about it.

13-00:02:56

Levine: Well, I was caught in a panty raid the first year I was here and then, "What have I done?" I thought I had made the greatest mistake in the world, believing—that was when I first had come. Then our failure to get pickets in the winter of '63 just shocked me, and I was absolutely down on this place in terms of any great activity; I saw it as a rather conservative place politically,

in terms of this kind of activity. And then suddenly—and maybe if I had been smarter I would have realized things, I'll get back to that in a moment—but suddenly, there was a student, and it wasn't just a Berkeley student, it was—when I say "student," I'm being inclusive here, in a way, where when I really mean students, I'm being exclusive I should say. Whatever I'm being [laughter], there were student types. They weren't all students, but there were young people, black and white, who began to picket on automobile row in San Francisco, the hotels in San Francisco.

13-00:04:07

Lage: Now was this that summer of—

13-00:04:09

Levine: No, no. This was the winter of '64, right after the winter of '63 and the winter in what—let's call it the spring semester of '64, the first semester, which includes the late winter and then of course the early spring. There were suddenly pickets. And they were picketing and they were doing exciting things, and they were getting arrested. They were picketing as I say on the auto row, the hotels, and Lucky supermarkets; they did shop-ins, where they filled their carts with goods, rolled it up to the person at the counter, the cashier, and then walked out, leaving these poor workers to put all the goods back.

13-00:04:48

Lage: Were you a part of that?

13-00:04:50

Levine: No, I didn't—I wasn't a part of that at all, nor were we invited to be a part of that.

13-00:04:54

Lage: It was more of a student-run—

13-00:04:55

Levine: Yes. And I didn't, but I watched it with amazement, just amazement. I couldn't understand how we had failed to tap into the—and they had their own CORE, and how we had failed to tap into—

13-00:05:10

Lage: Do you mean "core," capital letters? They were CORE—

13-00:05:13

Levine: CORE, yeah, I think there was a student CORE, I think there was. In any case whatever they had, they were organized. There was a young African-American woman whose name—I have written about her, but I haven't got her name here—who I felt was going to conquer the world, she was so powerful and articulate, and young, and attractive in every sense of the word attractive. And once she was arrested she kind of—they were arrested, these kids—she

kind of disappeared. Arrest doesn't go with everybody, but it's quite an amazing story, and this story has been told in a number of recent books about Berkeley; there's a very good book—very interesting book by a former student at Berkeley whose name I'm blocking, alas, on those years, talking about these strikes and about a young woman who got arrested a couple of times during the strikes.

So there you go, and then suddenly something was happening that hadn't happened. I remember going to dinner at Nat Glazer's, Nat and Lochi Glazer's. I talk about people who adopted me, Nathan Glazer, a sociologist at least a decade older than me, and his wife, his second wife, Lochi, who I think that's spelled L-o-c-h-i, but I—I think so, who is from India, Lochi and Nat Glazer who are still friends, though I don't see them. We have different political views, Nat—

13-00:06:43

Lage:

Right, he became—

13-00:06:44

Levine:

Yeah, Nat became a more conservative fellow. But Nat Glazer and Lochi Glazer were a couple who became friendly with me. So, during this spring semester of 1964, just before the Free Speech Movement was going to bloom that summer, or that next fall, but during this student movement, I was invited to Nat Glazer's house for dinner, and Lochi's father from India was there, Martin Trow, from—a sociologist, and a very good one, was there; I don't remember if his wife was there, and Marty—Seymour Martin Lipset was there, and I was a very young guy—I was twenty-nine years old, thirty maybe, I guess I was thirty-one [laughter]—but you know, especially Marty Lipset. Nat Glazer was a very big name, and Marty Lipset was an even bigger name—I knew his work. Marty Lipset—who later became my colleague at George Mason, also, he left Berkeley, went to Harvard, came to Stanford, then we both ended up at George Mason; he had a stroke, and he's now retired—Marty Lipset was calling these people Communists. He was calling this young African-American woman, whose name I haven't got, a Communist. If not Communist, he said "Communist dupes." And I sat back waiting for Nat Glazer to correct him, or Martin Trow to correct him; of course no one corrected him.

So I said, "You know, Professor Lipset, they're not Communists. That's nonsense. They're not Communists at all, they're—this is the civil rights movement, they're not fighting for communism, they're fighting for civil rights, and they're doing it in a time-tested way." Whatever I said; I said that kind of stuff. You know, there I was, the shy guy, speaking up. Marty Lipset—I'll never forget this, it's a very interesting moment because it speaks to the dichotomy in the faculty that was to come in the fall, during the Free Speech Movement—Marty Lipset reaches into his pocket, pulls out his wallet, opens his wallet up, and pulls out a membership card in the Socialist Party,

and throws it on the table in front of me and says, "Don't you do that to me. Don't you—" It was like the opposite of red-baiting, I was conservative-baiting. Yeah, he said, "I'm on the left," he said, "Now, when I call these people Communists," or "Communist dupes—" I was kind of shocked by this. "Communist dupes?" It had nothing to do with communism, but that was an interesting mindset, and Nat Glazer later talked to me and told me, you know, he felt badly because Marty Lipset—I didn't feel so badly—had dressed me down. I just thought Marty Lipset was embarrassing himself, I didn't understand where he was coming from.

13-00:09:36

Lage:

Did you ever come to understand where they were coming from? I thought that that apparent change among that type of thinker happened a little later, but they were reacting to the civil rights movement?

13-00:09:49

Levine:

Oh yeah, well, they were. And you know, Nat Glazer talked to me—at that very thing when everyone went to dinner, Nat sat me down in the living room and he said, "Look, Larry, you have to understand, this is hard. My parents are like your parents. They have a little jeweler shop, jewelry shop, and my father's employee is my mother. Do you think my father wants to have to fire my mother to hire—?" And I sat there stunned. Nat Glazer's a very smart guy; what is he talking about? No one's going to make his father fire his mother, or my father fire—my mother would have been delighted, my mother would have been delighted to be fired [laughs] from my father's fruit store. But somehow people were getting very personal about this, and Marty Lipset was—there was a fierce anti-communism on the part of the old lefties on the part of—he's not such an old lefty—but on the part of people like Lipset, who was a Socialist, who had flirted with the left, I guess, as many young people had. Heck, if I had been ten years older I would have, you know, been very far left in the thirties, and who knows, I might well have joined the Communist Party. I mean, certainly I would have been a Socialist, they were the only ones who seemed to have a program for ending the Depression.

So, there was a feeling about this kind of radicalism, and there was a need, I guess, to give it a title, and so they called it communist or "communist dupes"; of course it had nothing had to do—the Communists themselves, by this point, were rather socially conservative people. They had always believed in civil rights, they were good on the black issue, better than the Democrats, certainly, but they were socially rather conservative. They didn't believe in these kinds of—the kinds of things the students were doing, sitting-in, shopping-in. These were disruptive, socially disruptive tactics. In any case, it was an interesting prelude to me. People I would—and Nat Glazer was very good—and we'll get to him—he was very good in the beginning of the Free Speech Movement, he was on the right side, in many ways. But that evening has stayed in my mind.

13-00:12:08

Lage:

Yes, that's very interesting. Well, I just wondered if there's a thread, another thread—and I don't want to interrupt your flow, but the thread that Carl Schorske talked about, of the faculty trying to get speakers on campus, you know, allow a lot of speakers.

13-00:12:23

Levine:

Well, there is that thread, and that was a very interesting moment. I'm glad you reminded me of that. In the academic year 1963-64, I can't remember which semester, the faculty finally broke the ban on controversial speakers, and Carl Schorske chaired the first controversial speaker appearance in many years on the Berkeley campus. I was there, my wife—my future wife, then a graduate student, I didn't know her that well yet—so it must have been the—well, who knows what semester it was, it doesn't matter. I know that Cornelia—I did know her, but we weren't dating yet—she had to sit in an overflow room and listen to it on radio, in that room because 155 Dwinelle or Wheeler Hall or wherever it was, was just jammed. It was a big event, and Carl got up and the speaker was Mickey Lima, who was the chairman of the Northern—L-i-m-a—Mickey Lima, the chairman of the Northern California Communist Party. Carl gave a lovely talk as he always does about what a great moment this was, blah, blah, blah, and you know, Berkeley's finally achieved its place in the true university epicenter because we now were truly a free place.

And then Mickey Lima gets up, with no sense of the occasion at all, and gives the dullest talk in the world. It was just dull. He had no sense of how excited people were, and what this really meant. And after his talk, some student raised his—I think it was a him—his hand, and asked him about McCarthy, and he said, "Well, if McCarthy came here to speak we would prevent it, of course. We would stop McCarthy from speaking here because McCarthy is anti-scientific, he's anti-scientific and he has no right, he's therefore irrational, has no right to speak on a college campus." And it was like he took a great pin and stuck it into the balloon of euphoria. There was this [gasp], you could hear it. Everyone kind of leaning back; this man just didn't understand the occasion at all, it was a very interesting moment. And I should go on with this, I'm glad you reminded me of it, because what I didn't understand is when they finally, the administration in its wisdom, allowed controversial speakers to come—and that was mainly communist, but it turns out it had an overlap.

13-00:15:03

Lage:

Even political figures weren't—

13-00:15:06

Levine:

In the spring of '63, one of the controversial—no, no, it wasn't, it was after the Free Speech Movement began; it was in the fall of '64, it was in the fall of '64. Malcolm X was invited to come to the campus, and was going to speak in Dwinelle Plaza, and they had seats there in front of Dwinelle Hall, you know, adjacent—well, you know where, in front of the main entrance to Dwinelle

Hall. And I was invited by the students to introduce Malcolm X, a great challenge and interesting honor, and I of course accepted. And I wrote what I felt was—though God knows where it is now, I've lost it—but I wrote a little introduction, which was not an easy thing to do, but I liked what I wrote. I went down there and the place is jammed with people and I'm standing up in the front, and then the dean comes over to me, or an assistant dean—a "baby dean," we used to call them—comes up to me and says, "You can't do this," because in the rules only tenured people can introduce controversial speakers. So I said, "Well, I don't care. I don't mind." He said, "No, we're doing this to protect you." You know, so ironic. I said, "Well, I don't want to be protected. I want to introduce Malcolm X. I was invited to, and I'm going to do this." And he said, "No, you can't do it." And I said to myself, "I'm going to do it anyway, to hell with him." And then an older faculty said to me, "You shouldn't do this, they might close the whole thing down, you don't want to be responsible for that." So Charlie Sellers, I believe, did it ex tempore, because he could do those things. But I was kind of steaming.

I must tell you about a wonderful moment. So we're—by now I know I'm not going to introduce him, but they're waiting for the Campanile to sing, you know, which it does at noon every day, and before Malcolm starts his remarks, and I'm standing as close to Malcolm as I am to you right now, which is pretty close; I'm just standing there steaming inside, and they start to do the Campanile and they're playing song after song, and then they play "da da da," they're playing "Dixie," and they're playing "Dixie" right before—now these things are programmed months and months before, I don't—no one knew Malcolm X—though I did wonder why the hell they were playing "Dixie" at all, but they're playing "Dixie." Shows you the naiveté of the whole place, and they're playing "Dixie," and I'm looking at Malcolm, but Malcolm had one of these totally impassive faces; I mean, he was a strong looking face, jaw muscles were clenched, but he showed no emotion. He may not have even heard "Dixie," he may have been thinking about his remarks, probably I would have been, he may have heard. But I heard it and I was just amazed. One of the many little ironies of life. Then he spoke.

So we did break the speaker ban, whatever anomalies there were, the Mickey Limas who didn't understand what we were doing, and the baby deans who made one conform to arcane rules to protect me against the—the very people who would hurt me were protecting me against themselves, I mean [laughter] this is the great irony of all of this. But before this scene with Malcolm took place, there was of course the Free Speech Movement.

The summer of 1964 was, for me—and I've already talked about it—a very idyllic, a very interesting summer. I drove my wife and my stepson, my wife had an eight-year old boy when we got married—seven years old when I first started to see my wife, he was eight by the time we got married—my oldest son, Alex, with whom we are very close, who grew up in this house, grew up

with us. I mean, his biological father saw very little of him and then ultimately nothing of him, which is a great loss for him; I don't understand people who do that, but he did. So Alex and Cornelia and I got in the car and drove cross-country and met my parents, who were, as I said before, exquisitely nice to them and then back we came to Berkeley, and Reggie Zelnik walked into my office in August, and several people came and—

13-00:19:35

Lage: Reggie just coming in that year.

13-00:19:36

Levine: Reggie had just come and I told this story of his saying we have mutual friends. So this is the beginning of my third year of Berkeley. Reggie actually came at the beginning of my *third* year, I had said erroneously earlier that Irv Scheiner came and Gerry Feldman came; I think they came the beginning of my second year, and Reggie came at the beginning of my third year. There was this constant stream of young faculty, very exciting. And the term began. It was my third year, I was feeling like a veteran [laughter], you know, working on my teaching and caring about it, and feeling good about being here.

And there had been these four little tables on the place where Telegraph and Bancroft meet, and they had been there since I got here. They had originally been—those tables had a history. There was no advocacy on the campus, but they did give them a spot on the periphery of the campus, and the periphery of the campus used to be in the shadow of Sather Gate, because that's where the campus ended even though Sproul Hall—because the block between Sather Gate and Bancroft Way was a commercial block; there were stores and the like. And then when the university took over that block, got rid of the stores, built the student union and all of that facing Sproul Hall, the sanctuary area got moved to Telegraph and Bancroft, and there it was. It was just a given; I used to stop and look at the buttons and the petitions, and sign some of them, and talk to people. There were kinds of organizations, there were new religious organizations, they weren't all political, and they certainly weren't all on the left. In fact, I thought this was a pretty conservative campus, as I said, politically, but then there was that thing before the Free Speech Movement, that burst of civil rights activity, and very activist civil rights activity with students, you know, sitting in, throwing their bodies on the wheel, as the Mario [Savio] way to put it—

13-00:21:49

Lage: But they wouldn't have said that then. But nevertheless, they were—

13-00:21:50

Levine: No, they wouldn't have. But they were throwing their bodies, they were. And so here's my myopia. When I judged this campus, and my shock at the Free Speech Movement, the myopia was I didn't factor in that many of these students were in fact engaged in the larger civil rights movement. Mario spent

the summer of 1964 in the Freedom Summer in Mississippi, as did a number of the others who got involved. He learned tactics, he learned—and a number of people did. I learned those tactics too. We threw our bodies in the summer of '63 down in front of the entrances to the senate chambers.

13-00:22:31

Lage: In Sacramento.

13-00:22:32

Levine: In Sacramento, California. This was not unknown, these kinds of tactics. And we threw our bodies around the rotunda of the state capitol. We used those—and we invaded the state capitol. If there had been a conservative governor, we would have been hauled out immediately, and it would have been something, we'd have been arrested. But we had a progressive governor who was very careful. So, the students weren't the first ones to use these tactics, but they learned them, the same way we learned them, from the larger civil rights movement. And I didn't factor that in. So I was shocked along with everyone else when—first I was shocked by the stupidity of the administration at banning these tables, and I've read a lot about this now; I didn't know any of these things then. And I'm not convinced by much of what I've read. Clark Kerr tries to blame it on the Chancellor, Ed Strong. They all say that, and so do some of the histories of this, that Mr. Knowland and the *Oakland Tribune* had nothing to do with this. But understand that one of the things that preceded the banning of the tables was picket lines around the *Oakland Tribune* for hiring practices, and the picket lines were recruited at one of those little tables, and buses would show up right in front of the university and students would get on the buses and they'd take them down to the *Tribune* and they'd exit the buses and they'd picket.

13-00:24:03

Lage: And Knowland wasn't a man to stand around and do nothing.

13-00:24:05

Levine: No, no. So, we don't have to get into this, everyone can read about this, but—

13-00:24:10

Lage: Did you know Alex Sherriffs? He's often blamed for the—

13-00:24:13

Levine: I do. Yes, he is often blamed. I did know him because the chancellors had offices where African-American Studies later was, right on the third floor of Dwinelle, and Alex Sherriffs and I would meet in the men's bathroom and we'd chat. We were on different sides during this thing, and he'd be sarcastic with me. He knew who I was. I was very active in the beginning of—very active faculty person. So this thing happened, and I don't—you know, the memory is a very fallible thing, and I don't really remember the details of my own evolution here. It wasn't much of an evolution. I was already an activist, I absolutely felt the university was wrong to ban these tables, I thought students did have political rights, and they were protected by the First and Fourteenth

Amendments, their rights to speak. And I never understood even then, and I have later studied it more and given talks on it, but there was—but you know, Clark Kerr later called the Free Speech Movement—he said that was a misnomer, they were the free advocacy movement, and that they weren't fighting for speech, they always had free speech, they were fighting for free advocacy. So we get down to the—there was a big conference in Pittsburgh, which I spoke at some years ago on advocacy in the classroom, and I honestly do not understand the difference between speech and advocacy, it's a very hard line to draw. Certainly we advocate in the classroom, we advocate reading, we advocate for open minds, we advocate intellectual values, we *advocate*, right? Now should one advocate the premises of communism? One should not take advantage of one's position as to teach to advocate the premises of anything, except we do advocate the premises of democracy, and blah, blah. And some people advocate Americanism, you know, we know that. It's not a left-right thing.

Students—it's not just now, or just in the sixties that students became afraid to speak in classrooms, they were always afraid to speak in classrooms. If you were a socialist student in the 1930s and had a conservative professor, and that was very likely, right on this very campus, you watched yourself, you know. So that's not—none of this is new, and there's always been the danger of advocacy in the classroom if by that we mean political advocacy. And good professors, and I'm one of them, take great care not to do that, to be open, to try to present both sides. But, in my classes, were there two sides on the civil rights thing? No, there really weren't. Civil rights was right, you know? I certainly talked about the attitudes because Bryan taught me them. Trying to understand the mind of Bryan and the anti-evolution campaign opened up to me the fact that these people do have minds, and they do have views, and you have to let the students know what they were. In my classes I tried to do that. But when you get down to the—but it's a very hard line to draw, the line between speech and advocacy, and to draw it for students, to say that Savio was advocating and not just speaking, is a very hard thing to do. And Mario laughed at them for doing this, I remember he said, you know, "Socrates would have had trouble with that." It was a difficult line. And it was a line they developed, it wasn't their first line.

In any case, whatever their reasons, I still think it was Knowland, but there's no proof of that. Knowland did—I mean, Strong admits that an administrator in Knowland's newspaper did phone to ask what the rules were about this, and then they said they discovered this was on Berkeley land and all, whatever, whatever. It was a very stupid thing to do, and one thing that students had working for them throughout—and I say this advisedly, I'm not just saying this as an advocate now; I've spent some time studying this as a lot of people have; I felt this at the time, and the more I learn about it the more I feel it—one of the things the students had going for them all the time was the sheer insensitivity and duplicity, and I will say stupidity, of the administration. They broke their words, they lied, they—

13-00:28:38

Lage: At every crucial juncture they made the wrong decision.

13-00:28:41

Levine: At every crucial juncture. The dean of students, Katherine Towle, I think, said, "No, no, there's disruption. We're banning the tables because there's too much traffic, and it gets in the way of egress." And the students said, "Good, we'll monitor this. We'll make sure"—the students from the beginning were very smart. The students said, "If that's the reason, we can stop that. We can stop the congregation of people, we'll monitor this, we'll make sure there's egress." And then she switched to another reason, and there were always other reasons. The reason—none of—I don't know if they knew what the reason was; they were just being good soldiers and carrying out what they were told to do. The students were smart from the beginning, and the students—we have to understand something; if we want to, as the press did, see this Free Speech Movement as the results of a howling mob of radicals, we're going to see it through a filter that blocks reality. This was an ecumenical movement, anyone who was there knew it, the Students for Goldwater were involved, Republican students. The fraternity boys and girls were always on the outside of this for some reason, and they came and heckled and the like. In fact one of the great spectacles is seeing Mario standing up there, trying to explain Thoreauian disobedience, which he did, he was a very serious guy, and he was trying to work out Thoreau's principles of disobedience to fraternity groups [laughter], who were heckling him and laughing at him.

13-00:30:16

Lage: You mean he would go visit in—

13-00:30:18

Levine: No, no, they would come to him. He didn't have to go to them, they came to him a lot. The whole thing was interesting. So what one has to understand is these were, when they went to meet the administrators in the beginning of this, they wore their suits and ties, they were very bourgeois kids. You remember the famous case of Jack Weinberg in the police car; they put him in a police car to arrest him, the students simply sat around the police car and they couldn't drive, in front of Sproul Hall, and he was there for thirty-some hours. And they used the top of the police car as a podium to speak. They took their shoes off when they climbed up to the top of the police car. They took their shoes off. And when they dented the police car nonetheless, they took up a contribution and they gave it to the campus police department to repair the car. These were very good, basically well-mannered, bourgeois kids, and one has to understand that to understand this, that these kids, who were not engaged when I got to this campus, some of whom were doing panty-raids, became engaged. And they became engaged because they saw the egregious nature of the university's action and it troubled them.

What the university never understood, and what we will never understand if we keep up this notion of radicals and lies, is that the students felt violated,

that they honored those rights, they had been—you know, student generations are very short, they're four years. Students go through here in four years and they became, you know, they become then the older generation, they become the older generation in two years when they're juniors and seniors. They remembered these rights, they remembered that they had the right to these tables, they found the tables interesting, they found the right of advocacy interesting and speech interesting. And it was taken away from them, and they felt violated, and that's the only way you got those huge crowds. It was abetted by the fact that the university never understood that.

13-00:32:24

Lage: Put yourself in this; where were you?

13-00:32:27

Levine: Reggie and I were together in this in the beginning, I don't quite remember how this happened, but we both felt very strongly about this; we were both stunned by what the university—and Reggie was very new on the faculty, and I was entering my third year. We were both powerless assistant professors. But we just felt terrible about it, I haven't got the details, if Reggie were alive, and I wish he were, he could probably—

13-00:32:54

Lage: He's written—

13-00:32:55

Levine: Yes, he did, but I'm not sure the details are in that. That's a very—that wonderful essay Reggie has in there which is the best history we have of this, is very, you know, very factual and institutional. [*The Free Speech Movement: Reflections on Berkeley in the Sixties*, edited by Robert Cohen and Reginald E. Zelnik (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2002)]

13-00:33:09

Lage: Very much about the faculty?

13-00:33:11

Levine: Yeah, but I don't remember why or how Reggie and I, very early in this episode, went to talk to—just the two of us—went to talk to the steering committee of the Free Speech Movement. It was Marty Roysher's apartment, Marty Roysher was one of the members of the—he was a student—

13-00:33:31

Lage: And he was a history student, was he not?

13-00:33:33

Levine: I don't think he—you know, I don't remember. He has an essay in that book too, R-o-y-s-h-e-r, and he's still around; he came to Reggie's memorial, I saw him. And Reggie and I went—you know, this is interesting the way memory plays games. When I remembered this, until I read Marty Roysher's piece in that book, I remembered Reggie and I sitting in straight-back chairs, and the steering committee sitting on a couch, but of course the steering committee

could not have fit on a couch, there was a big steering committee. In fact, Marty Roysher, the minute he wrote it, I realized he was right—we sat on the couch, and there was a semi-circle of—in his apartment, semi-circle of straight-back chairs around us, and Marty Roysher says we sat around them in an inquisitorial circle, and it was. It was a very tense kind of moment, they were—and Roysher—

13-00:34:30

Lage: And here they've picked two friendly faculty, and got—

13-00:34:32

Levine: Well, who picked whom, I don't know. Whether *we* went to *them* and said—yeah, well, we were friendly faculty. But they were a little put off, as Roysher has written, by our age. You know, we didn't look a hell of a lot older than they did. I'm a year or two older than Reggie, I was thirty-one, and Reggie was probably twenty-eight or twenty-nine. We were young guys.

13-00:34:53

Lage: You were over that magic—anyone over thirty—

13-00:34:54

Levine: Eh, they didn't know that. And I looked very young; I didn't have facial hair yet; I looked very young. I was a young-looking guy, you know, both of us were young looking; we were tall, slim guys sitting around looking like students ourselves. But we were faculty, and we had a—and so from the beginning we felt a bond with these people, and—

13-00:35:18

Lage: Well, how did that meeting go? Do you recall what happened?

13-00:35:20

Levine: Well, it was basically an introductory meeting. They spoke about their grievances, and we talked about the fact that we were going to try to get the faculty to understand their grievances and to act on their behalf, that's what we—how the two of us were going to do that I don't know what we had in mind, but that's what we thought. Well, the thing that shocked me—that's not too strong a word—was how difficult it was to get the faculty to see this.

13-00:35:47

Lage: How did you go about trying to do it?

13-00:35:49

Levine: Well, our basic way was to—we talked to senior faculty, this is what—

13-00:35:53

Lage: Did you start with the—go ahead, I'm wondering about the History Department.

13-00:35:56

Levine:

Well, we talked to senior faculty. We talked to college—yes, of course, we talked with Charlie Sellers and all these people, and they clucked their tongues. Look, there was a lot of behind the scene—I was going to say they clucked their tongues in a compassionate way, and helped us when we decided to go and make a motion, which I'll get to in a moment. What I didn't understand because I was very peripheral here in the faculty—I had no power and I wasn't a member of the powerful groups, and no one invited me to come to Sproul Hall to talk to anyone—but there was a lot of behind the scenes activity. Marty Lipset and others were trying to mediate this thing in the beginning. Ultimately Marty said he didn't want any—we shouldn't sign anything with *those people*, but in the beginning there were attempts to mediate. There were all kinds of—you know, the students—from the faculty point of view, the faculty were stunned at the students.

There was a scene in which Mario went to the secretary—whose secretary was it, Katherine Towle's secretary—he wanted to see the dean, he was very upset about something because they had—we reneged on something, and she said, "the dean's in conference, and I'm not going to get her." And Mario said, "You have to get her." The young woman has testified about this, she was still furious about the way Mario treated her. Mario demanded—he was alone—that he see the dean right now, and she said, "The only thing that would get me to get the dean is if this building was on fire, I'd call the dean." And Mario said, "You don't understand, *I'm* on fire, and I have to see the dean." There was a passion. They had good leadership, these people, and there was a passion, and somehow it was hard for a lot of faculty to see this, even people I considered to be progressive, compassionate faculty, so with this—

13-00:38:05

Lage:

Was it hard for them to understand it, or did it turn them off? Whereas it excited you, did it turn others off?

13-00:38:13

Levine:

That's a very good question. I think they thought it was inappropriate behavior on the part of the students, I do think that. And you know, there are some very lovely things in your oral history papers, and Charles Muscatine has one of the best. He was a professor of English, who ultimately became a very important member of the faculty that mediated this and fought for the students, but in the beginning he was turned off, completely. And he says in his oral history that he had that old medieval view of the university, that it was an oasis, it was a place—I'm paraphrasing here—it was a place where serious thinking could go on, and where political activity had no place. Of course that's a little naïve—this is Larry Levine speaking now—but I understand that view because a lot of people had that view, Carl [Schorske] had that view; you know, it was a sanctuary. You come, and he says—this is almost a direct quote—he says, "I thought about the students, they came from Sacramento, they came from Fremont, and I said, 'You want political activity, go back to Sacramento! Go back to Sacramento and do your political activity; this is a different kind of

place.'" So he wasn't, until the—see, it took, and I began to realize this, it took an act of—a kind of atrocity and the arrest of the students on December 3 and 4 was, I think those are the dates, the 2nd or 3rd, I forget exactly, was that act that finally got the faculty to wake up.

13-00:39:52

Lage: The police on campus.

13-00:39:53

Levine: The Rip Van Winkle. Yes, the police on campus arresting "*our* students." But Reggie and I thought, and others too; we weren't all alone. One of the first faculty to speak out was a guy I never got along with very well, John Searle of the Philosophy Department, who was a young associate professor—he actually had tenure—and he gave some talks in favor of the students on the campus. So there were people.

13-00:40:15

Lage: When you say you didn't get along with him very well, because later he turned, but at that time did you have differences with him?

13-00:40:22

Levine: Yes. Well, they were tactical differences; I don't remember what they were. John once said to me during this year, "Why is it every time I'm around you I feel guilty?" I do have that effect on people sometimes. I just saw John as a guy who was wavering even then.

13-00:40:41

Lage: It's always interesting when you see somebody move to the right, if we could be that simplistic.

13-00:40:45

Levine: Yes, I know, I know. And John and I are in—you know, we were both interviewed; I forget—Kuralt, Charles Kuralt had an early Sunday morning show where he went around the nation, and one of the places he came was Berkeley. It was in the seventies by then, and Berkeley still, of course, was a place of activity. Maybe it was around '70, and he interviewed two people. He interviewed me on Sproul steps, and he interviewed John separately on a bench somewhere by Strawberry Creek, and it's quite interesting. I mean, John was then as far from being a sympathizer of the students as you can get; he wrote a book—yeah, John and Nat Glazer are both examples of people who shifted from protectors and defenders of the students to the opposite. But, it was very hard—to go back to '63 and '64 itself—it was very hard to get faculty—now, this is what happened. Reggie and I tried to talk to Charlie Sellers and others, Carl and others, about a resolution. And they helped us write a resolution, it was a very good resolution—

13-00:41:48

Lage: For the Academic Senate.

13-00:41:49

Levine: For the Academic Senate. And the resolution was very simple. It was that students had political rights of citizenship as embedded in the Constitution, the Fourteenth Amendment and the Bill of Rights, and that they didn't lose those by becoming students. And if the university ever interfered with those, it could only be—or modified those rights, or regulated those rights—it could only be when those rights interfered with the running of the university, and that the university itself should not be the monitor of that, but the Academic Senate should be. So, it called for the students to have those rights, it called for the creation of some committee which would administer those rights if—and judge whether regulations were needed.

13-00:42:41

Lage: And this was all before December 2, we should note that, before the sit-in.

13-00:42:43

Levine: This was November, it was in November. Mid-November or late November, yes indeed. And there is something I should mention here, because in retrospect it seems so clear—I don't know that it seemed clear then, but maybe it did to some of us—and it ties in very, very closely with what you brought up, happily, because I had forgotten it, and that is the “controversial speakers on campus” issue. That is, the faculty had been beaten down, not just the students. The faculty had been beaten down during the McCarthy years.

13-00:43:19

Lage: Right, the loyalty oath.

13-00:34:21

Levine: The loyalty oath, many faculty left, you remember I was—

13-00:43:24

Lage: And Muscatine was one of them?

13-00:43:26

Levine: And Muscatine was one of those who left. Did he leave? I think he left.

13-00:43:29

Lage: Yes, he did.

13-00:43:30

Levine: And he came back. And so the faculty had been beaten down, and, you know, Muscatine saw this as a sanctuary and the loyalty oath interfered with that sanctuary, surely. So our motion—and I'm not sure how conscious we were of it, but now it seems so patently clear to me—our motion was a motion not only for the rights of the students, but the rights of the faculty. We said that the Academic Senate was the only body who had the clarity and the principle to judge when the students' exercise of their constitutional rights interfered with the running of the university and how that should be tempered. So we were giving the faculty rights as well, finally. Well, we brought that before the

Academic Senate; it was a very interesting thing. We had people, a number of people, helping us create that. Very simple.

13-00:44:23

Lage: Now who's "we"? You mentioned—and you, just you—did you have—?

13-00:44:24

Levine: Reggie and me, just me and Reggie—oh, no, no, it wasn't just me and Reggie. There were a whole group of young people in the History Department who were involved in that.

13-00:44:31

Lage: Middlekauff, I'm taking these names from Reggie's article. Scheiner, Stocking, were they involved?

13-00:44:35

Levine: Yeah, Middlekauff. I don't remember where George [Stocking] was, but I think George had his problems with the FSM, but he has an interesting—I've read all of the, because I've given some talks on this since Reggie's death—

13-00:44:50

Lage: Oh, Lisa Rubens' oral history.

13-00:44:52

Levine: So I've read a lot of the oral histories, not all by Lisa Rubens, either. They were by a number of people, but I've read all the oral histories on this stuff. Though Lisa did most of them, and they're very good. And George—she had the presence to go to Chicago and interview George; she went to University of Illinois in Chicago and interviewed Stanley Fish, and somebody—maybe I should—I don't know how much you want me to talk about this, because some of these views are really very interesting.

So we had the aid of some of our fellows, all young, and some older ones, but this is the way it worked. Reggie was not a member of the Academic Senate because he had not yet finished his doctoral dissertation, and he was an acting assistant professor, therefore not a member of the Senate and not even supposed to be in the building, in the room. He sat in the back row; he snuck in and sat in the back row. On the great day of December 8 when we passed our resolution, Reggie couldn't even come into that meeting. They were then guarding the hall, but Reggie was in the back of that room. But he couldn't be there to help me. And I became—and I'm not particularly good, I knew nothing about parliamentary rules, I'm not so terribly great on my feet, I'm much better when I've had time to think about things, but there I was.

13-00:46:09

Lage: But you had thought about that because you had the resolution.

13-00:46:11

Levine: Well, I had thought about it, yeah. But I didn't know parliamentary maneuvers. Sitting next to me to help me—if Carl had sat next to me to help

me, maybe it would have been good, but Tom—a very nice man who I liked a lot, Tom Parkinson, who was a poet and was in the English Department, Tom sat next to me to be my guide—he was of no help, as it turns out, at all.

13-00:46:33

Lage: Because of *Robert's Rules [of Order]* and things like that?

13-00:46:34

Levine: Oh, I don't know. He just wasn't very helpful, he wasn't that adept himself in these rules. So I stood up, and I moved this motion, and immediately, I mean, the doyens of the Senate took us with some amusement. See now, if Carl Schorske had stood up, if Henry Nash Smith had stood up, why the hell those guys didn't do this I don't—

13-00:46:54

Lage: Did you ask them to?

13-00:46:55

Levine: They encouraged *us* to do it. They were not ready to do this, it's that simple. I didn't go to Carl and make demands. He had the right not to do this, he was not moved to do it. They helped us with language, I forget who was crucial there, Carl probably was very helpful, but these guys did not help us.

13-00:47:14

Lage: But do you remember asking them to do it, or did you just hope they'd step in?

13-00:47:19

Levine: I don't remember that, whether we asked them to do it. I think they made it clear that *we* should do it, we sat with them, they agreed with us, but they did not volunteer to do it.

13-00:47:30

Lage: It's quite interesting.

13-00:47:32

Levine: Yeah, it's very interesting because if they had stood up, they first of all knew more about parliamentary rules, and they had clout. We had no political clout, so we had two things against us: we knew—I say we, but it was mainly me because Reggie couldn't participate—I knew nothing about parliamentary rules, and I had *zilch* political clout, so there I was with nothing.

13-00:47:56

Lage: So what happened?

13-00:47:57

Levine: Well, what they did was they began to amend it. They were amused by it, by me, by us, I should say, because there were others. And there was a professor in the sciences who did stand up and try to help us, but they amended it and amended it, and I tried but I didn't know how to stop the amendments or

counter the amendments with my own amendments, and I just didn't know how to do this.

13-00:48:25

Lage: No one stood in—to rescue you?

13-00:48:27

Levine: Well, there were a couple of senior people who did, and my buddy sitting next to me, Tom Parkinson, was whispering things in my ear which made no sense to me. I mean, it didn't address the problem I was having, and I was getting humiliated, but that's not the most important thing. Our resolution was getting killed. So they amended it so much—you know, they picked at little things, we said something like, "It's the sense of the meeting," and we should have said, "It's the sense of the division," and so the—now, you know, here's a young person, a relatively new faculty member, you're the head of the Senate, you say, "Listen, you should say 'division' here and not—" but no, they didn't do that. They gave us no help at all, and they crucified us with these little mistakes we made, and then they began to amend it. And at the end, the Levine Motion, it was called, the Levine Motion, it turned into kind of a quasi-Fascist motion that was banning speech and that was—it turned into something worse than the administration could have dreamt up, so I had to stand up in the Academic Senate and ask the Senate to vote against the Levine Motion, which I did. And they did. At the end of that meeting, though I have another thing I want to say about that meeting, but at the end of the meeting at five—dusk, it was dusk, it was November, dusk came early—I left the meeting really roiled up inside. I walked down Telegraph Avenue to Cody's Bookstore—I say this in my article but I think it's important to say here, too—and I bought my first copy of *Robert's Rules of Order*, and I went home and I read the damn thing many times, and I never—that never happened to me again when I stood up in the Academic Senate.

13-00:50:11

Lage: So that was helpful?

13-00:50:12

Levine: It was helpful, but it was unnecessary. It should have been done by someone with more experience and that—we lost, and it was a pretty one-sided vote, we lost badly.

What I want to say about the rest of the meeting, because I think it shows something about the faculty, is that the second half of the meeting had to do with what was called the Katz Case. Eli Katz was a professor, had been an acting assistant professor like Reggie was an acting assistant professor because he hadn't finished his dissertation of German, and then he finished his dissertation. And the—his department and the Academic Senate Committee on Privilege and Tenure both recommended that he be given—not tenure, but that he be made a regular assistant professor, still tenure to get, that he be regularized and he would now be on the tenure track. This went through all

the committees that it should have gone through and [Chancellor] Ed Strong vetoed it. And he vetoed it because Eli Katz—he thought Eli Katz was communist; he might well have been. Eli Katz refused to cooperate with the House Un-American Activities Committee, refused to answer questions—which he had every right to do, I think—but he did refuse, and then Strong called him and Strong said, "Just between you and me, are you a member of the Communist Party?" And he said, "I'm not going to tell you that. I signed the loyalty oath in good faith, that I belonged to no organization or advocated the violent overthrow, and I'm not going to tell you, I don't have to tell you what my political leanings are and what my political memberships were. It's not your business, and it's not my obligation to tell you." And Strong fired him.

So, the Academic Senate took this issue up. Katz had already left the campus, I believe, and that was the second half. And the Academic Senate condemned the administration for violating the rights of the—see, again we get the faculty rights here, the faculty was very concerned with its own rights. Our motion spoke to faculty rights too, but this motion spoke to it very—in other words, that our rights had been violated by the administration, and that motion passed overwhelmingly; there were very few votes against it. I walked out of that meeting. And Reggie and I had such different takes on that meeting, which was one of the differences we had, it was a nice difference. Reggie said, "Well, that was very encouraging." The Katz thing, that was very encouraging. "See, if we go back and do our homework better and learn *Robert's Rules* better, we can get this passed. Ultimately, that is true, that is what happened. But my take was, "Look at these short-sighted characters. They understand *their* rights, and they can't take a step empathetically and understand the rights of the students. They understand when their rights are violated, and they cannot understand when the rights of the students are violated."

I was *very* upset, really. It began really—it showed a very big difference between me and Reggie because when the senior faculty did finally get engaged, Reggie was able to work with them and I was not. Reggie remained much more potent than I because I was so turned off by them. I get turned off in ways. I was so turned off by their myopia and by their "me-ness," yeah, "we understand 'me' but we don't understand 'them,'" even though they're part of the enterprise, those students, we have responsibility for them. It took them just too damned long, I thought, to understand what the issues were. I was very angry.

That was our big—this was toward the end of November, November 23, I think, this meeting, and then things just took off. There was a strike between—so the students—when was the strike, was the strike after Sproul Hall? No, it was before. So there was a quick strike on December 1 or something, and that was an issue. And I remember—

13-00:54:11

Lage: An issue among the faculty?

13-00:54:12

Levine: Oh, indeed. So it was a very—indeed. I had no hesitation in not teaching, I didn't teach. I think I met my students off campus. We did that several times, they did that during the Third World Strike too, I met them off campus, which—

13-00:54:27

Lage: But that is meeting your obligation.

13-00:54:29

Levine: Well, it is, but at the great inconvenience of students. You couldn't always meet at the same time, the rooms were not as nice, a lot of students couldn't make it because you couldn't—and there were students who complained, who were saying that you weren't fulfilling your obligations. Ken Stampp has a very lovely thing in his oral history in which he says he missed one class because of the strike and students came to him and said, "You have no right to do that, you have no right to violate our right to learn," and Ken felt very badly about this. He empathized with the Free Speech Movement, he cared about the Free Speech Movement, but he found his oblig—and I respect this a lot—he found his obligation as a teacher to conflict with this, and he was torn. And he finally thought he had to give in to his obligations as a teacher. Carl I don't think honored the strike because of that same thing. Carl was so articulate about everything, but Carl explained that to me; I went to his office.

But I decided that this was a very important thing the students were trying to do, and that it was not understood, and they were then resorting and they were forced to resort—Mario said this very eloquently, that the faculty had betrayed us again, and again, and again, and forced us to do things we didn't want to do because they weren't there *for us*. And I think there's a lot of truth to that. I don't think Mario wanted strikes, Mario had his—I mean, I didn't always agree with Mario Savio, and I remember his saying at one point that when we win we're going to have real classes in the Berkeley campus for the first time, and I was furious at that because there were real classes from the founding of Berkeley, and I knew my classes were real.

13-00:56:12

Lage: So that kind of thing did touch a nerve?

13-00:56:14

Levine: That was hyperbole. It touched a nerve, sure, he touched nerves. But you know—I say this in the little piece I wrote about this in Reggie's book—that the truth is that in a certain sense, he was right, and I realized much later. Because what happened after the strike was learning went on in venues that weren't opened before: students sat on committees, students and faculty met in different ways. The dichotomy, the gulf between students and faculty was not as deep. There were—

13-00:56:48

Lage: You mean the kind of social hierarchy was—?

13-00:56:50

Levine: Yeah, that's right. Berkeley was a very formal, conservative place when I got there. Everyone wore suits and ties. Not the students, but they were well-dressed, the young ladies, wore—many of them wore tartan skirts, and long socks—

13-00:57:05

Lage: Loafers.

13-00:57:06

Levine: Knee socks, yeah. It was—after—because there was a cultural thing happening here, as well as a—

13-00:57:12

Lage: When do you date this cultural—?

13-00:57:15

Levine: Well, I think it was happening at the time, but we didn't realize it. But you remember, I described the student leaders of this in the beginning wearing ties, suits and—not suits, but jackets and ties when they went to see the administration, taking their shoes off, paying for the dents in the car. This was not Columbia University a few years later where they used a lot of foul language and the like, but there was a cultural revolution happening and we didn't realize it. It was very interesting because partly it was the youth culture saying, "We have a right, we have rights here."

And that became fully more cultural—I don't remember when it was, but I think it was the spring of that year; it's a story I've told elsewhere, but I think it's worth telling here. I was walking on the northern part of the campus near the education buildings and Tolman Hall, and there was a guy who had a crowd around him, and he was giving a filthy speech. The "filthy speech movement" the papers called it—and I want to tell a little story about that in a moment—but he was giving this speech, and there were a whole group of kids around him listening. It was dirty and stupid and not very interesting, and I was about to walk away when a young policeman, a young Berkeley policeman, came and went up to the guy and said, "Stop that talk." And he pointed for some reason—I guess you could find a reason—there were a number of women there, but he pointed to a young blonde woman, attractive, young, blonde woman who was in the audience, a student-looking person—she was a student—and he pointed to her, he said, "There are ladies here."

Now, I understood where that cop was coming from, because I was raised very firmly, in a lower-middle-class environment, immigrant in my case, where you *never* cursed in front of a woman. You never—my father would have killed me if he ever—and so there was this young cop coming over who was probably raised in the same kind of environment, and telling this guy to

stop it. The young woman that he pointed to walks up to him, says, "Officer, fuck you." And the look on his face—I remember standing there—the look on his face was—it was a look of shock, he had never heard a woman say "fuck," and it was a—I think, and what she was doing wasn't just being vulgar, she was saying, "Look, this dichotomy is over, buddy. No longer—"

13-00:59:40

Lage: Right. Even though the women's movement hadn't gathered steam, there was—

13-00:59:42

Levine: No. Yeah, but it was in the air. "No longer do you guys have certain provinces that we can't enter, we can enter them." Or "We can listen to this language and we can use this language and we're," you know, "full adults."

13-00:59:55

Lage: Now, did that strike you at the time, something's happening here?

13-00:59:59

Levine: Yeah, I'm not sure because, you know, memory is a funny thing. You look back and you bring the present into the past, so you have to be careful about memory. Wordsworth thought of memory as a rock that stood for all time, against the storms of time, et cetera. But we have learned since—it's a beautiful, beautiful metaphor, but we've learned since that memory isn't a solid rock that lasts for all time. Memory is a thing that's eroded by time, changed by time, re-seen by—revived and reshaped by time.

13-00:60:34

Lage: As are the rocks, we've come to learn.

13-00:60:36

Levine: Well, as are the rocks, as are the rocks themselves, that's right. They don't—there had been a scene, though the timing of this is very hard, but I think it was the spring of that year, so it would be—

13-00:60:47

Lage: '65.

13-00:60:48

Levine: Well, it was—Free Speech Movement was '63-'64.

13-00:60:52

Lage: '64, the fall of '64, free speech.

13-00:60:55

Levine: So I don't remember when this other thing was, but there was—you know, the *Lady Chatterley's Lover* was a banned novel, and the kids got up at one point on Sproul, right in that corner of Bancroft and Telegraph, and one kid was standing there reading pages from *Lady Chatterley's Lover*, a less sexy thing than you can imagine, but it was banned, and he was reading those passages

which are so tame today by our standards, but which I guess didn't seem tame then, and he was arrested. And other students wrote "fuck" on pages of their notebooks and stood up and held "fuck" over their heads, and they were arrested. Lenny Bruce was fighting his fight then, so was this '64 or '65, it may have been.

13-00:60:47

Lage:

I think it was spring '65. Now how did you react to that? I think that was another place where some of the faculty were turned off and said, "Well, look what's happening, it's degenerating."

13-00:61:46

Levine:

Well, of course I thought the whole thing about banning words, about banning Lenny Bruce, about not allowing—was ridiculous. You have to understand, if this guy had stood up yelling "fuck," and was arrested for that, I would have not had much sympathy for him. But he was reading *Lady Chatterley's Lover*, and the kids were reacting by being outrageous. But they were reacting to what I considered to be an outrageous act, and outrageous acts breed outrageous acts. That's the way I reacted to it. In other words, I had no problem with the cop going up to this guy and telling him to tone down. I think it's inappropriate to yell these words out in a place where there are people who find offense in those words; there's no point in it, there's nothing gained by it. People would voluntarily hear Lenny Bruce, they knew what they were going to hear. People don't walk near Tolman Hall voluntarily; they need to walk near Tolman Hall. And this guy's shouting, "Fucking motherfucking," whatever he was shouting. I think there's something inappropriate about that. But the scene on Telegraph and Bancroft where the students were reacting to the arrest of someone who was reading *Lady Chatterley's Lover* is a different thing. Anyway, these things were happening, and they were beginning. So what happened in the wake of the Free Speech Movement—it happened to me—is ties came off, dress got much less formal, much more casual, beards came on. I think Dick Herr in the History Department, for very different reasons, grew a little goatee. So I would say I was the second beard in the department, in the—

13-00:63:24

Lage:

He grew it before the Free Speech Movement, you mean, or—?

13-00:63:26

Levine:

No, it was after. But I don't think it had any political implications. Mine had every political implication. I grew a beard in the summer of '65, yeah, in the summer of '65 I grew a beard, and—

13-00:63:41

Lage:

And what were you thinking?

13-00:63:43

Levine:

Well, it was an alternative look, and it was a political act to have a beard in those days. You have to understand, I had that beard for twenty years, I

shaved it off in '85, but I had that beard for twenty years, and in the beginning that beard marked me. And I guess I wanted to be marked, like my long hair marks me now, maybe. Maybe as an aged hippie, but I wanted to be marked.

Let me, if I can, digress, because I think this is all the same story. We had very good friends in LA, and we used to spend every Thanksgiving with them, and we had no family here; my wife's family was 6,000 miles away in Germany, mine was 3,000 miles away in New York. We had no family here and so we clung to good friends we had in LA and we went for Thanksgiving. It became a ritual and we went to LA not often, but periodically. And so we were in LA once, after I grew my beard, and our friends took us to some ridiculous upper-scale hamburger joint. We had to wait on line to get in, and we finally got in, we were seated, and it was a long line, and we had a little—we had our son Alex, who was, I don't know, nine or ten, and then we had a little baby, our Joshua, who was a little kid in arms. And our friends were all clean-cut looking people, and so were we, for that matter, but I had a beard. There was a table empty next to us. We were being served, we were eating, a table emptied next to us, and a couple comes in, a man, his wife, and his little blonde boy. They're walking to the table and the man looks and says to the waiter, loudly, "I won't sit next to the man with the beard." So the waiter—and we had been treated nicely until that moment—the waiter and the wait-staff were blaming us after that, they were not treating us nicely anymore. I was on the verge, but I—I was on the verge of saying to the guy, the first thing that came to my mind was I felt like standing up and saying, "Our Lord had a beard," but I chickened out. [laughs] But I should have said that.

13-00:65:50

Lage:

Now, how long was your beard?

13-00:65:52

Levine:

Well, it was—it was a shaggy beard. It wasn't very long, but it was not a little trim goatee, it was a full beard, a mustache beard. I often shaved the moustache off and had an Amish-looking beard for twenty years; I didn't like the mustache. There were so many interesting stories to tell about our vanity. The day I shaved the moustache off—and it took me a long time to come to the conclusion I should shave it off; it never was fully the way I wanted it to be, so I shaved it off and I just had the beard. This is a few years later, and I used to drop in—the Litwacks don't live far from here and they're very close friends, and I used to drop in some afternoons for coffee. So I dropped in for coffee and Leon Litwack had a moustache in those days, and it was beautiful, but his wife never liked it, I guess. So I came in, and we're sitting down, and I had my usual cup of coffee with them, and I said, "Boy, that's a beautiful moustache you have" and Rhoda said, "No, I don't like that moustache. But you would look good with a moustache." And I had just shaved it off that morning, you see, so—

13-00:66:53

Lage:

People don't notice.

13-00:66:54

Levine: Anyway, going back to the Free Speech Movement—

13-00:66:55

Lage: Yeah, we didn't really finish how things changed from your point of view during—after that sit-in.

13-00:67:00

Levine: Well, there—actually nothing changed after the sit-in.

13-00:67:04

Lage: You know what, let's stop here and move to a new tape.

13-00:67:07

Levine: Okay.

[Audio File 14]

14-00:00:00

Lage: We are recording again on the next tape, and everything seems fine.

14-00:00:09

Levine: Okay. So, after the meeting I described, and after the very short strike—I can't remember the causes of the strike, but it had to do with arrests and, you know, Mario's famous thing at the Greek Theatre, where he was pulled down, when he was trying to invite people to a student meeting. There was an attempt on the part of faculty and the administration to form a kind of alliance against the students, but that fell through. The students were driven to more drastic actions, as we say. So there was the strike, and then there was the sit-in on December 2, I think it was; these dates need to be corrected perhaps. But I think the sit-in began the afternoon of December 2, and ultimately, at its height, there may well have been over 1,000 students in that building. Then that evening I was home with my family. My family then consisted, in December of 1964, of one child—I never called him my stepson, so I'm not going to do it now—my son, Alex. And about midnight, roughly, I get a phone call—I knew about the sit-in, and then I went home, and had dinner, and was in bed. Midnight, 1:00 am, something like that, the phone rings and one of my graduate students tells me that they're arresting the students and there's violence, et cetera, and they really need some faculty down here. So I said to my wife—I remember pulling on—I had these old winter army pants that one of my uncles gave me after World War II. [laughs] I was still wearing them. They were indestructible things. They were heavy winter—

14-00:02:08

Lage: And they're in style, now, probably.

14-00:02:11

Levine: Yes. I was putting on my army pants, and I said to my wife, "I'm going down to the campus." And she said, "Oh, I wish I could go with you." And then it

hits her that our son was staying at a friend's house; he's not there. So she gets dressed, and she wears another World War II garment. She wears a bomber jacket—remember, with the mouton collar? Well, these were Air Force bomber jackets. They went to the waist, and they were khaki, and they had a mouton collar—they were Air Force things, and they were still being worn. People—they were old army garments; it was only twenty years after the war. She zips it up; it was a chilly December, and it was roughly twelve, one o'clock in the morning, and we both go down to the campus.

14-00:03:01

Lage: Did you call anyone else?

14-00:03:03

Levine: No, I didn't call anyone else, but people were calling, and there was some faculty. So we go down to the campus, and Sproul Hall has a cordon of policemen around it, and I go up to one of them, and I say—remember, I was told that there was violence inside, and there was a young woman yelling out of one of the windows that "they're hurting us." There were stories that they were pulling the kids down by their feet, and their heads were bouncing on the steps. We heard all kinds of things. So I said to one of the policemen, "I'd like to go in. I'm a faculty member." And he said, "No, you can't." And I said, "Well, I really need to go in there. These are my students. I want to make sure they're being treated nicely. I want to be able to talk to them." And he said, "No, you can't go in." And it was a circle around Sproul of policemen. And I turned to talk to my wife, and she's not there. She had dropped down to her hands and knees, and crawled between the legs, or between the spaces between the policemen, into the circle. Where she was going, I have no idea.

14-00:04:04

Lage: You could see her, though.

14-00:04:06

Levine: Yeah, I did. And the cops saw her too, and they lifted her out. And we had a discussion about this later, because she was a German citizen, and I said to her later, "Listen, I am not going to go with you if you're deported to Germany." [laughs] So, you've got to decide either to become a political emasculant or become a citizen of the United States." Which she did; she did, in fact, very shortly, because she had her green card and all that, and she did become a citizen, which is the right thing to do if you're going to become politically engaged. She had no intention of going back to Germany in any case. So, they wouldn't let us in the circle, and I began to walk around, and I discovered other faculty. I'm trying very hard to remember who they were. Nat Glazer was one of them, ultimately. The mathematician—

14-00:04:55

Lage: Smale?

14-00:04:56

Levine: —Stephen Smale, yeah, was one of them. There were a few. I think Mo Hirsch, the mathematician—there were a few. So we decide that—

14-00:05:05

Lage: Ken Stampp was there, I think.

14-00:05:07

Levine: But I don't know; I didn't see him at that—I don't remember Ken. He may well have been there. I mean, it was so long ago. So we around—the first thing we did was we walked over to the chancellor's house on the campus, and we went to the door. It was like 2:00 or 3:00 in the morning. And we knocked on the door, but no one answered. So then we went to the President's Office in University Hall across Oxford Street, and we couldn't get into University Hall. We wanted to talk to someone in authority, and we couldn't locate anyone in authority. By now, it was getting light, and we were standing on—we couldn't get near the students, and they *were* being arrested. They were being hauled away to—is it—

14-00:05:48

Lage: Santa Rita.

14-00:05:49

Levine: Santa Rita, exactly—Prison. And I think by now we also realized they weren't being manhandled, but I don't know what we knew at that moment. Again, the present interferes with the past. But then again, the past often interferes with the present. So we were standing outside—we were standing on Bancroft Way, right outside the campus, right outside Sproul Hall on Bancroft—I remember this very well—having a discussion. And I remember—and I think this is worth recording—I remember Steven Smale with that—who wasn't a hell of a lot older than me, but who was a full professor, and had already won important mathematics prizes, whereas I was very much an assistant professor with unpublished—Stephen Smale saying, "Well, it's clear that there is a vacuum where there should be an authority. We have tried our best to locate authority. Authority is not there." And so with that wonderful radicalism that mathematicians often have—that abstract radicalism—he said, "Let's call a press conference and declare ourselves the university." And, well, we—

14-00:06:52

Lage: Were you ready to do that?

14-00:06:52

Levine: No, well, no one was ready to do that, because we'd know no one would have come to our press conference. [laughs] We were five assistant professors and two full professors—Nathan Glazer and Steve Smale.

14-00:07:03

Lage: What was his—?

14-00:07:04

Levine:

Well, Nat Glazer was very much on the side of the students. There's an interesting story that Bob Scalapino tells in his oral history, where Nat was a member of a committee chaired by Bob Scalapino. Robert Scalapino was chairman of the Political Science Department and a conservative fellow. And Bob Scalapino arranged a meeting with the steering committee many—long after the meeting Reggie and I had with them. So the steering committee comes into the room—

14-00:07:33

Lage:

Of FSM?

14-00:07:34

Levine:

Of FSM. Steering committee comes into the room—this is pre-Sproul Hall—the steering committee comes in, and Nat Glazer's sitting there with the committee—with the faculty committee. And the steering committee comes in and sits down and Bob Scalapino looks at them, he says in his oral history, and is about to open his mouth to say something, and Nat Glazer jumps up and says, "Bob, I can't do this. I'm with them," pointing at the Free Speech Movement steering committee, and he walks out of the room. So that's the story Scalapino tells. Anyway, Nat was with us there.

14-00:08:06

Lage:

It seems different from what your dinner party would indicate because it happened in the summertime.

14-00:08:09

Levine:

Well, that was a—yeah, well, Nat—that was abstract, and this was concrete. He saw the administration. He was very upset at the way they were treating the students and the rights of the students. So Nat Glazer suggested something that was so right. This was like 5:00 or 6:00 in the morning. He said, "You know, we have the right to call an emergency faculty meeting, and that faculty meeting can call a meeting of the Academic Senate. This was like May 3.

14-00:08:39

Lage:

No, December 3. [laughs]

14-00:08:41

Levine:

[laughs] December 3. Yes, we're in May now, many years later. December 3. I think that's right. And so we did. It was an amazing effort. We got a lot of graduate students, and we went back to our departments and we typed up notices that there'd be a meeting somewhere, in some big room, an emergency meeting of the faculty that afternoon at 3:00 or something like that. In those days, we mimeographed; I don't think we had Xerox yet. We typed that thing out and mimeographed it. I remember turning the, you know, the things in the mimeograph machine. And graduate students and young faculty went around the entire campus stuffing them into the boxes of people. We got an amazing number of faculty who came for the emergency meeting. It was chaired by Nathan Glazer, and it began—and we got enough signatures to call a meeting

of the Academic Senate. That turned out to be the December 8 meeting. We did that. And—

14-00:09:40

Lage: Was this the Committee of 200? You haven't mentioned that—

14-00:09:42

Levine: That's post. No. There was no Committee of 200 here.

14-00:09:46

Lage: Okay, this is just people.

14-00:09:47

Levine: Yeah. The Committee of 200 may have—this was the day of the arrests. The Committee of 200 is a post-arrest thing. That's what finally got those bloody people off their backsides. But Nathan Glazer and *we* called that meeting. This was my last important act. I was very important—

14-00:10:07

Lage: Not in your entire life I hope. [laughter]

14-00:10:09

Levine: No, in the Free Speech Movement, in that particular Free Speech Movement.

14-00:10:12

Lage: Was this sort of passing it—?

14-00:10:14

Levine: I didn't pass anything—

14-00:10:14

Lage: You say your last important act—

14-00:10:16

Levine: Well, it was taken away from us. But nonetheless—yeah, and we sat there—and there were lots of people who were later members of the Committee of 200 in that meeting, and we began to talk about the language of the—so, some of that language of the December 8 resolutions was being framed in that emergency meeting. The Committee of 200 comes out of this, I'm sure, and it was all tenured. They did not recognize—nor did I really want them to—but they didn't invite those of us who had been on our own and who'd really fought the fight and that I'd like to think prevented this from degenerating into total chaos. And had given the students a little bit of hope that there was a hope of faculty help.

Reggie—at the first meeting, Reggie, who had even lower status than I did, had a whole different attitude. See, I was sick of those guys. I was disgusted with them. I didn't really want to be part of them at all. I was angry, and it's probably a mistake. I'm not a good politician. Reggie brought a message to one of them of—I forgot how it worked; he describes this in his essay—and

then just stayed in the room. And he says, "And they let me. Then I came to the next meeting, because I heard what it was, and they let me in," and he became a member of it. [laughs] But I never was a member; even though lots of books say I was a member of the Committee of 200, I wasn't, because I was an assistant professor, and there were no assistant professors, save for Reggie, who had both chutzpah and—and it was an accident, and he just stayed on. But Reggie was a much more moderate human being than I am. And you know, he could—he never saw what I considered to be the egregious behavior of these people. He thought, "Oh well," you know, and that's much better. So I lost any official role after that. I went to the December 8 meeting and voted, and I was delighted at the outcome of that, and—

14-00:12:33

Lage:

Did you see shifts among people you had been dealing with or talking to—

14-00:12:35

Levine:

Well, I—let me—thank you, because there was an important thing that happened on the morning of December 8. I was walking across Sproul Plaza, the Lower Sproul Plaza—I was walking across Lower Sproul Plaza and bumped into Lochi Glazer, my friend. And Lochi Glazer came running over to me—remember the role Nat Glazer had played in helping to set up the meeting of December 8, a very crucial role, and even helping to begin to frame some of the language at that meeting we held, that emergency meeting. Lochi comes running over to me—a very sweet woman, to this day I like her a lot—she came running over to me and said, "Nat and I and Louie Feuer"—Louis Feuer was a professor of philosophy, probably, I would guess, possibly an ex-communist, but certainly an ex-radical, who was on his way to becoming a conservative, or maybe had already arrived—Louis Feuer, a member of the Philosophy Department, sat with Nat and Lochi the night before the December 8 meeting, she says, "We sat up all night, Larry, and we were thinking of what the implications of this resolution are. Do you realize that the Ku Klux Klan could come here and burn a cross, that the Nazi Party could come here"—what Nazi Party? [laughs]—"the Nazi Party could come here and hold a meeting." She was very upset. And I think that was the beginning of Nathan Glazer's move—to the right is too easy—to the right on this issue. He began to move away from—there already were a number of faculty, a man named Petersen in the—P-E-T-E-R-S-E-N—Petersen in the Sociology Department and others were already—Marty Lipset, Scalapino—there were others who were members of my department, who were not very vocal, but who were completely turned off by this.

I should tell another story. Hunter Dupree, my colleague in the history of American science, and Bryce Lyon, the medievalist—these people ultimately left Berkeley, and I think they left Berkeley because of the Free Speech Movement. Nat left Berkeley, Petersen—that fellow Petersen left Berkeley, Marty Lipset left Berkeley. These people who are offended by—

14-00:14:53

Lage: Was it demagoguery they were worried about?

14-00:14:55

Levine: Yeah, they were offended by the student actions. They were offended by—I think they were offended by the strikes. They were offended by the mass action on campus. They were offended by what they considered to be the pusillanimity—is that a word?—the pusillanimous—let me get to another word—by what they considered to be the caving in of the faculty. That is the very thing that woke up people like Muscatine and made them realize the students had a point here. Muscatine says in his oral history that the students said, "This is our community. Fresno is not our community; this is our community. This is where we live for four years." And they were right. He says, "They turned out to be right." I think that the faculty began to realize this was the students' campus as well as their campus. But that very revelation turned off—and the opening of the campus to advocacy turned off people like Lipset, who was prone to see communism. And it turned off people like Nathan and others—it was sad, really.

I remember once after November 23—I hope that's the right date of the Senate meeting that I was [laughs] a central actor in—I was on—in upper Sproul Plaza there used to be a restaurant that's now some kind of student meeting place but used to be a restaurant, I forget the name. And they had an open air—I remember standing in front of that with Nat and his friend Petersen—I wish I could remember his first name. A colleague of Nat's in Sociology walked over and began to give me hell for what I had done. And Nat was so upset. It wasn't Nat. You know who it was? It wasn't Nat—I take this back. It was—oh, he was a professor of economics and history—he had—

14-00:16:58

Lage: Rosovsky?

14-00:16:59

Levine: It was my friend Rosovsky. What's his first name?

14-00:17:03

Lage: Henry?

14-00:17:03

Levine: Henry. Henry Rosovsky was a good friend of mine, and Rosovsky got so upset. He hated that kind of—and he left also, by the way. He—

14-00:17:11

Lage: But where did he stand, then? Well, finish—

14-00:17:13

Levine: Well, Rosovsky was not visible. I think he probably voted for December 8, but he didn't take a visible role. Most of these people didn't take a visible role.

Until the Committee of 200, Carl had taken no visible role, Ken Stampp had taken no visible role, Leo Lowenthal—these were all friends of mine, or became friends of mine. Leo Lowenthal, who I became very friendly with later, took no visible role. Leo Lowenthal was sixty-four years old at the time in this thing.

14-00:17:38

Lage: Now, but you say Rosovsky left. He did leave.

14-00:17:44

Levine: Yeah.

14-00:17:44

Lage: Was he upset by the administration, or was he upset by the students? Or upset by the turmoil?

Levine: Well, you know, it's hard to know. He went to Harvard, which had some meaning for him. I know his wife would—that was a little later. I don't think Rosovsky left because of this incident.

14-00:18:01

Lage: Not the same as Bryce Lyon—

14-00:18:01

Levine: Bryce Lyon and Hunter Dupree—. Story. I'm on the graduate advisors committee. One of our graduate students, whose name was Steve Weissman, I believe, was active in the early days of the Free Speech Movement. And he obviously was doing a lot of advocacy and not a hell of a lot of his work, and he petitioned us for an extension of some deadline. And Hunter was the chairman of the graduate advisors committee, and Henry Rosovsky was on the committee with me. And this petition came before us, and Hunter Dupree read the petition and then said—and Hunter was a very emotional guy, and his hands were shaking—he said, "I think it's only fair to tell you that if you grant this petition I will resign my chairmanship." And Henry Rosovsky was appalled at this, because Henry Rosovsky had no doubt that he was going to vote against the petition until Hunter said that. Ultimately, I can't remember what we did, whether we granted the petition or not. It wasn't very important.

14-00:19:14

Lage: It was to the student.

14-00:19:15

Levine: No, because he—Steve Weissman never got his degree. [laughs] You know, he became a kind of full-time advocate, and whatever. I don't think he ever finished his degree. But it was a very interesting moment. I'm not sure we did grant his petition. I don't think the committee did; I can't remember. He didn't have very good reasons for it. So whatever happened, whether it was granted or not, Hunter did not resign. He remained. But I was appalled also at that kind of throwing of weight around.

So there were a lot of interesting things happening on the campus. A lot of faculty were being very alienated. I had been alienated to begin with, and then liked the resolution of this, but there were others who were very alienated by what happened. I thought that we were beginning to act like a real university now. Students had rights, we understood that the university was part of the world. Look, what was really happening was this—I'll say this very briefly—what was really happening was the breaking down of the notion that the university was an oasis. It never had been an oasis. That's just nonsense. It had never been an oasis. The university had been an oasis for a long time for wealthier, affluent, white, Anglo-Saxon, northern European Protestants and some Catholics, and there were some Jews also. But basically, if it was an oasis for anything, it was an oasis for privileged people. By the end of the nineteenth century, with the establishment of many state universities, that whole picture began to change. But the whole evolution of the university waited upon the evolution of the high school system. And when the high school system evolved to the point where most Americans began to go to high school, that is the extension of the educational process, partly because of the Morrill Act of 1861 [1862] giving land to states that created state universities that then had to create more high schools to feed them, and partly because America was becoming the kind of society and economy that needed educated people, modernity—"the acids of modernity," as Lippmann said—partly for all of those reasons. More and more people went to high school, and more and more people were coming under the aegis of education. That's when you get the anti-evolution movement, when kids in high school were learning evolution, and college. And the universities are becoming very different things. They are becoming extensions of the community. They are no longer oases of anything. I don't think they were particularly brilliant oases to begin with, but they are no longer oases of anything. They are now becoming part of the society. And —

14-00:21:59

Lage: So this is part of a much bigger trend—

14-00:22:01

Levine: Absolutely.

14-00:22:02

Lage: —once seen by—

14-00:22:03

Levine: Absolutely.

14-00:22:03

Lage: —the cultural historians. [laughs]

14-00:22:04

Levine: Absolutely. And another thing is happening at both ends of the university, the faculty end and the student end. New people are coming into it. More women are coming into it. Eastern European Americans, Catholics and Jews from

Poland and Italy and, you know, all those places that these people came from, Russia, are beginning to come into the university in larger and larger numbers. And they don't carry with them this nineteenth century sense that "This is our place, and you know, we have to protect it." They carry with them, "This is an extension of our society," and they saw it as part of our society. And right on their heels were going to come African Americans, more and more women, Asian Americans, Native Americans. The university was changing, and the Free Speech Movement was not an aberration, the Free Speech Movement was one of the early signs of that change. And I think some of us understood that, however feebly at the time. And the very fact—to go back and to just underline that thing I said—the very fact that people like Mario Savio and others could carry into it the tactics of the civil rights movement, showed what we're talking about, that it was now part of the society. And that offended some people. It definitely offended some people, and they left to go to—and, you know, where a number of the History Department people went was Brown University, one of those elite New England places that was slower to recognize the changes.

14-00:23:36

Lage: Now, when people talk about the sixties, they often blur the Free Speech Movement into the later anti-war—

14-00:23:44

Levine: Yes, they do.

14-00:23:45

Lage: And then the Third World—

14-00:23:47

Levine: There was a natural progression. Once the students had rights of advocacy, then all kinds of things opened up. The students became a voice. For instance, was it right to have ROTC on campus as an academic activity? Remember, ROTC wasn't an extracurricular activity, it was an academic activity. Members of the ROTC carried faculty rank. They were members of the Academic Senate. I remember they came to Academic Senate meetings when there were crises, and you'd see uniforms. They were blue uniforms for the Air Force people and, you know, khaki uniforms for the army people and Marines.

14-00:24:26

Lage: Did they have PhDs?

14-00:24:27

Levine: No, but they had military rank, and they taught the ROTC—some of them may well have, but I don't think that was necessary. If you had a certain military rank, you had a certain academic rank, you know, colonel—I don't know how it worked, but—and there was a very serious effort on our part, since—if I can go on with my story—

14-00:24:48

Lage: Yes.

14-00:24:50

Levine: This is one very interesting thing. Students rose up against this. They rose up against recruiters on campus. It was part of the anti-Vietnam war. And a faculty [committee] chaired by Sanford Kadish of the law school, a faculty—I don't know what it was called—committee to look into this issue of the military on campus. And we spent a year—I can't tell you the year this happened —We spent a year holding hearings. It was a very, very interesting thing. Holding hearings—and I was a member of that committee—holding hearings on whether—and we really held hearings; students came, faculty came, the military came—on whether the military should be an integral part of the campus. Because they are, and were, an integral part of the campus. And people without academic training held the ranks of, you know—and that was an aberration.

14-00:25:56

Lage: And students were getting credit.

14-00:25:58

Levine: And students were getting academic credit. Not a hell of a lot of it, but nonetheless, they would get academic credit.

14-00:26:01

Lage: And they had to take it.

14-00:26:03

Levine: If they joined the ROTC—I don't think it was mandatory anymore. Yeah.

14-00:26:05

Lage: It was compulsory at one point. I can't remember when that—

14-00:26:07

Levine: Yeah, well that's a good—

14-00:26:08

Lage: Maybe that was before.

14-00:26:09

Levine: It was compulsory at one point, and I'm blurring on that, whether that was the issue. Well, what we ended up recommending, after a lot of—see, there were three positions, as it turns out. There was a position that the status quo should remain, there was a position that the army should go and be off campus—it should be an off-campus activity and have nothing to do with the campus—and then there's the position our commission took, our committee, commission, whatever it was called; we were an investigatory tribunal—

14-00:26:39

Lage: Of the Academic Senate, or the—?

14-00:26:40

Levine:

Yes, the Academic Senate—well, that's a good question too. I'm afraid I've forgotten that. But we were all academics on that committee, and Sandy Kadish chaired it. It was a very interesting committee. And it was—I do remember I was living in this house, so it was after '69, it was '70, something like that. But it was the aftermath—it was a *long* aftermath. You mentioned the Third World strikes; we can get back to that. The anti-Vietnam movement—it was a long aftermath. By now, the students had voice. By now there were many faculty members who were more prone to speak up than they had been before. And there was much more turmoil on campus. The campus was undeniably a much, much more interesting, alive, dynamic place than it had been in 1963 [1962] when I entered it. There's no question about that. The students were more aware of the world around them. They were more aware of what troubled black people, what troubled women, what troubled a lot of minority groups. They were made aware of these things. They were not aware of these things in 1962 when I got here. You had to bring those things, if you were aware of them, into the discussions in class, but they were not aware of them. They could not be aware of them. That doesn't mean they were all in favor of them. But it was in the air, it was important, the university was changing, and this university became a very exciting place to be. Frustrating sometimes, no question.

So we had this commission that we—I still remember the Academic Senate meeting—and we recommended—ours was the third position, if you like, the middle position—we recommended that the military could stay on campus, but as an extracurricular activity, carrying no academic rank, the teachers of which had no academic status in the Academic Senate. And students were free to take it as an extracurricular activity. They could use student facilities, but students did not get credit for this.

And that passed. We had quite a debate in the Academic Senate, and I remember getting up and offending some of my lefty friends, because they argued we should abolish this. I got up and I made an analogy—I got up to speak—I hadn't planned to speak, but Sandy spoke, our chair, and the debate got more and more intricate and difficult, and Sandy said, "You've got to get up and speak." And I said, "I didn't prepare a speech." He said, "You've got to get up and speak." So I got up. And I remember saying that, you know, during the abolitionist movement, there were those abolitionists like William Lloyd Garrison, who ultimately said, "Let us secede from the South. That is error, we will pull away from the South. And we will," you know, "the North will be its own nation." And I said, "And that reminds me of some of my colleagues who want to secede from the military as if it won't still exist." I said, "We understand the military is part of it. Some of our students want to join it. And we're trying to say it should not be an academic thing. But a thing it is. And we can't shut our eyes to it." And I sat down, and Sandy Kadish turned to me and said, "How did you think of that?" I said, "I'm a historian, Sandy." [laughs] But a lot of my friends, a number of my friends, because I was on the

left of the faculty, were not amused by that thought. However, I became convinced that that was a viable way to go, and we won. And this was an interesting lesson. We won, and the Regents just ignored us.

14-00:30:20

Lage: They didn't make the change?

14-00:30:22

Levine: They did not make the change. The Regents met and voted to continue the status quo. So to this day, the military is part of the campus, and its members are part of the Academic Senate, and students get academic credit for ROTC.

14-00:30:36

Lage: And they march around also.

14-00:30:37

Levine: And they march around. Well, they would have marched around under our thing too, but it would have been extracurricular. Like you don't get credit for the volleyball team. That's what we were trying to do, saying sports are part of our life, and they're part of the campus, but you don't get academic credit for being on the football team, and the football coach, unless he's an academic—and some of them are—is not necessarily a member of the Academic Senate. Whatever. We were trying to make this analogy. And you don't get, you know, credit for a lot of extracurricular things; this should be an extracurricular thing. But it would have still been a presence on the campus. We lost. But we lost in such an interesting way. The Academic Senate has its limits and power, and we knew that, but this was another demonstration of it. And of course, it was frustrating; we spent a lot of time—we spent a whole year doing this, and it added up to nada.

So, do you want to go on? We could talk about the Third World strike, or I—

14-00:31:38

Lage: How are you feeling in terms of your time and energy? We could take another fifteen minutes.

14-00:31:49

Levine: Sure, I could do that. I haven't got an enormous amount to say about the Third World strike. I was not—I had a position—and again, I'm blurring years, but that's okay—I was not a mover and shaker in that movement. And I can't even—I think I've tended to go along with most strikes. I didn't stop teaching, but I taught off campus. And I did that in 1970 in the strikes that were called against the war, and the strikes that were called for the Third World College. But I had a position—which I wouldn't go to the stake for now—but I had a position that the best way—in fact, I think I'd say I was probably wrong—but my position was that the best way to do ethnic studies was to do them as part of the structure of the university. That's the way to legitimize them. Remember, when the third world college was ultimately created, it was

created as a third world college, and was not a member of the Academic Senate. It was created by the chancellor apart from the Academic Senate.

14-00:33:04

Lage: I don't think it was called a college.

14-00:33:05

Levine: No, no—

14-00:33:05

Lage: It wasn't given that status.

14-00:33:06

Levine: —it was the Department of Ethnic Studies, I believe it was. And in it, there was black studies, which ultimately became its own department in the Academic Senate. There was black studies, Native-American studies, Asian-American studies, Chicano studies—yeah. And—

14-00:33:28

Lage: Created by the chancellor?

14-00:33:30

Levine: Created by the chancellor, answerable to the chancellor.

14-00:33:33

Lage: Was it created by the chancellor because the Academic Senate wouldn't go for it?

14-00:33:36

Levine: Probably. Or he just didn't want to mess around with the Academic Senate. My own feeling was that wasn't the best way to do things. I wasn't against that, but if I had had my way it would have been—see, I wasn't sure we needed a department of African-American studies. I thought that the best way to teach African-American studies was in the departments we had.

14-00:33:56

Lage: In History and Sociology—

14-00:33:57

Levine: Teaching special—exactly. That's what I thought. I think now that that was probably strategically wrong, that—first of all, and this is sad, and this is a sad story, the way to hire members of those groups was this way. Because the—

14-00:34:18

Lage: —the departments were slow to—

14-00:34:19

Levine: —were slow to do it, and were very conservative. Berkeley is one of those institutions—I may have said this earlier when I talked about George Mason; well, maybe I didn't say it, but let me say it now—Berkeley is a guardian institution that sees itself as that, guarding the flame of the academe. And it's

very, very slow to change, and very slow to adapt to things happening outside. For all our victories, and for all my rhetoric about how the university was becoming a part of the society, and we understood that, and the Free Speech Movement was a sign of that as was the anti-Vietnam movement and the third-world-college movement, et cetera, the university was very slow. The professoriate was very slow to recognize this, and very jealous of its guardianship of the tradition. And so there were some institutions that were open to this change, and others that were not. We were one of the institutions that was very slow.

14-00:34:16

Lage: "We" being?

14-00:34:17

Levine: Berkeley. Very slow. So that we were slow, and the History Department didn't have an African-American member until somewhere in the seventies. And that was hard. That was not an easy hire. We had fights—I'll get to this—

14-00:35:31

Lage: Yeah, let's—

14-00:35:32

Levine: —we had fights over hiring women. We had fights over hiring—yes.

14-00:35:34

Lage: —not rush to any of that. Because I want to come back to that.

14-00:35:36

Levine: Well—right. So strategically it probably was a wise thing to create these departments. It was a way of getting a foot in the door. It was a way of hiring African-American, Mexican-American, and Native-American faculty.

14-00:35:53

Lage: Did you have any objection to the community involvement there? I mean, this was a case where those communities were saying, you know, "We want a role."

14-00:35:01

Levine: Yes, well—

14-00:35:02

Lage: "We want a role in hiring them. We want a role in what's taught." It was—

14-00:35:06

Levine: There is an interesting thing in American religious history, a thesis, that many religions begin as sects, and then become churches. Not all sects become churches, but many do. A sect is inclusive—no, it's exclusive, excuse me. A sect doesn't want the gentiles to join it. A sect wants only those who have found the way to join; it wants only its own kind in. It does not see itself as part of a larger society. It's pure and exclusive. When it becomes a church,

then it becomes much more inclusive. The Catholic Church being the best example. Catholic meaning exactly that, of course. It's inclusive, it's broad, it embraces many different types of people and the like. And that's a thesis in American religious history, that sects often become churches, and this change takes place. The Mormons become more of a church, blah-blah. You can go on with this. It's a slow movement, often. You can use that analogy to academic departments. These departments began as sects.

14-00:37:22

Lage: These Third World departments?

14-00:37:23

Levine: These Third World departments, yes, though I could argue that some of the regular departments were sects as well. [laugh] S-E-C-T-S, now I'm talking about.

14-00:37:31

Lage: [laughs] Right.

14-00:37:33

Levine: But these departments began as sects. And as sects, at one extreme the community had a big say in them, and it was a very interesting thing. The first of the divisions in ethnic studies to abandon the sect status was African-American studies.

14-00:37:56

Lage: They went into L&S.

14-00:37:58

Levine: Bil Banks, Professor William Banks, led them into L&S, into the Academic Senate, into the regular College of Letters and Sciences, that's right, and was accused of all kinds of betrayal. To this day, people will tell you he sold out. But he thought that African-American studies had no future unless it became a member of the larger community. That doesn't mean immediately that community involvement was not there, and there were many members of these departments that continued to feel the community; they represented the community. But they became regular academic departments, with regular appointment procedures, et cetera. And that slowly happened to the rest of Ethnic Studies. So that was an interesting—I kind of agreed with that. I agreed that these departments had to become part of—as long as they were under the chancellor, as long as they were separate entities, as long as their rules were different, they were never going to be seen as a legitimate part of the university.

14-00:38:58

Lage: Ghetto status.

14-00:38:59

Levine: Yeah. And I thought they needed to be. So I evolved from the feeling that their studies ought to be part of regular departments to an understanding that

that wasn't going to happen so quickly, and that, in fact, this was not a bad idea, but that they should be regular departments. And they ultimately all became regular departments. And I remember there was a time when some of these departments—I think Chicano Studies was one of them—didn't want non-Chicano students to study Chicano studies. They didn't want these people in. That's very different now, they do want them in. And African American Studies, again, led that way, I think. You know, you can do the same thing with women's studies departments. Should men be—yes. Should men teach women's studies? Should men be a part of women's studies? Well, if you're going to be a regular department, and if you're going to have any impact, I think you have to say yes to that. That there was a history that these departments go through, maybe, an evolutionary process. But this is all very interesting. I could go on with this, but I probably shouldn't.

14-00:40:04

Lage:

Did you have any role on advisory committees, or personally with individuals, or is this just—?

14-00:40:10

Levine:

Because, by this time, I was doing it—

14-00:40:13

Lage:

You were doing them—black studies.

14-00:40:14

Levine:

I was doing black studies. I was writing a book on it, and then ultimately did write a book on it. I was consulted and talked to, and I was always cooperative with the African American Studies Department. When it created a graduate program I was part of it. When it began to give the PhD I was one of those who argued for it giving the PhD. It was a change that had to take place in the Academic Senate, and I participated in teaching students who came here to get PhDs in African American Studies. I became a convert to the importance of these departments, yes. And that included, ultimately, women's studies. And ultimately—see, ultimately, it included a lot of things. Film studies. Berkeley is a very traditionalist place, and one of the parts of the campus that is not well understood by those who control the campus are the performing arts parts of the campus, the dramatic arts departments, the painter, the art practice people

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14-00:41:24

Lage:

And periodically, they're trying to do away with them.

14-00:41:27

Levine:

Yeah, they periodically try to do away with these places. They don't really understand them as part of—here's where a place like George Mason University is much better. They understand the importance of these departments, dramatic arts, and painting, and visual arts, and things like that. And they support them, and they—Berkeley was very slow on the scene, and every once in a while—it's an ongoing fight. There are administrators who try

to cut them down and bring them to size and see them as a non-academic part. But really, that's a big mistake, I think.

One of the things that attuned me to the world of thought and the world of creativity was Music 1 at City College in New York. I think I talked about this. That just changed a lot of things in me, and music now is, of course, expanded. The Music Department here in Berkeley slowly expanded to include jazz and other forms of music. These are very important, very, very important parts of education. I think it's a big mistake. The thrill of young students being able to act and do Shakespeare, and many other things—Eugene O'Neill and indeed modern playwrights you're never heard of—is so important to our education. So, universities are responding. See, this is all part of the same picture. Universities are growing, expanding—

14-00:42:52

Lage: Yeah. Would you tie this into things like FSM, which is always said to lead to educational reform?

14-00:42:59

Levine: I think so. You know, the person who thinks that the Free Speech Movement was one the important—according to his oral history—one of the most important events in American history—those are his words—is Charles Muscatine. Because it led, he thinks, to educational reform. Now, there's a lot of us that began to say, "Hey, these are our students. How did this happen? Why were we not with them? Why did we not understand what they were telling us? How were they led to do these things, sitting in and striking? What was the failure of our education?" He said, "It led us"—and Charles Muscatine was one of those who ended up creating a new college, one of those experimental colleges. Tussman, Joseph Tussman was another one—though I suspect he wasn't very excited about the Free Speech Movement—Joseph Tussman was another one who did. We began to experiment with education, I—

14-00:43:58

Lage: Did you change your teaching?

14-00:44:01

Levine: No. I think what happened is that the students were—I think what happened was a kind of a greater academic pluralism took place and students became interested in the academe, and in their own ways—for instance, they would ask me why I was teaching the way I was teaching. Students had never done that before.

14-00:44:25

Lage: Why were you were lecturing, or—?

14-00:44:26

Levine: Well, no, why did I have this assignment? And why was it a written assignment? Why couldn't they do a poster instead of a paper? What was

wrong with me? Why was I so *linear*? They used that word a lot. They got it from Marshall McLuhan. Why was I so—?

14-00:44:45

Lage: Did you start in the sixties or are you—?

14-00:44:46

Levine: Well, certainly around the late sixties, 1970, yeah.

14-00:44:51

Lage: So, people would be challenging you—

14-00:44:53

Levine: All the time. And I found it exciting. I didn't let them do posters instead of papers, but I let them do posters *and* papers. I had a PhD student, Gene Rossow, who wrote a very good dissertation, on the crime films of the twenties and thirties, called—and it became a great book. Oxford University Press did it as "Born To Lose," it was called, a great title. Gene, at some point, came to me and said, "Larry, I'm going to do this as a film, not as a dissertation. I'm going to do a film, not a dissertation about crime films." I said, "Not with me, you're not." I said, "Gene, I bow out. If you can find faculty to let you do it, and if *they'll* let you do it, you better check upstairs. You can do it, but not with me. I believe in the written word to do a film and a dissertation. That's fine with me. Hand them both in. I'll look at them both. And pioneer." I said, "But you're not going to do a film instead of a dissertation." So he ultimately worked with me and did a film and a dissertation. To do the film, he pirated; he had to pirate. In those days, there were no—you would have had to pirate today too, but in those days, he didn't even have VHRs and tapes. He had to rent the films and copy them, he got expensive machinery to do all this. He had to make copies, all illegal as hell, I'm sure. The library refused to accept his film, because they said it's—

14-00:46:15

Lage: Because of it.

14-00:46:16

Levine: They said, "This violates copyright. You didn't have—get permission, and we'll take it." They only took his dissertation. And the dissertation became a wonderful book. Gene did not go into the academe; he's a filmmaker. So there was a lot of that going on. They would say things to me like this—I had one wonderful exchange with students in American studies. They said, "Why do we have to hand our papers in on December 12? What if we're not moved to write the paper?" "You can't just write a paper," they said, "Don't you understand that?" And I said, "Aha. So when would you hand the paper in?" "Well, when it strikes us. And if it doesn't strike us before the term is over, we'll give it to you in the beginning of the next term, and you'll give us incompletes." And I said, "I see. So let me get this straight. You hand me your paper, whenever you're moved to write it," I said. And I say, "Well, I'm so glad you got around to writing this paper. But you know, I'm into my book

now. I'm into my family and all my kids are now a certain age, and they really require my presence. And I'm writing a book, and I'm into other things. I may not get to this for a year or so. I have to be moved. There has to be the right moment for me to read your paper and do it justice." I said, "What would you say if I said that to you?" And you know what they said? "Oh, that's different. You're being paid." So, ultimately, we just shaved it away. A lot of them were little bourgeois at heart. But these debates never went on earlier. And I found that—

14-00:47:47

Lage: And they wouldn't have called you Larry either.

14-00:47:48

Levine: No, some of them—yeah, I had no problem with that. Though as I get older, no one will call me Larry anymore. But sure, I was much younger then. And it was wonderful to have those kind of debates. You know what, I've already said this in another way, talking about an episode where Tom Laqueur came to me for a change in the academe in our graduate program—that the *process* is important, not just the product. And the process of students being engaged enough to care and debate about the nature of my assignments. And I learned things from them, by the way. I did vary some of my assignments because of these debates. I just believed that they had to learn to write papers, and I would never vary that. But I did vary things about the number of papers, or the nature of papers, or when they were due; that was all open for discussion and debate. I wasn't going to—

14-00:48:39

Lage: The number of readings and things? I mean, did you make your classes less rigorous or difficult?

14-00:48:44

Levine: No. If anything, more. You know, during the Vietnam War, an interesting thing happened. We got a lot of students who would—you know, it was very unfair, but if you were a student, you didn't have go into the army. So we got a number of people who were graduate students because of their desire to stay out of the army. And they were terrific students. They were people who—many of them never finished, and many of them would probably have never come into the graduate program without this. But I think those were great days. The whole Berkeley graduate program was in transition.

14-00:49:19

Lage: Now, why were they great days?

14-00:49:21

Levine: Well, because we got a lot of students we might not have gotten otherwise, and many of them were activist people. They were interested, they were well-read, they were—but I think we were in the process of changing. I think our students were getting better. I think the whole university was getting better. I am not one of those who sees the university as an institution in decline. I think

it's an institution that is burgeoning and blossoming. Quite the contrary to what you just asked me, my assignments didn't get smaller; they got bigger. The students were more ambitious. You could do more with them. They were better, they were more—I don't know if they were more intelligent, but they were better educated.

14-00:49:59

Lage: More engaged.

14-00:50:00

Levine: Yeah, and a lot of them were more engaged. In a typical upper division course at City College I was asked to read a textbook—*upper* division course—I was asked to read a textbook on the subject and to do two book reviews of books I picked from the library, because paperbacks weren't in yet; it got easier with paperbacks to assign people books. But I went to the library with a list of books, chose a couple of them, and did book reviews. That was what an upper division course consisted of. My upper division courses at Berkeley consisted of eight books that the students had to read, papers they had to write, tests they had to take, and more *complicated materials*, you know. People can see movies, you know, as candy, but they aren't really. They're complicated things to work into written materials. To give them visual materials, photographs—after all, you know, Renaissance history always included slides, but when we began to do it in modern American history, people say, "Candy, candy." Or, "You diluted the courses." But actually we weren't. We brought photography in, and we brought visual items in, and we brought films in, many of us; I certainly did. And I think it complicated—the kids had to take other things into account. We brought first-hand accounts, and we brought popular culture in. We brought the history of people in. They read autobiographies. They didn't just read about the tariff acts. And I think we complicated history. We made it more diffuse, more eclectic, more comprehensive —

14-00:51:33

Lage: Was your urge to do this affected by the social conditions at that time, or would it have happened—?

14-00:51:43

Levine: This is very interesting, and maybe this is a good note to end on. Things are connected, and we often don't see the connections. There was a political movement going on, politics from the bottom up. A lot of the students said, "We have to go out and talk to the workers. We have to go out and talk to blacks in the ghettos. We have to take them into account that—"

14-00:52:04

Lage: History from the bottom up, do you mean?

14-00:52:06

Levine: No, I'm talking about politics from the bottom up. That is, in the politics of the anti-Vietnam movement and of the civil rights movement people talk about the people, you know. "We have to engage the people. We have to engage

workers. Why are workers pro-war, for God sakes? They suffer from wars. Their children fight the wars. Why can't we make them see this? Let's go out and talk to them." And the civil rights movement—look, way back before the Free Speech Movement, I was knocking on the doors of workers who told me to go to the "pink hills," but nevertheless, we were trying to get people engaged, and that just grew. So, at that moment, when politics was taking to the streets to involve the masses, at that moment, we begin to get history from the bottom up. These things are connected. And maybe we ought to end here, and we can then talk about the kind of history I began to do.

14-00:53:04

Lage: Yeah, I think that's a good transition to the next topic, which is going to be the new kind of history—

14-00:53:10

Levine: Good.

14-00:53:10

Lage: —and your next book.

14-00:53:11

Levine: Good.

### Interview 8: June 8, 2005

[Interview sessions 8 and 9 were reviewed in whole or in part by Larry Levine, with minor corrections in fact and language, in preparation for “The state of cultural history: a conference in honor of Lawrence W. Levine.” Excerpts later appeared in the Journal of American History, December 2006, pp. 792-804.]

#### [Audio File 15]

15:00:00:00

Lage: Today is June 8<sup>th</sup>, 2005. This is the eighth session with Larry Levine. We're both recording here. You wanted to start this time by finishing what we talked about last time, the FSM.

Levine: Yes. I'd like to say one thing about—I listened to the interview. I'm recording it also, as it turns out. I expressed near the end of our last session, maybe at the very end, my anger towards the—what was it called, the 200?

Lage: The Committee of 200.

Levine: Committee of 200 and the professors, the tenured and almost all full professors who had ignored the problem or closed their eyes to the dilemma and then came out after the arrests to create this committee and displace—those of us—except for Reggie, who by accident managed to work his way in, and by temperament—displaced the rest of us.

I talked about my anger, and I wanted to say it struck me as an anomaly in a way, because it wasn't *personal* anger. A lot of these people on the Committee of 200 were friends of mine or were going to become friends of mine. I mean, I had deep, deep respect for Carl Schorske, for instance, who had been my first chairman here and who was just a humane and amazing man, who I loved to talk to and learned a great deal from. I was never personally angry at him or at Henry Nash Smith or at most of these people. I later became friendly—for instance, one of the closest friends my wife and I had in the world was Leo Lowenthal, not at that time but later, and he was a member of that committee. Leo, who was much older than we, thirty-three years older exactly, became a very close friend of ours, and that's true of a number of people who served on the Committee of 200.

So it was not a personal anger. It was an institutional anger, and perhaps, though I don't know that I want to get into this, perhaps even a class anger. You know, there is a class system in the academe. The difference is that there are ladders between the classes, which is not true in many societies, in most societies. You enter as an assistant professor and you work your way up, and so there isn't a lumpen proletariat.

Now, with the growth in this adjunct system, that's a different story, but Berkeley doesn't have that. Berkeley, instead of adjuncts, has TAs. You see I work now with George Mason University, which doesn't have any TAs because it isn't a big graduate school yet, and it uses adjuncts. And those people are a lumpen proletariat. They go nowhere, there is no ladder, there is nothing beyond their class, no way of joining with the class above them. Whereas the TAs at Berkeley hopefully have such a way.

Lage: Maybe not at Berkeley, but somewhere.

Levine: That's true. Well, most of them don't expect to stay at Berkeley.

One other thing I wanted to speak about, which got lost in the transmission of my thoughts about the Free Speech Movement, was an amazing moment that no one who lived through it will forget, I think, and that is, after the December 8 meeting, that is, the meeting in Wheeler Auditorium, I believe, the *old* Wheeler Auditorium before it burned—it was a huge place, bigger than it is now—we had that famous December 8 meeting in which the faculty finally came to its senses and passed resolutions trying to bring some rationale into the campus.

We walked out, outside of Wheeler, and the students—there were thousands of students standing there—and they cheered us, and as we walked up they opened a pathway and we walked right through them. And Mario Savio has left recollections, and Bettina Aptheker has left recollections, and others have, too, in which they talked about the tears. They were crying. Mario says that we were crying, and Bettina talks about this. And walking through that was an amazing experience, and just being part of it. There was one of those moments, and there aren't a lot of them, it was one of those moments where the gaps between students and faculty—you know, I was talking about the class system, that's part of, you know—the campus is a hierarchy, there is no question about that. College campuses are anomalous places. They have a dual mandate which is contradictory.

[Tape recorder turned off.]

Lage: Now we're back on after change of battery, and we're doing fine. So, had you completed that thought? I'm sorry, we were rudely interrupted here.

Levine: I think I did, yes. I just wanted to talk about that scene, and then I wanted to talk about—

Lage: Did that feeling of closeness with students, and in a way, kind of adoration, it sounds like—

Levine: Well, you know, the students kept saying things during the Free Speech Movement like, "Trust no one over thirty." And a lot of faculty took that

seriously. And the students—there was something else going on in the sixties which was so interesting for me, and was a connection, another connection, between the campus and the outside society—the students began to see themselves as an exploited class. They began to see themselves as a class. And they began to increasingly identify with blacks. They saw themselves as blacks, and the faculty as, you know, the white oppressor. They saw themselves as workers, and so that was a very interesting moment. They saw themselves this way, and they began to identify with the underclass.

You know, I had come from Princeton, where there was no such identification, but these students were beginning to identify themselves with the various underclasses in America, and they saw themselves as an underclass. So you have that. It was not just rhetorical, it was real, and it was one of the things we didn't understand.

I should say something about this, and I will. But on the other hand they wanted so badly the approbation of the faculty, and you saw that at this moment. And the faculty withheld it until this moment. I mean, there were faculty like Reggie [Zelnik] and myself, who gave it early and frequently, but we were not exactly powerful faculty. Then ultimately December 8 came along, and a majority of the Academic Senate—and that was a very, very well-attended Academic Senate meeting—there was an overwhelming vote in favor of the students. So that was very interesting.

Lage: Did that carry over into the classroom, that sense of euphoria?

Levine: I think a lot of that did. I talked a little bit about that last time, that the classrooms changed. You know, when Mario Savio said, "We're going to have real classes here," For the first time, I was outraged at that kind of hyperbole. On the other hand, there was some truth to it; education now went on in places it hadn't gone on before. So in that sense, the real classes expand. I mean, students sat now on committees. They congregated with faculty in places they hadn't congregated before. There was a—whether democratic is the right word, I don't know, but there was certainly a more open atmosphere in the classrooms, and I think this was very important.

Can we stop here for one moment?

Lage: Sure.

[Tape recorder turned off.]

Lage: Now we're back.

Levine: Before I leave the subject of the Free Speech Movement, I do want to say something that's very important, which I don't think I have said, and that is that when we were going through the Free Speech Movement of 1964-'65

there was no way of knowing that this was the first shot across the bow and that this was going to turn into a series of movements that encompassed many universities throughout the country and indeed throughout the world. It looked *sui generis*. It looked like it had to do with the peculiar culture of Berkeley rather than the culture of the United States, and that was more important.

Lage: Right. And not just the United States. France?

Levine: No, the world. Europe, certainly. So one has to understand this, and when you're living through something you can only see it the way you can see it, and we saw it as a Berkeley thing. And so did everyone else, and there were some amazing things. There were articles published in respectable magazines like *Harper's* and *The Atlantic*, by people like Diana Trilling, Lionel Trilling's wife, saying, "You see,"—in essence this is what they were saying—"you see, this is Berkeley's comeuppance in thinking that a state university on the far western frontier really belonged in the company of Harvard and Yale and Princeton and Columbia." And when my wife and I—I don't think I've said this—when my wife and I went down to UCLA to visit our dear friends—I've spoken about them—in Los Angeles in the interim; I think it was probably the break between semesters. You know, we had the old semester system then, so the fall semester continued after Christmas, and then there was a break. When that finally ended somewhere in the middle of January there was a break. We went down to LA to visit our friends, and when we got there they said—both of our friends were in the History Department, both of them male friends—

Lage: At UCLA?

Levine: At UCLA. And they said, "We're having a big departmental dinner tonight, and we got you invited." So Cornelia and I went to the departmental dinner, and it was an amazing event. People came over to our table and yelled at us, or scolded us at least, and said, "You're destroying the university. What are you people doing there? I mean, you are bringing ruin to us all. But," they said, "what you're really doing is you're destroying Berkeley, and now UCLA will become the Berkeley of—," you know, "we'll become the important center here as you destroy yourselves in this way."

So there was a lot of feeling—I was amazed at this, I was just amazed at this—among some of these people there was almost a sense of glee that Berkeley was destroying itself. So there was a real feeling that this was confined to Berkeley and had nothing to do with anything else. It had to do with the peculiar student body and the kind of faculty and the like. But as we now know, it was the first shot. It was the first shot of what? The first expression of what? Well, the first expression, I think—and again with a lot of hindsight, but then that's what historians do—the first expression of the fact that if it was ever true that the university was part of something separate from

the society, those days were over. Actually, I think I've said this before, so I won't belabor it. I don't think the university ever was. But this was clearly a sign that the university was part of the society, and that the university had changed a great deal from the nineteenth-century university, which was devoted to male, white Protestants. The university had become something much more typical of the society.

You know, there's something interesting. People talk about the death of the public intellectual, that there was in the earlier parts of the twentieth century there were public intellectuals like Walter Lippmann and a whole bunch of people who existed apart from universities and wrote books and wrote articles in magazines like *The Atlantic* and *The Nation* and *The New Republic*, and thought. Edmund Wilson is a good example. And those people themselves didn't like professors, and they'd talk about them. Edmund Wilson, who had a place on Wellfleet on Cape Cod, hated the thought—and writes about it in his books—of the invasion of the professors. Arthur Schlesinger Jr., Richard Hofstadter, people like that, "are coming to Wellfleet now and building houses, and it's horrible." You know, that kind of thing. So people talk a lot now about the death of that public intellectual, and I think there's something wrong about that. What's happened is that professors are teaching the public, and you can now be a public intellectual in the academe. I really feel strongly about that. That's something a lot of people wouldn't agree with.

Lage: You mean even without going on the talk shows or the interview shows—

Levine: That's right.

Lage: —just in the campus.

Levine: Because we have the public in front of us, and not only do we have the public in our classes, but the books we write, like *Black Culture and Black Consciousness*, which is hardly a best seller, but that book is used widely in classes, and other professors assign that book and books like that to their students. And the students go out and—you know, we have a larger segment of the American population going to college—and they go out and take all kinds of jobs, and have all kinds of responsibilities, and they're learning a history that I didn't learn and that people before me didn't learn, a history which has black people in it, and women in it, and immigrants in it, and the like. And they're reading books by people like this. This is a very important thing, and they're going out with those books and with those thoughts and with that sense of the past, and they're the public.

Lage: You're sounding—I'm thinking about the right wing, or the conservative wing argument that these left-wing professors are shaping our children and—

Levine: Well, I'm not talking about left-wing professors.

Lage: I know, but—

Levine: College professors do shape children. And we had the first real manifestation of discontent with that, and the first anti-evolution movement of the 1920s. An increasing number of American kids were going to college, certainly going to high school, and in high school and then really in college they were meeting Mr. Darwin, and they were no longer protected from that. When fewer students went to high school, and very few students went to college, Darwin was okay. There was a debate about Darwin's theories of evolution in the late nineteenth century between clergy and intellectuals, intellectuals in the clergy and intellectuals out of the clergy. There was protest, but it was intellectual protest. When regular human beings began—that is, plain kids—began to go to school and learn Darwin—who was not left wing, by the way; Mr. Darwin was a conservative Protestant man who believed in God very firmly—when they read Darwin's theories the *public* was now subject to these theories, you see. So it has nothing to do with left wing, right wing. It has to do with the cutting edge of—there's nothing left-wing about discovering that blacks were part of American society, one out of every five Americans in 1800 was black, from Africa many of them. There's nothing left wing about that. There's nothing left-wing in coming to the realization that we have left half the population, e.g., women, out of our history. There's nothing left wing—

Lage: But it does seem to upset a certain portion of—

Levine: Well, it upsets a certain portion.

Lage: But anyway, I think we shouldn't get diverted too much on that at this point.

Levine: Well, that's the essence of what I do, so it's okay to say these things. The essence of what I do and what I have done as a scholar and as a teacher is to try to give voice to people we have ignored. That's what I've done, so it's fine to talk about these things. I think it has to do with—if this is about what I am and what I've been at Berkeley, this is right on target.

So. I suppose before we get to my work, though this is all my work, perhaps, perhaps we ought to talk about something that comes right after the Free Speech Movement, I mean directly after it, and that was the march from Selma to Montgomery. We were notified in the winter of 1965, that's just a year after the Free—it would be less than that.

Lage: Yes, just months after.

Levine: We were notified that a contingent of historians was going to go down to join the march somewhere.

Lage: When you say we, you mean the department?

Levine: Yes, the department. I think departments all over the country were notified of this. And the department chose myself and Bob Middlekauff to be the representatives of the department on this march, which was amazing for this department to even get involved in that. But they did, and I was very pleased about that. Bob Middlekauff, however, since he was a colonialist, felt that the person who really ought to do this was Kenneth Stampp. Now, he thought I was an appropriate person because of the kind of history I did. So he went to Ken and told Ken he thought he ought to go, and he ought to be one of the department's two representatives. Ken resisted for various reasons, but ultimately gave into this and later told me it was one of the greatest experiences of his life. So Ken and I flew to—I guess we flew to Atlanta, I can't remember. We ultimately—we spent an evening at Tuskegee, which is in Alabama.

Lage: And you were official representatives. They sent you—

Levine: The department sent us. We were the people the department sent, and I think the department contributed. I can't remember these details, whether we paid for our airfare or the department did; I think the department did. We joined the march and we were all able to march for a couple of days. We entered Montgomery with the march, and we were there.

Lage: Were you part of a larger contingent of historians?

Levine: Yes. We did ultimately join the other historians, and we drove from Tuskegee to the outskirts of Montgomery, somewhere in Alabama, and we joined the march. It was an amazing group of people. My friend Robert Dallek from UCLA was on it; John Hope Franklin was on it; Dick Hofstadter was on it, my mentor. He was a very apolitical guy, but this moved him and he did it. Walter Johnson, who was a professor at the University of Chicago. I remember this; it's funny. My book had just come out, my first book, in 1965; it had just been published. Walter Johnson came over on the bus. He said, "You're Larry Levine. I've reviewed your book for the *New York Times*. Very fine book, and my review should appear shortly." Well, I was thrilled. There was no *New York Times*, no California edition of the *New York Times* at that moment, so I every Sunday rushed out to some news place that carried the *Times* and I bought the Sunday *Times*; it never appeared. The *Times* does that, they kill certain reviews. You know, he got paid for it and everything. I was in correspondence with him. I said, "Do you know anything about what happened to your review?" And he said, "I fear it's not going to appear." And it never did appear, I don't know why. But that was just a side note.

So we marched in little neighborhoods on the outskirts of Montgomery. This was my first trip to the South, I think this is true; 1965, I had not been there before. I had never gone down before this, you know, for instance for the Freedom Summer. I guess a lot of students went down, but maybe people of my, you know, young faculty status went down. I didn't know anyone who

went down. So this was the first time I had been down South. There were things I expected to see, and did see, and nonetheless was moved by seeing. Black neighborhoods had no sidewalks. We went through many, and they were literally—and this is, you know, outside Montgomery, Alabama, which is a big city—people lived without sidewalks, they lived without streets, they lived in shacks. So that hit me right away. I expected that to hit me, but when you see it it's different than when you expect to see it.

Lage: Were the people in those neighborhoods out watching the march, or on the march?

Levine: Well, some were, and this is what's interesting. As we—people did join the march, indigenous people from the neighborhoods, black people. And when we got to whiter neighborhoods with sidewalks and streets and the like, we were in the street and there were people on the sidewalk looking at us without any pleasure. And this is what amazed me. People would get into the street with cameras, plain people, and they'd take their camera and they'd go right up to a black man or woman, and they'd put the camera up in front of their face and take their picture. Now, this was a very intimidating thing to do. In other words, they didn't know who these black people were, but they figured if they're neighbors, they can find out and retribution can take place. So I thought, what courage. This whole thing took some courage, going on this march.

I want to say this. One of the things that—we were protected. Lyndon Johnson called out the National Guard, and so we were protected. But the kids who were protecting us, the young guardsmen, were Alabamans, right? They were the local Alabamans who worked for the National Guard, and they were—the fury in their faces was so manifest. At the end of—the march ended at the capitol, and Martin Luther King got up on the capitol, and Governor Wallace was the governor. He got up on the capitol and he gave a speech and all of that, and then we broke up and dispersed, and we had to go back to the bus, which was going to take us to Atlanta.

And I got lost. I don't quite know how that happened, but I got lost and I didn't know where the bus was. And I had this feeling of—I was walking through streets which were becoming increasingly devoid of marchers, who were dispersing. The march was over, and I was walking down streets on both sides of which there were National Guards. I know on one street I walked down all by myself; I was the only person on the street, and they knew exactly who I was, and the anger. And they were all carrying guns, of course, and the anger.

Lage: And they're there to protect you.

Levine: And the anger. And then I got to the corner. I was beginning to wonder what the hell I was going to do. I didn't know who to go to. I was an invader. I

wasn't going to go to local people and say, "Hey, I'm one of the people who came down to invade your institutions and change them. Would you help me get out of here?" I was not quite sure about what my next course of action was, and I got to the end of the street, totally lost at this point, and my friend Bob Dallek, who saw I wasn't on the bus, had left the bus—what an act of friendship—and came running through the streets looking for me, and found me at the end of the street.

So Bob Dallek said, "Come on, come on." So we're walking back to the bus together. I was so happy to see him, and it was such a sweet, courageous thing for him to do. We're walking through the streets, and I wish I could think of his name, I'm so sorry about this, but a professor, southerner—there were some southerners on this march—a southern professor at the University of Kentucky, I believe, whose name has totally escaped me, very heavy guy—we would call him fat—comes driving by in a convertible. He says, "Hi, boys." He says, "Where you headin'?" And so we said, "We're going back to the bus." He says, "And where's the bus goin'?" And I said, "Atlanta." And we knew him, vaguely. And he said, "Well, I'm headin' for Atlanta myself." He said, "Come on in the car and I'll drive you there." And I said to Bob, "I don't think this is a very good idea. I don't think we should do this, Bob. We're northerners. We're going to be sitting in a—." You know, a woman was killed later that day, from Detroit. She [Viola Liuzzo] came down for the march, and going home, she was driving home, she was shot to death in her car. Someone just shot from outside, killed her. Well, that happened later, but that was in my thoughts, that something like that could happen. We'd be driving in an open convertible through the South, from Montgomery to Atlanta.

And he says, "Now, boys, now don't worry." He said, "Don't worry at all. You'll be perfectly safe. Come on, it'll be nice." And, of course, it would have been nice if I was a little less nervous about it all. But Bob thought it was a great idea, so we never went back to the bus.

Lage: The bus must have been worried about you.

Levine: Yes, well, maybe we did tell the bus. When I say we didn't go back to ride on the bus, but maybe we did tell the people in the bus. We got in the car—this was an experience—and we're driving. And we get—I don't know, we're still in Alabama—he gets hungry. He's a big guy and he obviously eats, and he gets hungry, and he says, "Let's drop into that restaurant and have something to eat." And I said, "I don't think that's a good idea. I think we should stay in the car and drive to Atlanta." And he said, "No, no. Now, we'll just go in that restaurant and we'll sit down and we'll eat, and I'll do all the talking. You boys just keep quiet." So the three of us walk into the restaurant. We sat down. He did all the ordering for lunch and everything, and there were people in that restaurant, and they knew who we were. I could feel it. They knew who we were. He, clearly, was a southerner, and an effusive one, spoke the lingo. He was a professor but he spoke like he was a farmhand, you know. He was

putting that on and he did it well. But he does speak that way; I've seen him many times since then and I mean, he speaks that way, he's a very nice man and a very bright one. So we sat there and he's going on talking out loud, and we're just sitting with him, and I felt a thing in that restaurant which scared me, you know. I mean, we were—it was a very interesting and sobering experience for me, and very interesting. Nothing happened. We got back in the car and he did drive us to Atlanta. I got to the hotel and there was Ken, wondering where I was. We spent the evening in Atlanta and then flew back the next day. I have one—

Lage: Did you feel any sense of danger in Atlanta itself?

Levine: No, but we didn't do much in Atlanta. We just got to the—you know, I got to the hotel and we went, Ken and I and maybe others, I forget, had dinner, and then the next morning we went out to the airport and flew back to California. Safety. It was a very wonderful experience in every way.

If I may, I have two quick stories to tell, or one anyway. Before the march to the state capitol, we gathered in a big empty field. It was a kind of spring day and it was very green, you know, coming from the winter in California, where it wasn't green at all. Or maybe it was green; I guess it was the spring in California, and everything was turning brown, and this was very green, in any case, and the trees were beginning. It was a very pretty scene, and we were standing there, but it was cold, it was still winterish cold weather. We were standing in what was basically a muddy field, and Martin Luther King was late. He evidently was late a lot, and we were waiting, couldn't go without Martin Luther King. We were standing around and I was chatting. In fact, this is where I had that chat with Dick Hofstadter that I talked about last time, where he told me about the sales of his—it was in this field—he said, "You know how many copies of *The American Political Tradition* sold last year?" [laughs]

And I saw this old man standing around—I don't think I've told this story—I saw this old guy and he was all alone, and he was elderly. I finally walked over to him and I said, "Hi," and introduced myself. I don't know why, but there was something about him that—and he was so all alone—that I walked over. He turned out to have come from New York, and he was a German Jewish refugee who had fled Hitler in the thirties, thirty years earlier, and he told me that he was listening to all this on the radio, and on television I guess. And he said to himself, "Well, if people in Germany had come to our aid the Holocaust wouldn't have happened." So he got himself a ticket and took a bus or a train down to Atlanta, down to Montgomery to join the march. I was very moved by that.

Lage: Yes. And it also shows that identity that so many Jews felt.

Levine: Yes, in those days. Final story, which I suppose a more prudent man would not tell, but I will tell it. It's something I'm still embarrassed about, but I think it's worth—if I'm going to tell my story, I should tell it.

I was teaching a big lecture course and I guess I missed a lecture, and the students were told why. So, I'm sorry about that. Whoever came in to tell them I wouldn't come to that lecture told them where I was. So a very moving thing happened, and a very stupid thing happened. The moving thing was the students took up a collection, and when I got into class they presented me with—I don't know if people know what these are anymore, but they're those plastic juice things in which you would put a can of frozen orange juice and water, and mix it together and then use it as a dispenser for the frozen orange juice. Now it comes in its own containers. Two of those were jammed with money, which I turned over to the department, and the room was packed. Even my wife was there, to my surprise. I don't know how she knew about this. And I failed the moment, and I'm still very surprised at myself. But I didn't see the moment. They came to hear about the march, and I didn't satisfy them.

Lage: You did your regular lecture?

Levine: I said, "Look. This is a class and I've missed a lecture already, and I really need to go—". It was a very stupid thing to do, but we fail sometimes, you know. We're not prepared for history, and I certainly wasn't prepared. And it was so unlike me that in many ways—well, maybe it wasn't so unlike me. I am also very serious about classes and things. And my wife left. [laughs] There were so many extra people that had come to hear me talk about—it was such a loss of an opportunity that I—that was 1965.

Lage: You regretted it right at that moment?

Levine: It's forty years later. It was forty years ago, 1965. This is 2005. I still think about it. I still think, "What in the world was I thinking?" They came, they gave me the dough, the room was packed, they cared about what happened, they applauded me when I walked in, and I just stuck a pin in that balloon out of some kind of anal need to go on with the lecture, you know. So we sometimes drop the ball.

Lage: Well, did that affect, that sense that you'd missed the opportunity affect you later when there were more moments on campus, like strikes against Cambodia?

Levine: See, I always took part in those things. I always understood those things. I generally did not hold my class in a regular place when there were strikes; I held it off campus. So I understood the students' needs and my needs, and we agreed that this was a very important thing that had just happened in Selma

and Montgomery. God knows why I didn't do what I should have done, but I didn't.

I'm just hoping this is recording [refers to his own tape recorder]. So, should we go on?

Lage: I think we should go on to—my thought next was writing *Black Culture and Black Consciousness[:Afro-American Folk Thought from Slavery to Freedom, 1977]*.

Levine: Okay. I have talked about the Bryan book.

Lage: And what made you decide to write the book.

Levine: Let me say before, just as a very quick preface, that I have always liked to talk about my work. I've always shared it with my students. I've always been open about it, I've always talked. Maybe I ought to preface this by something. In the second year I was at Berkeley, my good friend John William Ward, who I taught with in Princeton, came out and spent a year at the think tank at Stanford. He had been a student of Henry Nash Smith; I mentioned this, I think. Henry Nash Smith was a professor here, so Henry Nash Smith offered to drive me to Stanford to Bill's house when we were both invited for dinner there, and it was a wonderful thing. I sat with this man who had been such a great influence on my own thinking, in his book *Virgin Land*, and we had the whole trip to Stanford together. And Henry Smith told me a story about his great book *Virgin Land*, which Alfred Knopf turned down, and it was published, I think, by the University of California Press, which in those days—or maybe it was published by Harvard Press, I guess Harvard. In those days Harvard didn't have a paperback, so when it got to paperback Knopf published the paperback, but Knopf had not—Knopf by then realized it had made a big mistake and published the paperback, which was the paperback I knew. Later when Harvard had a paperback series it took the rights away from Knopf.

So I heard Henry Nash Smith tell me about how Knopf had not published his book, and then on top of that, sometime later Ken Stampp told me that his second book, *And the War Came*, was turned down by Knopf. So here are two stories which were very—both of these guys told me that Knopf had turned down one of their books. I sent the William Jennings Bryan book to Knopf at Hofstadter's insistence, and Knopf turned it down. The fact that Smith had told me his story and Ken had told me his story made my being turned down by Knopf—well, it put it in a context, and it made it much easier for me, and I never forgot that. I never forgot that.

So I always did things like that with my own students. I always talked about myself as a human being to them, my failures as well as my successes, my insecurities as well as my securities. If they told me they were nervous about

studying for the orals, I would tell them, "Oh, you couldn't be as nervous as I was." You know, I would tell them of my fears and all of that. I was frightened—when I walked into Dick Hofstadter's office a month or two before my orals, and he said, "Is something wrong?" I said, "Well, I'm nervous. I'm studying for my orals." He said, "What are you nervous about?" You see? Then I walked out thinking, "Is there something wrong with me?" So I never did that to my students. So, you know, when they were sending their manuscripts off I'd tell them, "Well, you know, mine was turned down by Knopf, and that's okay. Just have a second press in mind. Wrap it up and send it off again," that kind of thing, and I learned that from this willingness of Ken and Henry Smith to do that.

And I carried that over into talking about my work, that we mystify our work. There's something I read when I was teaching that historiography course I talked about. We read a book by Marc Bloch on history. He was a French historian of the medieval period, who was killed by the Nazis in France. He wrote about "the curious modesty, which as soon as we are outside the study seems to forbid us to expose the honest groping of our methods before a profane public." That's a wonderful quote. And, of course, the profane public wasn't just the public out there, it wasn't just the gentiles, who were outside the academe, but the profane public turned out to be our students. The profane public even turned out to be our colleagues. Professors too often don't talk about their work with each other. It's really quite shocking how—

Lage: And the trials and tribulations of the work.

Levine: And the trials and tribulations of the work, exactly. So I have always gone out of my way to talk about my work to anyone who would listen. My students have to listen, about their colleagues. I've cared about talking about my work, so I'm delighted to talk about a little bit of it now.

Let me just say one final word about the Bryan book and then we'll go on. And that is, after I do things I often find quotes which tell me what I've done, and so after I wrote the Bryan book I read something by John Higham which I loved. I'm not going to fill this with quotes, but I loved this. "The serious historian may not wrap himself in judicial robes and pass judgment from on high. He's too much involved in both the prosecution and the defense. He is not a judge of the dead, but rather a participant in their affairs, and their only trustworthy intermediary." I loved—and I realized that it was only when I was willing to be a participant in Bryan's affairs that I was able to understand him. I entered his world. I became part of it, and I could hear his voice, and that was very, very, very important to me. And I learned that, writing the Bryan book, that I had to be open to his voice. See, when I first spoke about Bryan in my biology class, which I've recounted here, I was his judge. I just *judged him*, and my biology professor questioned me about that, you know. But in writing the book about Bryan I couldn't be his judge if I was really to understand him. I could be his judge, and many biographies are judgmental,

and mine was, too. I mean, I criticized Bryan, but I was open to him, and I tried to understand the culture from which he came. This was the evolution of me into a cultural historian.

So after I finished the Bryan book—see, Hofstadter was a little disappointed when he asked me—when I was writing my dissertation he asked me what my next book was going to be, and I said, “I don’t know.” He says, “What do you mean, you don’t know?” Because he was in a different place than I was, and I ultimately got to that place where I had more books to write—and I’m still there—than I knew I was going to live to write. I am certainly still at that place and narrowing all the time in terms of time, what I still can do. But when I was young, even when I published my first book, I didn’t know what I was going to do. And I said to Dick Hofstadter, “Maybe I should write a book of essays on the twenties.” He said, “You’re too young to write a book of essays. You need to write another monograph.”

I was active in civil rights, and I was thinking about things, and then I had that feeling that—maybe people will still remember this commercial, “I could have had a V-8.” I had that “I could have had a V-8” feeling, you know, I don’t have to drink plain tomato juice. I suddenly realized I could write about African American history. It was no longer—you know, when Leon Litwack first did it, he was told, “Now get back into the mainstream.” When I met Leon he was, in fact, working on a book on John Quincy Adams, which he never wrote, because he had the same thought; when he came to Berkeley he realized, “Heck, it’s okay to write about black history.” You know, we’re interested. People understand. We were changing. So I realized that, too, and this is the book I was going to write; I was going to write a book called—it excited me a lot—I was going to write a book called *Black Protest Thought in the Twentieth Century*. I was going to do a history of protest thought from, oh, let’s say W.E.B. DuBois to Stokely Carmichael, who was the doyen of protest in the 1960s.

I had my first leave in the year 1965-’66. My Bryan book was published. I had a leave. We were in this house—no, we weren’t in this house by then. We were still living down on Grove Street, opposite what is now Fat Apple’s. I had my leave, and I stayed home, and I wrote—I read. I read and read and read. I did a lot of work that year. I read DuBois, all of his editorials, and I read James Weldon Johnson, and I read novels, and I read Richard Wright. I just read a lot. And in the middle of the year I suddenly realized that I was writing the Bryan book all over again, in this sense: I was writing from the perspective of the leaders. And that was okay; after all, books have to be written from the perspective of the movers and shakers. I would be the last to say they shouldn’t be written. But at the end of the Bryan book—I think I mentioned this—I was a little upset about whether—I said that Bryan helps us understand the people, but I had no evidence of that. They followed him, so I assumed they agreed with him, and therefore the anomalies and the directions of his thought were theirs, but I had no way of knowing that. And when I tried

to confront that, my friends told me, “Stay away from that. That’s another book. You want to write that book, write it next. Do your Bryan book.”

But here I was, writing another book on black leadership, and I was a little troubled by that. So I wondered what I could do to open it up, to—in other words, was what DuBois wanted, what blacks wanted, or did he have to convince them to want this, and did he ever communicate that to them, and was what James Weldon Johnson and all the rest of these leaders, the NAACP leadership, all the black intellectuals like Richard Wright and the like, were they expressing the feelings of the black people, or were they expressing their own feelings, you know? I needed to do that. I needed to know that.

Lage: Was there a model?

Levine: No. I didn’t know a model. See, I didn’t know a model. This was the period where—I think we said this last time, I said this last time—where what was—you know, we are taught that there should be strict divisions between what’s happening in our time in our history, “the virus of the present,”—that’s someone’s quote—the virus of the present can destroy. It’s true. The virus of the present can, if you carry the present into the past and don’t understand that the past might be different. They look like us, and they sound like us, and they speak our language, but they *aren’t* us, and we have to understand that.

On the other hand, on the other hand—I mentioned tracking devices; I think Jack Hexter, a historian of England, talked about tracking devices—we have tracking devices that they didn’t have in their own time. Let’s say, depending on when you’re writing, they may not have understood Freud, because Freud didn’t live yet, or Darwin. So we have tracking devices, both intellectual tracking devices and technical tracking devices, the computer, that they didn’t have, and these things have a bearing on our ability to understand the past.

So the present can influence you in very good ways. We can understand things about biology, about the human psyche, about the way humans think, in ways they couldn’t understand, and we should bring these present things, these present tracking devices, to bear on the past. We understand things about race that they didn’t understand. So the present can have an effect, and I was affected. I think there’s no question; I was affected by the politics of my time, the civil rights politics of my time, the history from the bottom up. You know, politics from the bottom up affected history from the bottom up, learning to—realizing that we could not do what we needed to do unless we recruited women and blacks and everything.

Could we understand America without understanding women and blacks, you know? That thought—I happened to be lucky enough to be a young historian in a period in which that thought was penetrating, and it was penetrating a lot of young historians. The older historians, some had been doing it and some were affected by it. Ken Stampp wrote one of the great—he’s twenty-two

years older than me, twenty-one years older than me—he wrote one of the great books on slavery. So there's no question it wasn't just confined to my age group, but it was very prevalent. Well, I don't know that it was very prevalent, but more than a few people in my age group, in my generation of historians began to think this way, and I began to think this way.

So the first thing is I'm working on black history, but that's not enough. I now want to see the connections between the leadership and the people, and how do you do that? No, there weren't very many, if any, precedents. I could think of none. So I hit upon some things. Blacks moved, spatially. Americans always move spatially, and you know, there is a tendency to see spatial movement—my people have moved spatially, from Russia and Lithuania to the United States, and there is an unhappy tendency sometimes to see them as leaves blowing in the wind. And one of the great conundra is the filter. Why do some people leave and some people stay? Why did some people come here and others lived to be destroyed in the Holocaust? Why did some Irish come here, and others died in the famine? You know, this is interesting. Is it just accident? Is it just that the wind hit those leaves and blew them, and the other leaves were not exposed to the wind and stayed? This is very interesting. People make choices, and this is a very difficult thing. So blacks migrate. There are migrations. So I thought, if I study the patterns of black migrations I might be able to see, are blacks moving, unhappy, when DuBois is most unhappy? Are there connections? So I started to study black migrations.

Lage: Demographically, statistically.

Levine: Yes, that's right. I read about black migrations. I looked at other aspects of black, you know, race riots. Race riots in America begin as pogroms. Whites walk into, just as the Jewish pogroms in Russia, whites walk into black neighborhoods and burn them. Well, I thought—and then blacks began to fight back. After World War I, or even earlier in the Atlanta riots, blacks begin to fight back and defend their territories, and in the 1960s I was thinking, the next step is blacks in riots will come into white neighborhoods and trash them. So there are patterns to black race riots, so that's another thing one can study.

Lage: We're still on this black protest theme, then.

Levine: That's the book I was writing and I was trying to figure out. And then in this leave, this pregnant leave I had, toward the end of the leave I began to think, well, you know—I knew nothing about it. I never took a course in folklore. It never entered any of my history courses. My history courses, the ones I took both at City College of New York and at Columbia, were resolutely political in their orientation and their arrogance, and did not deign to look at the masses of people and what they were thinking. It just wasn't part of the thing, of the historical equation in those days. But I was beginning to do that, and I was beginning to wonder about how you can do it, and it occurred to me that

blacks sang songs; I knew they had in slavery, and they told tales, and there was this whole thing called folklore. And I thought, well, I could have a chapter on folklore, so I began to read black folklore.

Well, it just amazed me, the beauty and the complexity and the depth of this thought. I began to read it seriously. So I said, “Okay, so I’ll have a chapter on songs and I’ll have a chapter on tales, and maybe I’ll have a chapter on folk beliefs, like superstitions, and folk medicine.” I began to read very seriously on this thing, and it took over the book. There was no longer room for DuBois and those guys. I want to make it very clear, I think it’s crucial, obviously, to write about those. I’m just talking about Larry Levine at this moment in his career. I began to realize I could get into the mind of black folk, because they left this record behind. I had to learn how to use it. I had to learn about it.

Very, very helpful to me was Alan Dundes, who was a folklorist on the campus, and who was very interested in what I was doing, and who was very open to my coming and chatting with him, and I did a lot of chatting. But mostly—

Lage: Did he help direct you to sources, or did he help talk about interpreting a source?

Levine: Yes. He talked about the methods of folklorists more than interpreting. I had to work my way through interpreting the sources, because he wasn’t a historian, and I was very interested in how a historian used these sources. Well, it opened a world to me which was quite amazing, and I am going to—because it was so important, it was at this time—I’m going to give you one last quote. I read some stuff which changed me. You know, if you’re open to certain insights, and then someone gives you the insight in a memorable way, it has a great effect. I read Robert Louis Stevenson’s essay, *The Lantern Bearers*; 1892 [1888] he wrote it. But I read that. I found that because I had read William James’ *On a Certain Blindness in Human Beings*, and James talked about the difficulty of human beings understanding other human beings, how blind they were to other human beings, and he quoted Robert Louis Stevenson in *The Lantern Bearers*. So James’ essay *On a Certain Blindness in Human Beings* was a well-known essay and I read it, because I was—

Lage: You read it at that time.

Levine: Yes, I did, because I was looking for ways to—William James was a very bright guy—I was looking—and I had known about this essay and I read it, because I realized I was blind.

Lage: Were you wondering if you could cross that chasm?

Levine: Yes, exactly, exactly. Then I read Robert Louis Stevenson, and I'm just going to give you a brief quote, but it was very important to my intellectual development. I quote this all the time to this day, to students and to anyone who'll listen to it. "A good part of reality runs underground. The observer, poor soul, with his documents, is all aboard, for to look at the man is but to court deception. To one who has not the secret of the lanterns, the scene upon the links—" I'll explain that in a moment, "the scene upon the links is meaningless, and hence the haunting and truly spectral unreality of realistic books."

That phrase, "the haunting and truly spectral unreality of realistic books," just rang in my head. I remember that it rang. What Stevenson was talking about was he, when he was a young boy, would meet on the links in Scotland, he'd meet on the links with other young boys toward dusk, and they would be dressed in long black coats. They were dressed all in black, and their coats were long, and they would put a lantern at their belt, and they would cover the lantern with their black coats, and they would walk along the links, images of blackness. But they knew what no one else who looked at them knew, that they had bright lanterns at their belt, covered by—and if they opened it they would have a bright lantern, but they didn't open it. And they took great joy, he says, in fooling the people around them who saw them only as dark things, when, in fact, they had these lanterns.

And so, you know, he wrote, to those who did not have the secret of the lanterns the scene upon the links is meaningless. And when I read that I suddenly realized what it was I had to do. I kind of had already realized this with Bryan. What I had to do is I had to get inside these people. I had to understand their culture. I had to understand *their* culture on *their* terms. I had understood this with Bryan, but it was easier with Bryan. Now I was making a greater leap into an agrarian people. What I was also coming to understand was how African much of their culture was, and that is, by the time of the nineteenth century, which is when I got most interested, in slavery—I mean the period in which I was studying was nineteenth century—they were African Americans, certainly, but there was a big element of African in there. See, Dick Hofstadter—

Lage: But that was controversial itself.

Levine: Very controversial. A lot of people—

Lage: Maybe you can talk about how you came to realize that.

Levine: A lot of people—Henry May said to me, "You know, it's sad that they had nothing; they came from a place with nothing." I mean Henry saw what so many people saw, that Africa had no culture. Historians, who are so mesmerized by the written document and by written culture, have a lot of

trouble when it comes to people who have oral cultures, and they see it as no culture at all.

Lage: So they felt Africa had no culture, let alone African Americans.

Levine: “There is no African history,” said one very famous historian, Trevor Roper. “There is no history in Africa till the white man gets there, because the white man brings documents, he brings writing, and all you have”—I’m paraphrasing him now; his own words are even worse—“all you have are wild gyrations of frenetic dancers. There is no history there.” When British students asked Trevor Roper to teach African history he said, “There is no African history. There’s only British history in Africa.”

So, I mean, this was a very common feeling, and Dick Hofstadter, on one of his last trips to our house in Berkeley, said to me, “Melville Herskovits was wrong, wasn’t he, Larry?” Now, Melville Herskovits was an anthropologist who wrote a book in 1940 called *The Myth of the Negro Past*, in which he argued that blacks brought Africa to America, and he had bad examples, the knife, you know, the razor and the knife in Africa. He made analogies between the black razor and [tape break], baptism-in-water cults, you know, that kind of thing, Protestant baptism-in-water cults. But, in fact, he was right, and when Hofstadter asked me that question in—oh, I know, he died in ’70, so it was the late sixties, and I was just getting into this book and beginning to shape it and to realize what it was about. I began to think that Herskovits was quite right, but I couldn’t make a case yet. I tried to say something to Dick about this, but I couldn’t make a case. He was writing his own book on the colonial period, the first volume of a three-volume intellectual history of politics in America and of political culture in America. He was talking about blacks, and he had come to the conclusion that they didn’t bring any culture with them, and they were the only group in America that didn’t bring culture from the place they came from.

Well, it became clear if you studied the folklore that they did, and Robert Louis Stevenson was a good example, so the first thing I did—let me talk about methodology rather than the findings—the first thing I did was I studied the words. When I first read the folktales I couldn’t make heads—I mean, I understood the folktales on one level, but I didn’t know how to use them. So what I did was—by then, thank the lord, Xeroxing was in, and I don’t know what I would have done if it wasn’t. I couldn’t take notes, even on the spirituals, because I didn’t know what I was looking for. I just didn’t know what I was looking for. So I Xeroxed and I brought home—and, of course, it’s one of those futile things you do, but it was necessary—you Xerox and you bring it home, and you still haven’t digested it or understood it. But I had bulging—I still have those—I have bulging files of Xeroxes—

Lage: From where?

Levine: From the Library of Congress, from books I read, from manuscripts. You see, the anomaly—I've used that word a lot today—the anomaly was that whites said blacks had no culture, and then spent a huge amount of time collecting their tales and their songs. Isn't that interesting? So I began to do that, and the words, of course, were meaningful. There were lots of words that were meaningful. But I began to realize that there was also structure, and that I had to understand the structure. Without the structure I was lost, and the structure began to open itself to me.

Let me just give you two examples. One is that blacks were spoken about as a rootless people who had no community, who had no culture. I mean, even Ken had said in his book, because he wrote that book before all this cultural work was done, that blacks were living in a cultural limbo, in his wonderful book *The Peculiar Institution*. In my first essay I said, "Cultural limbo was impossible." I didn't mention Ken, but he understood and was not amused by it, I think. He understood what I was saying.

What I needed to do, though, is, as I say, go beyond the words to the structure, so here's an example. Blacks' music was antiphonal. Antiphonal simply means, you know, one definition of that is call and response; one voice answers another voice. Now, for people who have no community, who are atomized, at least which is the way blacks were pictured in many books, they were an atomized people. They were atoms rather than a community. How do you create antiphonal music? Someone would get up and throw out a line, and that line would be answered by the community. What it turned out is that they had a deep reservoir of musical lines, of musical phrases, of musical structures, and they dipped into that reservoir, and they could improvise on the spot. But they weren't *totally* improvising. They were using things in their arsenal. There was a lot of creation going on. New lines were being created, some of which would go into that reservoir, but there *was* a cultural reservoir there.

So I began to realize that that's how songs were created. They weren't just creations on the spot. They were created in a cultural context, and they had folktales, they had patterns and motifs, and they played with those, and you could create new folktales out of those patterns and motifs, and songs out of these reservoirs of music, both music and lyrics. That began to occur to me. I began to realize that, that that was a deep cultural thing, a structure which belied the notion that they were atomized, and had not brought anything from Africa with them.

Lage: That's very interesting.

Levine: Yes. And then let me tell you one other example, which really—well, I'll go through it. Rather than tell you what my book said, let me just give you two examples of what I was able to do by learning to do it. You read a B'r'er Rabbit tale, and, you know, we all know B'r'er Rabbit tales. The weak rabbit

outsmarts the stronger fox and bear and wolf, and gets something, gets away with something. And this is a pattern throughout all B'r'er Rabbit tales. It's not always the rabbit. There were other trickster figures. In Africa, in parts of Africa it was Anansi the Spider, but Anansi didn't make it to America in any important way. But the rabbit makes it to America, and the rabbit is the leading trickster figure. And this is a fantasy, of course. You know, the fantasy is the weak beats the strong. It took me a long while to understand something, and the minute I understood it, worlds opened up to me. What I finally understood is that blacks didn't hear one rabbit story, they heard many rabbit stories. A kid growing up in a community, or an adult sitting around telling rabbit stories, didn't hear one, they heard dozens, hundreds, maybe thousands of rabbit stories in their lifetime.

So get this, now. Once you get that structure, then something interesting happens. The rabbit meets the powerful animal. The rabbit wins—not always but most of the time—the rabbit wins, or at least escapes with his life, which is winning, because they're trying to kill him and eat him. And then you hear another rabbit story, and the rabbit's weak. He's assaulted and wins. Then you hear another rabbit story, and the rabbit's weak and he's assaulted and wins. And suddenly it occurs to you there's a pattern here. The rabbit wins, but the next time you meet him he's weak and vulnerable and under threat, and he wins. And the next time we meet him he's weak and vulnerable, under threat.

So the point of the story is not the individual ending of any tale, but the cycle, which is rabbits win battles, but they don't win wars. Rabbits don't replace foxes and wolves; they're *rabbits*. They have to use their mind all the time. They're *always* in danger. They *never* become secure. They're *never* on top. *That's* the lesson that was being taught to these kids, not some fantasy of victory, but what you needed to do to survive in this world.

And many of these tales—I won't go into this in detail—in many of these tales, it is the stronger animal who is the trickster. The most famous tale we all know is tar baby, where the wolf puts a tar baby—he knows the rabbit's vain. See, they understand each other. Rabbit says, "Mornin'." Tar baby doesn't answer him. Rabbit gets angry, says, "Mornin'" again and then hits the tar baby with one hand and another, kicks him and kicks, and he's caught in the tar baby. The wolf knows the rabbit's going to do this. You see, the wolf here is the trickster, and that often happens. But then the rabbit understands the wolf and out-tricks the wolf. The wolf now captures the rabbit and the rabbit says, you know, "Cut me, shoot me, strangle me. I don't mind, wolf, but don't throw me in that briar patch." You know, that famous saying, which was where he was brought up. The wolf, of course, is going to do the worst thing he can, and he throws the rabbit in the briar, and the rabbit escapes. So they understand each other.

But the trickster is not only—so you have to beware of the strong trickster, and they tell tales about their masters tricking them into working more,

tricking. You want to sell a slave who's half starving? Put grease, pig grease, around the slave's mouth so that people coming to look at that slave will think he's just had a good meal, things like that. They saw that all the time, and they realized they had to trick in order to survive. So that structure was very important to me, the notion that you have to go beyond the individual tale. You have to see where it's coming from. You have to understand.

And then finally, one last example, which was very important to me. My book goes into freedom as well, and it asks two questions. What happened to African culture in slavery, and what happened to African-American slave culture in freedom? Those are the two questions. So one of the things I was looking for in the book was that moment of acculturation when blacks, now free beings though still terribly oppressed, become much more like the Protestant-American culture they lived in the midst of. There was, for instance, almost no solo music in black slavery. There was solo music in lullabies, where you were singing to a baby who couldn't answer you back. There were field hollers where you were out in the field with a mule and you sang to it because there was nothing else to do, and you sang field hollers, lovely haunting things. But when you were with other human beings you sang antiphonally, and so there was a solo voice, but then it was answered. So, you know, people didn't sing solo music.

So the first solo music was the blues, really, which developed sometime in the decades after slavery, and that was wonderful. I said, "Wow, there it is. There's the solo voice. There's the 'me.'" You know, "This is the enlightenment of the human being standing as a human being, as an individual in the sight of God, you know, the Protestant revolution," all that stuff. "Now there it is. The blacks have gotten this voice. How exciting this is." And I was very excited. I found my moment of acculturation, and I was going to use the blues as a big—and I did, in a way—use the blues as a big moment of acculturation.

But see, if you keep looking for structures, something happened which ruined, well, it didn't ruin my thesis, but it modified it. The words were individual words. The music was African-American music, deeply. Now, blacks could have lost that music. After all, this was an age of phonographs. Blacks were moving. They were moving into cities; ultimately you're going to get the radio. They could have lost that African element in their music, but they didn't lose it. They deepened it. It got deeper and deeper, and blues are very African in so many parts of their structure.

So I was looking at this thing and I was realizing—and this was very hard for me—but I was realizing that blacks were doing two things in blues. They were moving further into the society with the solo voice, with the "me." "I'm important. I'm broke. I'm lonely. My girl has left me. Oh," you know, that's very post-enlightenment European, right? "I matter and you should care about what happens to me. Here's what happens to me," you know. "I ain't got a

dime. My shoes are so thin I can feel a dime through them." You know, "I'm hungry, I'm lonely." But they're doing this voice of the individual in a communal music which holds onto its African roots, so they are both moving further *into* the society, and they're revitalizing what's different about them at the same time. They're moving—they're acculturating and staying particular in the same cultural voice. That took me a long—I had to take some deep breaths and think about that. That's a very interesting pattern.

Lage: Did this all come just in your head?

Levine: Slowly. Slowly.

Lage: Or did it come in conversation with other people, or musicologists?

Levine: No. It mainly came sitting in my study and working. You see, I felt very isolated when I wrote this book. I didn't know that there were other people writing books, not quite like this one, but writing books about black culture, like Gene Genovese's history of slavery [*Roll, Jordan, Roll: The World the Slaves Made* (1974)], Herb Gutman's history of the family [*The Black Family in Slavery and Freedom* (1976)], John Blassingame's history of black community [*The Slave Community: Plantation Life in the Antebellum South* (1972)]. This was a moment—

Lage: They were being written at the same time, but you weren't in touch with them?

Levine: Not really in touch, even though Gene Genovese was a close friend of mine. For a long time I felt isolated, and wasn't even sure that what I was writing—when I tried to explain it to certain historians they—I remember meeting George Tindall, a very nice man, a southern historian who's still alive, I believe. I met George—he was at North Carolina and I met him when I was a graduate student writing the Bryan book. He was a senior historian, and he was very nice to me, as people in the library tended to be when you met senior historians in the library. He was very nice to me. So I met him again when I was working on this book. George says, "What are you doing?" And I tried to explain this book to him. It was very fragmentary in my mind, but by then I was into this stuff. I was no longer writing on black protest thought. I was trying to explain it to him, and this is what George said to me, "Have you ever thought of writing a full biography of Bryan?" So I walked away from that realizing I wasn't doing a good job of communicating. I had trouble communicating with Dick Hofstadter about Melville Herskovits and why I thought he really was right.

Lage: What about people here in the department? You mention in the acknowledgments that certain people read the book.

Levine: Yes.

- Lage: Was that later, or did they—?
- Levine: Oh no, they read it when it was done. No, no, I wasn't—I, of course, published pieces of the book. I published it in 1970. In 1969 I gave a paper on black—now, here's an interesting—let me tell you this quick story, and this was an important moment. John William Ward, my senior friend—he was ten years older than me, or eight years older than me, and he was so nice to me throughout his life, which ended too early—John William Ward was the program chairman for the 1969 AHA, between Christmas and New Year's—
- Lage: I'm going to stop because before launch into it—
- Levine: Okay, just let me finish the sentence. Yes, I'll just say he was the former chairman for the American Historical Association's meetings that were going to take place in Washington in December of '69.

[Audio File 16]

- Lage: Now we're on, and you were telling me about—
- Levine: So Bill Ward says to me sometime in, I guess it was in early '69, he said, "You know, you're doing interesting work." He was the program director of this convention, and he said, "Why don't you give us a paper on your work?" And he gave me a whole session. I mean, I gave the only paper, and there were two commentators and a chair. I was just thrilled, scared and thrilled. So I was going to do something on twentieth-century black music, and I started. I sat down to write something on twentieth-century black music, and I hadn't yet written anything. I was just reading and taking notes, and Xeroxing. But I felt, "Okay, I'll do twentieth-century black music."
- Lage: With the theme of what? Or you weren't sure.
- Levine: Well, I wasn't sure; I was going to try to analyze it. Understand that I was not yet—at this point I wasn't yet so sure what the contours of the book would look like. I still thought it would be a twentieth-century book, but I had been reading slavery stuff and everything else. I was trying to understand the genesis, but I didn't know that the book was going to deal a lot with slavery, or that it would be, in fact, a nineteenth-century book at all. You know, I was a twentieth-century historian. My first project, the project on twentieth-century black protest thought, that kind of stuff. So I'm going to write about the development of twentieth-century music, and the more I read and the more I read, and the more I think, the further back I'm going, and I'm not understanding. I finally thought—I shocked myself, and I shocked Bill Ward even more. I ended up writing a paper called *Slave Songs and Slave Consciousness*, about the spiritual. That was my first piece, and that was the realization that I had to do slavery. I had to do slavery—and I told you the genesis—I had to do slavery, and then I was going to do freedom. So, what

happens to African culture in slavery, what happens to African-American slave culture in freedom.

Lage: Did you have a sense you wanted to sort of prove that the slaves had a culture?

Levine: Well, I was working against contemporary theories that they were in some kind of, Ken called it limbo. Others—in other words, they were just—

Lage: Nathan Glazer made a very strong remark. I forget exactly what he said. Did I write it down here? Just dismissing any culture.

Levine: Sure. Well, I'll tell you, in the first edition of their book—what was their book, that Nathan Glazer—*Beyond the Melting Pot*. He and Daniel Patrick Moynihan wrote *Beyond the Melting Pot*, and in the very first edition, which I own, if you look up the word “slums”—now, they dealt with five groups, blacks, Puerto Ricans, Irish, Jews, I can't think of the fifth.

Lage: Italian maybe?

Levine: Italians, perhaps Italians. Five groups in New York, and it's a very interesting book. If you look up the word “slums” in the index of the first edition of that book it says “See Negroes.” Okay? So they see blacks as exceptional, having no culture, being the only denizens of slums. A book about Jews in New York, Jewish immigrants, and Irish, and they say “See—.” And *Puerto Ricans*? And *Italians*? And they say, “See Negroes,” for slums. They all lived in slums, you know, if you want to use the term “slums.” So it's—my parents lived in slums in East Harlem with Italians. So, yes, they had this exceptional view. So I was writing a book—

Lage: And you were aware of that when you approached this?

Levine: Yes. I was really writing a book partly about the acculturation of black people, and both their—you know, how they acculturated. And the little thing I did about the blues gives you a sign of the complexity of acculturation. Acculturation, I came to the conclusion—and I realized that about Jews, too, another group I knew without studying them—acculturation is not losing everything you have. It's not becoming a neuter and then having a new identity poured on top of you. Acculturation is acculturating in certain parts; you can take advantage of the new society you're in by keeping other parts of you, which gives you identity and meaning and the like. Jews acculturated that way, and so did blacks, and so did every other group. You know, the Irish, whose main migrations were a long time ago, remain very Irish. Many of them have never seen Ireland, but they talked about the Emerald Isle, and they sang songs, you know. So our notions of acculturation were too simple. They were too one-dimensional and I realized that. So blacks helped me realize that, the history of blacks.

So anyway, Bill's invitation to do this made me realize what the book had to be. I had to go back. So I published my first article, gave it in 1969 at the very end of the year in December, and it was published in 1970 or '71 in a book of essays, "Slave Songs and Slave Consciousness: [An Exploration of Neglected Sources]" [in Tamara Harever, ed. , *Anonymous Americans* ( Prentice-Hall, 1971)].

Then Hofstadter died in 1970, alas. You know, I'm being very selfish here, but I would have loved him to see some of this work, but he wasn't around to see it. My first piece was published after his death. I would have liked him to have lived for his own sake, too. [laughs] Not just for mine. Then I was invited to contribute something to a memorial volume for Dick Hofstadter. It's not a Festschrift if you're not alive. A Festschrift is for a living scholar, a book in his honor or her honor. This was a memorial volume, and I wrote a piece on slave tales. So that was the second piece.

And then Nat Huggins had been under the—he was editing a book I knew very little about. He chaired my session. And Nat Huggins was editing a book on black culture, black everything, and he was *very* upset when he heard I was publishing my slave song piece, which I had given at the session he chaired, in someone else's book. But I had promised it, and I had no—he said, "Well, you know, you promised it to me." And I said, "God, Nat, I don't remember," and I don't forget things like that. I think he was wrong, but I felt terribly guilty, so I sat down and wrote a piece for him. That was a piece on the concept of the "New Negro" and the realities of black culture, and I just tried to show that the notion of the New Negro was a perpetual one. We got new Negroes in the 1890s, and new Negroes in the 1920s, and new Negroes in the 1950s, and you know, it was a myth. Negroes were always *new*. So I wrote a piece for him. So I had three pieces published.

Lage: What response did you get?

Levine: Well, I got a very good response, especially to the slave song piece, which was, of the three, the most innovative.

Lage: So your fellow historians—

Levine: Yes. I'll tell you what I discovered. If I had waited, if I had never published—and I had no desire to publish; these were all accidents, giving this lecture and then having a Romanian woman phone me one Sunday morning and saying, [imitates accent] "I *loved* your piece." She's Tamara Hareven, who was editing this book called *Anonymous Americans*, and she wanted my piece in it, and I was delighted. But that was an accident. Then Dick Hofstadter, had he not died, there would have been no memorial volume; I wouldn't have written a piece for it, and then my guilt with Nat. So that led to my publishing three pieces. What I discovered, and what I now tell my own students, is it's very good to publish pieces of your work before, and I'll tell you why.

In the interim, while I was working on this book in 1974, or even earlier than that, John Blassingame's book on the black community was published. Gene Genovese's book on slavery was published in '74. Herb Gutman's book on the black family was published. A number of things were published. If I had not published anything till '77 when my book came out, it would have looked like I was derivative. But, in fact, I published before those guys, a couple of the pieces. Especially Genovese, who was closest to me. So, in fact, I think Gene learned things from my article. So I think it was a good thing for me to publish, and it helped me work things out. To write these papers helped me realize where I was going, so it is important at some point to sit down and write before you're ready to write the whole book, to sit down and try to put your thoughts down, because it helps you understand where you are and what you're doing. Just sitting alone in your study, you know, reading and reading, it's always tempting to do the research; it's easier than doing the writing.

Lage: And you work things out as you write.

Levine: And you work things out, so I learned that.

Lage: Now, let me ask you this. Peter Novick, in *That Noble Dream*, says that there was a network of young scholars who shared common aims and cooperated, that it was an unusual situation when there's a lot of collaboration or cooperation, interchange. Now, did this come after? You're not giving me that impression.

Levine: Well, here's how it comes. I didn't feel that, but I was early. I mean, I was one of the early books on this, and as the communal—

Lage: And were you generationally just a little bit older than some of the—

Levine: No. No. We were—Gene's a year or two older than me. Leon [Litwack] is two or three years older than me. No, but this is the way—see, even to this day I don't give my book to a lot of people to read. Gene Genovese gave his slavery book to twenty people.

Lage: Before he published?

Levine: Oh yes, his manuscript, I'm sorry.

Lage: To get reaction?

Levine: I'm sorry, yes, his manuscript. He gave it to me and he gave it to Leon. Here comes a story; I'm going to tell it. I want to tell it; I'll tell this story. Well, maybe I shouldn't. It doesn't matter who arranged—

Lage: But which book did this become?

Levine: This is his slavery book, *Roll, Jordan, Roll*. It was a big fat book. We changed it a lot. He gave it to a lot of people. He had in that book a manuscript—the end of the book became another book, because we told him, “Cut it out.” He had a whole two hundred-page thing at the end of that slavery book on why blacks in America didn’t rebel while blacks in the Caribbean did, and he tries to explain it. We said, “That’s another book, man.” And he listened to us. He cut it out [*From Rebellion to Revolution: Afro-American Slave Revolts in the Making of the Modern World*, 1979]. Gene sent that book around, and I was unpublished yet, because he published his book in ’74; I didn’t publish mine till ’77. Litwack was working on a book which he didn’t publish till ’78, and yet Leon and I shared things with him.

He went to another scholar who we knew well. I don’t really need to give his name. He went to another scholar whom we knew well, and that scholar told him, “No, I can’t read your manuscript because that would entail my telling you what I think about it, and that would entail my sharing research with you, and I don’t do that. I will publish my book.” This man was working on a book he never published on the history of slaves in the colonial period. Gene phoned me—I knew this guy—and Gene phoned me and said, “Was he joking?” I said, “No. He does fear plagiarism, and he wouldn’t let me read his dissertation because he feared plagiarism, even though at that time I was working on another subject.” So Gene, in his introduction, thanked Leon and me for sharing materials—though we had not yet published—for sharing materials with a “competitor,” —he put it; I think he says “competitor”; he puts it in quotation marks—“which is the true way of a scholar, but we can’t take it for granted,” because too few scholars—I’m paraphrasing—do this, and he had this other guy in mind. Gene was quite upset.

So in that sense, the sense that there was a community Gene could go to. *I* went through part of that. I stayed pretty much at home, in my own. I gave the book to Leon Litwack—in addition to my own wife, who I give everything to—I gave the book to Leon Litwack. I gave the book to Paula Fass, who’s not a scholar in black history, but I respected her a lot; we were very friendly then. And I gave the book to Irwin Scheiner.

Lage: Now, why Irv Scheiner?

Levine: Because he’s a bright guy, and I felt close to him, and he reads books for everybody, and he’s smart.

Lage: And he’s in Japanese history.

Levine: Yes, he’s in Japanese history, and Paula was in a very different kind of US history.

Lage: Was anybody doing the kind of cultural history you were doing, of those people?

- Levine: Not really.
- Lage: You also gave it to Bob Middlekauff.
- Levine: And I gave it to Bob Middlekauff, a colonialist.
- Lage: And Kenneth Stampp.
- Levine: Oh, of course. And he was the most competent of the people, in terms of his field, and Leon, of course, was. I gave it to those people, but they were all my colleagues at Berkeley. I didn't give the whole manuscript to Ken; I gave him the chapters on slavery, and I got some very good feedback. But I didn't, and I don't tend to do that, I don't do it today. I didn't send the book around to a whole bunch of people. I mean, Gene sent it to everybody, David Brion Davis, he sent it to everybody.
- Lage: It's hard to collate all the responses.
- Levine: Then I wrote Gene something like thirteen or fourteen single-spaced pages of criticism, and he said to me, "Let's see. You say that this is my worst chapter, and David Brion Davies says it's my best chapter? I'm confused." Well, that comes out of sending it to too many people, and that's one of the reasons I don't do it. You get confused. You know, you give papers along the way, and you get feedback. Then you get feedback from—well, my publishers don't send it out to anyone else, and I had attained a certain—they have never, Oxford has never sent it out.
- Lage: They don't.
- Levine: Well, they do, but they didn't send my stuff out. Sheldon Meyer said of my first book, "Well, your dissertation was read by Leuchtenburg and Hofstadter; I'm not going to get better readers than that." By the time my second manuscript came around he just wanted it. He knew he was going to publish it, and he didn't send it out to anyone. I've never had—except my *Highbrow/Lowbrow*, because Harvard has to send things out; they're a true university press. Oxford's a kind of hybrid press, but at Harvard they have to send it out. But even there, she sent it out to people that she knew. She let them know this book was going to be published, because it was in a series. I had given the lectures, and the book was going to be published.
- Lage: Now, one criticism that you got, it seems to me, is presentism.
- Levine: Who?
- Lage: Well, the book—Meyer wrote a review. He wasn't strong on it. He thought it was a great book, but that there was unconscious present-mindedness, and then Novick also.

Levine: Yes. Novick also made a comment, I believe—in fact, I need to go back and get—I don't have his book. I need to get a copy of his book, because I'm writing a piece about my career for this conference that's taking place at George Mason in September, and I want to write about this. He—as I recall, it's been a long while since—I was not impressed by—I was impressed by his book, but I wasn't impressed by the part of his book I knew the most about, which is my generation. He lumps us together, first of all, and I think there are differences between us. And then he attributes what we did to our ethnicity, as I recall.

Lage: He talks about Jews studying blacks, and non-Jews, gentiles studying white reaction to slavery.

Levine: Yes, but except he's got the problem of Genovese, so he lumps him with the Jews. He's an Italian American. It's true, Winthrop Jordan studies white reactions. It's not so simple, and this was all going to change when lots and lots of—but it is. So he talks about Litwack and myself being Jews. I don't know how much I've said about this in my prior stuff, and I don't think this is the time, but I am thinking a lot about this.

Lage: No, I think this is the time.

Levine: Yeah? To talk about this?

Lage: Don't you?

Levine: It's just very hard to know. I never felt—let me say that—I've talked about Carl Bridenbaugh's speech, haven't I?

Lage: Oh yes, yes.

Levine: Well, when he said that we could not, people like me could not understand the American past; it's not their fault, they just can't do it, there're always going to be strangers on our past, I'd already written about William Jennings Bryan. I hadn't been published yet, but I wrote this dissertation, which I knew was good. I just knew it was good, and I knew I understood William Jennings Bryan, and I was able partly to understand him because I was a Jew. And I thought Bridenbaugh had it wrong, that my problem with Bryan wasn't that I was a Jew and the child of an immigrant family. My problem with Bryan was that I was an intellectual and an academic, and so was Bridenbaugh, and he would have had the same problem. Bryan was neither of those things.

Lage: That was the gulf you were crossing.

Levine: Bryan used ideas. He didn't value them as ideas. He valued them as tools, and he had a lot of trouble with the notion of objective science and the like. "If

science—,” no matter how light it might be, he didn’t care. He didn’t say evolution was wrong. He said it was harmful. He didn’t care if it was wrong.

Lage: [laughs] He didn’t care if it was right or wrong.

Levine: It sapped the faith. So you had to overcome your own predilection as a scholar. My parents wouldn’t have had terrible difficulties with Bryan’s views. They probably would have shared some of them. “The Rock of Ages is more important than the ages of rocks.” They would have understood that, they would have. I thought it was terrible, a terrible pun, you know, and also a mistake. They’re both important. I mean, spiritual, religion is important, but so is science, and you don’t need, necessarily, to put them in a hierarchy.

You know, my whole thing, I realized as I did more of it, was breaking down hierarchy. So when Bridenbaugh did his thing, I didn’t think my being a Jew counted here very much at all, except then in a way it helped me. When I did the black book I thought being a Jew helped me also. I didn’t talk about this, but let me give one example. When blacks in the Sea Islands were freed, the South Carolina and Georgia Sea Islands, the Carolina and Georgia Sea Islands, New England schoolteachers flocked down. You have to remember that one of the arguments of the New England abolitionists, whether they thought blacks were equal or not, is they thought they were educable, and that they could educate them, and that they could change them, and that they could make them free men and women. And so down they went. Five thousand of these schoolteachers went to the South. It was a great moment to prove that they could educate these people and bring—of course, they had troubles, because what they didn’t understand was these people had a culture, and it was difficult to just rip them out of the culture, wipe them clean, and dip them into another culture. But they thought they could do that.

And so one day one of them—and they wrote letters. We know a lot about what they did because many of them were letter writers. They were good New England—and many of them were women, and very smart schoolteachers. So one of them, I forget which one it was, writes home and says—to give an example of the conundrum that these blacks posed—she says, “I was walking along the street this morning and I met little Willie.” I’m making the name up, of course. “And I said, ‘Good morning, Willie. How are you today?’ And he says, ‘Tolerable, ma’am, just tolerable.’” And she writes, “Who can understand these people? Here is this young boy bursting with health, *bursting* with health, so vigorous, so healthy, walking vigorously down the street, and he says he’s just tolerable. I *cannot* understand him.” Well, I understood him immediately. Like the story I told you a little bit ago, he was just aware that he better not say more than that, and he didn’t. She didn’t understand that culture, you see, and he may not have understood hers, but it’s not important.

Lage: So you felt more affinity from your own—

Levine: I understood what Willie was about the minute I read it. Willie was scared of being struck down. He was just a finite human being, and there were bigger powers, and if he was going to boast about how good he is, the other powers could say, "You really think so, Willie? You think that's just the way you should be?" Whop! And then, you know, he's not so tolerable anymore.

No, I think that was very common, and there were so many things that these schoolteachers discovered about the blacks. "What color is the sky?" one of these schoolteachers asks her class, and they don't understand her question. She asks it again, and there was an older black man there, and she says, "What is wrong with these children? They don't understand the color of the sky?" And he goes over to the kids and says, "Chillun," he says, "how the sky stand?" And they say, "blue," because they're talking another language. Or he's saying to them, "How does the sky stand?" And they say, "blue." So they had a lot of trouble understanding that they were dealing with a culture and a diction that had rules. They just thought these people were speaking bad English, but these people had rules. They were speaking a bad English, perhaps, but it was consistently bad, because it had its own rules. So they had lots of discoveries to make; many of them didn't make them. It was incumbent upon historians to understand this kind of thing. And did being a Jew help me? Did being a Jew motivate me to begin with? Well, I've thought a lot about this. Did I tell you the story about being beaten up? Did I tell that story here?

Lage: I don't remember.

Levine: Well, let me tell it, and if we did this earlier we can pull it out. When I was eleven years old in 1944—and I remember the date, because I was wearing Roosevelt reelection buttons, "Three good terms deserves another," "Don't change presidents in midstream," you know, that kind of stuff; I was covered in buttons. We were tossing the football around on my street, on 176<sup>th</sup> Street, eight or nine of us having a little game of football, and three Puerto Rican kids, older—we were eleven and they were seventeen, eighteen; they were much older than us, and bigger and stronger. They come around and one of them says, "Hey, mon, can I see the ball?" And one of my stupid friends throws him the ball, and that was the end of the ball. I knew it the minute he threw it to him, and my friends began to know it, too, and they began to back up as these bigger Puerto Rican kids are throwing the ball around, and speaking Spanish. It's not my ball, mind you. I want to make that clear. But I do a very stupid, impulsive thing, which I tend to do. I went over to them as my friends are getting further and further away, and I say to them, unnecessarily, "We have to go now." [laughs] You know, we're already going. I said, "We have to go now. Can I please have the ball back?" And he grabs me, says, "Take it." And I realized I couldn't take it. I couldn't beat this guy up. And he pushes me out of the street, over the curb onto the sidewalk against a building, and he says, "You're bigger than me, man. Why don't you hit me?" And I wasn't going to hit him.

Lage: You were bigger?

Levine: I was almost six feet at eleven. At twelve I *was* six feet. I was very tall. Everyone thought I was going to be a giant, and I stopped growing; I grew another two inches. So he begins to pluck the Roosevelt buttons off, and I don't defend myself because I know he'll kill me. You know, I don't want him to hit me, but he does anyway. And as he's doing this, before he hits me and as he begins to hit me, his friends are yelling something at him in English, and this is what they're yelling. "Hit the Yankee. Hit the Yankee." Now, of course we have to be very careful. I'm thinking back on this story. I was eleven and a half. It was October or November of 1944. Do I think this thought then? I think I do. I'm shocked at this.

Lage: That you're a Yankee?

Levine: That I'm a Yankee. There were no Yankees in my neighborhood, and if there were they were the Irish-Catholic kids who we didn't know had their own problems, because they looked like the movies and they looked like the ads. They were nice clean-cut Northern European types, and we were not. He begins to hit me and the blood's running down, and I'm still hearing this "Yankee" in my ear as my blood's down there, and I feel shocked, you know, at both things. But—so there's an interesting instance. I don't feel like a Yankee.

I've thought about this now, because I'm trying to come to terms with this, so, you know, I not going to—so if you had these two moments, one in which the Puerto Rican kids see me as American, as a Yankee, and the other in which Carl Bridenbaugh sees me as an outsider, incapable of understanding the American past, that as an outsider forever, because of my birth, here are two poles. And obviously I fall somewhere in between these poles. I'm never a Yankee, but I'm more Yankee than my father, you know. [laughs] And much more Yankee than my grandfather, especially the grandfather who died in Lithuania, my father's father, who died in 1904.

So we're dealing, of course, with degrees here. We're not dealing with—having said that, was the fact that I was a Jew instrumental in making me study blacks? Or study Bryan, and let's not even go to blacks. Did I study Bryan in order to understand the culture that I was in by birth, but also—?

Lage: Did you study American history to understand?

Levine: Well, that's right. I became an American historian. It may just have been that it was so hard for me to learn English, I realized I could never learn another language. But yes, it may well be, it may well be. I mean, when I say—

Lage: It's particularly of interest in the question of black history, because that's where it's brought up, that a lot of—

Levine: Sure. And it is true that a number of the early practitioners were not just Jews but people like Gene, a person like Gene anyway, blacks, Jews.

Lage: Outsiders in some way.

Levine: Gene was a child of Italian immigrants. He felt like an outsider. He now feels like an insider, but that's too bad. Yes, he did, he did. And he was also a Communist when he began this, so he was an outsider politically as well, and his interests were with the disinherited, the people on the periphery, the people below, sure. And so are mine.

Now, that's another interesting thing. I was always, at least from my mid-teens on, on the left. I cared about the people. Look, I felt things about black people long before I got interested in writing their history. As a kid I used to sit in the subway hoping they understood I was not an enemy, because there were lots of black people in the subway, and as a young boy I would sit there saying, "Gosh, I hope they understand I'm their friend." But I didn't have black friends. There were no black people in my neighborhood. My schools didn't have that many black people, if any, and I didn't know black people. But I did know their situation, and when I was old enough to know it I deplored it. So all of that, does that have to do with my being a Jew? Perhaps. You know, after all, I was a Jew during the Holocaust. I was an American during the—sure. Sure.

I think the real question to ask is not that these people, as Novick says, these people were drawn to this study because they were Jews or whatever. What effect did that have on the kind of work we did? I like to think that even if I was drawn to this because I'm a Jew, or because I came from the kind of family I came from, and because I lived through—safely in America—through one of the horrendous acts of our history, the Holocaust, I still like to think that I was a good historian in doing this. Maybe that's just a conceit, that I did this the way a historian would do it.

You see, one of the problems in dealing with blacks, and women, and indeed Jews in the Holocaust, if you like, is the temptation to see them as victims, as recipients rather than as agents, and this is done commonly. Indeed, we do it to the Holocaust people. But I suspect the story of the—it's hard. It's hard, because people don't want you to romanticize either. But I think the story of the Holocaust victims is probably more complex. I think they held onto their things that we can't conceive of them holding onto. I think they probably did things. We know they did art. We know they even did some music. We know that they communicated. We know some of them opposed it in whatever feeble way they could. Yes. And, of course, the analogy was being made at this very moment, 1970, I forget when, *Slavery* was published by—

Lage: Elkins?

Levine: Thank you so much, Stanley Elkins. And he used Bruno Bettelheim's concept. Bruno Bettelheim was a survivor who was guilty, as many survivors are, and he tried to understand why the Holocaust, the Jews went into the ovens without more protest, without more action, and he comes up with the notion that they were infantilized; he uses this term. And so the guards become gods, and—

Lage: He was a psychiatrist, we should say.

Levine: He was a psychiatrist. This has a great, great influence on Elkins, and Elkins writes this book. And I really was writing, in part—maybe I should have said this earlier—to answer Elkins. I've realized that.

Lage: Yes. I wanted you to address that, because that's another—

Levine: Elkins says that when the slaves were ripped out of their cultures, out of their womb of Africa, stuck on these ships, many of whom—many of them died on this horrible voyage—and then brought over here to a new culture, to a language they didn't understand, to a system they had no control over, to guards that were gods—you know, the significant other, the white man—they were infantilized, and that's why they didn't rebel. And that's why they did what they were told, and that's why they had no culture of their own. And that's why, in fact, Elkins says amazingly in that book, when you think about what the folklore was like—of course, he never looked at the folklore or anything else; he did this all out of his head—he says that there are only fantasies, or fantasies of catfish and watermelons. Can you imagine? This is a book that went through myriad editions and is probably still used today. So in part I did have Stanley Elkins in mind.

Lage: Did that drive you partly, wanting to answer that? Although you had started it before that book was published.

Levine: Yes, I did. Once I realized I had to deal with slavery, and once I read this stuff, I realized how wrong Elkins was, and I do say so. You know, it was an accident. I wanted to write on twentieth-century black history. I then needed to understand the connection between the leaders and the followers. I read folklore to understand that. The folklore led me back to the nineteenth century and slavery, and once I got into slavery, reading the folklore, the songs and the tales and the folk beliefs—they had their own folk medicine—I realized that they had a hell of a lot going for them, that they had a culture.

Now, I was worried, really worried, because when I began this book, whites were still welcome; I was a member of CORE and all of that stuff. And we were thrown out of CORE, and more and more, you know, you got—

Lage: In the course of your writing the book this was happening.

Levine: Yes, it was. And there was more and more black nationalism and exceptionalism, and all of that is understandable, and I understood it. But I began to realize that this may not be the best milieu for my book being published, because I was not only writing about black culture, I was trying to write humor, which gets into things blacks were keeping from whites, and into tales.

Lage: Yes. You were trying to get inside their minds.

Levine: That's right, inside their minds, intimate stuff, so I was very nervous. I'll tell you a cute story about—Nat Huggins chaired that session at the American Historical, in December of '69, and the two commentators were Jay Saunders Redding, who was a very established black guy who had written a beautiful autobiography, and whose work I knew, a very interesting man, wearing a tie and suit, and Michael Thelwell. He's a professor at UMass, Boston.

Lage: And was he a black man?

Levine: He was. And he came on. This is 1969, he's a young guy, you know, my age or younger, or maybe older, I suspect. He comes on, so Jay Saunders Redding comes on wearing his dark suit and tie, and Thelwell comes on, and he's wearing a dashiki, and he's got bracelets and necklaces on, and he's banging away there, and I'm sitting there saying, I'm dead meat, you know. I gave a talk on slave songs and slave culture, consciousness, slave culture and consciousness, and I was trying to argue that slave songs were deeply influenced by Africa as well as by the new culture, and they were, in fact, an important manifestation of an African-American culture, a newly manifested, and I tried to explain this, and they were also oppositional, and how slaves used religion to give themselves a sense of dignity and hope. J. Saunders Redding, who I thought would be friendly—I'd read all his stuff—gets up, and he has a lot of problem with this Africa stuff, as some of the older blacks did. He had a lot of problems with it, and he expressed those problems, and I was surprised. So he's already picking at me, and I thought this other guy would kill me, because he's clearly into Africa himself. I figured he's probably a nationalist. Then he gets up and he says, "That a white man can write a paper like this in times like these is a cause for rejoicing."

Lage: Oh. That must have made you feel good.

Levine: Well, it did, and it also made me realize how foolish I was, in being superficial, and in thinking that the older guy, who had written very interesting things, oppositional things about the situation—he was a black intellectual at a time when they were all—and he wrote some wonderful stuff. *On Being Negro in America* was one of his books. He wrote several wonderful books, which I read. I was so glad to see him. First of all, I admired him a lot, though I had never met him, and he was very polite to me, but he had problems with my paper. He didn't get up there and say, "hosanna." But the

other guy, who was clearly a young modern black who was embracing the culture, and didn't look like an academic at all, did embrace my paper. So I realized that once again, you know, I was going with superficialities rather than with—

Lage: Did you run into—you must have, in the course of these years—run into some hostility, for being a white man doing black history?

Levine: At the time—there is some rewriting of history now, but at the time I had a review in the *Herald Tribune* by a woman whose name I should remember, but I don't, who was a professor, I believe, at Howard University, and she had a lot of problem with my book, but it wasn't substantive.

Lage: But did they say, challenge why is a white man doing this, or can a white man do it?

Levine: Well, this is what she said. Her problem was that in the beginning of the book I thank the University of California; I had gotten a couple of fellowships to take time off, and Phi Beta Kappa gave me a centennial fellowship to write this book. So I had two or three sources of dough, and I had a university which had given me research funds, not a hell of a lot of them, but some of them, and that had given me the facilities of the university, the library and all of that wonderful stuff, and she used that. She took my acknowledgments and she said, "Oh yes, he had NEH grants." The NEH told you to acknowledge the grants, or Social Science Research Council, I guess it was, so I gave Social Science Research Council an acknowledgment. And she said, "He had this, he had that. Our black boys don't get, or our black students don't get them," which was nonsense but—there weren't that many black historians, but they got these things. "They don't get it, so this white man comes along, and he does our history because he's privileged to do our history," and she used it as a kind of mark against me, that I was white. But she didn't have substantive arguments with the book. Some years later I went to Howard for a conference on the black diaspora, and I gave a talk about Africa and slavery, that is, African culture and slavery. And she was in the audience. I hadn't met her. She didn't want to meet me. But she got up in the audience and denounced me again for the same thing.

Lage: As a privileged scholar?

Levine: Yes. So when it was all over—she was the last and then it was over—and she was still in the audience. I was up on the stage, and I said to her, "Can you tell me any part of my argument you disagree with?" She said, "I don't want to talk to you about this." And I said, "Well, I would love to talk to you about it. Can we sit down and have a cup of coffee?" "No, I don't want to talk to you." I said, "Well, can you then just tell me from the audience here?" We were talking to each other. Most of the people were gone. I said, "Can you just tell me from there, what is it you disagree with about what I did here or in my

book?" I realized she was the reviewer. But she wouldn't. She stamped out of there furious at me. But that's the only reason I'm telling this, is that's the only opposition I had from anyone black. On the other hand, I had a lot—I had the thing I just described at the paper. I had very good reviews by African-American scholars. I had a famous black poet—

Lage: Not Langston Hughes.

Levine: No, no, no, but a Langston Hughes colleague. Isn't that terrible that I'm blocking this? A very famous poet, he wrote beautiful poetry in the renaissance [Sterling Brown] and who was a professor at Howard also was there, and I talked to him later, and he was kind of wonderful to me. He thought it was a very important book. And then I met someone else who knew Ralph Ellison who was there and said Ralph Ellison—I was hoping Ralph Ellison might review the book. He didn't. He said, "Ralph Ellison thought highly of the book."

So I didn't have problems from black scholars, and I didn't have problems—some whites had problems in their black history courses with black students.

Lage: Yes, that's what I wanted to ask.

Levine: I had nothing like that. You know what I had? One day I walked into the classroom very early, which was what I usually do. There were two young black guys there, and they came over to me to tell me how important this course was, and they said, "You know, that stuff—" What I was doing in my lecture courses before my book was published is I was working out some of these problems. I always used my teaching to do that. I was talking about spirituals and things like that, and black slave music, thinking out loud and trying to engage the students and the problems, and they said, "Man, that is so important what you're doing for these white people. These white students need this." So I said, "Thank you." And I said, "So tell me, did you guys know a lot about slave spirituals before you came to this class?" "Oh, sure." I said, "Did you know a lot about nineteenth-century black music before you came to this class?" "Oh, yeah." Well, I didn't believe that for a moment. Not for a moment did I believe that, but they had some difficulties telling me they were learning from a white guy, an ofay, that they were learning—

Lage: About their own past.

Levine: —about their own culture. Gee, you know, a lot of groups have this problem. A lot of women have this problem. They didn't really want men to come in, I mean, some of them didn't, to teach them about women's history. They were more comfortable having women do that. So it's a common problem. But I must say I have not suffered much from this at all. That's never been a problem.

Lage: Did you ever feel you had to kind of justify yourself, why you were teaching this?

Levine: This is the way I felt. I felt that I didn't have to justify myself studying blacks any more than I had to justify myself studying William Jennings Bryan. I wasn't going to apologize to Protestants for being a Jew studying a Protestant fundamentalist Christian any more than I was going to justify, you know, apologize to black people for being a white man.

I had an easy out. My easy out was that my people weren't here. They had nothing to do with slavery. Winthrop Jordan didn't have that out, and I think Win felt some guilt about slavery, and some strange feelings about slavery.

Lage: Because his people had been here through it.

Levine: Indeed they had. Yes, they had. He comes from a very prominent family, New England family, and New England collaborated in slavery and all of that stuff. So, you know, it's an easy out. But even so, Winthrop Jordan didn't live in the nineteenth century, and he has no individual guilt about this, and he has nothing to apologize for. You know, I don't believe that the sins of the fathers are visited upon the children unless they embrace them.

I married a German girl, woman, who—and I said girl because she was a girl during World War II, as I was a boy during World War II—and I didn't blame her for World War II. She was twelve years old when it ended, as was I. I was no more guilty about Hiroshima personally than she was guilty about the Holocaust, and I understood that, and I didn't blame her for this. That was not a burden in our relationship. If it had been I wouldn't have married her. So I felt the same way about the past. I didn't feel guilt. I felt a terrible need to understand, and I was enough of an intellectual—maybe that's the problem—but I was enough of an intellectual to believe I could understand it intellectually. And, of course, you never just operate intellectually. I understood you operated emotionally as well, and I was furious about slavery.

And I have problems with Bryans' attack on evolution, but it was not—you see, there's the Higham quote. I didn't feel I was to judge Bryan; that was not my function. My function was to understand him, to try to understand him, And if I thought he was wrong, say he was wrong, as I did think he was wrong, but to explain why he did it, because that's very important. He didn't do it because he was perverse. He didn't do it because he was a racketeer making dough on it. He did it because he firmly believed, honestly believed you couldn't have reform if people didn't believe in a living God, because why should they reform? And Darwin was teaching people that they were animals. And if people were animals then why should they be reformers? Get the biggest piece of meat you can. Go out there and kill the biggest animal and keep it for yourself, you know. We're just animals, that's all.

So I understood that, and he really did have that world view, and I was delighted, and I could understand it though I was a Jew from an immigrant family. I mean, that's nonsense. Why couldn't you? That's not that hard to understand if you try hard. And I could understand blacks.

I met a black scholar, a young black scholar who was my age, who came from a very distinguished black family, a family of great educators, and we got to know each other. I forget the situation. He was an anthropologist of Africa, and he told me that he would run into this problem too often, and he began to worry about it, where he couldn't make the leap. There was something he couldn't make the leap, and he just couldn't understand African culture, certain aspects of it. He couldn't make that. He didn't use the term "empathetically"; that's my term, but that's what he was saying in whatever language he used. And what did the Jewish guy from New York say to the—from an immigrant family in New York that had very little education—to this man who came from a very educated family, and who was himself African American, who was telling me he couldn't understand aspects of African religion? What did I say to him? "You can do it." Is that American, or is that American? I said, "You can make that leap. You can jump. You *can* understand it. I don't believe you can't understand it."

And I do feel that way. I don't see a bright guy like that with a great education, who has the desire to understand—I just don't believe that there are things that are impossible to understand out there, unless we don't understand them because we don't have enough information, and that can be a problem.

Lage: Well, and you found the sources that helped you understand them.

Levine: I did.

Lage: And I'm very struck that you made the leap from just looking at words to looking at structure.

Levine: Yes.

Lage: Is there more to say about that? I think we should finish up, but is there any more—?

Levine: Well, I think you have to do that. I think you have to do that in anything. You have to understand the structures in which people exist. Let me say a few words about my next book, or do you want to end?

Lage: I think we should save it, because we're going to—

Levine: We'll save it. Okay.

Lage: And then next time we'll go there.

Levine: I think that words are—maybe I'll end with this, and maybe this will help, or maybe it won't. There was no such thing as cultural history in American history when I was—there was no cultural historian at Columbia who did American stuff, and there was no cultural historian at Berkeley who did American stuff, and I didn't know a cultural historian. So I didn't think I was doing cultural history; I was doing what I was doing. And suddenly I found myself being called a cultural historian. I liked it a lot. What I was really doing, of course, was intellectual history. I'm not studying their food ways, or their living conditions, or their clothing, or their arts. I was studying their minds, you know? I wasn't interested in their songs as songs. I was interested in the songs as evidence, in the tales as evidence of what they were thinking.

Henry May, who was chairman of the Merle Curti Prize for Intellectual History the year my book was published, came to me and said, "Your book has been nominated for the Merle Curti Prize in Intellectual History. Your book isn't intellectual history, is it Larry?" And I said, "Well, Henry, that's really your problem, and not mine. I haven't thought about that." I said, "But the subtitle of the book does say '*Afro-American Thought From Slavery to Freedom.*'" And that's all. I didn't get the Merle Curti Prize. In fact, I got no prizes, and a lot of people didn't think this was history at all. We didn't talk about *that* reception.

Lage: No, we didn't.

Levine: We talked about the black reception. The white reception was a little more dismal, I think. But I'm telling another story now. So—I've lost myself, I'm so sorry.

Lage: About intellectual history and whether—

Levine: Oh yes. So there was this thing about intellectual history. What I think happened—you know, there's not a conspiracy theory, I hope—I think people didn't know what to call this kind of history. Of course, several people were doing it. They didn't want to call it intellectual history because it was not a history of intellectuals, but they didn't quite know what to do with it, and so they began to call it cultural history, and I liked the title a lot.

Lage: Now, who began that?

Levine: Well, I don't know who began; that's a good question.

Lage: Were there other people at Berkeley doing cultural history then? You quote Joe Levenson as intellectual history being the history of—

Levine: Yes, he was an intellectual historian, and I don't really crave to be called an intellectual historian. But I must say, if I was going to give a name to what I do—because, okay, I was going to tell you—so people began to call me a

cultural historian, and I liked the term and I thought about it. And I realized that I was a cultural historian but not a historian of culture, and let me explain that. A historian of culture is a historian of genres. You study the culture of the literary genre. You study the culture of genres, the genre of dance, the genre of literature, the genre of music, whatever it is, a song, the genre of television, the genre of film. And those things—after all, we have departments of literature. They wouldn't call those—and they deal with the literature of the past. But we don't call those people cultural historians; we call them historians of literature, which is a cultural genre, and we do because some of them contextualize what they do, but most of them don't. They deal with literature, and I won't go into the—once they dealt with the book as the book, and then they dealt with the author, and now they're dealing with the audience, but they deal with literature as literature. They don't necessarily—and most of them don't—deal with the context.

That was true when people started to write the history of radio, the history of the movies, the history of whatever, of the stage. They dealt with this as a genre, and they were interested in the workings of the genre, just as many literary people are interested. And sometimes when they did comparisons, and they often did, they compared it to other authors. And there were different stages that this went through. In one stage, the New Criticism, the book became a universe in itself, and it didn't matter that the author was a Russian named Dostoyevsky in the late nineteenth century, who drank too much or whatever. That just wasn't important. Or you could focus on the author in another stage.

So I realized I didn't do that. I was not interested in movies as movies, in film as film, in songs as songs, in religion as religion. I was interested in those things as sources for understanding the mind of people who did not leave their own writing, written histories, behind them.

Lage: So that's more your definition of cultural history, or is it everyone's?

Levine: Well, I don't know if it's everyone's definition. It's a definition of what I do. I do not study genres, and in this book I'm now working on, on the Depression, I'm going to use film but I'm not going to have a history of film, and I'm going to use the crime novels but not have a history on science fiction. I'm not interested in these things as genres. Now, maybe that's a mistake. Maybe I should be more interested in them as genres, because it has some effect on what they are. And I do, I mean, I do pay attention to the contours of slave music, because it was—after all, music was not, religious music was not just the slaves', so I have to know something about the state of white religious music as well as black religious music.

You see, I could go on and on, and I suppose I shouldn't. But in any case, that's where I was, so that my career as a cultural historian really begins with

that second book of mine, though I realize in re-reading the first book I was doing that kind of stuff as well.

Lage: You were moving in that direction.

Levine: But I thought of myself as a political historian when I wrote that book, and a twentieth-century political historian. I began to change my self-definition with the black book.

Let me just end with one observation, and then we'll end. That observation is, in writing the book I realized a lot about verticality and hierarchy as enemies of what I wanted to do. A very good example of that is Louise Pound, who was a very fine folklorist. She was a folklorist early in the twentieth century and maybe late—I forget when she was writing, but it was early twentieth century. She was looking for the derivation of a black folk song, and I'm blocking its name, a religious song. I have it in my book. She was looking for the derivation of that song, and she thought it was a black song. But she kept digging and digging, and she discovered through her grandmother that a friend of her grandmother's learned that song at a white religious meeting—you know, these big open-air religious meetings that they had in the nineteenth century. In the 1840s, this white woman, friend of her grandmother's, had learned that song at that religious meeting. The minute she learned that, she said it was a white song, because it was inconceivable to even so sensitive a folklorist as Louise Pound that a white could learn a song from a black, that whites could learn songs from blacks, that cultural diffusion could go from black to white.

Lage: Right. Go both ways.

Levine: Yes, go both ways. And I knew that was wrong. I knew that was wrong, because I already had evidence that blacks influenced whites in so many ways, in folk medicine, in folklore, in language, and influenced America. So we had to get over that notion of diffusion, and the way to get over the notion—and I'll end on this—I thought—this is not said in a very fancy way, but it is the way I think, not very fancy theoretical ways—the way to get over this was to take the hierarchy, the verticality—because that's what hierarchies are, they're vertical—and to bend it down into a horizontal mode.

Now, I don't mean we do this in order to make everything equal, because everything isn't equal, and there are hierarchies, and there are art forms that are more glorious than other art forms. But if we get it into a horizontal position then we can put things next to one another, which is where they are in life. They're next to one another. You know, blacks are singing their songs, and whites are singing theirs, and blacks don't say, "We can't influence those white men."

Here's a good example. You bring blacks to a camp meeting—these big open-air meetings—or to a church, and you segregate them. Sometimes they were segregated, sometimes they weren't, but often they were. And you segregate them. When you segregate them they can't mingle with the whites, but when they sing they don't have to mingle with the whites. The whites hear it. If they're sitting upstairs in the church, the whites hear it. If they're in the east field and the whites are in the west field, and even if you build fences the music goes over the fence and the whites hear it, and that's exactly the way life worked. And that's why you need to put them next to one another. When you put them next to one another and look at them, then you can understand their similarities and their differences and the like, and you break down this hierarchy, that diffusion and influence only goes in one direction. Nonsense. If you're horizontal they can go in two directions, and life is horizontal. It's not hierarchical. That is, even in slavery, where there was segregation, there was segregation in terms of how high you could rise, but there wasn't segregation in terms of how close you could get. Whites were very close to blacks throughout slavery.

And so I came to that conclusion as well, and I have been fighting that little battle ever since, that it's often misunderstood, that you have to break through the hierarchies to understand cultural influence.

Lage: And that'll lead us to your next book, which we're not going to talk about now.

Levine: I thought we talked about all the books today.

Lage: I know. [laughs] Okay, we're going to stop.

[End of Interview]

### Interview 9: July 6, 2005

[Audio File 17]

17-00:00:00

Ann Lage: The date is July 6, 2005, and I believe this is our ninth session with Larry Levine.

Levine: We discussed my book, *Black Culture and Black Consciousness*. Before we get on to my next book, I just want to say a few words about the fact that one of chief criticisms leveled at *Black Culture and Black Consciousness* and other studies of that genre in the seventies, and throughout the eighties as well, was that they were limiting and fragmenting. People who—even someone like John Higham, who had complained about homogenizing American history, he meant about class. We forgot all the fights and we homogenized—it was a good term. He argued this in '59. By the late seventies he gave a talk in which he said, "Larry Levine is one of the best, but even he fragments the American past. How can we understand the American past if we keep looking at it as a congeries of groups, rather than as a nation?" et cetera. And that still is a criticism.

I just wanted to say that in fact I think the opposite is true; that is, the more we study these individual groups, the more we understand the process by which, for instance, they come into the culture, they acculturate, they disseminate their own culture, they fit in with the larger culture, the more we understand that process, the more we begin to understand America. It isn't fragmenting at all; it's necessary to understand how groups fit together in this culture. A good example is the part of *Black Culture and Black Consciousness* I spoke about, where I was looking for moments of acculturation after the Civil War, when blacks were now free to move around, when they had a mobility they were free to absorb other cultures in a way they couldn't as slaves, et cetera. And I thought that in the blues, which rises in the decades after slavery, I had found a chief medium of acculturation. Here's a good sign of acculturation: they're now singing in the solo voice. The "me" is important here. "Look at me. I am broke, I am lonely. I'm important." It's the post-enlightenment consciousness, which blacks really didn't have in slavery. But I also found that at the same moment, the music to the blues was revitalizing. It wasn't acculturating; it was moving *back* toward the group practice, back towards what they brought with them from Africa, revised of course, but nevertheless. And it was that that had such a profound influence on American culture, in turn. So that by looking carefully at the group, one can begin to understand its influence in American history, the ways in which American history influenced it, and the process by which groups tended to acculturate, not by giving up everything they have, but by amalgamating what they have.

The only other group I know as well as blacks, almost as well, are Jews, East European Jews.

- Lage: From personal experience.
- Levine: From personal experience, but I have read a lot too. East European Jews had exactly the same process. They gave and they took. They pushed forward and they pushed back. They held on even as they let go, and the process is fascinating.
- Lage: And where does theory fit into all of this?
- Levine: Well, you asked me that question in an e-mail. I thought about it a bit, and I realized I am not a theory-theory guy. I don't take someone's theory, be it Freud or Foucault, and lay it down on the materials I have to see if they fit the theory. Or I suppose more commonly, people take the theory and then look for examples of it. I make up, as I think most people do, though they don't call a theory, and that's okay, but it does annoy me sometimes when people say, "Well, this is not theoretical at all." What I just said about culture is a theory. It's a theory of acculturation. It's not Marx's theory of acculturation. It's not Plato's theory of acculturation, and it's probably too—
- Lage: It's Larry Levine's.
- Levine: —it's too grandiose to call it a theory at all, but it's an idea. It's a hypothesis. It's a way of beginning to sort facts, which you have to do, even you just write—maybe I should take the "just" out—even if you're writing pure narrative history, you have to have a selective process. You have to. You have to have something that tells you what facts you want in and what you don't, what's significant and what is less significant, and what is insignificant. Something has to tell you. That filter is often, whether you know it or not, a kind of theory. The theory is, this is what it was important about the revolution, and therefore I'm going to concentrate on Washington's doing this and not doing that, because I can't do everything he did. Even in the most freewheeling narrative style, I've got to have some breaks, so what are those breaks?
- Now, the theory might be that the most important thing is the most spectacular thing. It can be very unimportant, that is, as a thought process. But something's at work, and I think it's very good to be conscious of what's at work. I was very conscious of the fact that I wanted to know—and it took a long time to refine my book, *Black Culture and Black Consciousness*, into two large questions: what happened to African culture when blacks came here, and what happened to African-American slave culture when blacks were liberated? Those are the two questions, and it took me a long time to understand the significance of those two questions.
- And I was prodded by other hypotheses: that blacks had no culture, that blacks lost their culture, et cetera, et cetera, that blacks were different than any other immigrant group who came to the United States because of the nature of their

coming. And then, in all of this, there were theories. Bruno Bettelheim had a theory of infantilization. He was a psychoanalyst, who himself experienced the Holocaust and who created a theory about the Holocaust, asking why was there not more resistance. And he came up with the process of infantilization, and Stanley Elkins used that theory on slaves.

So I began by finding a theory that, I must say, factually seemed wrong to me, and spiritually offended me. But one has to be careful of that; of course, one has to be careful of all of this. So I think there are a lot of theories all the time. In fact, if I sat down with *Black Culture and Black Consciousness* and went through it, I could probably isolate many, many, many theories. Karl Mannheim is there, and Freud is there, and Henri Bergson is there. I used those guys.

Lage: People that you've read but perhaps—

Levine: Or that I went to read. For instance, I had never read Henri Bergson on laughter, but when I decided to write a chapter on black laughter I began to read on laughter. I read Freud's fantastically interesting, insightful *Wit and Its Relation to the Unconscious*. I read Henri Bergson on *Laughter*. I read a lot of books and used them.

My own feeling about the use of theory, which is probably influenced by Hofstadter—with whom I never spoke about this, but I just watched the way he used it—educated people read books like that; educated people read the books they need to read, and they also should keep up with what's happening out there. If Foucault is having an influence, you should read a little Foucault. And you use those things. You use them if you're an educated person, and you use them in your writing. You use them in your thinking.

Lage: Well, you use them if you feel that they're appropriate.

Levine: Well, that's right. But no one can pretend that the unconscious has not been discovered. No one can pretend that we're aware of everything we do and the reasons for it, so there are some things you can't escape. I mean, if you write as if there were no such thing as sexual urges, or that people—then you are denying, then you're writing as if you're living in an earlier century, and that would be silly, too.

Sometimes that isn't conscious in your writing, and sometimes it's not relevant in your writing, but that's the kind of thing I think—

Lage: But a lot of people now, or for the past couple of decades, have used theory much more consciously, it seems.

Levine: Yes.

Lage: How does that sit with you?

Levine: Well, what worries me sometimes, and I see it in American—I teach in an American cultural studies program at George Mason University. I'm a member of the History Department, also a member of the Cultural Studies Program, which is a graduate program. And there is a danger in making—and this happens not just in cultural studies; it happens everywhere. Theory becomes the subject. You don't just use Foucault, you find yourself writing about Foucault, or Derrida, or any one of a number of these theorists, and they become more important than the subject matter. That's happened with Freud and Marx and God knows who else. That's a mistake. It's a mistake. These should be—if you want to write about Foucault, absolutely. He's fair game. He's an important thinker in an important time, and absolutely, write books about Foucault. That's a good academic thing to do, good intellectual thing to do. But if you're writing about women in twentieth-century culture, if you're writing about prisons, then you should write about prisons, and you should use Foucault as a tool, not as something else, not as a subject.

I think that theory—I mean, that's an old, old problem. We all have friends who are Marxists, who are more interested in Marx than the subject matter to which Marx applied his own thinking, so there is a problem. However, I don't mean to create a hierarchy of theory or ways to use theory. My way of using it is this way. It's very pragmatic. I create little ideas as I go along; they're not brand new. You know, I can't remember the idea, but I remember when I was a young man—I can't remember the idea, so this story is going to lose its force—but I came to a thought, and I was so excited by the thought. I was so excited. I came to a conclusion that seemed logical to me, and I told it to a friend of mine who said, "Oh yeah, that's in the second volume of Marx's *Das Kapital*," and it was. So did I arrive on that thought really independently? Who knows, you know. I hadn't read, at that time, the second volume of *Das Kapital*, but that's the kind of thing that happens. You often discover these things for yourself, because a lot of them are logical, a lot of them come out of experience, a lot of them come out of sharp observation. Then you find out someone else thought about it and formulated it in a very useful form.

But I think people think. I think people, you know, they don't need other people to do their theorizing for them. So I think it's a combination of what's out there—and I like to use that lightly—and your own, your own constant process of theorizing, of formulating hypotheses, of putting things into categories, of understanding the way the things you're looking at work. It took a long time for me to understand how slaves used folk tales. I didn't find a theory to help me with that. Maybe there is one, and maybe I was just dumb enough not to see it.

Lage: Does yours come out—if I'm understanding you right—of your materials, from being steeped in your materials? Or do you bring—?

Levine: Yes. It occurred to me one day—it's not an earthshaking thing, but it made a difference to me; we've talked about this—that slaves heard B'r'er Rabbit stories hundreds, perhaps *thousands* of times, and therefore, the *cycle* becomes important. It's not that the rabbit wins. He's always a loser at the beginning of every tale. So there's a message in that very cycle, that the rabbit doesn't win permanently. He never wins permanently. The minute I understood that, I understood a lot. They had their own theory about rabbits and wolves and foxes. You can win battles; you don't win wars, because you're a rabbit. And they're teaching their kids life-sustaining lessons through these tales. So it's that kind of thing. That is, *they* had a theory, and I discovered their theory, their theory of slavery, their theory of slavehood, their theory of power and how power is used, and what is possible and what is not possible.

So, to go back to something I said at the very beginning of these marathon interviews—now I've forgotten what I said at the beginning.

Lage: We have it on tape, luckily.

Levine: We have it on tape. Oh yes, it's Joe Levenson's statement that intellectual history is the history not of thought, but of people thinking. And people do think, and people do figure things out. They don't just need us to walk in and [claps hands] impose order on them. They have an order. We can see deeper things. Otherwise, why study them? But we also have to discover the order *they* thought, the notion *they* thought, the hypotheses *they* developed. Otherwise, what are we doing? So, so much for theory.

Lage: Great. I like that. [laughter] I like that.

Levine: Now, when I finished and published *Black Culture and Black Consciousness*—I should say a few words about the way it was ignored. I am told now by friends—

Lage: Didn't it get very good reviews?

Levine: Well, it didn't get a *lot* of good reviews. It got good reviews insofar as it was reviewed. The *Times* ignored it, but the *Times* has ignored every one of my books, except for *The Opening of the American Mind*, which is about educational, the whole educational controversy. It tended to ignore—it didn't get a lot; it got some reviews, and it was not thought of as history by a lot of people. I think I mentioned Henry May came to me; he was the chairman of a prize committee of the Organization of American Historians. And in intellectual history my book was nominated for that, and he asked me if I thought my book was intellectual history. He, obviously, did not. And I said, "Well, Henry, that's really your problem and not mine to figure this out." I said, "But the subtitle is, *Afro-American Folk Thought from Slavery to Freedom*, so—but it goes back to how intellectual history is conceived."

Lage: But it wasn't that he didn't think it was history, it seems.

Levine: He didn't think it was intellectual history, you know. Others who—I mean, I can't remember the anecdotes, but I heard anecdotes that I shouldn't have heard, I suppose. On the other hand, I am told by someone—in those days—now the Pulitzer Prize Committee tells you who the second and third choices were, but they didn't then. But I have been told by a professor who was on the committee that gave the Pulitzer Prize, that I was the second choice. So there may have been more admiration for that book than I understood, and I am now told by people that book was a land—that book had just exploded all over the place, that people were excited by it. But, you know, you don't know those things when you publish a book.

Lage: You didn't realize it at the time.

Levine: No.

Lage: Was that book the reason you got the MacArthur Prize, just to leap ahead a tiny bit?

Levine: I haven't got the foggiest notion. I got the MacArthur in 1983, and I hadn't published another book yet, so—

Lage: Yes, you hadn't done *Highbrow/Lowbrow*.

Levine: The most important thing I'd done thus far was *Black Culture and Black Consciousness*, so I would imagine this is the book. They don't give it for a book; they give it for a process. Yes, so I would imagine the book—so, yes, in the long run—

Lage: Let's not denigrate the reception of the book.

Levine: But the immediate reception of the book was very low-key, and it was easy to think that the book was being lost. It's later on when you realize the book's been used widely and still is. They're coming out with a thirtieth-anniversary edition of the book next year, well, 2007.

Lage: So it has lasting impact.

Levine: Yes, it has, and I'm delighted. And when the book was published I then thought I would turn to a cultural study of the Great Depression. My teaching—and I will get to this later—my teaching was getting more and more focused on the Great Depression. I was beginning to experiment a lot with techniques of understanding culture, using the Great Depression. The students—and I will come to this, too—were great in helping me, and that's the book I thought I would now write, and when I got grants for the years after—I should say that *Black Culture and Black Consciousness* took a long

time, partly because I thought in the beginning I was writing another book, protest thought, black protest.

Lage: We've talked about that.

Levine: Yes. So it took a long time, and second books do take a long time. Maybe I've already said that. The third book wasn't exactly a speed demon either. [laughs] But it came a little more quickly. However, what I wanted to talk about is the genesis of the third book. It's interesting, because of all my books, the third book may have the most purely intellectual genesis. That is, something troubled me when I was doing *Black Culture and Black Consciousness* that wasn't central for *Black Culture and Black Consciousness*, but it was pretty central for my sense of the way culture worked, and that is, I read white blackface minstrel shows, just to get a sense of how whites were depicting blacks—because I knew about minstrelsy, but I had never read, so now I read some.

And I was quite impressed and surprised by the ubiquity of Shakespearean parody: "When was Desdemona most like a ship? When she was Moored." And they got very positive responses to things like that. Hamlet tells Ophelia, "Get thee to a brewery," rather than "Get thee to a nunnery." Well, you know, there's a lot of that. And I wondered, why would they laugh at that? Because I came at this with my own twentieth-century consciousness, that Shakespeare was tough going. When we read him in school we had footnotes; fardels, we had to know what fardels were. He was difficult, and he was the supreme playwright, very hard to understand, very difficult to comprehend, and when you could understand and when you could comprehend him you could be proud of yourself, et cetera, et cetera. He was for the few and not the many. He was *culture* and not just entertainment.

And then I discovered that minstrels can crack jokes like this and get people to laugh; so they keep cracking jokes like this, over and over. Then I ultimately discovered that Shakespeare's in advertisements for brandies. Reporters will say when they're reporting a robbery, they'll say—oh, what's that famous Shakespeare quote: "Who steals my purse steals trash; 'tis something, nothing; 'twas mine, 'tis his, and has been slave to thousands. But he who steals from me my good name steals something that benefits him not, but makes me poor." They would do that in reportage. I mean, Shakespeare was all over that culture. I discovered that late.

So what I had to begin was this minstrel stuff, and it troubled me, and being a big mouth I kept talking about it. I got grants to go to Washington to do research on the thirties, and I did. I have done an enormous amount of research on the thirties, but I kept talking about this thing that bothered me. So a friend of mine, who was a friend of the head of the Folger Library, which is a Shakespearean library just a couple of blocks from the Library of Congress in Washington, DC, phoned her friend and said, "I'm sending my friend Larry

Levine around." Then she phoned me and said, "Larry, I'm tired of hearing you talk about this. You've got a nine o'clock appointment with"—I forgot his name. So I went to see him.

I was *bludgeoned* into going to see him, and he turned out to be a nice guy who didn't quite know what I was talking about, I think. He said, "Well, what would you like to see?" He didn't solve my problem. He didn't say, "Oh, you should look at—." He said, "What would you like to see?" So I didn't really know what I wanted to see, but I did know that Shakespeare was advertised and disseminated—not Shakespeare, but plays were advertised and disseminated through playbills. They'd pass them out. They'd hang them up on churches, on buildings, on wherever; well, maybe not churches; in the eighteenth century the church looked down on plays, and they were advertised, in fact, as something other than plays in America. So I said, "Do you have playbills for eighteenth- and nineteenth-century America?" He said, "Yes, we have a lot of playbills. What would you like to see?" I said, "I'd just like to start at the beginning," and I did. I read an enormous amount of playbills, and that really answered my question for me. Shakespeare was presented as popular culture. "See the witches on the heath, see the forest come to Dunsinane, see the" whatever. And admonitions against rowdy behavior. Of course, there was a lot of rowdy behavior. That is the masses were going to the theater, and they didn't read Shakespeare.

You see, John Adams, Thomas Jefferson, they read Shakespeare and they'd talk about it in their letters and everything else. They *read* Shakespeare. They brought Shakespeare with them from the old country. The working masses of America *saw* Shakespeare, so the whole notion of visual culture—you know, they went to the theater. It was a popular entertainment.

Lage: As they did in Britain.

Levine: As they did in Britain. And you can see—I didn't prepare for this, so don't put that in the thing. A lot of the facts that I—Junius Brutus Booth, who was the father of John Wilkes Booth, who later kills Abraham Lincoln, and Edwin Booth, who becomes one of the great Shakespearean actors of the second half of the nineteenth century, Junius Brutus Booth and his three sons—I lost track of the third son—would travel around the country, as many British stars did. They came to this country. They played Shakespearean plays. That's one of the reasons why Shakespeare was so popular. These great actors from Britain would come, but they'd come without their own companies, and they'd play with repertory companies, and America had repertory companies all over the place. Theaters had their own companies. These guys would just slot into them. So Shakespeare was one of the things they shared. Probably more than half the plays, or somewhere between a third and a half of plays in the United States were Shakespeare. So Junius Brutus Booth and his three sons could travel around the country visiting city after city, but they didn't just visit cities. They went to the California gold country, and they played in all kinds

of unbelievable places, churches, bars; they'd make makeshift stages. And this great British actor, who was probably a bit mad—Walt Whitman thought he was mad, but Walt Whitman also thought he was a great actor.

And that's the other thing. Junius Brutus Booth was a very voluble, emotional, bombastic actor, a great actor, but of that mode. This was America in the nineteenth century, a bombastic culture. I mean, they *loved* that kind of oratory. They loved—so Shakespeare lends himself to that. Shakespeare lends himself to being played loud. He lends himself to being played *sotto voce*, you know. You can play him the way he wants. Edwin Booth, one of Junius Brutus Booth's sons who became the great actor, played him very cerebrally in the second half of the nineteenth century, but he was not played that way in the first half of the nineteenth century. And the theater historians knew that Shakespeare was popular. It's not that I discovered something.

But, see, this is what I thought. Now, let me back up a minute. When I was writing *Black Culture and Black Consciousness*, and writing about black music and spirituals, religiosity, sermons, tales, this unbelievably beautiful, intricate stuff that is so worthy of intellectual analysis, when I was doing that I was a little angry that American historians hadn't done this a long time before, and that some of them still didn't think it was worth doing, you know, for whatever reasons, and that it was *easy*, and that it wasn't *real* intellectual history. But I wrote it off as, "Oh well, it's black. That's why, it's black. They're too busy doing the white stuff."

But then I got into this new book, and now we're dealing with Shakespeare, and now we're dealing with all kinds of stuff, because I don't just limit myself to Shakespeare in this book, and I realized they don't do that either. They don't do plays. They don't do books. They don't do performing arts. They don't do ballet. They don't do any of it. American historians—they're beginning to change, but it's very slow—American historians ignored that whole part of a culture, as if it were, "Oh, well, they do that for relief." No they don't. That's part of life. The stage is *part of life*. People go to it as one of the things they do. And in the nineteenth century, *sans* movies, *sans* television, *sans* radio, they went to it a lot. You know, they went to it and other things *a lot*, and we'd just written all that off. I won't get into the intricacies of the way I sign contracts for my book and everything, but my book *Highbrow/Lowbrow* ultimately was—well, let me get to that.

So, once I came to the conclusion that indeed Shakespeare was part of popular culture, and it was very hard for me to come to that conclusion because it refuted so much of my own thought about how Shakespeare worked and culture worked, I was really interested, I must say. I got an invitation to come to Hungary to—Carl Schorske was one of the organizers of this—an American-Hungarian symposium on culture, on popular culture. They asked me if I would like to come, and if so, could I list a few possible topics I might speak about. So I did. I listed three. One of them was William Shakespeare

and the American people. And I said to myself—I was playing dice—I said to myself, if they pick that one I'll write that, and they did pick that one.

So I wrote a lecture. I find this interesting about myself and about the way culture works, because I already talked about some of the things that come from American culture that inhibited me in studying Shakespeare, but here's another thing. Shakespeare is high-toned stuff, and I'm just a lowly old American historian. You know, literature experts do Shakespeare, not Larry Levine. What was I doing messing with this guy? Maybe it was easier to do it in Hungary than it was in Newark, New Jersey, I don't know. But so I did it. And Carl was there and a lot of other historians, both Hungarian and American, and they really liked the paper. They came up to me afterwards and, you know, we were together a lot, because we were a symposium. It was a wonderful experience. It was 1984, and they urged me to publish this. So I went home, and I deepened it a bit and published it, and it was published. I just didn't know whether I wanted to go on with this.

Lage: This was after your visit to the Folger Library.

Levine: Oh, long after. I already had determined that Shakespeare was popular culture. I hadn't determined whether I wanted to do anything with it. So now I had an article. The *American Historical Review* published it. I had friends telling me, "You ought to really work this up." It was interesting because there were questions: Did this work for other genres? In other words, did it work for opera? Was opera popular culture? Was classical music popular? All kinds of stuff came to mind.

And, you know, there were certain things that occurred to me, though I didn't do anything with this. But Emerson was popular culture. You know, he went all over the country and gave lectures to everyone. Lowell, the poet, Longfellow, the poet. I mean, their poems were known. People memorized them, because it was a great age of memorization. People memorized large chunks of Shakespeare and went around reciting them. Walt Whitman talks about the fact that he'd get on the ferry, the New York ferry to go to Brooklyn or to go to New Jersey, and he'd sometimes just declaim Shakespeare, loudly. No one put him in the booby hatch for that.

Lage: Now they'd think he was talking on a cell phone.

Levine: Exactly. So in any case, I was contemplating writing a book going beyond Shakespeare. I had that done. I get a phone call from Harvard. They have the Massey lectures, and they'd like me to give a series of three lectures at Harvard, and there they were. I gave a series of three lectures, and that became the book. It also called for publication. Well, I didn't publish the lectures. I said to them, "I want this to be more than three thin lectures, a hundred-page book." And they agreed to that. So I had another year after the lectures, and I did things, but things I couldn't do. For instance, you could do

this with art. You could do it, as I just said, with Longfellow, Lowell. Well, these guys were both respectable. Both Longfellow and Lowell had professorships at Harvard, and they were also widely known poets who were known throughout the culture, so they hit both audiences.

This was true of so many people. It was true of artists. There were great raffles for art. People would put in money and they'd get the winning picture. Some of the great nature painters, like Church, would paint the painting. The painting would be brought to something—whether it was a museum or not doesn't matter, a building—put into a context. Let's say it was a painting of a beautiful river, so they'd dress it up like a window, so when you walked into the room you'd look at the window and there would be this beautiful painting of the mountains beyond the window and everything. People would pay twenty-five cents to come and see that one painting. There was a lot of that, and if I was just writing a book and didn't have these other, I would have had a chapter on art and a chapter on literature. Maybe it's just as well.

As it is, I had a chapter on opera and other forms of music, and chapter on other things which showed a mixed culture, that the boxes that most of us grew up with of highbrow, lowbrow, middlebrow and all that stuff didn't exist in the nineteenth century. That doesn't mean there weren't values, and that doesn't mean there weren't snobberies. I mean, the things—I talk a lot about that in the book—Charles Eliot Norton, I believe it was, saying things like—I forget if it was him or someone like him—that the mountains in Europe are much more beautiful than the mountains in America. Nature in Europe is much more beautiful than nature in America, that kind of—there was so much elitism.

So I wrote that book, and it was a wonderful experience. Both these books, which I guess are my best work, *Black Culture and Black Consciousness* and *Highbrow/Lowbrow*, were great experiences for me. They introduced me to new phenomena, and I grew. I grew with them.

Lage: And how was that received, *Highbrow/Lowbrow*?

Levine: With great surprise. I don't think people expected me to write a book like that, and they didn't expect a book in US history to focus on William Shakespeare. So, I don't know, Ken Stampp wrote me a very lovely note. "Gee," he said, "that's a really unusual book you've just written. I don't know if I would have ever thought of writing it." So, you know, I was a guy who was now associated with *Black Culture and Black Consciousness*, and now I'm writing a book on Shakespeare.

Lage: Had you been thought of—did you start to be thought of as a historian of black history?

Levine: Well, inevitably, inevitably, of course, and I still am. I got an enormous number of invitations to lecture here or to do that and do this. And I did for a long while. I taught black history here for a few years, but there were so many people at Berkeley who taught black history, Winthrop Jordan, Leon Litwack, Kenneth Stampp, ultimately Waldo Martin, myself, so they didn't need to draft me to do a lot of it, and I quickly shifted to this, and then to other things.

I wrote in these years to get on to the next book, a series of articles on all kinds of things, including four on the Great Depression, because I was working on the Great Depression all this time, and I wrote four articles on the Great Depression. And I wrote articles on other things. I wrote articles on history, I wrote articles on jazz and other forms of music. Some of these articles were also—I have that very nice article, which is still my first article out of which *Black Culture* comes, “Slave Songs and Slave Consciousness,” which is itself a very nice piece. If you just want the method without the four hundred pages, that's not a bad place to get it.

So I had all these articles, and I began to worry, as people do, that no one was reading them, because a lot of them were published in journals which were not so well known, and collections which are gone, and no one reads them anymore, and no one ever read them very much. So I approached Oxford University Press, and Cornell approached *me*, so I had—Oxford was interested and Cornell was interested, and I ultimately published a book called *The Unpredictable Past*, which is a book of essays that stretch from my very earliest work on thinking about my life and history to right through the seventies and eighties. The book was published in 1993. I think the last article might have been as late as 1990, I forget. So it's a good spectrum of my work, and it shows how cultural I was becoming, and how cultural I really had been even from the beginning.

Lage: When you did that book and drew together articles that you'd written, some of them in the distant past, did you become a revisionist in any way? Did you look at anything and say, “I would do that differently if I was doing it now”?

Levine: If I had a paper bag I'd put it on now and say, “I kind of like my work.” It was work of a quarter of a century, and if you had said, “You can go back and rewrite things,” you know, I would have said, “Why?” They're okay for the time. It *is* true, I wouldn't have done everything the way I did. After all, I knew a lot more in 1993 than I knew when the book was published, or '92 when it went into the press, than I did when I wrote the book. But I thought they were interesting articles.

I have something in there that's very old, a comparison of the twenties and thirties. Oh, no it isn't. It's an article about the twenties, and it's an article about nostalgia and progress, the two forces. I tried to talk about how Americans look back and forward at the same time, and I use the twenties as an example. That's probably one of the oldest things I've ever done, and it

comes out of a lecture I gave. That's something interesting to me. This comes out of a lecture I was giving to my students here at Berkeley in the sixties, in the early sixties, and it's a very cultural piece. I mean, it's a piece by a cultural historian, though I didn't think of myself as a cultural historian.

Lage: Right. That is interesting, that as you approached your teaching, your instincts towards the cultural historian came out.

Levine: The title of the book is interesting, too. *The Unpredictable Past* comes from a joke I read, a Soviet joke. This was, after all, the Soviet Union of the past, and it said, "The future is certain. It's only the past that's unpredictable." Because, of course, the Soviet Union was constantly changing its history books and all that. But if one goes beyond that totalitarian state to talk about the whole process of history, it is true that the past *is* unpredictable. It's unpredictable for lots of reasons. It's unpredictable because it's seen from the present. It's unpredictable because our needs change, and our needs have something to do with this thing. It's unpredictable because our tools change, our weapons of understanding change, of the way we supposedly progress.

So the way I see history is that it moves in circles, and what I hope is true is that the circles themselves progress, so you don't just start here and then keep progressing and then you're right back where you started. You may be right back to a political orientation, rather than a cultural or economic orientation, but ultimately the political orientation is a little more deeply rooted in human nature and what we know of human nature, et cetera, et cetera.

Lage: Because you do look for different things.

Levine: Well, you do.

Lage: For instance, gender issues, you know, were kind of ignored for so long.

Levine: I had no sense of it when I began writing, at all. No, it's true, and there would be some people who would say I still don't, but I hope not. So that was a good experience. My wife wasn't so positive I ought to do a collection of articles, because I was still working on that book on the thirties.

Lage: The Depression.

Levine: Yes. And she said, "Do you really want to publish those four pieces now?" But I did. I wanted—you know, you want your work to live, and it was kind of not living. It was stuck in corners, it comes out in this book. Not that the book is a great best seller, but it's used and it's there, and people can read it.

The next book, my next book—I sound like, "And then I wrote—." But the book—it's interesting looking back on the genesis of these books. The next book was—I want to say that all the time—and I will get to this when I get to

my teaching, very quickly—all the time, I'm doing all of this, I'm working on the thirties, I'm going to Library of Congress, I'm reading original research in all kinds of materials, a lot of them visual materials, film and photography and the like.

Lage: Do you have a focus yet for your book on the thirties? I don't mean this minute, but as you're going and doing this research.

Levine: Well, yes, I do have a focus. I do have a focus. I have a question. You want me to say it now, or—?

Lage: Well, I was thinking more how the question evolved. Were you just immersing yourself in the culture first?

Levine: Yes, let's hold that up. I just want to set the next book. I don't have to say a lot about the next two books. They're hopefully good books. I will say, the next book came out of the present in a way that I don't think any of the others did. Well, all our work does, *Black Culture and Black Consciousness* came out of the present, too, but this really came out of the present. History was under attack. It was the 1980s and nineties, and we were being attacked mercilessly.

Lage: Now, who is "we"?

Levine: Historians. Professors in the contemporary university. And, of course, *the great attack*, the attack that really pushed me into the fray was Allan Bloom's *The Closing of the American Mind*. Good title—which I would have used myself, in fact—*The Closing of the American Mind*, which sold 800,000 copies in hardback, and I don't know how many copies it sold in paperbacks since it's been published in paperback. It was a vicious attack on the academe. It was a vicious attack on modernity. It was a vicious attack and a wrong-headed attack, I think, on contemporary culture. You know, "Once young people put on the Walkman, when they take it off they're ruined forever." It was the "one sip of beer in the Prohibitionist era," you know. "One sip of beer and you're through. One long inhale of the reefer and you're dead." In other words, it was an anti-democratic book. He saw culture as having gone to the dogs, and universities as having lost their sense of what was important: the classics, Western culture, capital W, what was once the center of things that had been lost.

Now, it's interesting. My anger at this attack was that I saw it as wrong-headed, and I saw the university as a wonderful place, encompassing increasing numbers of kids who *never* would have gone to a university earlier. I mean, it was changing in front of our eyes. It was becoming black and brown and yellow, and male and female, and older people have chances to come now. I just thought it was one of the most exciting places to be. I was so happy that I had chosen to spend my life in this milieu. I was so charged by it,

and this guy comes along, but it wasn't him alone. He was not esoteric. It was Lynne Cheney, who was the head of National Endowment for the Humanities. So many people were attacking the university this way that it began to upset me.

Now, my upset came from the fact that I thought the university was a wonderful place full of intellectuality, full of excitement, full of growth, not because I thought what they were saying was wrong, that once American culture was based on the classic, and once Western Civ was the heart of it. I thought, yes, that's probably right, but so what? So I decided to try to answer Bloom and his ilk, and I discovered they were completely wrong. Classics were not what they said classics were. When the American system of higher education was rooted in the classics, classics were a grammatical thing to teach kids grammar, and grammar, like mathematics itself, was a form of teaching you how to think. It was a logical form of thinking. They didn't really teach them Latin and Greek in order so they could ennoble themselves. I mean, that was there, but you have to read the kids themselves. We have a record of these young people in the late eighteenth-, early nineteenth-century universities. They hated these courses, because they were rote, they were mnemonic courses. You memorized things.

Lage: Now, what were your sources for that, what the kids thought about it?

Levine: Oh, it's all over the place, and it's hard to avoid. They talk about it, they wrote memoirs, they wrote letters, it's in early histories of education. It's not that people didn't know this. These guys were distorting, you know, they were saying the classics were something in the early nineteenth century that classics were not. Classics were tools to create the thinking mind, as mathematics was a tool to create a thinking mind. There was no modern education. The kids were not taught to read modern languages. They were not taught history. History was Roman and Greek history. Science was pre-laboratory science. No one was advocating we go back to that; there are a few diehards. St. John's University had just two campuses, in Maryland and in Nevada or Arizona.

Lage: Santa Fe, I think.

Levine: Santa Fe, New Mexico, you're quite right. And there are a few other universities that have gone back to that kind of stuff, but not much. Nor was Bloom asking us to go back to that. So the one thing is the role and nature of the classics in American higher education was distorted. And the other thing was that it's not true that America's education was based on Western Civ at all; that's simply not true. Western Civ becomes a factor in World War I, when the fact that American boys are being sent to the European battlefields and the government is very upset that Americans will wonder, "Why are we sending our kids back there? We *left* that place." So they encouraged universities—Columbia was one of the first—to create courses showing the kids how tied we were to the European tradition, and that's the birth of

Western Civ, 1910s, and it doesn't last beyond World War II, during and after World War II.

Lage: It got us through two wars.

Levine: Yes. There was a rebellion against Western Civ. People say, "Hey, we have to take in Africa. We have to take in Asia." Wendell Willkie wrote a book called *One World* during World War II. So it lasts a very short time, and there's a rebellion against it long before modern education, you know, long before now. There's a rebellion against it in the forties and fifties. We have to take in the world. We have to teach world history.

So it's just that they're wrong. They were wrong, they remained wrong, so I wrote a book. My book sold 20,000 copies, where Bloom's sold 800,000. [laughter] Nevertheless, it was important for me to write that book; I felt the call. I think it's a very nice book, and it's a book which has two halves. One half is this. I just described the other half. It has to do with the nature of minorities in America, because that was being attacked, too. The other point of attack was the kind of history I did, and the kind of history a lot of young historians did on groups that had been neglected, and Lynne Cheney hated that stuff, and so did so many other people. So I tried to talk about how important that was to an understanding of America, in the second half of the book.

So it's a book both about the nature of American education and its evolution to the post-World-War-II period, when there was a real rebellion against Western Civ, which is a very narrow slice of American educational history. Then the second half had to do with the importance of teaching about the groups that live in America.

Lage: Did it start a conversation? Did you ever have a forum for debate, other than—?

Levine: Oh, there were debates, but most of the debates were worthless. I debated Dinesh D'Souza, who is not worth debating. See, the problem is, if you're going to debate those guys, and you can watch it on television, you're going to debate a Dinesh D'Souza.

Lage: Now, who is that?

Levine: Oh, Dinesh D'Souza. He's a Portuguese Indian, a dark-skinned fellow who comes from Goa, which was the Portuguese colony—I think it still is—on the western Indian coast. There was a Goan restaurant in Berkeley for a number of years that wasn't bad. He's made a living—he works for the Heritage Foundation, right across the street from where we live in Washington—and he's written a number—and he wrote a book called *The Illiberal Education*, terrible book but it sold lots of copies.

So they teamed me up in a debate with him. But I'm no good at that, because you can only debate a guy like that, who'll say anything, if you're willing to say anything, or if you're willing to be murderous. I'm not willing to be either of that. I'm not willing to say anything, and I'm not willing to be murderous, so it was a kind of standstill. I know I disappointed people in the audience who thought I was going to kill him, because he's killable—he's so up front—but I—

Lage: Where was the venue?

Levine: Harvard, Harvard School of Education. And there was a big dinner afterwards.

Now, my book did not please everybody. I sent copies to the people in Berkeley who I'm friendly with. One of them was Bill Bouwsma, and he wrote back and said, "Gosh, Larry, I don't—" He sent me a very sweet letter, and I'm paraphrasing wildly here, it's been so long. I published the book in 1996, so that's almost a decade ago. But he wrote back and said, "Gosh, Larry, I don't know what to say, you know. You're attacking some of the things that are dearest to me." And I said to Cornelia, my wife, "Attacking some of the things—no I'm not. I'm not attacking anything here." I mean, it is true I was attacking a classical tradition, but I didn't think Bill believed in the classical tradition in the way it had been in America in the eighteenth century, nineteenth century. Anyway. Win Jordan wrote a very sarcastic—I sent him a copy. I sent copies to the people I exchange copies of books with. Bill and Win would give me their books, I'd give them mine. But he wrote a scathing, kind of, less-than-pleasant letter. Well, Win and I were less close than Bill and I.

Anyway, most of the people at the Berkeley campus who I gave the book to enjoyed it, and I'm proud of that book. I am proud of the fact that I am not *not* proud of anything I've done. I think the work is good. Should I have taken the time I spent writing that book in finishing my thirties book? Maybe, but I was moved to write that book. I did not lose—maybe I should say this now—I did not lose—though I was getting older—I did not lose my desire to be part of the world I was living in. In 1985, I should tell you, I was arrested for the last time in my life outside of University Hall. I was on the committee negotiating with the president of the university, whose offices were still in University Hall. They have since moved to Oakland, partly because of us, I think. I was on a committee of several faculty members, trying to negotiate divestment, that is, that the university should pull its monies out of South Africa. And the President, whose name I've forgotten—

Lage: President [David] Gardner.

Levine: Yes. They all look alike to me now, but that President Gardner *was furious*. You know, "Students have come in here and accused me of this or that." I forget what they accused him of. He was just righteously furious, and he had

academic toadies around him who, you know, told him he was a great man, including, alas, my old friend Neil Smelser, who was one of the chorus telling him how great he was and how bad we were.

But I was a member of this committee of very decent academics who just thought the university was a symbol and needed to divest. And we had three meetings with him, and he was pretty intransigent. What troubles me about these guys is that when the Regents told him to divest, he divested. When we, the faculty—we were a representative faculty group—tried to talk to him, he wouldn't even talk. Well, he talked to us. He physically talked to us, but he was so righteous and so—

Lage: Well, there is a difference in that the Regents were his boss.

Levine: Well, there is, there is. No, here's an empty vessel, see, who tells us, "No, it's a sin to do this," and the Regents tell him and he does it. You know, why do you want a guy like that as president of your university, for god's sakes? Anyway, after the third meeting in University Hall—it was a sunny afternoon—I come out of the committee, and there were a large number of students, many graduate students, who were furious. We come out and we say, "Well, we didn't make much inroad." And they said they're going to sit-in in University Hall. Several of them were my students, graduate students, and I said, "You know, theoretically these talks are still ongoing, I'm still on this committee, we haven't cut relations with this guy. Maybe we should wait." But the students were in no mood—my wife and one of my sons was there looking on, and I said, "Maybe we should wait." I was trying to reason with the students, but there was no reasoning with them. They were very upset, and so about ten, twelve, fifteen students throw their bodies down. Two or three of them were my own. I had thrown my body down many times. In 1985 I was fifty-two years old. I had a long white beard—that will come into play in a minute—and my long hair. My hair was not yet white, but my beard sure was, and I just decided that my place was with the students, and I threw my body down.

Now, I wasn't the only faculty. There were several faculty who did this.

Lage: Do you want to say who they were? Do you remember?

Levine: You know, I don't remember. David Matza of Sociology, but there were others and I don't remember who they were. Ruth Rosen, who was a PhD from Berkeley, one of my former students who taught at Davis, I believe threw her body down.

Lage: I like your expression, "threw the body down."

Levine: Well, we just threw our bodies down right there.

Lage: You really did. This is a description.

Levine: Right there. And we were wearing—I should tell you—academic garb. There was a march and then a consultation. I was wearing academic garb, black. So I threw my body down and I was arrested. What was funny about that—I told my wife later, “I think this is my last job”—a cop came over to me, a policeman came over to me and he said, “Sir, I’d like you to get up now.” He invited me to leave under my own steam, and I said no. They always do that. They say, you know, “Will you please leave now?” “No.” “Well, you’re breaking Ordinance 7643.” I said no, I wasn’t going to leave, and he said, “Then I’m going to have to arrest you. Sir, would you be very careful getting up? I don’t want you to hurt yourself.” I looked like ninety years old to him, you know.

Lage: With the white beard.

Levine: So that was 1985. I did cut my beard off, actually, after that. I was ready to cut my beard off, I had had it for twenty years, I grew it in 1965. And we were arrested, numbered, photographed. Got a lawyer, but they didn’t press—they dropped the charges ultimately, and they divested ultimately.

Lage: Ultimately. Because the governor more or less ordered that, Deukmejian.

Levine: The governor, yes. No question, yes.

Lage: Interestingly enough.

Levine: Yes. So I don’t have much respect for presidents who are hollow tubes, which I think Gardner was. I have no doubt he did some good, but—okay, the last book—

Lage: I want you to stop here, because we need to change the tape. I’m also going to adjust the light a little bit.

[Audio File 18]

Lage: We’re on video tape two, still July 6, and talk a little bit to be sure you’re still connected over there.

Levine: I have long—you know, my technique was to emphasize research materials that were esoteric, relatively. Technically, I was focusing on visual materials, photography, which God knows, photography has been used by other genres, but not by historians on the whole. And radio, television—though I wasn’t using television very much—film, really. Film, radio, photography, and then, of course, I used genres, folklore and the like, and dance, performing arts, jazz, music, opera. I had used materials that historians didn’t tend to use a lot, at least historians of the kind I was, that is, historians who were historians.

There were genre historians, and I've gone into this, I believe, where I talked about culture and cultural history, historians of culture.

Lage: Right. But cultural studies people used these things.

Levine: Well, they didn't use them when I started. There was no cultural studies.

Lage: There was no cultural studies.

Levine: So—they do use them—what began to be clearer to me was that plain folk like us leave things behind which are quite normal. They destroy a lot of good things they leave behind them. Or their kids destroy them. When I die I'm going to leave a lot of letters. No one's going to collect those letters. I am a historian and people know me, but I'm not an important guy and no one's going to collect my letters, they're going to be destroyed. I mean, my kids are going to, hopefully, throw my letters out. But that's okay.

Lage: You could put them in the Bancroft Library.

Levine: Yes, but there's nothing there. My letters, I'd be embarrassed that I wrote, "How are you? I am fine. It is windy." Mainly, I don't write letters of great substance. People leave diaries; you know how many people keep diaries and keep memoirs and the like, and sporadically. So these things are kept. People *do*, in fact—what's the word I want—replicate what important people do, you know, what significant people do, people who we take note of in history; they do a lot of the same things. They write letters. They keep diaries. They keep notes. They do all kinds of things. They keep their financial records and all kinds of things. I mean, the records of their insurance policies, the stuff that people use in biographies of Rockefeller and Carnegie, most of us have. And they get thrown out. We don't keep them.

What brought this stuff home was after a lecture I gave on World War I in my classes—I *cannot* stress how important my teaching has been to my development as a historian—a young man comes up—it was a large class—and he says, "Professor Levine, my grandfather was in World War I." This was probably back in the sixties. "My grandfather was in World War I, and he kept a diary for one year, the year he was in France. My family has kept that diary, and I've read it, and I was reminded of the diary when you were speaking. Would you like to read it?" It was a short diary. It was only a year, and I said, "Yes."

So here's this guy—I don't know if he was from California or where he was, I forget now—who understood he was doing something Significant with a capital S, and he for the only time in his life kept a daily diary, and the kid brought it to me, and it was typed. So this family had what was clearly a handwritten diary, had it transcribed. Maybe they did it themselves, or they had someone, so they thought it was important. They didn't give me the

original document, they gave me the transcription. I read it, and it was okay. Earthshaking? Certainly not. If you had a thousand of those would that be a source? Yes, indeed, it would be a great source. So I noted that, and I said to the kid when he came back, the young man, "How would you feel if I showed this to the historians at the Bancroft Library?" He didn't know what the Bancroft Library was. I explained to him, I said, "You know, they do western history. Your grandfather lived in the West. He did something important. He was in the war. He kept a diary. They might be interested in this." So he said, "Sure."

So I showed—we're dealing now with the transcript—I showed the transcript. Bancroft Library then asked me if they would be willing to show them the original, so I told the student this, and he says, "I'll ask my parents." Then he comes to me, and this is really very interesting. He comes to me and says, "Well, my parents are willing, but they just wonder, is the Bancroft Library going to make my grandfather a laughingstock or something? Why would they be interested? He was just a plain guy, and why would they be interested in him? Are they going to do something to embarrass him?" I was kind of—my heart broke when he said that. I tried to explain to him that no one was going to do anything like that. But they were genuinely interested, so they did, in fact, the parents let them see the original. And then the Bancroft Library asked if they could have it. They'd like to keep it in their collection. And I think the parents said yes, so it's in there. If there were a lot of them—.

Now, at the same time my wife was very, very friendly with Elizabeth Elkus. Elizabeth Elkus was the widow. I never met him—he died the year before I met my wife—but my wife has family connections. Elizabeth Elkus knew some of her family in England, and when she came here Elizabeth Elkus—and her husband, who was the chairman of the Department of Music and a musician, took her in. They were very nice to her always. So Elizabeth was a working-class British woman who came here in the twenties, met her husband, married, and settled into a Berkeley life. Starting in 1939 [1940] when the Nazis bombed London, her father wrote her a weekly letter. He was a working man. She comes from working-class culture. I don't think she ever went to college or anything. Father was a working-class guy, and he wrote her a letter every week from London, which was being devastated. She kept those letters. Now, she lived in a very educated—and she herself is very educated; she was self-educated and she didn't go to college, I don't believe. She kept those letters lovingly, and she had them lovingly put into a book, and ultimately those letters were taken by one of the British museums and libraries, because here's a working-class guy writing about conditions in London, weekly, during the whole blitzkrieg.

And then, of course, there were the slave interviews. During the Great Depression, and even before the Great Depression, Fisk University sent interviewers around to interview the slaves. You know, this is 1928, '29. Then the other interviews, the thirties interviews, WPA interviews, begin in the

middle of the thirties. These are old people who are either very old or are not quite very old but they were very young in slavery. So something like 2,000 interviews. Well, you know, people are interviewed. Here we have interviews, and that's not that unusual a source. Is it a problematical source? Of course it is. First of all, a majority of the interviewers were white. Second of all, these are very old people. Third of all, they're still living in a repressive environment in which they have to watch what they say.

There have been all kinds of tests of these interviews. When the interviewer was black do people say different things than when the interviewer was white? Yes. More slaves were willing to admit the food stank and conditions were bad when the interviewer was black, but the majority still said, even when the interviewer was black, that the food was okay and life wasn't so terrible. Now, they're old people looking back on their youth, when they had Mommy and Daddy and all kinds of things, you know; we do that. Still, there's so much in those interviews that is just earth-shattering. They tell stories. They talk about strategies. They talk about attitudes. I mean, it's all there. They had their own ways of telling the interviewer what they wanted the interviewer to know, or relieving themselves. They had their ways of doing it. Did the majority of them say, "My master was a bastard?" No. But they had ways of telling you this if they felt that way.

Anyway, they're very valuable. They were ignored until the time I was writing my book in the seventies, and these interviews were taken in the middle thirties. There were people who were writing about, "They're useless, you can't trust them." Well, you can't trust any historical source. You simply can't. Would anyone not use Henry Adams autobiography, *The Education of Henry Adams* because he left twenty years out? His whole marriage is left out? No, of course not. They know that. Okay. This is a tricky source. Sources are tricky, and you learn as much as you can about them, and you use them as intelligently as you're able. That kind of stuff was ignored.

So it occurred to me also that plain people, the people I was interested in giving voice to, leave a lot of traditional sources behind them, and that's the genesis of—

Lage: Traditional, not just the kind of sources you had been looking for.

Levine: That's right, and that's the genesis of the last book I did in 2002, three years ago. It was such a massive job that I asked my wife, who was a German historian—who never, alas, finished her dissertation—if she would help. She's a very skilled historian and a very intelligent person, and she did, so we did this book together [*The People and the President: America's Conversation with FDR*].

The American people wrote to Franklin Roosevelt. For whatever reasons, they saw in him someone who turned them on, someone they could speak to, and

they wrote an unprecedented number of letters to him. Clearly, probably Bush and Reagan are going to get more letters. Reagan *has* gotten—but then there's twice as many people in this country, 125 million, 130 million people in America during the Great Depression, who wrote Franklin Roosevelt about fifteen million letters. I think about thirty million, but there were fifteen million letters in the Franklin Roosevelt papers. Some of them have been destroyed, so there are probably fewer. They just destroyed some of them to make room. But on the other hand, the Roosevelt papers were the only papers to keep letters from plain people completely. Others sampled. They would keep a sampling of letters from everyday Joe and Jane, but the Roosevelt Library kept them all.

So here was an interesting problem in terms of research. How do you use a source like that? It's vast. It's millions of letters.

Lage: Fifteen million letters.

Levine: And, you know, the reason why I think there were *thirty* million written is because if the letter contained a specific request, "I'm not getting the part of the parity payment my landlord is supposed to be giving me," they were shipped immediately to the AAA, the Agricultural Adjustment Administration, et cetera. So a lot of those letters are—if you really wanted to be a completist, a lot of those letters are in the various agencies and departments. But they kept enough so that you don't have to be a completist. The problem is to be a sort-out-ist. How do you sort this out?

And it occurred to me, one thing to do is you have to know how the letters are organized. They're organized in many ways. One of the ways they're organized is letters Roosevelt received in response to a public statement he made, and they're very well organized in that category. It's called the President's Personal File, something like that, I forget, or Public File, I forget. So I said, "Well, so if you take a body of public statements he made, a discrete body of public statements he made, and then look at all the responses he got to those public statements, you now have a way of cutting into those letters." I mean, it's not a perfect way, but it's not a bad way either. You're not just saying, "I'll look at every eighth week." You're saying—and I chose the Fireside Chats.

Now, I'm going to be honest here, because I think some young historians might read these pages. Let me say that I was a very experienced historian. This book was done from—it was published in 2002, therefore handed in to the editors 2001, and I probably began it, you know, in 1999 or whenever. I was a pretty experienced historian. It didn't occur to me that by taking the Fireside Chats I was also getting into radio. It just didn't occur to me, till we sat down and began to read these letters. I said, "Of course, he's on radio. They're responding to radio addresses. They actually heard his voice. They haven't just—." Well, I suppose I should instead be saying [uses deep voice],

"Well, I chose these because—." But I didn't. I chose them because I had heard of the Fireside Chats, because I knew they were important, because he covers lots of stuff in the Fireside Chats, and therefore I thought we'd get the American people writing about lots of stuff. But, in fact, I got myself and my wife into radio, which was very good, it turns out, but it was another aspect. So that's what we did. We read these letters.

Lage: Let me just ask you, had you listened and had your parents listened to the Fireside Chats? Did you have memories of their responses?

Levine: Well, I have memories of them listening. I was very young. I was born on February 27, 1933, and Roosevelt became president on March 4, so I was alive in the last five days or so of Hoover's presidency. Then I was there for the beginning of Roosevelt's presidency, but it wasn't until the late thirties that I was conscious enough. But I do remember my parents listening to Fireside Chats. They loved him. A lot of immigrant Jews loved Franklin Roosevelt. My grandmother cried. She was in a wheelchair. She cried and cried when he died. She was a woman whose English was imperfect. That's being kind. She loved that man. We didn't have a huge number of pictures on the wall, but we had a little picture of Franklin Roosevelt on our wall, because my parents loved him. They thought he was a good man, a man of the people, a man who cared about them. Interesting. So—

Lage: Do you think that has something to do with this long, really, attention that you've had to the Great Depression?

Levine: To the thirties. Well, partly it's something I lived through. Partly—however, I think it's because of a—dare I use the word—of a theory I have, a little modest theory, that a good testing place for the values of a culture is a period of crisis, and this is a period of crisis I know a lot about. I lived in it, I taught it, I have memories of the thirties. I have memories in the late thirties of very early in the morning when my father opened his little fruit store. His fruit store was a real old-fashioned fruit store. He had to take off the doors and lift out boxes, and make stands on the street, and it was terrible work. Old people would gather and they'd stand there—I don't know if I talked about this—and they'd stand there with little baskets, and my father would fill their baskets with ripe fruit. He would do this—my father was a nice man, and he would do this without any rhetoric, without any guilt. He'd just hand—he kept baskets of ripe fruit that he'd probably have some trouble selling, but that was perfectly nutritious and delicious, and he would give it to them in the mornings, and sometimes stuff that wasn't so ripe.

I remember those congregations. Every morning this little group of old people would come, waiting quietly, and my father would say good morning to them, take off the doors of his store, and then reach under the stands and bring out baskets of fruit and give them to them. So I remember that. I remember people coming in. We lived in real tenements, and there were spaces between the

tenements, alleyways. And people would come into those alleyways and they'd collect the garbage in those alleyways. Kids would run—I was one of them—through those alleyways making all kinds of noises, and entertainers would come in those alleyways through the thirties, playing violins and clarinets. In my neighborhood they would be playing old-world Jewish stuff, and then you'd throw coins at them. Guys would come—I remember there was a cry: "I cash clothes." Well, I always heard it as, "High-cash clothes," and I didn't know what that could mean, but it was "I cash clothes," meaning I buy clothes, and sell clothes. "I cash clothes," and people would run down and sell their old pants, or buy. "Got anything in a blouse that would fit me?" That kind of stuff.

So I remember signs of economic troubles and people in economic troubles. And then, of course, it was an old-fashioned neighborhood—I think I've spoken of this—filled with vendors selling food and this and that. But I do have those glimpses in my mind of the Great Depression. So yes, that and the fact that my teaching happened to throw me into this period—and this is something I knew a lot about, so I focused on it for a while, while I was learning other stuff, other periods—the fact that I lived in it; the fact that it is a long period of crisis followed by another crisis, the war. It's a very good place to study American values. And this is the theory of the book, and I'll just say it here.

Lage: The theory of the book that's coming?

Levine: The theory of the thirties book that I've been playing with, writing pieces of, teaching. The theory—the structure of the book, I should say, is people enter a crisis with culture. They don't enter it as tabula rasas, they enter it with culture. The crisis and the culture meet. The crisis tests many of the culture's—

One of the aspects of American culture is that you get what you deserve, that if you work hard you will prosper. Well, in the thirties people didn't get what they deserved. Not just the thirties, but in the thirties it was egregious. That's why periods of crisis are good to test these things. They didn't get what they deserved and they could work as hard as they liked, if they could get work, and they still weren't going to prosper. So how long does it take for the situation to overcome the culture. And how long can the culture distort the situation? What's the meeting point? That's what interested me enormously. How does a crisis change the culture, and how does a culture alter the perception of the crisis? So for a long time people blamed themselves, even though they were not to blame. Men lost their jobs and their women looked at them as economic incompetents. They were men, this is what they were supposed to do, what the hell is this, sitting around at home?

So I found that a really interesting moment in American history, and I thought I would try to do the culture of that moment, and I had done so in my teaching. I'll get back to it. So *The People and the President*—

Lage: Was that sort of a diversion from what you were doing?

Levine: It got us into the importance of radio. The fact is that this guy actually probably had, in a country of a 125 million, for one or two of his Fireside Chats an audience of something like eighty million. Now, in a country that's twice as big as that, more than twice as big, if you have a television audience of forty or fifty million you're doing very well. This guy got bigger audiences, often. People would stop their cars. They'd gather around taxicabs. They'd go into hotel lobbies to hear him. Because everyone didn't have a radio; radio ownership was not universal in the 1930s. It grew throughout the decade, but it was not universal.

We had a big Stromberg-Carlson radio. It was the most impressive thing in my parents' apartment, probably cost hundreds of dollars. I don't know why they bought it, but they did, and I just took it as a fact. There it was. It stood in the middle of the living room. It was a big hunk of stuff. Sat down in front of it, and I always imagined there were people in it, speaking. I couldn't figure out where'd they get food? How did they get clothing? What happened when they died? This is doing my parents a great injustice. I don't think I've mentioned this, but—well, maybe I did. I wasn't sure my parents knew the answer to these questions, so I didn't ask them, which was very unbecoming of me. I didn't ask them a lot of things like that.

Lage: You just tried to figure out where these people went when they died.

Levine: Or how they lived, how they ate.

So we did this very, very interesting book. It's a mixed book, you know, about 250 pages of our writing in it, and there are an equal number of pages of the letters. We are scheduled to cut it down for a paperback edition. And it was very interesting. So I was getting back into research on the thirties through this book, and my plan, if I live long enough—I am seventy-two—my plan is to write that book. So we can get to the book. But before we get to the book I'd like to talk a little bit about teaching, if I could.

Lage: Please. Yes. You've mentioned how important it was to the development of your ideas, I guess, or interests.

Levine: Well, I'd said this earlier, and I won't repeat it in great length, but I was asked to teach what I thought was an almost impossible course when I first got here, from 1929 to the present, which was a period of thirty-some years, and so I dallied on the things I knew a lot about. One of them was the twenties, because I had written the book on Bryan, which took place mainly in the

twenties. A lot of that was the Great Depression, because Bill Leuchtenburg had taught me a lot about it in Columbia graduate school, and because I knew a lot about the Great Depression. I lived through it, I have a feel for it. So I spent a lot of time on those two periods in my course. As the course stretched out and I had more, I knew more historical stuff, I taught other things as well, but I did teach this.

I'm trying to think about—here's a model that does not conform to reality. But you walk into my study, and my study has two desks. One desk is the desk at which I write, and I have all my research materials, and I have file drawers, and I keep my stuff there, and I write my chapters and articles there. The other desk is the desk from which I teach, and I have an equal amount of paraphernalia there, writing my lectures and the like. And there's a connection between the two desks. Well, I don't have two desks. I have one desk in my study. Most people only have one desk in their studies, though it would be nice to have two desks, but I've never had a study in which I could. I have one desk in my study, but it does both functions. I say this only to reiterate what sometimes people don't understand, often they don't understand, that there is a very solid, integral connection between teaching and research. They are not separate entities, at least they haven't been in my life. They are not things that go on in bitter war between each other.

There are frustrations, there's no doubt about it. Would I have published more had I not taught? Yes. Would what I published be worth this much? No, I don't think so. I have learned an enormous amount from teaching. I was able to test theories out in teaching. I was able to try techniques out in teaching. I was able to talk to the students, many of them bored maybe, but they were enough who weren't, who responded and who came to my office, who talked about this stuff. I was able to first use visual materials, teaching films, how to use films. I used photographs. What do they mean? Teaching has been essential to me.

Lage: Are you saying that as you develop your lectures you're trying things out, or is it in the interaction with the class?

Levine: Oh, as I'm developing lectures, as I'm—what's important to you? What shall I talk to these kids about? What should I try out? I was forced to think about the materials, and it was a thought process. I tried things that didn't work, I tried things that did work, but it was a thought process. I was forced to ask myself, "What is significant here?" And that was all related to the fact that I wanted to write this book.

Now, are there dangers in that?—because I taught a lot of things that had nothing to do with books I wanted to write, but it did have to do with questions that interested me about popular culture and culture. I worked out a lot of my thinking in my classes, in both small classes and large classes. I taught a small class for years that Charles Sellers devised way back in the

sixties, in which the students read no books at all; they just read primary materials. One of the subjects was the year 1919, which is a very interesting year, and they just read about 1919 and tried to understand it from primary materials. We didn't want them to read books or history. We wanted them to be their own historians. Now, it's a little artificial because historians do read books, and they do read prior histories, you know. But it was good. But we have, you know, a limited time.

Let me give you an example of something I did in my class, just to give you an example of the kinds of things I did do. One of the foci of Roosevelt's politics was agriculture, much more so than anything else. He had focused on agriculture and that interested me a little bit. It was an industrial depression in an industrial country, which was urban. But there he was, creating the Agriculture Adjustment Administration, the Federal Credit Administration, the Farm Security Administration, the Tennessee Valley Authority, et al., and there were many, many, many, many.

Lage: Soil bank.

Levine: Yes, the soil bank. I said, "Well, isn't that interesting?" I wondered, and I talked to the kids about this. I said, "Why don't we have a similar panoply," because we really don't, I think, "of things for labor, not just for farm labor but for industrial labor and the like?" You know, we don't seem—he did good things, some good things for farm labor, but we don't have a panoply of this. These organizations go on and on. So in class I began to say, "Let's look at culture." And what did we discover? We discovered—I wrote some of these things down, and I spent a lot of time on this kind of stuff—popular novels. *Gone With the Wind*, about agriculture. I mean, it really is about the land, *Gone With the Wind*, about Tara, about the plantation. *The Good Earth*, a Pearl Buck novel, which was *very*, a big bestseller, which is about China, but it's about a Chinese farmer who is a peasant that becomes more wealthy and has wives, but it's about him and the land, and that's very popular. *The Grapes of Wrath*, the same thing, it's very popular. *The Little House on the Prairie*, which is one of the most endearing books and one of the great bestsellers, a children's book, is about children who lived on the prairie.

And you can go on with this. And we did, we played with this, the students and I. There's a great panoply of agrarian novels.

Films. Well, the first three novels I mentioned were also great films, *Gone With the Wind*, *The Good Earth*, *The Grapes of Wrath*, and also [Frank] Capra films. Capra was one of the best-known directors. Throughout the thirties he won three academy awards, and only Walt Disney won as many. And Capra has the guy from the small town—because it's not all agrarian; it's also the small town—wandering into the city for whatever reasons, and having to grapple with city problems, and overcoming them and being the smarter guy than the urban types, many of whom are like him but have been ruined by the

city. So you get this bias in *so* many films, in so many icons of popular culture.

Folk music. You know, we take it for granted that urban workers sang folk songs as they struck. *Why* are they singing folk songs? Why are they singing? So, Woody Guthrie, Big Bill Broonzy, the use of folk music and jazz by classical musicians like Aaron Copland and [choreographers like] George Balanchine. There's so much of this stuff reaching back. Aaron Copland, a Brooklyn Jew who is the child of immigrants, just like George Gershwin was, child of Jewish immigrants, infuses his music with jazz, I mean many things, but jazz is one, and then he writes things, you know, like *Billy the Kid* and *Appalachian Spring*. So, so there's no doubt that that was an important motif throughout the 1930s, and it's there in the culture.

And the kids and I, the students and I discovered this together. We played with the stuff. We watched it together. We'd talk about what this could mean. It's going to be an important element in my book. It's already been an element in some of the articles I've written. That's the kind of thing.

Lage: Did you do this in your lecture classes?

Levine: Yes. I also did it in my—I taught a course, I developed a course which I came to love, and still teach occasionally, on the film and culture of the Great Depression, which we watched together. I always insist on watching it with them. My friends say, “Why are you wasting—?” I get long classes, so we can watch a film and discuss it. My friends say, “Why don’t you just assign the film the way you assign a book?” And I say, “Yeah, but then I can’t hear them laugh and watch them.” I said, “I want to hear their reaction to the film.”

Lage: Right. Because that tells us something about today’s culture.

Levine: Yes, it does. It also allows me to teach, because when I hear certain sounds I can pick up on them and talk with them about them. So I taught that course a lot, so in that course we did it as well. It’s a small course, fifteen, twenty kids, and I now teach that course at George Mason University with a professor, a guy who’s a very good friend of mine, a professor of theater, and we have a lot of fun in that course, because he brings in all kinds of stuff I can’t about theater. I bring in the Depression, and we have historians and theater majors, and it’s a good—teaching is a very exhilarating thing. It takes a lot of time, there’s no doubt about it. It interferes with publishing, but I think it makes, at least in my life, it’s made my publishing much better.

Lage: You mentioned in various places some interdisciplinary teaching at Berkeley.

Levine: Yes. I’ve taught as I am now teaching with this fellow from the Theater Department, who knows very little about American history in any specialized way. Why should he? And I know very little about the theater in any

specialized way. I have taught here. I taught with Richard Hutson, from the Department of English. We taught courses on the thirties together. I've taught with VèVè Clark. VèVè Clark is a professor of African-American studies, and she and I taught a course, a wonderful course, on ethnicity, which was very good. I mean, we really—that was a revelation. We had a rainbow of kids. We had over two hundred kids in that class, a rainbow of kids in that class. Each of us had one section, and then we had three TAs, two of them students of mine who were writing dissertations with me, and they had two sections each. So we had one big lecture a week, and then the kids met.

Lage: What was the focus?

Levine: Well, we began with theories of acculturation. How do people acculturate? What does ethnicity mean in America? And then we used some test examples. So we began with the theories going back to the colonial period. We reviewed, for the first half of the class we reviewed the various theories given about how people acculturate, and then we took some real examples and looked at them to see what—and the students did papers on other examples to see if, in fact, that's the way it works.

Lage: Was this an American Cultures class?

Levine: It was an American Cultures class, yes, for the then—it was a wonderful experience. VèVè Clark and I, I've known her since she was a graduate student. She was a graduate student in French, in Folklore or French, but I think she got a PhD in the French Department, I forgot. I was one of her professors. Then she went off to teach at Tufts University for a decade, and then she came back to Berkeley.

Lage: Is she African American?

Levine: She is African American, and she's a former dancer and a very smart, wonderful person. It was funny. Her section, because she is herself black, her section was all black.

Lage: Just by chance?

Levine: I guess a lot of black kids wanted to take that section. I don't know. I don't think it was by chance, no. The kids were free to sign up for the section they wanted. She and I would talk a little bit. I'd pick her up and we'd talk on the way into the university the day of the lecture. I forgot if we gave two lectures or one lecture a week. But we had no set thing. We had a subject, and we both thought about it. We'd go out there and we'd have a dialogue, and it worked very well. We knew each other very well. So about the third or fourth week, one of the kids in her section said, "How come you and that white guy can get up there and just talk that way?" And VèVè Clark said, "Oh, he's not a white guy. He's a New Yorker, just like me." [laughter]

Lage: That's a wonderful story.

Levine: Well, there's some truth to that. There's some truth to that. You don't always relate on these levels. You relate on lots of levels. We both were born in the same city. We come from the same class, working-class America, you know, so I think she was quite right to say that.

It was a wonderful experience, that teaching. But I found teaching here a wonderful experience, teaching at Berkeley, and I must say, teaching at George Mason had also been a great experience. But I went to George Mason as a well-known guy, and I came here as a kid, well, a kid, but I was twenty-nine years old when I got here. I had been teaching for three years on the college level, and I had the public schools before that, so I've been teaching a long time. I started teaching in 1955, which is fifty years ago, and I started teaching college in 1959, which is a long time also. So I came here and they told me I'm teaching a 103; 103 is a colloquium in which you can do a lot of different things, for history majors. They have to do two of them, three of them, two of them in their major field and one outside, I don't remember exactly.

So I went around asking people, because I got here a few weeks before the term began, and I went around asking people what a 103 was, and I got about twelve markedly different answers. You know, it's some—I made the kids do research. So I realized, hey—at first I was annoyed; I said, "Hey, I've got to work this out for myself." Then I realized that's wonderful; I can work this out for myself. No one's telling me you've got to do this and this and this. You've got a bunch of history majors. This is the subject. You can post your own specific subject. No one's telling you what to teach. We need a certain number of twentieth century classes, we need a certain number of nineteenth, but other than that you're free to pick. So there was a freedom at Berkeley about teaching. The lecture course was bound, of course, but within that you could do whatever you want. And my lecture courses, as I've said earlier, began as political narrative courses and became more and more and more and more and more and more cultural classes in which we used cultural materials.

In the beginning I did have kids who would come to me and say, "Hey, I thought this was a history course." And I said, "What do you think it is?" "Sounds like a sociology course. You're not doing history." You know, that kind of stuff, but ultimately that faded, because kids began to realize history is not just politics.

Lage: I'm wondering about the diversity of the student body. You did notice changes, I'm sure, over time at Berkeley, and how did that affect—?

Levine: I have a bawdy joke. When I first got here I would write home to the New Yorkers. "When you're going to teach at Berkeley you've got to wear sunglasses, because the blondes in the class will blind you." I had never seen

so many blondes. I mean, that was an amazing experience for me. It was a very white campus. And was CCNY a white campus? Yes, but it was an Eastern European, Central European white campus. It was dark-haired people. But it was European, certainly. But this was a campus where there were many more, and it was also California, so you had maybe a lot of those blondes were bleach blondes, but whatever it was, there was an awful lot of Northern Europeans, to a greater extent than Southern and Eastern Europeans. But it wasn't a very diverse campus, in that sense. It was diverse in terms of who was here, but it wasn't very diverse.

Look, I think I've said this before, but as long as you raised it I'll grab the bait. I think students have gotten better. I loved the students I had when I first got here, but I love the students I teach now more, because I think they're better. I think they learn better. They have a more diverse sense of what history is. They have a far more diverse sense of what America is. They understand America is not a white European place, but a place of great diversity. Of many people here are from Africa, many people here from the Caribbean, and many, many people are here from Asia. And they understand that that's always been true. I mean, the proportions have changed, but America's always been—one out of every five Americans in 1800 was black. Who knew that? Who taught us that? Who talked about that? Nobody. But now it's different, so I think that's just exciting, that's all.

So I really completely disagree. I didn't say this before but I should say it now, that one of the reasons—I said it in a more abstract way—one of the reasons I wrote *The Opening of the American Mind*—by the way, I didn't talk about the title either. One of the reasons I wrote *The Opening of the American Mind* is because I just didn't understand what these people were talking about. It is not true that these are poor students. It is not true. They are good students. They work hard. They're more—I say this in the book—more is expected of them. When I took an upper division course at City College of New York, which is, you know, people say, "Oh, those days at City College." Well, City College of New York wasn't as hard as this place is, in many ways. It was hard to get into, but it wasn't—I don't mean to knock it. It means everything to me. But we took an upper division lecture course; we were given a textbook. Then we had to go out and read two books in the library, because the paperbacks weren't in yet. He'd give us a list of books. We'd go to the library, get a couple of them and write book reviews, and that was the course, a textbook and two book reviews.

My students at Berkeley having to read eight books? That's what an upper-division course was. I poured it on them. They had to read books. Not only that, but they didn't just have to memorize, as we did, a kind of political progression, "and came president, and then came president. These were his aims and these were his accomplishments and these were his failures. Five causes of the Civil War, eight effects of the Civil War," that's how I learned history. That's how it was taught. I don't mean to knock City College, but we

don't teach history that way, and it's harder the way we teach history. They have to understand more things, more factors, more elements.

Lage: More complexity.

Levine: Yes. I think it's a more complex world, so I just think it's all—I got angry. That's why I wrote *The Opening of the American Mind*. I might have written *The Closing of the American Mind*. I mean, I might have used that title if he hadn't used it, because there was a closing happening. People like Bloom were encouraging people to close their minds to what was really happening. But since he used that, I used opening, because I think the university has seen an opening. I just think we're far more open-minded, far more daring in our thought, far more profound in our understanding of the past, and these kids are wonderful. Are they all wonderful? Of course not, but they never were. But enough of them are, and they're exciting, and you can get them excited, and I love teaching them.

Now, at George Mason, while I have taught undergraduates, I've taught more graduate students, and the graduate students at George Mason are a panoply of people. Many of them work for the federal government and are coming back just because they're bored, or really want MAs. We have a lot of military, so we have the biggest MA program, I am told, the biggest MA program in history in the country. It's a huge MA program. And then since I've been there we got a PhD program, and I have always been partnered with a PhD program in cultural studies which began the year I began there, so I have done a lot of graduate teaching, and it's been very rewarding. So I have—

Lage: Do they tend to be more conservative, with these kinds of backgrounds?

Levine: No. I don't see that. That is, they've been open in my classes to all kinds of things. I think that the population—for instance, we just hired at George Mason two military historians, because there is a lot of demand for military history, there's no doubt about that, and Virginia. But we're not going to teach them the kind of military history they think they're going to be taught. It ain't going to be the history of battles and campaigns. We've hired two very young and smart military historians.

So, yes, I mean, in that sense they're a different undergraduate body. They do come from Virginia, many of them. I don't know what significance, I don't know what proportion, but a proportion of them are military brats, as they call themselves, whose parents are professional military who bought homes in Virginia, and they can now go to Virginia. Virginia has a very impressive state university system, and George Mason is one of the more recent examples. It was started less than fifty years ago. It's thirty thousand students. It's a major—and it's becoming, you know, its PhD program in history, and it's got a few other PhD programs. It's building. And northern Virginia is a, to use that old tired expression, a melting pot. It's just an amazing place. It's just

full of all kinds of people, Ethiopians, Asians, lots and lots of Muslims. You see them praying in the student union building several times a day, the boys, the girls behind them.

So it's an exciting place to be, and you know, it's not Berkeley in terms of its prestige and everything else, but there's a relief—let me say this—there's a certain relief; I have been blessed beyond articulation there. I taught at one of the prime universities in the world—I think that's what Berkeley is—for the bulk of my career, thirty-two years. I taught at UC Berkeley and I left it voluntarily—

Lage: On the VERIP [Voluntary Early Retirement Incentive Program, special UC retirement offer].

Levine: —yes, the VERIP, to go to George Mason University, half time.

Lage: Did somebody you knew draw you there, or how did you happen to end up at George Mason?

Levine: Well, I said to my wife if I could find a place in a place I'd like to live, we'd like to live, that would hire me half time, with the pension and a half-time salary we would do very well and I could have half time to write. I'd have more time to write. I thought of George Mason University because it had a kooky reputation. I knew people there who taught half time. They had people who taught in different universities. They were open, and that's the point I wanted to make. When I came to George Mason what struck me right away—though it wasn't Berkeley, but that was not all bad—what struck me right away is that it wasn't a university filled with keepers of the flame. Its function was not to keep the flame, the *flame* of higher education burning brightly. That was not its function. It had nothing to do with the flame, really. It was trying to build a first-class university there. Virginia has the University of Virginia, it has William and Mary, it has Virginia Tech. These are all very good places. It has a few very bright gems in its diadem, and it has many other universities. It's an impressive system of higher education, I think.

Here was a new example of it, and it was trying hard. It was growing immensely, and it was a place where you could relax a little bit and not worry so much. So it took chances, whereas Berkeley—I'll get to this—but Berkeley had trouble with taking chances. If we hire a woman, can we fire her? If we hire a black, can we fire them? Are these people worthy? Are all these new people worthy? Are these subjects worthy? We're one of the places that guard the flame. And I went to a place that was full of risk taking, because it had little to lose.

Lage: Interesting.

Levine: Yes. And it was a very Zeitgeist, you know, and I liked it. I found it relieving. When we hire young people we're open to all kinds of things Berkeley is not open to. We're open to spousal hiring. In fact, *spousal* hiring for us is a good thing, because if we can hire two people who are good—they both have to be good—but if we can hire two promising people, we have a better chance at keeping them than hiring one promising person who might wander off elsewhere when he or she has written a book.

So I don't think that's the conscious motive, but it's certainly there. So we have one, two, we have at least three spousal couples teaching in our department, and there may be as many as four. And without the fights, without the fights that, you know, I went through at Berkeley over the decades.

Lage: Which we're going to talk about next time. We don't want to think that we're ignoring them.

Levine: No. So, let me—

Lage: We haven't given full range to what you're working on now. Do you want to leave that for the—

Levine: Let's start with that next time. Then we'll get to my years at Berkeley.

Lage: Okay. Yes. I think we've probably gone on—so next time we'll do what you're working on now, and then some of the departmental matters.

Levine: And then we'll end.

Lage: Okay.

**Interview 10: August 9, 2005**

[Audio File 19]

19-00:00:00

Lage: We are recording now, and we're at Session 10, and this is probably our last session with Larry Levine. Today is August 9th, 2005, and this is Tape 19. And we were going to begin today by looking again at, and finishing up our discussion of, the book that you're working on now, which is—tell me about the basic themes of it and why you're focusing on those particular themes.

19-00:00:38

Levine: Well, I'm interested, as I have been for my entire career, in using certain kinds of sources to give voice to people whose voice has been lost. And I guess—well, in a certain strange way I began with the popularity of a politician and without checking to see if the people, in fact, agreed with his views, I assumed that many of his views were a mirror of the people's views because he was so popular with them; they loved him so much—

19-00:01:14

Lage: We're talking about William Jennings Bryant, not FDR.

19-00:01:17

Levine: Well, I was troubled that I didn't know how to do that check and it was in another book as my friends warned me, so I published the Bryan book. And then I started on a book on African-American history, protest thought, which suddenly, I realized, was the same as the Bryan book; I was focusing on leaders. So, in that case, I began to look at folklore, the oral testimony of people, much of which was written down or I wouldn't have been able to use it.

And, then, in the next book, I looked at public places that people go to, and historians, who were very elite in their—because they're word-oriented; they're literate-oriented. You know, for a long time, many of my colleagues thought there was no African history because there was no writing in Africa before the colonialists came, the colonists came, the imperial power came, and therefore there was no history. Well, I think we've learned better now; oral history is very important. And not only oral history, there was art, beautiful art; there was performing arts, very important performing arts in Africa and in many places that did not develop—North American Indians were another instance of this, that didn't develop writing necessarily. So, in the next book, *Highbrow/Lowbrow*, I looked at these places which historians, which many of my colleagues see as somehow addenda to the reality rather than reality, itself. But movies, theaters, concerts, jazz fests, whatever, are part of reality. That's what we *do* spend a lot of our time doing this. We read books, we go to movies a lot, and this is not something extraneous to our lives; this is what we do with our lives. So I looked at Shakespeare, I looked at the kind of music they were listening to in the nineteenth century, I looked at how stuff that was once popular became elite and why that happened. I posited why that happened, I hypothesized about it.

But all of this was trying to get at voices. I've used film and, you know, I've written a whole series of essays on the Depression, four of which are published, two of which sit in my drawer, but they're done, and they need polishing. So I've already done a fair amount on the Depression, and I've talked about a number of things like this. This is my passion to find voices in areas we've neglected. So that's what the Depression book really is about. I said last time that I think crisis is a good matrix for examination now because I think in crisis we become conscious of our values in a way. Our values are—well, let's take a value. Let's take a value; let's take a thing we all, most of us learn, that if we work hard we will succeed. My mother beat this into me. If we're worthy we will succeed. If we work hard we will succeed. It's up to us. We have a lot to do with success. It's not just something that happens accidentally. We have effect. And, suddenly, in the nadir of the Depression, in those early years, there was no effect. You could work as hard as you wanted, if you could find a job, but it didn't help; you could be as worthy as you liked.

So the question I ask is: How do people react to this lack of any effect? How do they react to their values' being turned upside down? Which I think they were. Well, one possible reaction, and one I think I have evidence for, is that they at first blame themselves; there was a lot of self-blame or there was a lot of familial blame. Kids saying, "My father's not doing what he's supposed to do." Wives saying, "My husband's not doing what he's supposed to do." And there's been a certain amount of from-the-hip hypothesizing about "men felt impotent"—blah, blah. I don't know if that's true, but it's an interesting thing to think about. So how do you get at that? Well, I thought I would look at popular culture, and I have been looking at popular culture increasingly. So I've moved from folk culture to the performing arts to mass culture.

Lage: What aspects? How are you—?

19-00:06:09

Levine: Well, I'm going to look at some of the most popular forms of popular culture: film, radio, popular novels. Mystery and science fiction are the two areas I want to look at. They're both relatively new; that is, the hard-boiled detectives are relatively—there's old mystery around, *the* probably best-selling mystery writer in the thirties is Ellery Queen, and Ellery Queen could be a British for much of his—he's a rational detective, and he works out from the evidence. But even Ellery Queen begins to change and he introduces the—Ellery Queen is the detective but it's also the writers. There are several writers of Ellery Queen novels and they call themselves "Ellery Queen," and their detective is also called "Ellery Queen." I think two cousins—I forget—wrote the Ellery Queen novels, and there are scads of them. And they're logical in the old-fashioned detective way; there's evidence and—but they introduce a private eye who's just like a hard-boiled detective, and he is at first a contrast to Ellery Queen but then Ellery Queen begins to adopt some of his techniques. So it's interesting. That is, the hard-boiled stuff, the system doesn't work anymore, the cops are corrupt, and the system's corrupt. And it takes a man whose values are ingrained and who has to

impose them vigilante-style, you know: He beats people up, he threatens them, he shoots them, he's executor and judge. There's a lot of that in the thirties.

So this is popular; these things are popular. And that's what the book is about, really. Now, there are problems with this technique; I understand them. And I also understand that if you were there in the thirties, and you ran up to a film audience that came out of a crime film like "Public Enemy" and you said, "What'd you think?" they wouldn't tell you, "Oh, he was a symbol for the frustration." People don't think that way. They would say, "Nifty film." "Cagney was great." You know, that's what people say. Maybe some of us, intellectuals, consciously will sit down and analyze this. Not maybe, we do. But nevertheless, I think my whole system, my whole technique, my whole approach has been to look for patterns of culture. I look for patterns in folklore, and I see no reason why you can't look for patterns in this. There isn't a single pattern. You're going to get—.

Look, let me give this example and maybe we can go on to other things. If I had written a book about black folk culture, concentrating on *the* most well-known and common aspect of it, and that's religious music—and we all know that slaves sang spirituals, and there's a lot of them around. They were collected; there was a book of them as early as 1867, of slave spirituals. Whites came down from the North, and they were dealing with slaves who were recently freed, and they wrote the music and the words down. And so we have a lot of evidence of what blacks were singing. So let's say I wrote a book about black folk culture and I concentrated on spirituals. I would have it all wrong. I would see the blacks as a totally religious people, full of hope for the future. You know, looking at the Hebrew example, example of the Hebrew children, and saying, you know, "If God saved Daniel from the lion's den, then why not every man?" And that's one of the big themes. There's no cynicism, there's no anger really. Well, you can see anger sometimes when God, you know, when Joshua—there's songs about Joshua and everything you see. And, indeed, there's songs about—in Revelations there's songs about what's going to happen when Christ comes back. There's some real anger there; the rich will die and the poor will live. There's justice and anger. But basically it's a spiritual kind of thing. I would have isolated one aspect of black folk culture, and I would have been wrong about the whole of the black folk culture.

But I didn't do that, happily. I looked at their work songs, I looked at their tales—some of which are spiritual but most of which are not—and we know there's a lot of blood and guts in the B'r'ner Rabbit tales. I was shocked. I had young kids when I was studying the B'r'ner Rabbit tales and I was *full* of B'r'ner Rabbit tales. I was a great father. I could sit three kids on my lap, and I could tell them stories into the night. And I found myself editing because some of these stories are really brutal. Rabbit cooks a soup of Wolf's grandmother and feeds the soup to Wolf, so Wolf is eating his own grandmother. You know, that kind of stuff, I didn't tell those stories to my children. There's *fury* in these. There's also a *really* pragmatic, *logical* sense of the way the world works. You've got to be a trickster. You're

always going to be weak, and the only way you can fight that guy is not through strength but through your mind. But he's a trickster, too. He's going to trick *you*. So, you know.

- 19-00:11:50  
Lage: Now, let's go back to the thirties.
- 19-00:11:53  
Levine: No, no!
- 19-00:11:54  
Lage: What are you triangulating—?
- 19-00:11:56  
Levine: What I'm saying is that if I only took one aspect of the thirties culture, I'd have—
- 19-00:12:00  
Lage: Like the detective stories—
- 19-00:12:02  
Levine: Like whatever.
- 19-00:12:02  
Lage: So you're taking a range of—
- 19-00:12:03  
Levine: Detective stories, like crime films, like romances, like science fiction. What I'm trying to do is look at the congeries as I did for the black book.
- 19-00:12:16  
Lage: Are you making a focus on gender, race, class, kind of three things that we hear so much about—
- 19-00:12:24  
Levine: No, this is the problem.
- 19-00:12:25  
Lage: —in cultural studies?
- 19-00:12:26  
Levine: I'm not. I'm not. But these things come up, and I have a chapter—see, I haven't even got all the chapters totally fixed in my mind yet. But I do have a chapter—I may not call it this in my mind, which I haven't written; I have written a number of the chapters, or at least parts of them—but a chapter called "Radio and Reality." Radio was *the* popular culture of the thirties. At the end of the thirties, *Fortune Magazine*, which had a terrific—they didn't call it a "poll," they called it something else—but a terrific poll they'd print every month. They'd ask a question, they'd go out—it was really good—and they asked people, "If you had to choose between radios and movies, if you had to give up one to save the other, which would you give up?" Seventy percent said they would give up movies, and movies were unbelievably popular. A few years later, in 1941 or '2 they asked

that same question again, and they got 84 percent, and it cut right through—they were very sophisticated for the time—it cut through gender, it cut through region, it cut through class. People understood that radio was—first of all, it was free, the price you paid was listening to the commercials [laughter]. You had to buy the radio, but they came down in price. By the end of the Depression, something like 90 percent of the people in the United States owned radios and an unbelievable, I mean, I recall something like 30 percent had radios in their cars already by the end of the Depression, by the beginning of the war.

So it was a very popular thing. So I thought I'd do a chapter, not on radio—see, I'm not interested in the media. I don't know if I said this, but I make a distinction between the history of culture and cultural history. The history of culture is the history of culture. You can write a history of literature, you can write a history of radio. That doesn't interest me. I think it's very important, and without those histories, I'd have trouble. But I'm interested in cultural history, the way people interact with culture; that's the way I define it. So I'm interested in the kinds of things—for instance, radio and reality is, I think if I do this, is going to—blacks are depicted—*Amos and Andy* is the most popular show, and it's not just simply a minstrel show, it's much more complicated than that. They often do very good things and people admire them; they're laughing at them and admiring them at the same time. *Amos and Andy* was the most popular show in radio for years. These two white guys pretending to be black guys, black people; they make up many voices, women and men. And soaps! They were invented in the thirties. The soap opera is invented in the thirties, and it waxes strong throughout the decade.

19-00:15:31

Lage: Is it more of a women's—?

19-00:15:33

Levine: Well, they're basically about women. There are men in them, but the men in them are a mess, and the women in them are strong. So, what I wanted to do—I mean, the women in them do very interesting things. There are lots of stereotypes but there are lots of breakthroughs, too. Women are the strong characters. *Ma Perkins*. Ma Perkins' husband dies and she inherits the lumber mill, and the only thing standing between her and success are a whole bunch of men who are, you know, who are just incompetents and full of problems. Men have amnesia. Men get crippled. Men—it's just amazing the things that happen to men, and they stand in the way of the women, and they, you know, they're jealous and they're inconstant and they're just—it's so interesting. So what I want to do is look at the image that comes out of radio about gender and race and then look at the society, you know, where are women and that kind of stuff. I thought I would do one conscious chapter on that. That gets women and blacks into the thing. There are blacks in a lot—and women certainly. And women play a very important role, obviously, in films, and that's not a role you would guess.

But the thing that one has to fight against is this whole notion of escapism. It's a loaded notion. It's not that we don't have escapes from the reality of our lives, but

those escapes are part of the reality of our lives; our dreams are part of the reality of our lives, and they're escapes. Singing in the shower is part of the reality of life, and that's an escape. We mask the awful sound of our voices in the shower, but what I'm saying is—and going to the movies and—you see, this is the problem with theorists and intellectuals. They wouldn't call Beethoven an "escape," or Mozart an "escape" or Shakespeare an "escape." But, of course, they are. The purest escape in my life is sitting in my comfortable leather chair, listening to Mozart. That has absolutely nothing to do with the reality of my life; it's pure genius, and I can sit there—this is true of a lot of music; if I put on my tape of Mozart, but if I played jazz, you'd say, "Yeah, yeah." But Mozart. And I'm a great Mozart—small-group music and jazz or classical music is a sustaining element in my life. I probably spend more time listening to music than I do anything else because I work to music. I've learned what music I can work to. I listen to music twelve, fifteen hours a day, and I listen to small-group jazz and to small-group classical music. And to the opera. I can work to opera for some reason. And I listen to this stuff all the time. It is pure escape, much of it. It simply is. And no one would call—you don't call that "escape." You tell your Mom you're going to a crime movie, she says, "Ah, don't you have better things to do?" You tell her you're going to Shakespeare, she's so pleased. But what is Shakespeare but the same kind of escape? It's another world—

19-00:18:38

Lage: Do scholars criticize the attention to popular culture or diminish it by saying it's only an escape?

19-00:18:45

Levine: Well, they do. The movies were an escape for people who were hard pressed and they went and watched beautiful women.

19-00:18:53

Lage: So they kind of dismiss it as a meaningful thing?

19-00:18:55

Levine: But the fact is, the movies are full of reality. You see, what I wanted to say is, Larry Levine reading a hard-boiled detective novel or Larry Levine listening to Mozart, you want to call one of them an escape. I don't think either of them is an escape. But if you want to call one an escape, the Mozart's the escape because the stuff in a hard-boiled detective novel or a science-fiction novel or Ursula Le Guin has to do with my life. It does, there's a lot—I'm not sure Mozart has anything—well, it does. You see, I'm being stereotypical, myself. Mozart has a lot to do with my life because he invokes in my feelings, "Well, how can he do that? He lived hundreds of years ago." But I listen to Mozart and he invokes feelings and dreams and attitudes which are—so nothing is an escape; that has to do with me or I wouldn't waste my time listening to it. And that's what I think of the culture of the thirties.

19-00:19:50

Lage: Is any of this book going to tie back into the New Deal and—?

19-00:19:54

Levine: Well, the New Deal is part of this.

19-00:19:56

Lage: Will politics come into it?

19-00:19:57

Levine: Well, let me give you an example. Let me give you an example and, then, maybe—I keep saying we can drop it because I do want to go on with other things. We should end this.

19-00:20:04

Lage: I know, we have the big topic here.

19-00:20:07

Levine: I'll give you an example. Well, maybe we should just do this. We'll do what we have to do. I think maybe I've said this already. If I have, we'll skip it, but this is important. If you look at the politics of the New Deal, they were more agrarian oriented than they were urban-labor oriented. The things they did for agrarian America were manifest, and it's a theme throughout the politics of the thirties. Well, if you move from the politics of the thirties to the culture of the thirties, the novels of the thirties, the films of the thirties, the photography of the thirties, you've got the same agrarian things. Some of the most widely read books—Pearl Buck's—

19-00:20:52

Lage: *Good Earth.*

19-00:19:53

Levine: Thank you. *The Good Earth*, which is about a Chinese farmer, but you can make that jump easily. At a time of agrarian crisis, Americans are reading a book about a Chinese peasant who becomes a farmer and then loses some of what he had. *Gone With the Wind*. "Scarlett gets the land," her father says to her. "It's the land, Scarlett, that's what you're—." And at the end of it, you know, she goes back when she loses Rhett, she goes back to Tara, the plantation. There's so much. There are many books like this, movies like this. Oh, of course, the book about the Okies and the Arkies in *Grapes of Wrath*, there's such—the photography is full of agrarian themes. So it's not just the politics.

See, I have a theory: if culture works, it works everywhere. If people are in a cultural mode, and for some reason they're looking at the agrarian side of America, the earth, Abe Lincoln is the most ubiquitous symbol throughout the thirties. The man from the earth who comes back, the man from the frontier who comes into—Capra is full of that. Small-town boys who come in and solve urban problems will almost get destroyed by urban America and yet persevere in the end. The thirties is *full* of that, and it's not just the politics. The culture. I have a feeling, and it's more than a feeling, I have a conviction that when something is working in one area really strongly, you're going to find it in other areas as well. So that Copland, Aaron Copland, the son of Jewish immigrants who grew up in

Brooklyn, his music, a lot of his music—he also writes, you know, frontier music, I mean—that's the wrong word—he writes cutting-edge music, you know, which is unlistenable to. But then, in the thirties, he begins to write *Billy the Kid* music for ballets, *Billy the Kid* and *Appalachian Spring* and—

19-00:22:56

Lage: And pull in folk motifs—

19-00:19:57

Levine: Exactly. George Balanchine, the Russian choreographer, comes over here. He comes out of Russia, he comes over here and he starts to incorporate jazz and stuff into his stuff, you know. He does also this neoclassical ballet but he does—so you just get an Agnes de Mille. I mean, these people have nothing to do with the agrarian mind.

19-00:23:20

Lage: Well, how do you explain this?

19-00:23:22

Levine: Well, I think this becomes the essence of America in the middle of an urban crisis because America is an urban country. However much it made focus on the agrarian part of the crisis, it is an urban country by the 1930s, and this is one of the things I'm going to have to work out: How do you, but what I'm trying to say is that the New Deal politics absolutely comes into this.

19-00:23:45

Lage: Do these themes cut across race and gender and class, even?

19-00:23:51

Levine: You see, I think they do cut across class because the two most popular forms of culture cut across class. Everyone goes to the movies and everyone goes to—everyone listens to radio. They may not all listen to the same shows, they may not all go to the same movies, but these things are ubiquitous. Baseball—

19-00:24:17

Lage: Do blacks listen to *Amos and Andy*?

19-00:24:19

Levine: Well, yes, and they love it. The black intellectuals don't love it; but black people love it, from what we know. There's already a very good book on *Amos and Andy*. Look, *Amos and Andy* is a difficult and emotional subject because it looks like pure prejudice, but the people got involved with these—you know, they speak this gibberish language and this stereotypical accent—but people got involved with them as human beings, and it worked. Many shows that got you involved with blacks as human beings, they might laugh at them but they also cried with them. And, yeah, blacks did like the show. Look, there were no blacks anywhere and, suddenly, here's the—even though these were not really blacks, they were the accoutrement of black culture in these shows, of the lodges and things like that, their own little—these are entrepreneurs, these two guys; they own a taxi cab service. They were aspiring middle-class blacks, and they

followed the route; they came from Georgia, they went to Chicago and then they came to New York ultimately. So they were migrant blacks, and I think that Amos' girlfriend's father was a dentist, if I'm not mistaken, so there was middle-class stuff in here, though they, themselves, weren't middle-class guys, but they had middle-class aspirations. And they spouted the line. "My Daddy always said that you get what you work for, there's nothing free in this world, you've got to work hard." That kind of line is throughout much of the culture. But then much of the culture also destroys that line. Because Amos and Andy don't—Amos works very hard, but he doesn't always get what he is worth, whereas Andy's the phony who sometimes gets more than Amos does and he's always pulling deals. And, you know, there's so much in the culture that should—there are so many cynical, angry movies and—people have just misread a lot of this culture, and I think it's—increasingly, there are good books on it. I probably should have written my book when I started writing it.

19-00:26:28

Lage:

Let me ask you one more thing, then we can move on. I noticed in a review, I think it was the sort of symposium, that one of the criticisms they made of an article you wrote about popular culture in the thirties, you were nostalgic. You were wanting to return to the old neighborhood.

19-00:26:49

Levine:

Yeah.

19-00:26:50

Lage:

How do you react to that?

19-00:26:50

Levine:

Well, that's one guy, Jackson Lears. I don't know what his problems are, but he doesn't know me, so how he knows what I want to do is very interesting.

19-00:27:01

Lage:

But do you sense any of that in yourself?

19-00:27:03

Levine:

I react to that as nonsense. I was accused of nostalgia in *Highbrow/Lowbrow*, where once there was this ideal—but I don't really believe that, that there was there an ideal order. I don't want audiences to interrupt my lectures and make me repeat lines. I don't consider that—all that I'm saying is that once people have a sense of participation, it could take many forms. It could take raucous forms. I had a sense that they were a part of the picture. As they do at ball games, as they do at many concerts, jazz concerts, people have a sense of participatory activity. Jazz is becoming classical music, and that's being cut out. When I went to jazz as a kid, people spoke up, they yelled, they screamed, they applauded, they said, "Oh man!" They responded to BB King. They listened to his stories and responded. "That's right, BB, tell it!" So I like that a lot, I do. It doesn't have to be part of every form of culture, and it can't be part of film or even radio, but people felt included. They felt part; they weren't just an audience. This is what was so important about black culture in slavery, African culture. There was an

audience. Everything was call and response, everything—

19-00:28:23

Lage: So for that, you sort of have a feeling of—

19-00:28:26

Levine: Yeah, I do. I think it's good to have as much of that in your cultural spectrum as possible. But I'm not nostalgic for a day that's gone. Jackson Lears' comment on my article is silly.

19-00:28:40

Lage: Let me ask you one more thing because I've been thinking about this. In one of our early interviews, you told me about going to hear jazz as a kid, or a young man.

19-00:28:50

Levine: Well, fifteen. I started at the age of fifteen.

19-00:28:53

Lage: Did this have an effect—?

19-00:28:58

Levine: You got to look eighteen to go.

19-00:29:00

Lage: I think we never went back to discuss what that meant in your own modeling or your interest in black culture.

19-00:29:09

Levine: It meant a lot.

19-00:29:11

Lage: Because you didn't have much exposure to African Americans.

19-00:29:14

Levine: No, I didn't. And yet one of the chief games we played as kids was an African-American game, but I didn't know it at the time. We played a game like slipping, which is the Dozens. We would insult each other's mothers, sisters, siblings, but mainly mothers. "Man, he slipped your mother that time." It was the Dozens, I later learned in life—so this black game comes—and it wasn't just the black game, the music, the way we moved our bodies, the way people danced, was very influenced by African-American culture, it was clear. It was just clear.

19-00:29:50

Lage: But what was impact of the jazz?

19-00:29:52

Levine: Well, the jazz influence was this. This may be a later intellectual formulation, but I don't think so, I think I felt this at the time. Here were these guys who are, to me they were both an alternative culture—clearly this was not the America I was learning about in school, or the America my parents were aiming for me to be a

part of—they were an alternative culture, and yet they were so American. What was more American than this music and these guys and their body movements and their smiles, their laughter, their sense of humor. It was so American and yet it was so alternative to America. It began to hit me that you could be black and American at the same time. You didn't have to choose between these two things. People might argue this—but I don't think I've ever—see, I think measuring someone as, let's say an urban New York Jew from an immigrant family, it's not whether he goes to synagogue or not—which I did for much of my life—but whether he has renounced a style. I have renounced none of that. I'm so obviously a Jew in my sense of humor and my body movements and everything. I just never found a need to drop that stuff. I think I learned a lesson that you can be a very American person, which I think I am, and also have all of these ethnic accoutrements and style, which has become part of America too. I'm amazed at the number of words which now—. This English case manager in a hospital—I'm now dealing with an illness—she said to me—she's so English—she says the other day, "Oh, you're going to have to schlep over here to San Francisco so much." [laughs] I said, "Yeah." And it's not just words, it's the style; and Jews have impressed themselves on the humor of America and that. So yeah, I've learned a lot about acculturation. I learned a lot from these guys, and gals.

19-00:32:09

Lage:

Didn't also that attraction to the culture lead you into black studies?

19-00:32:18

Levine:

It might be. I think civil rights lead me in more, but both. I was already into it. What interested me so much was my own experience. I think I've spoken about this. My own experience as a quasi-acculturated child of immigrants, an immigrant family with a lot of other language and all of this stuff, a lot of illiterate people in my family, a lot of the women are illiterate. I have a lot of understanding and empathy. And a kind of religion I grew up with, the folk religion that I grew up with was very similar to the folk religion a lot of blacks grew up with. So yeah, I already had a lot of this, civil rights, the culture. Yes. But what led me to want to do black history was not a cultural affiliation so much as both the civil rights—the blacks were a minority whose story had not been told, who were misunderstood and stereotyped and caricatured and the like. I wanted to try to end that. And one area I had some little power—

19-00:33:23

Lage:

You didn't stay with African-American history. Did you think about staying? Was it a conscious decision to move out into—well, *Highbrow/Lowbrow* being the next book.

19-00:33:35

Levine:

That wasn't conscious. See, I had that Depression book all the time. It was there, it was supposed to be the next book.

19-00:33:43

Lage:

It's been your next book—

19-00:33:47

Levine: That would have been a conscious shift from black culture to—but the book I did write after *Black Culture and Black Consciousness* was *Highbrow/Lowbrow*. When that came out after *Black Culture and Black Consciousness*, that came out of the minstrel shows—I've talked about that—Shakespeare being popular among the minstrels and among their semi-educated audiences and my wonderment—so that was purely, the most purely organic book I wrote. It came out of a problem that I didn't expect to encounter that troubled me and troubled me. When I was going to Washington to do research on the thirties, it kept troubling me till a friend—as I've said already—drove me to the Folger—

19-00:34:32

Lage: Yeah. I just wondered if at some point you said, "Okay, I'm going to—"

19-00:34:35

Levine: No. I taught black history for a while, and I always taught history of blacks in whatever courses I was teaching. But no, I never considered myself an African-American historian. I've always considered myself an American cultural historian who could work on what—happily, I had the freedom to work on what interested me. So this other thing interested me, the Depression has always interested me. I got involved in popular culture, and I wrote a book of essays on popular culture. Then I got involved in the university, and I wrote a book about that. Then back to the Depression with the letters to FDR. I've said this already, so I won't say it at any length, but, the letters that people wrote to Roosevelt reminded me that a lot of people, plain people, do things and leave behind them—alas, they don't leave behind them, but could leave behind them—many of the materials that the elite leave behind them. They write letters. They have contracts. They have to make all kinds of arrangements. But these things get destroyed. We don't value this, we're taught it's not important, we destroy our letters. We throw them out. We don't keep them.

19-00:35:44

Lage: Unless you've written to the president.

19-00:35:49

Levine: That was the chance, the president; people kept those letters. Yeah, exactly. So that people do also produce the kinds of documents historians love, but they're not around to use.

19-00:36:01

Lage: Okay, so maybe we'd mine that, unless you have a final word—

19-00:36:04

Levine: No, I don't. The final word is, I'm no longer young and I'm not longer healthy, and I'm hoping still to write this Depression book. My wife and I are also working on—and hopefully will finish this winter—an abridgement of the Roosevelt *People and the President*, which we're going to give a different title to, it's going to be a different book, it'll be shorter. We're going to call it something like *Franklin D. Roosevelt and the American People*. So we've got

that little project. [*The Fireside Conversations: America Responds to FDR during the Great Depression* (UC Press, 2010)].

As long as we're on my scholarship, I've written a few articles recently which will be coming out, one just came out. It's right over there. It's in a book called *Music and History*. I wrote an article about me as an American historian using music. I've got an article on African-American slave music as protest, which is coming out in a big book on the diaspora and music, which is going to be a very good book. I've just got that one little piece in it. Oxford University Press amazed me recently by calling me and saying they want to come out with a thirtieth anniversary edition of *Black Culture and Black Consciousness* in 2007, which will be the thirtieth anniversary. They want me to do a twenty-page introduction to the new book. So I've got to work on that. What I'm going to do, I think, is show—I going to talk a little bit about how I came to write the book, but not too much; but what I would like to do, but that's going to take work and I hope I have the time—I thought I would write in this introduction how the patterns that were already evident by the 1940s in black culture help account for kinds of the things that have come since, rhythm and blues, rap, all that stuff, comes right out of it. I thought more than once that I could write another chapter or two later on in the book, but it didn't interest me to do it. I just had other things—

19-00:38:18

Lage: So you might just show the direction.

19-00:38:23

Levine: Yeah, I'll just show how this stuff is a precursor to some of it and how that comes right of it. So there are things to do. I'm not sitting around—

19-00:38:33

Lage: No, you're not.

19-00:36:34

Levine: —twiddling my thumbs. Well, maybe I am, but I shouldn't be. Let me talk a little bit about the UCB History Department.

19-00:38:45

Lage: Right, which is our main topic for the day really.

19-00:38:51

Levine: Well, let me say, and I hope this sounds not too pro forma, but let me say that I can't even articulate what I owe the History Department, and I think some of that will become clear. It had a great impact on me. It allowed me to do what I've done, and it helped me to do what I've done, both materially and intellectually. It was, and I hope remains, a great department and full of good people.

19-00:39:27

Lage: When you say "it," are you talking about it as a collection of people, or as an institutional entity.

19-00:39:33

Levine: As a place to work. I'm not a big institutionalist. I think the people make the department. But the department has a goal as an institution. It has a teaching load. It has aspirations. It expects its members to be both good teachers—that was very important from the beginning. It was clear to me from the beginning and I think that tradition goes on—I've been gone for eleven years now—but I think that tradition goes on, that teaching is very important; we're a teaching department, we should care, we should teach well, we should be there for our students. On the other hand, it's a department that expects and tries to arrange for its members to be producing scholars. Could we take a quick break?

19-00:40:18

Lage: Sure. Let me put it on pause. [tape break]

19-00:40:24

Lage: Now we're recording again.

19-00:40:27

Levine: Okay. When I came to Berkeley, I was twenty-nine years old. I had been teaching in college for three years. I taught for two years at City College in New York and for one year at Princeton. While I was at Princeton, I got the Berkeley offer, and I talked about that already of my dilemma and my acceptance at Berkeley. I came to a department that had undergone its own trauma for some time. Carl Bridenbaugh came into the department and decided it wasn't worthy, and there were wrenching fights, and he brought people like Ken Stampp and Henry May and others into the department, and then left because the people he brought wouldn't listen, wouldn't do exactly what he said. [laughs] This is often the problem with building a department. So I never met him. He left just as I came. My first year followed his last year. He went back to Brown, where he had come from. I entered the department, which I was very happy in. It was a very hierarchical department, there was no doubt about that.

19-00:41:36

Lage: In what respect?

19-00:41:38

Levine: Full professors were full professors, assistant professors were assistant professors in the sense that we did not—I was trying to think about this. I did think about this, but not completely successfully. For instance, let me give you an example. Every year for the first few years I was there, new young people would appear. Irv Scheiner came in my second year. Reggie Zelnik came in my third year. Gerry Feldman came in my second or third year. They were just appearing and would come to my office and say, "Hey, I heard about you. I'm the new German historian." I was in no meeting where they were chosen. No one told me, "Oh, yeah, we've chosen Gerry Feldman or Reggie Zelnik." I mean, today, in this department as well as in my department at George Mason, young people were around for the choosing of other young people.

19-00:42:33

Lage: Do they vote if they don't have tenure?

19-00:42:36

Levine: I can't remember that. But we weren't even *present* for that. Do they vote for non-tenured people? I think you have to have tenure to vote, this is true. And then you have to be a full professor to vote for a promotion to full professor, yes. But I wasn't even aware of it. I wasn't in *any* meeting where the—that changed.

19-00:42:54

Lage: Pretty well excluded.

19-00:42:56

Levine: You may not have a vote, but you were still apprised. But it was that kind of hierarchy. None of this troubled me at the time because first of all, I was even lower at Princeton, and even *lower* at City College, and I was working my way up.

Junior people. The one thing that got me angry—and I've always been outspoken I guess, though I don't know where that came from—but the one thing that got me angry was that junior members of the department, that non-tenured members of the department, taught one course more than the senior members of the department, tenured members.

19-00:43:31

Lage: Oh. Even though they were busy trying to get tenure?

19-00:43:35

Levine: Oh yeah. They were busy finishing their books. Many of them were establishing their lives. They had just gotten married or were about to get married, moving into houses and having children. And getting that book out, turning their dissertation into a book and teaching *brand* new courses for the first time, facing masses, as I did; I had not taught large lecture courses at either of my prior institutions. So teaching 265 students, which I had in my first class.

19-00:44:08

Lage: And then managing TAs.

19-00:44:10

Levine: And managing, yeah. And teaching an extra course, it really, it seemed to me to be *completely* wrong.

19-00:44:14

Lage: How many courses were you required to teach? What were the extra courses?

19-00:44:22

Levine: The load was two and two, and junior people were doing three and two. It was a load of a research institution. George Mason is trying very hard to go onto this load. Now George Mason's load is higher. It was a good load. It was the load of most teaching research institutions. But we taught one course more. I was hired

with Delmer Brown as chairman, but he was in the last year of his chairmanship, his first chairmanship. That was a five-year chairmanship and later he served a second chairmanship. So Carl Schorske was chairman when I arrived. He was a very fair guy—is; he's still quite alive; he's, I'm sure, still a very fair guy. But he was a very fair guy. The rationale—because I did ask—I accepted it, it was part of the institutional network, I wasn't questioning it completely when I first arrived. It just seemed illogical to me. And I did ask, and the rationale was that junior people did not serve on committees, and senior people had a committee obligation, which took a lot of time, and that was the tradeoff.

Well, what Carl did is what any chairman would have had to do ultimately. The department was swinging slowly in favor of junior people. There was more and more of them coming every year.

19-00:45:50

Lage: So many of them were being hired.

19-00:45:54

Levine: And Carl realized that he could not keep junior people off the committees. If we were going to have a committee system that worked, junior people were going to have to sit on it. And therefore the rationale was no longer there, and therefore they abolished it my second or third year; the discrepancy between tenured people and non-tenured people disappeared and we all taught the same load, which seemed fair.

19-00:46:18

Lage: How about the respect accorded you as a junior person aside from teaching?

19-00:46:25

Levine: Here's the respect I wanted. People treated me nicely; some ignored me, some invited me into their homes. But no one treated me badly. The respect—and this amazed me, this was not true at City College and not true at Princeton—was that I was totally *free* to teach what I wanted to, not in subject matter, but in manner.

19-00:46:52

Lage: You would be assigned to History 17A or B.

19-00:46:56

Levine: Well, I didn't teach that at first, but I was brought in to teach part of the twentieth century, and I did. But I was totally free to teach it any way I wanted. Well, in those days—though they gave me a course that stunned me. I was supposed to cover from 1929 to the present, and that was 1962. That was what, thirty-three years, right? I couldn't believe it. I was supposed to give forty-five lectures on thirty-three years? I didn't know the stuff after the New Deal. No one taught that to me. Leuchtenburg a little bit at Columbia. But nonetheless, how I taught that, they did tell me, "This is your course."

19-00:47:35

Lage: You could do it social history, cultural, intellectual.

19-00:47:41

Levine: Oh yeah, absolutely. Well, I taught political history because that's what the books were about. See, there wasn't even a big literature in this period yet. Much of it was not covered by professional historians at all. You had to use memoirs. But I learned how to do it. How I did it was up to me. I was asked to teach a 103, which is a senior pro-seminar for our majors. I went around asking people, "what is 103?" I asked five people and got eight descriptions. And I realized, "Well, it's my course. I can teach it—." Some people taught it as a research course, some people taught it as a reading course, some people had this kind of paper, some people had that kind of paper. And I realized they were doing their own thing, and I could do my own thing. At first, that's a little scary. Sometimes you'd rather have someone tell you, "Here you use six books." Then I discovered that you can use a lot of books. These kids will read if you get them to read. They're bright.

I think the Berkeley students have improved enormously, but they were good enough. I had come from good students. Students at City College were good, and students at Princeton were good. But Berkeley put me back in the world of coed education, which I just adored. I found that a lot of the brightest, most articulate, most demonstrative students in my *little* classes were women. And I said that to some of my colleagues out there, that there seemed to be a disparity. One or two of my colleagues who were very liberal people said things like, "Yeah, those are those female overachievers." That was the first warning I had of a problem, which I will talk about.

19-00:49:23

Lage: That and the fact that the department—I think we have talked about this a bit—

19-00:49:27

Levine: Yeah.

19-00:49:28

Lage: The department you came into had no women in it.

19-00:49:32

Levine: One woman, Adrienne Koch.

19-00:49:33

Lage: Oh, I thought she had left by then.

19-00:49:34

Levine: No, I got to know Adrienne a little bit. She was tough, like a lot of the full professors. That's what I mean about hierarchy. In a department meeting, I would raise my hand—you know, a lot of the young people come in and say, "The orals aren't like the orals were at Columbia." And they try to change things. I don't know what the issue was, but I raised my hand one day in the departmental meeting. It was the meeting of Americanists. In those days—that stopped; I kind of liked it. We would not only have departmental meetings but the groups would meet. So this was a meeting of the Americanists. It was my first or second year, and I raised my hand and I made a suggestion, and Adrienne Koch said—she was

Professor Koch to me—and Adrienne Koch said, "I think that's a great idea. I move that we create a committee to look at this with Professor Levine as the chair." She was telling me, "Look buddy, don't give us this work. You want to do it, you do it." I learned to respect her a lot, but a lot of the men in the department didn't like that, that she did that, though the men did the same thing.

She was the only woman in the department when I got here. After a few years, I can't remember how—I'm going to be very, very fuzzy on the years, I'm afraid—I don't remember how many years, but her husband was an economist and he got a job with the US government. So Adrienne picked up the phone and phoned the University of Maryland—she was a well-published person, a Jefferson scholar—she phoned the University of Maryland, which just was ecstatic, and they gave her a professorship. So Adrienne left us. And then we went through a very bleak—I want to get to this later though, if you don't mind.

19-00:51:19

Lage:

No, not a bit. Just as long as we get to it.

19-00:51:22

Levine:

As I said, teaching was very valued in the department. After my first year here, Carl called me in—during the end of my first year—he said, "Larry, we have this course called History 101; it's a historiography course." Every history major had to take it and they had to write a major paper. They were put into small groups, taught by a TA, although some of them were taught by faculty. In those days, they also had lectures, and I was put in charge. Here I am, a second-year man at Berkeley, and I'm put in charge of teaching historiography, which didn't just mean US historiography. I thought about that, I said, "How is that taught?" Carl said, "Well, it's taught the way you want to teach it." I tried to get some models, but there were none forthcoming. That's the way it was here.

So I thought a lot about how to do it. I had sixteen or seventeen TAs because we were covering the whole senior class, practically. They usually took that course in their senior year, so we had all of the history majors. There were something like 500 history majors, so like 250 kids were taking that course in small groups. I had them in one lecture a week. So I thought, "How do I want to do this?" And then it hit me, "Well, I'm sitting on top of one of the best departments in the country." So I just invited—I gave three or four lectures on US historiography and I invited Woodrow Borah and Gene Brucker. Gene Brucker gave a lecture on Renaissance historiography and Borah on Latin American historiography. It was great. In those days, we had an Egyptologist. If the kids were sharp, listening to the difference between how Egyptologists work in centuries, and Americanists teaching a course on twenty-nine years or whatever. It was very interesting. I had this *huge* group of TAs, all of them not that much younger than me, and we would meet once a week and have a session, and it was good. They'd come and take wild notes whereas the students—see, the students learned very quickly that they were graded on the paper they wrote in their section. Ultimately, these lectures withered and died because the students weren't responsible, and therefore

they weren't responsible—the two meanings of that word. No one asked them to feed back what they learned. They were just supposed to learn about historiography and apply it in their papers, but they were graded on their papers. So tuned out in the historiography part. But it was a great experience for me. I learned on historiography, I read many books, and I met my wife.

19-00:53:28

Lage: Oh, that's where you met your wife?

19-00:54:01

Levine: Yeah, she was a German historian. I would not have met her otherwise, probably.

19-00:54:06

Lage: Now, in today's climate, would you have been able to do develop a relationship?

19-00:54:12

Levine: Well, I was Mr. Responsible. I did not—though she attracted me from the outset—I did not invite her out until the course was over. I had nothing to do with her in the sense that once the course was over I had no position of authority over her. She was in German history, I would never teach her, I wouldn't be in on her orals.

19-00:54:38

Lage: So you thought of all of that, even before the rules were in place.

19-00:54:41

Levine: Well, yes I did. Absolutely. I hated the notion of someone feeling they had to date me because I had some power over them. Yekh. I don't know how you spell "yekh." [laughs]

19-00:54:53

Lage: [laughs] That will be difficult for the transcriber.

19-00:54:57

Levine: Yekh! So that was a great experience. I loved the fact that the department cared about teaching. I just loved it. Let me talk a little bit about the department. These were my romance years in the department. I love this period.

19-00:55:15

Lage: What about the—I know you have something that you want to cover—but I want to ask, the intellectual interchange and stimulation, did that feed into your work?

19-00:55:28

Levine: My intellectual interchange and stimulation was mainly with the junior people. I socialized with them, I saw them, I had lunch with them. I had some interaction with the older people, and one or two of the older people adopted me. I mentioned Gene Brucker. Gene Brucker took me into his home. I had my own apartment but Gene and Pat Brucker, his then wife, and their three lovely kids—the youngest of whom owns one of the best restaurants in Berkeley—I got to know them very, very well. I was very close to them.

So I did make friendships. Gene in those days was a middle-tier person, an associate professor. I did make friends with some of them. Some of the senior people, the famous ones, like Ken Stampp, were very nice to me. But I didn't see them on a regular basis. I mean, I was invited into their homes; however, I was a bachelor; they were not invited to mine. There was no question that the department was friendly, but my interchange—look, in the big-time academe, maybe in any academe, but in the big-time academe it is not easy to have a lot of interchange. That was one of my big disappointments. People are busy, they're running around, and they don't read each other's—they do read each other's work. I mean, they do; you have friends who will read your work, I've always had that. But if you think the academic world is a world where people sit down and have long wonderful talks over coffee about their work and talk about their teaching—

19-00:57:01

Lage: And new directions in history.

19-00:57:05

Levine: It isn't. It isn't. It just isn't. Some of my best friends are people I never talk to about my work. There was *precious* little talking about teaching. I had to develop my teaching on my own. In the very beginning I did visit the classes of some of my friends, and they visited mine. I loved that because I used to do it at City College. I had a good friend, a girlfriend—as we then called them—she was just beginning teaching at Brooklyn College, she was from Utah. I met her in Washington, and I was just beginning to teach at City College, and we visited each other's classes. So I liked that. I did invite some people to come into my class as friends and vice versa. But it didn't last. There isn't a hell of a lot of that. I think that's the disappointment; there isn't as much intellectual life as I thought there'd be. There is; I mean, you talk about interesting things. But I thought it would be a world where you'd talk about history a lot, about teaching a lot.

19-00:58:09

Lage: But you talked about baseball.

19-00:58:13

Levine: But, no, people talk about their work.

19-00:58:17

Lage: I've talked to people—and usually an older generation—who belonged to the art club or had—

19-00:58:26

Levine: They did. Yeah, when you went into the—well, I should talk about something that I've never talked about with you. But when you went into the Faculty Club—which I did precious little because there was no liquor in the Faculty Club in those days, and I didn't find it very interesting—there were tables of people. There were tables—I'm thinking of a terribly nasty remark someone made about, is it Stephens Hall? There was a Stephens Hall.

19-00:58:51

Lage: Stephens Hall is where the ASUC used to be—

19-00:58:54

Levine: Stephens was named after a professor of history named Stephens, he was once a very—and every day he sat at a table with some of his colleagues, and someone walked in and wrote a very nasty remark, but it's so funny: that "every day he sat at that table, it would be a table of a false giant and seven true pygmies." You remember that remark?

19-00:59:24

Lage: Yeah.

19-00:59:26

Levine: Well, there *were* tables of people, and very early I was approached by a senior gentleman, a member of the faculty—I don't know why he chose me, he didn't know me—who asked me—a very nice guy, I think his name will come to me—who asked me if I—a professor of English, I believe—if I would like to join a monthly luncheon group of new people on the faculty, young people on the faculty. I did join it. Fred Crews was in it, professor of English. There was a guy named Rappaport from Australia who was an architect, a professor of architecture, who didn't stay here. I can't remember the others—oh, Sue Ervin—she was then Sue Ervin; she became Sue Ervin-Tripp, a professor of psychology. We were all young people and we met every few weeks for lunch. And it was nice. See, the other problem was you didn't meet people outside your department.

19-01:00:24

Lage: Was there an agenda for this, or was it just social?

19-01:00:27

Levine: No, we just talked. I don't remember an agenda. There were eight or nine or ten of us. Not everyone came every meeting, but it was very pleasant. I did meet a few people, some of whom became career-long acquaintances at least, if not friends, and I still see them, and we still greet each other with warmth. But there was nothing like that in the History Department for me. We went to eat. And I used to go to eat every day. I was a bachelor, and I came to the campus every day because it was lonely back at home, and I worked on the campus, I worked in my office. So I went out to lunch every day with friends, most of whom were junior, but not always. Bill Bouwsma would take me to lunch; I'd go for lunch with him or Hans Rosenberg. The department was very nice about that.

Hans Rosenberg, who was a very famous guy—much, much older than me; I mean, he left Germany when I was born, he was already a professor there—he came in, my first few weeks at Berkeley, this very famous—who had taught at Brooklyn College; so I knew a lot about him. I had friends who studied with him because he had been at Brooklyn College most of his career, and then Berkeley hired him. At Brooklyn College he taught five courses a semester; that was the load then. I got to City College just when they had dropped its course load from five courses a semester to four. At Berkeley you taught four courses a year. At

City College you taught eight, and that was a reduction from ten. So, Hans Rosenberg, was—

19-01:02:03

Lage: He was happy. [laughter]

19-01:02:03

Levine: —had a change of life when he came here. He walked in my office and said, "Would you like to have lunch with me?" I said, "Yes." He pulled out his book—I didn't have a book—he said, "Tuesday at 12:00," and I said yes. I had lunch with him. A number of the senior people took me to lunch, went to lunch with me, I don't know that they paid. [laughs]

19-01:02:28

Lage: The way you're talking though, it sounds like your intellectual growth and development happened with your books and your study. Is that right?

19-01:02:35

Levine: And my teaching.

19-01:02:36

Lage: And your teaching.

19-01:02:37

Levine: And just being around.

19-01:02:38

Lage: We did talk about that.

19-01:02:39

Levine: Just being around this place because this place was full of people doing work. I don't want to say that there was no influence because there was. I mean, Ken Stampp would be working on books and I'd know about it. Not that he'd talk to me at great length about them, but it was there. You know, graduate students are great conduits of knowledge. They'd come from one class and they'd come into your class, and they'd say, "Well, Professor Stampp in his class—"

19-01:03:07

Lage: Yeah. What about Leon [Litwack], for instance? You were both giving voice to this unrecognized group.

19-01:03:14

Levine: No question. No question. I had interaction with a number of people, sure, absolutely. And slowly I met people in other departments, especially during the Free Speech Movement, where a crisis is a great generator of interdepartmental interaction. So I met a lot of people, some of whom remain good friends to this day. I mean, I have good friends in other departments. One of my good friends is an immunologist. I never would have met him if it wasn't for crisis and if we didn't share views.

I wanted to say that this department really showed what it was all about during the Free Speech Movement, and this is what I mean. I didn't agree with a lot of people in the department. Reggie [Zelnik] and I were on the left, and we were from the get-go—and I've talked about this—from the very beginning, we were partisans of the students, just thought they were being dreadfully handled and treated. Not everyone in the department agreed to that. Larry Harper, who was a colonialist, got up and made an impassioned speech against the students. He was maybe the oldest man in the department. In those days you had to retire at no later than sixty-seven or so; but Larry Harper may have been already retired, quasi-retired. He got up and gave a very impassioned talk against the students. I'll never forget that.

The day in November, I think it was November 23, 1964, when Reggie and I—and I've talked about this—Reggie and I got up—well, I got up because Reggie couldn't since he wasn't a member of the Academic Senate—to move our motion in favor of the students. Henry May, my chairman—he was then chairman of the department in 1964 because Carl only had a two-year chairmanship; he got ill and didn't resume the chairmanship; Henry May was chairman—Henry May got up and spoke against us. Now, it was very interesting. There's my chairman getting up in the Academic Senate and speaking against an assistant professor and an acting assistant professor, who wasn't even a regular yet because his dissertation wasn't finished, speaking against us in public and urging our colleagues to vote against our motion and deplored our motion. It never occurred to me that this was a dangerous situation. Now, it could have been my naiveté, and it could have been that I got the vibes right and that it wasn't a dangerous situation because I never—and this is to the department's credit—never felt that I had to do what the chairman would do—

That wasn't true of all departments. There were a lot of intimidated young people who got lectures from their senior colleagues, "How dare you; do you know how bad this looks? How dare you sully the department?" Political Science wasn't open to young people going their own way. Though Mike Rogin ultimately did. Mike Rogin in his oral history talks about how nervous he was and how scared he was to go his own way and how he thought he'd be fired. I never thought that, ever.

19-01:06:23

Lage:

How did Henry May treat you during that time period, on a private basis, in the hallways?

19-01:06:31

Levine:

Oh, courteously. That was his way. He's very courteous and very polite. He always said hello. Even people who disagreed with me—but see, there were also senior people who agreed, like Ken Stampp and Carl Schorske, even though it took them a long time to make that agreement public. But we had real disagreements when it came to things like strikes and what you do—the students struck right after the sit-in. There was a student strike in December of '64, at the

very end of the semester and that was a difficult time. Carl was totally against the strike. He said, "You just don't strike. This is the academic world; we have an obligation to teach." I understood that argument, although I didn't do what Carl did. Ken did miss a class—I don't remember it at the time, but I know it from his oral history, which I've read—Ken did miss a class at the time and then regretted it terribly. Students came up to him and said, "You didn't just miss a class, we missed the class, but we don't agree with you. You can't make these decisions for us." Ken came away saying, "They're right, I can't, I shouldn't, and I won't." He started to meet his classes again. I scheduled—I think Reggie and others—scheduled my classes elsewhere, and this was not the last time this was going to happen.

19-01:08:00

Lage: No.

19-01:08:02

Levine: It happened during the third world period and other times.

19-01:08:03

Lage: Vietnam.

19-01:08:04

Levine: Vietnam. So, but never, ever, ever, ever did I feel—I got tenure in 1967. I never felt I was jeopardizing it. I must say, now, I think back and say, "Wow, was I a jerk?" Well, no.

19-01:08:22

Lage: Because you did get tenure after all.

19-01:08:26

Levine: Yeah, but I didn't think about not getting tenure. Pam Zelnik [Reggie's daughter] tells me that this was a subject in Reggie's house sometimes about whether he jeopardizing himself. And I had no cause for it to be a subject; I mean, I wasn't married in the early years. No, that's not true, I was married by 1964. It was never an issue. I am a bit headstrong and crazy anyway. I will tell you the truth. I don't know how to say this without looking like I'm bragging, but I'm going to say it anyway because it is true. I just never thought much about getting tenure. Once it came time to get tenure I thought about it, but before that if you had told me, "Larry, we're sorry, next year is your last year at Berkeley," I would have been sad, but it wouldn't have broken my life, it wouldn't have destroyed me. Berkeley was not the place where I wanted to spend the rest of my life. I had no aspirations. I wanted to be a teacher and by then I knew I could be one. My book came out in '65 and it was a decent monograph, it didn't change anything, but it was a nice monograph, and it got good reviews. I just never felt like it had to be Berkeley or I had to get tenure. So it didn't govern my actions. It just never governed my actions.

But I don't think it governed the actions of a lot of people; a lot of junior people, some more conservative than others, took their own stands. That resolution on

November 23—I hope that's the right date—in 1964 was crafted in the History Department by a whole bunch of junior people with a little help from some senior people. So Carl helped us and Henry Nash Smith in the English Department helped us. Howard Schachman in Biology helped us. But we were a lot of junior people, all of whom could have been fired. Bob Middlekauff was one of them, Richard Abrams was one of them, I think Irv Scheiner was one of them. Reggie and I became the spokesmen for this group. There weren't a hell of a lot of junior people quaking in their boots that they better not—as I said that Mike Rogin was.

19-01:10:34

Lage: So that's an interesting comment on this. I'm going to put in a new tape here. We're almost at the end. I'm assuming that's sort of the end of it.

19-01:10:40

Levine: Well, let me just say one thing. In Mike Rogin's department, the chair, Robert Scalapino, crafted a resolution, which was pretty much anti-student, anti-Free Speech Movement, and insisted on an open vote.

19-01:10:56

Lage: In the department?

19-01:10:58

Levine: Yes. So Mike in his oral history says, "Well, I wasn't going to vote for it. But did I have the guts to—I was so happy in Berkeley; I wanted to stay." And then he saw all four hands go up against it. I could name the people I'm sure. And he stuck his hand up. And he said he became a pariah from that moment on. See, there was none of that in this department, thank the lord. So, that's credit.

#### [Audio File 20]

20-00:00:03

Levine: Well, let me say, as a coda to what I've just said, that at the time I took all of this for granted, all of this freedom, all of this tolerance, all of this truly intellectual—intellectuality. And this freedom. You have the right to your own views, and as long as you did your job, produced the scholarship they wanted and was a good teacher and a decent human being—I was all of those things—if you went your own way politically you went your own way politically. This, again, was not always true, but it was true in those years, and I took it for granted. I thought "That's the way it is." Only in retrospect, when I began to think about the essay for Reggie's book on the Free Speech Movement did I realize how extraordinary that was, that my own chairman got up to speak against the motion that I was championing, and I didn't feel threatened or even see anything paradoxical in it. Interesting.

So, let me get onto—stay with the administrative stuff and the departmental stuff. Scholarship—teaching was deeply admired, though no one—

20-00:01:28

Lage: But not trained, it sounds like. You weren't trained.

20-00:01:30

Levine:

No. I don't believe teachers can be trained anyway. We weren't trained. TAs—I mean, if you went to a place where you had TAs you got some training. I didn't go to a place where there were TAs, so I got none. I learned how to teach by teaching and I think—I had already taught for several years in a junior high school so that certainly helped and—I want to tell you the truth. I took all those ed courses to train to be a high school teacher. I'm not sure I learned how to teach in any of them. I think you have to feel your way and care about the kids and know what you're doing. And partly you learn what you're doing. I think I was a much better undergraduate teacher at first than a graduate teacher; I've said this, I think. Though I keep meeting people who tell me I was a good graduate teacher in the years I thought I wasn't, so who knows? That's the other problem in judging. And we did learn—I did talk about teaching to some of my peers; ask them about how they handle this kind of problem. And we talked about students. If you have a student that does X, you know, what do you do about it and that kind of stuff.

But scholarship—it was clear from the beginning you didn't come to a place like Berkeley and think you weren't going to publish your book. Scholarship was crucial to promotion and to tenure. I knew that. My dissertation on William Jennings Bryan was published in 1965, and I got tenure in 1967. And I was promoted very quickly to full professor, more quickly than I expected to be, and it became a little bit of a problem. I was in England in Academic Year '67-'68, and while I was in England the University of Indiana wrote me and said they were interested to meet; would I fly back for an interview? They were very interested. My book was out, and they read it. I had really no desire to travel from Berkeley to Bloomington, Indiana. I mean, it didn't seem an intelligent move to me. I was a real New Yorker, you have to understand. [laughs] Berkeley at least was on a coast. Like New York. Indiana was in the middle of—I had never been to Indiana as far as I know, maybe I drove through it, I'm sure I did. So I wrote Indiana a reply letter and said thank you but I wasn't—but something told me—I don't know what it was because I'm not the most pragmatic of people and I don't know how to play the game very well—but I wrote the chairman, who happened to be Nick Riasanovsky, I think. I sent him a copy of the letter that Indiana sent me and a copy of the letter I sent them. I just—I said, "You might want this for your records." And Nick put me in for an acceleration from one step to another, and because of that acceleration I got to Step III by 1970. We have a step system at Berkeley, and in those days I think at Step III you had to come up for full professor.

I had my book and I had two or three articles for my next book on blacks and black America, though the book hadn't taken its final shape yet. I still thought I was writing about protest, but I was beginning—well, no, I couldn't have because some of the stuff I wrote was about, slave songs and stuff so I must have realized—I must have had the new shape of the book. And to my amazement I get a letter from the chairman saying, "You're up for full professor. Send me what you have." And I felt like going and saying, "I'm not ready to be up for full

professor. I just was promoted to associate professor. I'm not ready, you know? I have nothing written on my book, except a couple of essays." But the system is unforgiving. There's a system, and so I went up. I figured, I said to Cornelia, "Well, no. They're not going to promote me to full professor. I've got two articles since my book—." But they did promote me to full professor, which was an act of faith. They liked the articles; that also amazed me. And there's another sign there in favor of Berkeley. They hire me as a twentieth-century historian. I write the Bryan book, which fits right into that thing, and it's kind of political. And then the next thing I produce is *Slave Songs and Slave Consciousness* and then an article on B'rer Rabbit. I think I must've told you, Ken wondered what I was doing; he said, "I wonder what the hell this guy is doing" you know? And nevertheless, they promote me to full professor.

20-00:06:15

Lage: They appreciated the new kind of history, it sounds like.

20-00:06:17

Levine: I guess they did.

20-00:06:18

Lage: But you didn't get feedback, or—

20-00:06:20

Levine: They didn't—well, not really. All I know is I submitted what I submitted, I think they liked me, I think I was a—

20-00:06:28

Lage: Well, they don't usually go on whether they like having coffee with you.

20-00:06:32

Levine: No, no, no, I mean this fit in with everything else; I don't know, I was a good teacher, and I guess they saw enough promise in those articles. But when I said earlier that it might have been a mistake to go this quickly to full professor, I think they began to worry because my book wasn't going to come out for seven more years. The first book was published in '65, and my next book was published in '77. So that's twelve years from publication to publication. They worry, but the second book is always the hardest book to write. First of all, I took on the massive topic about which I knew nothing. I didn't know how to use folklore, I had to learn how to use folklore, I had to—and then it took me two or three years to realize what I was writing about. So it took a long time. It turned out to be a hell of a good book, and that's always good. But one senior person would meet me in the mailroom and say, "How's your book coming?" And I realized that had a lot of sense, that they were nervous.

20-00:07:39

Lage: By these little questions, "How's your book coming?"

20-00:07:42

Levine: Yeah. "How's your book coming?" And I would always say "great" even though I wasn't sure it was coming great; it was hard to write, I had three kids, we were

broke. I did a lot of summer school teaching because we had no money; we were a one-income family. My wife decided she wanted to raise the children. We were a one-income family at a time when it was becoming clear you needed a two-income family, but we never were a two-income family. My wife earned some money as a research assistant and things like that. She even taught a course at Berkeley. Of course, she was ABD; she had passed her orals but never finished her dissertation. And she was working on her dissertation for some of these years, too, before she realized she didn't want to write it.

So, there was a lot of pressure on me to earn money, to do this, to do that. I almost signed for a textbook once because we were broke, but I didn't do any of that, and I did finish the book. So this guy, this very nice senior man, would say to me, "How's your book coming?" and I'd say, "Fine, thank you." And then one day in the mailroom when I met him and he said, "How's your book coming," I said, "Great." I said, "How's your book coming?" [laughs] And that was the end of it. He never asked me again, because we all have trouble with our books, the truth is. But they had—they were stuck with me for life and—

20-00:09:02

Lage: But they were happy with the book when it came and the reception of the book and all.

20-00:09:07

Levine: Oh, absolutely. Bob Brentano was chairman, and he said, "What've you got? You're up for a step increase." Every few years you're up for a step increase, and I gave him this—it looked massive in typed version—I gave him this box, and I must say Brentano probably read it, and he phoned me up and said, "That is a\_." He said nice things about it. So I was happy. And it all worked out and I did get the book done. I'm not the only person this happened to. Leon [Litwack] had a big hiatus; a lot of people do. I've now realized that that second book is difficult. And I tell young people, though maybe I shouldn't, that maybe you ought not to get *too* ambitious with the second book. Or maybe that's bad advice. I just talk about the problem. The second book is a problem partly because of money, partly because of situation. A lot of people are just married, they're having young children. Today especially, men are not expected to be exempt from child-raising duties, housekeeping duties. And they're experimenting and they're trying out new things and they're teaching new courses and it's just a hell of a hard time. It's much easier to write the first book.

20-00:10:19

Lage: You've already done most of the work.

20-00:10:20

Levine: You're in a program. You know, you got a professor, several professors dedicated to your finishing this dissertation, and if it's a good dissertation you're not that far from a book. So, the second book is hard. And a lot of people never write it. The vast majority never write the second book. So my reaction—I was happy. Very happy—let me use an adjective here—in the department personally and

professionally. It was a department in which I felt that there was—I didn't realize this till later because I always assumed this is the way things should be—but it was a department in which there was no jealousy or backbiting as far as I could see. People didn't resent senior people. I don't remember people saying, "that goddamn Ken Stampp, that goddamn Henry May; they have chairs and research assistants." I don't remember any of that. No one ever said that, and I never felt any of it. And I never felt jealous of chairs and—when Henry May retired the Margaret Byrne chair came up, and the two candidates were Bob Middlekauff and myself, and both of us were interviewed, taken to lunch by the chair professors. Bill Bouwsma told me, "You and Bob are the candidates for the Margaret Byrne chair." Bob got the chair and—I swear to God, I wouldn't talk about this if—I just never felt anything about it. I didn't feel badly, I felt good for Bob, I just didn't feel like we were somehow competing for chairs. Again, this sounds like I'm bragging but I'm not; I'm trying to be truthful. I just—because it turns out that that was not to be the way it was to be but it was that way then. I just don't remember people competing with each other to see who could get the chair, who could get this, who could get more money. I just don't remember—

20-00:12:11

Lage: Was it because times were a bit flush?

20-00:12:15

Levine: No, I don't think times were particularly flush. I was broke all the time. I taught summer after summer after summer. I wasn't earning that much money.

20-00:12:25

Lage: I guess not. I'm saying in the department there were a lot of new hires and—

20-00:12:28

Levine: Well, that could make more competition—

20-00:12:32

Lage: —in the university as a whole.

20-00:12:34

Levine: You know, we didn't get where you had to compete for research money, you had to compete for this—we had no secretarial help at all. Once I became a chair later, after Bob left—

20-00:12:47

Lage: Bob left and you got the Byrne chair, right?

20-00:12:50

Levine: Bob left because he thought—he retired in fact.

20-00:12:53

Lage: Oh, he did? When he left for the Huntington—

20-00:12:55

Levine: Yeah, well, Bill Bouwsma thought it was a smart idea for him to retire. [Brief

section omitted] When Bob decided he wanted to come back from Huntington—he decided he wasn't happy there—it was very hard for him to come back because he had been retired. I think this is true; maybe we ought not to have this in because I don't even know if what I'm saying is accurate. All I wanted to say is that that's when I got the chair, in 1984, and I had it for ten years and then retired in 1994. But I just don't remember any of that. I think it was a much happier department than it was to become. My last decade in the department I saw the department go in ways—but let me wait with that.

My only major discontent in the department, which was pretty much straight through, was ideological. The department remained for too long white and male, and there were historical reasons for this. It wasn't just a product of the *department's* prejudices at all. It was part of a longstanding problem. I don't have to go into it, but for lots of historical reasons—a lot of them having to do with prejudice, backbiting and stereotyping—blacks and women did not go into these professions, and Jews hadn't either. I was in the first generation of Jews. You know Jews and other minorities were not allowed to handle the literature and the memory of the society. Jews could get into biology and anthropology and sociology—there were lots of Jews in those areas—but not into history or literature, and they've put them all—we've talked about this—

20-00:15:04

Lage:

So there wasn't—there weren't a lot of PhD students coming for those fields.

20-00:15:09

Levine:

No, because you knew what you could do and you knew—Jews didn't go into banking. For all the stereotypes because they weren't going to get jobs in banking. They didn't go into engineering because they weren't going to get jobs in engineering. Well, you know what minority groups do; it's very smart. Minority groups know exactly what they can get jobs in, and that's why you see so many Jewish lawyers and doctors, because a doctor, in those days especially, was less reliant on the hospital. He was reliant on the institution of medical school. He had to get in—or she, but it was mainly he's—had to get into medical school, but once you got into medical school and you got through you took your sign and you put it up outside your apartment house, "Lawrence W. Levine, M.D. Office hours nine to four," and you went into business. You weren't dependent on large institutions. If you became an engineer you were a department. If you became a lawyer you could do the same thing. Abogado, you know? So you see Hispanics, you see blacks, you see Jews, you see groups who can't be hired by institutions, or who worry about being hired by institutions, go into the professions where they can hang up their shingle and can be independent. More and more, doctors are dependent on hospitals now, but they weren't in those days. So, you know, that's very interesting. When I finally—why did I go into—did I even know about this? No. But they did talk to us about this, I've said this—about the difficulty of Jews getting jobs in the academe—but I was lucky. I was in the generation where the—

- 20-00:16:40  
Lage: The doors opened.
- 20-00:16:43  
Levine: —the logjam was broken.
- 20-00:16:44  
Lage: Now, when did you start being troubled about—
- 20-00:16:48  
Levine: When Adrienne Koch left. It suddenly occurred to me we're all male, and we're all white. I was deeply involved in the civil rights movement, and here I am, happily ensconced in an all-white male department. Now, what I wanted to say was I didn't blame the department for the condition, but I blamed the department for not being upset about the condition. And—I haven't got the years right here—but I made a number of attempts to stop it.
- 20-00:17:19  
Lage: Give, I mean, an approximate time. When did Adrienne Koch leave, for instance?
- 20-00:17:24  
Levine: Oh, I don't know—
- 20-00:17:25  
Lage: Not that long after you came, did she?
- 20-00:17:27  
Levine: No, several years, I think.
- 20-00:17:28  
Lage: '67, or—
- 20-00:17:29  
Levine: Something like that.
- 20-00:17:30  
Lage: We can find that date. [1965]
- 20-00:17:31  
Levine: I would say mid-to-late sixties. And then the first appointment—and I happened to be on her hiring committee—was Diane Clemens. Now that's the first female.
- 20-00:17:44  
Lage: And was she in American history?
- 20-00:17:46  
Levine: She's American diplomatic history, and she wrote a book about Yalta. In her case—and I guess I shouldn't go into too much detail here—but in her case, the objections had nothing to do with her being a woman. She was a woman who wasn't doing women's history or—she was doing a good old field, diplomatic history which, was legitimate as hell. But she wrote a book in which the Russians and not the Americans came off better at Yalta. I thought it was a wonderful book. So

there was some give and take about that, but it had nothing to do with her being a woman, and she was hired. There was some give and take about her theory about that the Russians emerged from Yalta with more glory than the Americans do. It was a revisionist book—I know—I thought it was—I didn't agree with every moment but I don't agree with every moment in any book. I thought it was a wonderful book, and I was very active in pushing her appointment.

20-00:18:43

Lage: As a person or did you see this as—

20-00:18:45

Levine: I didn't know her as a person.

20-00:18:46

Lage: No, but I mean as a hire, or did you see it as a hirable woman?

20-00:18:51

Levine: Well, I did see it as a hirable woman, of course, but we were hiring a scholar, but she was a woman. And she would be the only woman, now, so I was very active. And then I went away—I forgot what year it was—for a year. And that year Natalie Davis visited. And of course, Natalie Davis's husband, Chandler Davis, was a professor at Toronto. He had to leave because of the McCarthy thing; he was a left-wing guy and a mathematician, and he left and then she got a job at Toronto; they were both at Toronto. She came to visit for a year. The department was interested in her. She was a major figure, becoming more major all the time. I wasn't there the year she visited, but she then went back to Toronto and the department hired her, and Chandler had some strange notion that he could come here and be an independent educational mathematician, that he'd be hired by the Berkeley board of education to teach teachers mathematics. It didn't work, and he went back to Toronto. But the first year she came as a regular member he was here, and that's when I got to know them. And I was already very friendly with Wilhelmina Stocking, who was Chandler's sister. She was Wilhelmina Davis and he was Chandler Davis. So I got very close to Natalie, a wonderful, wonderful person. So she was the second. [Editor's note: Natalie Davis was hired in 1971 as a full professor, and Diane Clemens in 1972 as associate professor.]

And then we hired the third woman—and the years are a little, but we're in the seventies now—we hired the third woman and that was Lynn Hunt [1974], and she was hired as an assistant professor so she is the first woman who was hired on the tenure ladder because—oh no! No, Diane—I can't remember if Diane Clemens was hired as assistant professor or associate professor. I think she may have been hired as—because she had a job and she had a book—but I'm not sure of that. But, Lynn certainly came as a junior person. She had no book; she had just gotten her degree and—

20-00:20:53

Lage: And her field was?

- 20-00:20:54  
Levine: French history. She is one of the major French historians today.
- 20-00:21:02  
Lage: Now, by then you were part of the tenure committee?
- 20-00:20:04  
Levine: Oh, absolutely.
- 20-00:20:05  
Lage: So you got in on these.
- 20-00:20:07  
Levine: Oh, absolutely. So let me tell this story, because it's a story about—well, let me preface this by saying I was involved—I heard about a woman who was a bit older—I don't mean old, maybe in her thirties—a woman who got her PhD later, who had a manuscript, and I think I read the manuscript—a few of us did—and we moved that she be hired by the History Department in American history. I don't remember if this was before Diane or after Diane. And that meeting was very, very—it is an assistant professor—it was very reflective because there were people who said things in that meeting which they would learn not to say later on. What they said was not itself prejudicial. They didn't say, "Goddamn woman; women are no good." They didn't say—there was never—I never heard that at all, about women or blacks or any other group. There was *never* any of that overt prejudice. I would've been gone to president of the university if there had been; it was none of that. But this was the problem. The problem is—see, hiring Natalie wasn't dangerous. Except maybe she'd revolutionize the department, now. She wasn't dangerous, she was a scholar, she had credentials. *This* person wasn't yet a scholar, had a manuscript rather than a book. But we weren't hiring her at tenure; we did this with men all the time. But the fear, which was articulated, was "could we fire her? Could we deny her tenure? Would now all the women in the state of California rise up with sickles and hammers and beat us down," you know?
- 20-00:22:53  
Lage: So this must've been after the women's movement had gotten underway.
- 20-00:22:56  
Levine: Well, of course. Of course, yes, it's always after the women's movement had gotten underway; they raised consciousness. It was in the sixties when we had no women in the department. We had a lot of women PhD students who were treated absolutely well, as far as I know. There were idiosyncratic professors who had their problems, but they learned to stay away from those people. You always have to do that. So that was expressed, and that became a motif, though it was no longer expressed very openly, but I saw it.
- 20-00:23:29  
Lage: Did they also express things like, "Will she finish her book? Will she start to raise a family?"

20-00:23:35

Levine: Well, they didn't express that, but there were those fears—you could see it and so, you know, "Can we fire her? Could we fire any black or woman? Would we be allowed to? Wouldn't this cause revolution in the streets?" So better not to hire them, though this was never said. But it was the zeitgeist that I felt. And I didn't—there wasn't enough—see, I find it difficult to talk about this because it puts me in the guise of "Good Guy," all-seeing, perceptive, decent, and a lot of my colleagues weren't. But the truth is a lot of my current colleagues just didn't see this issue [laughs]. It just didn't bother them. And the best story about this, is the story of—and here I will mention the name—Wolfgang Sauer, who was a professor of German, and he was himself a German who came to America after World War II as a scholar. In fact, we hired him from Germany, so he didn't come to America after World War II; he came to America after we hired him, which was sometime in the sixties. He was a full professor and came with a wife, and then the wife left him, and he had some problems, and I won't get into that, but I think he had some problems with women. In any case, he put a letter in the box—and because it was a public letter I feel perfectly free to talk about it—he put it in the box—he didn't send it to me as a private communication—he put it in the box of every member of the department—

20-00:25:01

Lage: Wow.

20-00:25:02

Levine: And I can't tell you the years. But Natalie was here already, and Diane was here; we had two women in the department. He said that it is clear that women are political appointments; you can't be sure they were appointed because of their scholarship. This was a fear that some of my colleagues had, and I don't just mean my colleagues in history, I mean my colleagues in the academe. You can't be sure that they were hired for their academic—therefore every woman is a potential political appointment and therefore no woman can be sure—I'm paraphrasing, of course—no woman can be sure that she was hired for her academic merits, and therefore any woman with self-respect would resign her position. And therefore, he could no longer participate in the hiring of women. Well, if he had written that letter about Jews or about blacks, African Americans, there would have been hell to pay. And I should've gone around trying to raise hell—I didn't. I thought the letter was idiosyncratic.

20-00:26:06

Lage: Did people discuss it in the hallways?

20-00:26:10

Levine: No, no. I brought it home, I talked about it to Cornelia, whatever. Of course, Cornelia's in German history, and when he first came we invited him and his wife. I said, "What a jerk," you know? "What a jerk" That's what I said, but it was very unperceptive of me. I should've raised it as an issue. I should've raised it as an issue at that *moment*. How dare you write a letter like this? What are we going to do about this prejudiced guy who demeans all women? But I didn't. No

one did.

20-00:26:38

Lage: Nobody did, not even Natalie.

20-00:26:39

Levine: And we paid a price for this because when Lynn Hunt came up for tenure we went into the room to vote, and I was sitting right next to Nat—right near Natalie. I could see her. It was a strange room we were in, and you could face members; you didn't just see backs of heads. And Wolfgang walks into the room. And when he walked into the room, I saw Natalie's face and she was just—I was shocked. Because he said he wasn't—see, he later parsed words; he said he wasn't going to participate in the hiring of women anymore but this wasn't the hiring of a woman, it was the promotion of a woman, that's how he explained why he was there. But it didn't matter. He walks into the room and I could see Natalie—now, Natalie didn't feel that she should be the one to raise objections, and I already had a reputation in the department as being Mr. Nosy, who raised all the issues about why we don't have more blacks and women. So I sat there saying, "Please God, let someone else stand up and do this. Let Reggie, or better yet Bill Bouwsma, or one of the really respectable members of the department, get up and say, 'I have a problem here,' because Professor—." But no, no, no. No one did. Everyone leans back. So, I keep looking at Natalie, and I see how troubled she is, and I'm troubled.

So I get up and I did it the wrong way, I guess. I should have gotten up—I realized in retrospect—and said, "I'm delighted to see Professor Sauer here. This means he's changed his mind. And I'm delighted. He now feels free to judge women as scholars and not some stereotype as politicians." Instead of that I questioned his right to be in the room, which was also, as far as I'm concerned, correct, but it gave a hammer to other people to beat me with, and boy, did they beat me. People jumped up. No one, *no one* said a word about Sauer's right to be there, but they jumped up about my saying something about Sauer's right. How dare I say this? They'd say, "This violates every—." The fact that he called all women political appointments and said they should resign never was raised. But the fact that *I* questioned whether someone who wrote a letter like that should be in the room when it came to giving tenure to a woman, I was beaten over the head.—

20-00:29:07

Lage: Wow.

20-00:29:08

Levine: Person after person, and not all of them conservatives, got up. And even some of my friends said, "What were you *doing*?" And then the next day—

20-00:29:17

Lage: Did you have a chance to answer?

- 20-00:29:20  
Levine: I can't remember if I got to say anything. I was very articulate. I quoted the letter, I—it wasn't a personal attack.
- 20-00:29:30  
Lage: But did he defend himself?
- 20-00:29:32  
Levine: Who?
- 20-00:29:33  
Lage: Sauer.
- 20-00:29:34  
Levine: Sauer? No, no. Never said a word. And as I recall, though I wouldn't swear to this, he abstained on the issue. She got tenure almost unanimously.
- 20-00:29:42  
Lage: So you went on with the matter at hand.
- 20-00:29:46  
Levine: Well, that was the—yeah, we went on, but I was—and then the next day, the chairman, Robert Brentano, asked me to come into his office. I already knew what this was going to be about, so I stopped at Reggie's office. And Reggie never saw this issue, I don't know why. He was so good about these things, but he just never fully saw this issue. I said, "I want you to come into the chairman's office with me because I have a feeling it's going to be a very bad meeting and I want a witness." So Reggie came in with me. And Bob Brentano, who was a putative liberal and a friend of women, said, "I have never in all my years in the academe"—I'm paraphrasing—"I have never in all my years in the academe seen anything more disgraceful than your behavior, blah, blah, blah, blah, blah, blah, blah," and, it was quite an amazing—
- 20-00:30:33  
Lage: So this is a case where the chairman came down on you for—
- 20-00:30:34  
Levine: Oh yeah. Well, I was a full professor by then, but the point is—and Brentano—well, it was during his chairmanship that I became a full professor, so I don't remember. But it didn't matter. I would have done this as an assistant professor. That's who I am; I raise these issues. So, it was a very bad scene, and two years later—
- 20-00:30:59  
Lage: Well, what else went on between you and Bob Brentano?
- 20-00:31:02  
Levine: Well, we were very friendly. He just—
- 20-00:31:04  
Lage: But did you question Mr. Sauer?

20-00:31:09

Levine: Well, I told him—

20-00:31:10

Lage: I mean, there was the other party, Wolfgang Sauer, who had done this rather disgraceful thing.

20-00:31:16

Levine: They didn't see it as—the lesson here—they did not see it. My colleagues didn't see his public letter as something—they thought—they did what I guess I did at first, just threw it away as idiosyncratic and—Sauer did some stupid things with students also; he had a problem. But I don't know that first hand, so I'm not going to speak about that. But this was egregious and I guess they just saw this eccentricity—they didn't see it—they wouldn't have seen it that way if it was Jews or blue-eyed males or Episcopalians; they wouldn't have seen it as idiosyncratic.

20-00:31:59

Lage: Now did you argue with Bob Brentano? I mean, did you get angry?

20-00:32:04

Levine: I'm sure I must've gotten angry, but I was shocked. I was shocked. I was going through a period of shock here, that to pardon—. Not one person—except me and Natalie, but she didn't speak—Not one person stood up and objected to this guy being in the room after he said what he said in a public letter to every member of the department? I was shocked. I couldn't believe it.

I was very friendly with the administrative assistant to the department—the woman who's in charge of—we used to drive home together. And so she drove me home that day of the meeting and she said, "Larry, I just don't know how I feel"—because Bob Brentano also spoke against me in the meeting before he spoke against me in his office—she says, "I don't know how I feel about this." And I said, Well, you don't have to feel any way, Mary; it's okay." She says, "But I really don't know. You were articulate, and Bob was so articulate, and I don't know how I feel about this." I said, "Good." I was a little shocked at this, that she shouldn't know how she feels, but that's okay. Because of the issue, I thought every woman should feel there's only one issue here. But she didn't.

The next day, after my meeting with Brentano, we drove home—one of us would drive—we lived just two blocks apart and—and she said to me, in effect—she was not a very political person or anything—but she said in effect, "Well, my ambivalence is over. All day long members of the department have come into Bob's office"—she was right next door—"to congratulate him on the way he handled you yesterday." And she said, "And the self-satisfaction has just turned me away from my ambivalence." So I'm only raising that issue, not because there are any evil guys here—I remain friendly with Brentano; he came to my house, I came to his—I've never suffered for that, I've never—

20-00:34:07

Lage: Did it get discussed in later years, when—?

20-00:34:10

Levine: No, no. I'm only raising this to show a certain—I don't know what the word is—obtuseness? On the issue of women, that would not have been there on the issue of other groups. Women were not considered to be a minority—

20-00:34:23

Lage: Now, more women did come into the department.

20-00:34:27

Levine: Oh yes.

20-00:34:28

Lage: Did it change—or how did it change the department?

20-00:34:30

Levine: Well, women now have a—they're still the minority, but there's a critical mass of women who can protect themselves. They don't need Larry Levine or anyone else to stand up. When Lynn Hunt left to go to the University of Pennsylvania, she made a remark about “the Berkeley department dominated”—I'm paraphrasing—“the Berkeley department dominated by old anti-feminist, old something anti-feminist people,” I can't remember the exact term she used. She did not leave the university—she got tenure and was a full professor and she was honored here, but she thought the department was rife with anti-feminism, and I think it probably was. And that's too bad.

So there was that thing that troubled me and then women did come in in larger numbers, and there are a good core of women that could be more—I have no doubt that there are a good core of women in the department now. And like they're human beings, you know, I fought with some of these women later, on other issues. See, it's not that nirvana was achieved but some fairness and equity was achieved.

Now on the question of blacks, this department had no one in African-American—no African American taught American history until Waldo Martin was hired. I don't know when he was hired; I don't have the years. Though we did—I pushed a number of candidates and finally—one very interesting issue is the issue of Nathan Huggins, who had a Berkeley BA, and then he went to Harvard for his PhD, and then—of course it was very hard for blacks to get jobs in those days, and there's some wonderful stories about that but—getting a job—he got his first job at Long Beach, and he's convinced it's because his was the only name that wasn't obviously Jewish. So they hired a black guy without knowing it. So he went to Cal State Long Beach, and then he went to U Mass Boston, a new campus in Boston, and then he visited us. And while he was visiting us, he was finishing his second book on the Harlem Renaissance.

20-00:36:49

Lage: When you say visited, was he a visiting professor?

20-00:36:51

Levine: Yes, he was, sorry. He was a visiting professor. He was finishing his book. And I said we ought to hire this guy. He's just so smart and he's so nice and a very brilliant guy, and his book was very good. His first book was a dissertation. It had nothing to do with black history. His first book was a dissertation at Harvard on social work in the late nineteenth century. It was very much a monograph. But the second book on the Harlem Renaissance was just full of ideas and was a terrifically innovative, interesting book, which I didn't always agree with, but it was *really* interesting. It's still read widely and still maybe the best book on the Harlem Renaissance, history book. Anyway, it was hard to—we finally got him through, and he was offered a full professorship, but he turned us down because Columbia offered him a full professorship, and he decided that was the venue he wanted, the big city and he was a single guy, and he met a wife there and he had a wonderfully productive decade.

20-00:37:58

Lage: Now, you say you finally got him through. Was it difficult to get him—?

20-00:38:01

Levine: Yeah, it was. And I think again, unspoken. I think there was this feeling—well, there were some people that felt he didn't deserve a full professorship, the dissertation was a monograph, the book blah blah, it wasn't everyone's kind of book; those are usual issues that come up. But I think there was this whole fear that we were hiring because he was a black and that we wouldn't be hiring him if he was not a black. Well, yeah. We had no one teaching—hey, we had a lot of people who could teach African-American history, but we didn't have any blacks in the department. I really thought we had to end that, and he was a great candidate to end it, and the department did come around. But it wasn't the unanimous—but it didn't matter.

20-00:38:45

Lage: He turned us down.

20-00:38:46

Levine: He turned us down.

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Lage: Where there other attempts before Waldo Martin?

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Levine: There were attempts, and there were other black guys—we had a young black guy in African history who came here, but—

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Lage: African, not African-American.

20-00:39:01

Levine: No—but was not happy here. He made a remark to me, “I was not meticulously trained in Arabic”—he was an Arabist who studied Arabic culture in Africa—“I was not meticulously trained in Arabic to teach English to Berkeley undergraduates,” you know. So I said to myself, “Well, he’s in the wrong place.” And he did go—he went to an Ivy League college. So, he left Berkeley, but there were—and there still are. The only black in American history is still Waldo Martin. There’s—there’s one, and I think they just—there’s Tabitha Kanogo in African history and I think they just hired—I think the new African hire is also African American. Ah! Not African American, African. I don’t know why, I think he’s an African, like Tabitha. There is, what’s his name? He’s such a nice guy, in French history. I’m blanking his name. He came after, but I knew him. He came after I left.

20-00:40:06

Lage: Is he African American or African?

20-00:40:08

Levine: Yes, he’s African American, and so there were four or five black people in the department, which is good. You know, the students used to make a very interesting argument. When I was on committees and we met with minority students, they’d say things like, “There only is only one black at Berkeley.” And I said, “Well, actually, there are two. There’s Waldo Martin and Tabitha Kanogo” “Oh, no, no. She’s African. You see?” they’d say. And they’d do the same thing, “No Asians.” And I’d say, “Oh, there is.” “No, she’s Chinese, see?” But they’d say—listen to this argument, it’s so interesting—“They didn’t have the experience of growing up as a minority. They grew up as a majority. And so that’s a whole different thing. They’re not like us; they didn’t grow up from the beginning.” It’s an interesting argument. I don’t credit it, but it’s a balanced—in any case, there still aren’t a heck of a lot of minorities.

Look, when I left Berkeley I went to George Mason University, and I want to say, while George Mason is still majority male, there are a lot of women in that department and there’s just no issue. Now it’s later, it’s true, and there’s probably no issue in the Berkeley department now, but it’s just—I don’t know that there was ever an issue—there’s just no issue—I don’t. But that’s a little unfair—

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Lage: But then you weren’t there during these years where everything was controversial.

20-00:41:37

Levine: For instance, let me give you an example. Spousal appointments is an area that the academe is going to have to come to terms with because no longer do males, for the most part, carry docile females with them; their women have jobs and a lot of them have jobs in the academe—their wives, I meant to say—they have jobs in the academe. And to get scholars you sometimes—either way, if you want the woman you’ve got to get the man, and you want the man you’ve got to get the

woman, and the trick is to find two people you really want to hire, who can add something to your department, not to hire one and then just make a grudging appointment to the other. Of course not. George Mason University History Department has at least three spousal appointments, and they're good appointments and they're both terrific scholars.

I left here irritated over a number of issues. I mean, I decided to accept the last year of VERIP, and one of the issues was—I'm not going to go into details—but one of the issues was a spousal appointment, and it was a woman. And it's not an easy issue because a lot of the women didn't like it. They didn't—"Oh, we're just hiring her because you want him and it's really a bad—." That was unfair. Totally unfair. But Berkeley hasn't swallowed that issue yet and has to. It's a conservative—there's a conservatism there. Can you make a spousal appointment where you want both people? Yes, you can. Can you make a spousal appointment both parts of which will add to your department? Yes, you can. But Berkeley hasn't gotten there yet, and a lot of other places have. And that's the kind of conservatism—and so women can show it just as well as men; there's no question about that. So a lot of women were concerned that the spousal appointment I was trying to make was a grudging woman to get the guy.

20-00:43:38

Lage: They didn't want that?

20-00:43:39

Levine: That's what they said. I think there was a little strangeness going on, but there was a great woman, who's a terrific scholar and has since published another book that's first rate—

20-00:43:53

Lage: They didn't come here, I take it?

20-00:43:55

Levine: They didn't. She lost. And he left. He was here, and I was trying to make the appointment of his wife as well. They were teaching in two different places, and it was getting less and less viable. I thought, "She's so good and he's so good; why don't we keep them both?" And so we tried to make this appointment. It wasn't the reason I left, but it was just another irritant. I was tired of these fights. I thought, "By now I'm still having these fights?" So I went to George Mason thinking, "I'm only going to be there for a year, I won't get involved, I'm not going to be Larry Levine there, I'm going to be a nice senior guy teaching." But I've gotten very involved in that department and it's kind of—absolutely—it could get bad, who knows what happens? But it's kind of a lovely, tolerant place. People are happy there. There are no—you could hire anyone there and there's no—they wouldn't tolerate—I mean it's later, it's true. But what I'm trying to say is Berkeley still has some problems with an issue they're going to have to bite the bullet on. Because you can't build a department without some spousal appointments; it's going to be very difficult. You're going to lose a lot of good people if you're not willing to make spousal appointments, and Berkeley, thus far,

has not been willing.

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Lage: I have a couple things when you—

20-00:45:09

Levine: And it's still, when I say that Berkeley has a critical mass of women, it doesn't have a critical mass of others.

20-00:45:16

Lage: Of other, racial, minorities.

20-00:45:20

Levine: Of other minorities, yeah. Yeah, several blacks only two of whom are American born—that's an interesting issue—and two of whom are African born. I think there are now four. I could be wrong. It has one Asian American, maybe two, but I just—I have an awful feeling that Berkeley could do better than this without even trying. But these are hard issues to—.

Let me give you an example. And this is not necessarily something I'm right about. I want to say I understand that I'm just a fragile person here with a view and it could be not completely correct, but I'm willing to talk about it because I think it's important that we talk about these things. I, more than once, got up and said we should—I mean, the first time I did this, I got up in the department and said we should create a search committee to hire a woman in any field. I didn't care what field it was. And people said, "No, Larry, we don't do things like that here. We don't hire people that way. We don't hire that way, we hire intellectually, we hire by field." I said, "Now look," I said, "the fact of the matter is, you don't create committees that say 'Let's hire the best historian we can find.' First of all that's an unviable committee, and second of all that's not the way we hire. We hire, 'let's hire a French historian, let's hire a modern French historian because we have a revolutionary French historian, or we have a Renaissance French historian, let's hire some other French historian. Let's hire a medievalist who does Italy.'" I said, "*That's* the way we hire, and then we find the best medievalist who fits our needs, who fits our standards, and we hire him or her—well, him. [laughter] We hire him." I said, "That's the way we hire. Well, I'm telling you that we need women in this department. We intellectually need women. We train women. There are no women in this department, so let's go out and hire a woman and then another woman and then another woman and hire someone who fits our standards. And if you want to narrow it to fields, great, I don't care, but we have to have a committee that—." And I'd make the same argument for blacks, and I was shouted down all the time.

20-00:47:45

Lage: This was not acceptable.

Levine:

Well, ultimately it was, and we ultimately did create a committee looking for minorities in African-American history; we did. But, no, it was not acceptable and it broke all the conventions of the department. But see, I think so because we

never hire the best person available in the country; we hire the best person in the field we think is important to our teaching program and our intellectual life. I thought women and blacks and Asians and whatever else are important. For instance, it would be good to have some Native Americans. Now it is true you're limited by who's there, and the problem goes back to graduate school and the problem goes back to high school and the feeling that you can do this. For me it was an accident. No one ever told me I could do this, and I wasn't sure for years. I haven't talked about my own insecurities, but—

20-00:48:38

Lage: Yes you have! [laughter] You have for sure. Well, what difference did it make to the department and to the scholarship in the department to have women?

20-00:48:50

Levine: Well, first of all, a lot of our graduate students are women, so it made a big difference. If you don't have role models for people, if you don't have—after all, we don't ask our medievalists to train with Americanists. We ask them to train with medievalists who have the knowledge and who are role models. This is the way medievalists do things. Women were in an all-male department. Some of those males had problems. They're the guys who sent female over-achievers to me. I mean, I don't know that I would want my daughter studying graduate work with someone who thought of "female overachievers." So, though I don't know cases of them—I mean, I should, there are cases—my own students—I have many women students—my own students, I don't recall them, I don't know that they felt free to be as open as I am, but I don't remember cases of them coming to me and saying that Professor So and So is an arch bastard or something like that. I don't think—

20-00:49:47

Lage: Well, did they ever come to you and say "you're not sensitive to gender issues in scholarship?" Or—

20-00:49:52

Levine: No, they didn't. But maybe they should've.

20-00:49:53

Lage: —"you don't like the choice of my dissertation topic because it's gender oriented."

20-00:49:59

Levine: No, that never happened.

20-00:50:00

Lage: But did that happen in the department, do you think? Did women bring a new kind of history or a new focus?

20-00:50:06

Levine: Well, that's a very good question. I can't honestly answer that. In the area I know best—which are my students—see I'm open to anything. I'll allow a student to write on anything. When I went to the University of Wisconsin and I gave a

series of the Merle Curti lectures, and I gave a series of lectures on the Great Depression back in 1991—I lectured on the Great Depression thinking that's the book I was writing at that moment; I lectured on everything. I lectured on comic books and, you know, detective novels—my wife sat there, and she said, "The students were stunned." And Merle Curti, who was an old man, wrote me a letter and said, "I think this was a stunning—." My wife said, "The students can't believe you're a Berkeley professor talking about Superman." And a young woman asked me if I'd have coffee with her—and she's now a professor in New Zealand; I've met her, again—we had a nice coffee, and she said to me, "I so wanted to work on women fans of Hollywood." You know, the whole phenomenon of women becoming Hollywood fans, fanatics, you know? "And the movies. And I went to"—there's no need for me to mention names; she went to some senior professor—old woman—she went to two women. And the senior professor said, "What!?" [laughter] So, that didn't work. That seemed frivolous to her. And then she went to a junior professor—well, she wasn't junior; she was a younger woman but she was a tenured professor—she went to a younger woman, who's a terrific scholar. I know both of these people she went to, and they're both friends of mine, and the second person said, "It's a great topic, but I know nothing about it and I can't direct it." So she picked another topic and she's now working on this for her second book. I think she's working on this for her second book.

But see, I wouldn't have said that to her, if I knew nothing about it. I'd say, "Great!" Because you know what? They become experts anyway. They learn much more about the subject than you do, and I'm in popular culture and—there's nothing they can say—unless I think it's a crappy topic or too difficult a topic in terms of getting it done or—I don't know. I reject very few subjects that are reasonably put. No, I never had that problem, and I don't honestly remember a woman coming to me and saying, "Professor So and So won't let me work on this." Now I have had women come to me from other departments, two of them, who became my students. One of them is Ruth Rosen. She came from Art History, and she walked into my office one day and she said, "I've got to get out of that department." Art History isn't very good, especially to Americanists. And they're a very classically—not my favorite department. [laughter] I think maybe they're better now, but they weren't then. I love art history but I don't always love the way it's taught. But she came to me, Ruth Rosen came to me and said—see, it's not easy to transfer. What they don't want is students entering a graduate program in a department that's easier to get into—I'm not sure that's true of Art History; I'm just saying that—and then transferring after one year, so they make it very hard to transfer. You have to have all kinds of letters and—so Ruth Rosen, who I didn't know, said, "Would you support my transfer to History?" And we talked long enough for me to get the sense that this was a very bright person who wanted to do US history and women's history which—so I did write that letter, and she got into the history program. And the rest is history.

20-00:53:43

Levine: So these were issues that troubled me for many years. There were no good guys and bad guys here, but there were people who were behind the times and people who were not and—

20-00:53:53

Lage: Yeah. But it doesn't sound as if—for instance I think Fred Wakeman made the point that there was a shift in kinds of history that women brought, or contributed to, or came along at the same time as. Is that—?

20-00:54:11

Levine: I think that's absolutely true. I think there are lots of women doing standard kind of history—

20-00:53:16

Lage: Diane Clemens.

20-00:53:18

Levine: Diane Clemens and lots of others. There are lots of women political historians. There was a pressure on women to go into women's history, and of course Natalie Davis got into women's history because there was no one else teaching it. And if a woman didn't, who was going to do it? I understand that. But there were also women who didn't. And there were blacks who didn't want to teach black—my friend Nell Painter, who always taught black history always taught other kinds of history, too. She didn't want to be put into a box. Clarence Walker, who was a Berkeley PhD at Davis, *refuses* to just be called an African-American historian. He teaches the whole gestalt, you know? So you've always had that. It's not easy to box people up. I really think there was a lot of stereotypical thinking that "we're going to get locked into giving this person tenure and no one's going to allow us not to." There was also some insensitivity about the need for this. Our student body was changing and we needed to have a more eclectic, diverse teaching group, and—did I go through departments that had no or few Jews in it? Absolutely. Did it hurt me? No. But, after a while as Jews began to enter the profession, it's probably good to have, you know—there were a lot of Jews entering—there were very few Jews at Columbia. City College had a lot of Jews, but that's where Jews got jobs. But some of those Jews at City College were unrecognizable to me [laughter] you know, their...yeah.

So, okay. During my last decade I became increasingly dissatisfied with the department. There were a lot of fights, there were—

20-00:56:05

Lage: What were the fights over?

20-00:56:06

Levine: Well, I don't even know. I mean that fight I was in over a spousal appointment—there was resentment increasing—the resentment of people who had chairs. Why should they be privileged? A chair is undemocratic. There were a lot of tensions. People wanted to know what other people were earning and I never heard of that

before. They have the right to know. It's a public university. I don't know how you'd find out; to this day I don't know how you would find out, but I guess you can. You know, in Wisconsin it's published once a year, at Virginia it's published—it's easy to find out what you earn. I never—who cares? I don't care what my colleagues are making, but that was never an issue when I was younger, and suddenly it became an issue; I heard people talking about it. What does he earn, she earn? As I said, we're being conservative to new trends, such as spousal appointments.

So when VERIP came—the first VERIP lasted for four years, three of which were VERIP years; they skipped a year. That was—VERIP, of course, was the accelerated retirement plan in which they were giving you years of credit. The first one was five years. In other words you—they added five years onto the number of years you served, so it was attractive. You could retire at a younger age. And then six years, and then in the last year was eight years, which was a lot. That's the one I took. But I didn't take it because of the eight years. If I had been happy I would've stayed. I was less and less happy. The first year of VERIP, I was on leave at the Stanford think tank, the Center for Advanced Study in the Behavioral Sciences, and that was the first year of VERIP. I was in fact not even sixty yet—I was fifty-nine or something like that, fifty-eight, and Skip Gates, Henry Louis Gates, was then at Duke University, and he was offered the chairmanship of African American Studies at Harvard, which my dear friend—I had been offered a job at Harvard. I meant to say—

20-00:58:07

Lage: Yeah, you didn't—

20-00:58:08

Levine: In my happy phase I turned down a lot of jobs, Harvard, Yale, and other places. So I was very happy at Berkeley and didn't go to the—I had no call to the Ivy League. A lot of people do, but I didn't have one. Cambridge did not look better than Berkeley to me. [laughter] I like the climate here and I like the freedom here.

But Skip came and he said, "Listen, I would love to take you with me to Harvard. You've already been vetted for that appointment in 1980 and they probably wouldn't even have to do that again and—so there I was. I could take VERIP, I could retire, I could get a pension, and I could go to a full Harvard salary. And my wife and I took a long walk in the Palo Alto hills and decided we really didn't want to go to Cambridge, Massachusetts. We hadn't wanted to in 1980 when we almost went—we were tempted partly—and we didn't want to go now. I said no to Skip, but it would've been a very good deal for me to get a pension and a Harvard salary and the interest. Skip said to me at one point, "What would you like, Larry? What would you like to do? Is there something you would like? Because we're going to have this center and there's a lot of money. What would you like? Right off the top of your head." I said, "I'd like to build the best," I just said it off the top of my head, "I'd like to build the best collection of African-

American films in the world." And Skip, who was a little bit grandiose said, "(clap) It's done. We'll do it. We'll get the money, I know we—"

20-00:59:41

Lage: They can do that at Harvard, apparently.

Levine: Well, they can, you see? So it was tempting, and Corni and I walked and walked and talked and talked and decided against it. That was the first year of VERIP. Three years later, the fourth year of VERIP—and actually there was a missing year there, so it was really only the third year but it took four years to get there, 1994, late in the year, the academic year of '93-'94. You had to let them know by the end of April—I think it's true—that you were going to take it. It would've allowed me to retire at the age of 61, which I was then, and with forty years of credit. I had been at Berkeley for thirty-two years, and they were offering a bonus of eight years so I could retire as if I had been there for 40 years, which I would not be there for for eight more years. And it was a decent pension.

So I got the notion, but late, that maybe it would be good to get a half time job—which is not easy to get in the academe, but I thought I had the reputation to maybe convince someone that they wanted me half time. I picked George Mason University because it was a place that did things like this. I knew a number of people who were there half time. Catherine Bateson, who was Margaret Mead's daughter, was a half-time professor there. So I phoned my friend Roy Rosenzweig and I said, "If you could arrange this, through the History Department, I would come." I think Roy was stunned. I wasn't sure I would—though, he couldn't think of any reason why I would do this unless I wanted to come—so he did. He went to the History Department. They were interested immediately, and they voted me a half time job, and then they went to the dean and the provost, and the thing was very quick, within weeks. It had to be quick because I only had a month. And they accepted me and I went, and I've never regretted it. You know, there were times when thoughts come and—I think to myself, "I left the best History Department at the best university, best public university, in the world," probably, you know, and—or one of the very best, anyway—"for a place that a lot of people had never heard of." [laughter] Though it's in a place we like and we got a little apartment in Washington and—

20-00:61:59

Lage: So Cornelia didn't mind the move for half the year?

20-00:62:03

Levine: Cornelia began to see that I was getting unhappy, and she didn't want me to be unhappy—

20-00:62:06

Lage: Talk more about, now, why you were unhappy.

20-00:62:09

Levine: I can't tell you why, beyond what I've told you. There was a spirit in the department which I didn't like. I was also a little antsy. I never had my mid-

forties rebellion. Seriously, I think there was a spirit in the department that made me unhappy and—

20-00:62:26

Lage: And it affected your work? Or your—

20-00:62:30

Levine: I don't know if this is objective or not, but there was a kind of fight, but I lost lots of fights. I wasn't on some kind of ego trip which said I had to win every—and I also won lots of fights. And I had something to do with helping to shape the department and I was proud of that. And it was a much more diverse department than it had been; it would've been without my presence, but I like to think I, and other people like Leon and many—and Reggie, had something to do with it, and—I mean he—I think he definitely had something to do with it and so I was happy about that. But there was a spirit of—kind of an envy or—I don't know. I don't even know that I can say this objectively. I'm just telling you the way I felt. I was just ready to do something else. I had been there thirty-two years, which is a long time, and I had no aspirations of being a fifty-year man, or anything.

And I thought that this would also be exciting. It would give me a half of a year to work on my own stuff and—I had lots of leave time at Berkeley—I had a chair, which helped finance leaves. But I didn't want a chair if the chair was going to generate envy, and I think it did. I think by then it—though I don't know how it was—

20-00:63:50

Lage: Maybe you weren't comfortable being a chair—?

20-00:63:53

Levine: I think the major thing was the tenor of the fight over the spousal appointment that made me—that convinced me this wasn't the department I had belonged to for so long. And I didn't like its spirit anymore. That's not to say that I was right, but it's just to say—

20-00:64:11

Lage: That's just what you felt at the time.

20-00:64:13

Levine: So there was a pull and a push. I was being pushed, but I was also being pulled. Once I realized, "Hey, I can get a pension and I can also work half time," I decided to try it—to do that.

20-00:64:23

Lage: And were your—what was the reaction to your doing that? In the department. Was anybody kind of resentful, or—?

20-00:64:32

Levine: Yeah, I think there were people who were upset that I did it. I like to think that, and they have told me—Tabitha Kanogo, our African historian, who's a Kenyan, I believe; yeah, she's Kenyan—said something I can't—I wish I could—I can't

imitate her wonderful African accent or the exact words she said, but she said, "In my country, when people go away, we have two feelings. One is that we are very sad because they were so valuable. And one is that we are very angry." [laughs] And that was very lovely, and I kissed her. There were other people who told me that they were upset, and yeah, there were. Sure, I would've been upset if—knowing some of my friends were. But then I wasn't going away permanently.

20-00:65:22

Lage: No.

20-00:65:23

Levine: We were keeping a home in Berkeley. We were going to come back every year. We were going to spend seven months a year in Berkeley and five months a year in DC, or four and a half months a year in DC. So, it wasn't a monu—we weren't leaving to go to Harvard, which we would've done if we had accepted that. I don't know if Skip Gates could do what he said he could do, but I suspect he could. I say, "They wanted him badly enough so he could've brought—" I mean, they already offered me a job twenty years earlier. Oh no! It was only eleven years earlier, in 1980. So that is the story of Larry Levine at Berkeley. Thirty-two years.

20-00:65:56

Lage: Thirty-two years. Now, the one spot—I think we're really pushing it here, but—

20-00:66:00

Levine: We can push it.

20-00:66:002

Lage: We didn't talk about your role in the OAH and your presidency and—is this something that we should talk about?

20-00:66:11

Levine: Well, I'm willing to do that. It's not my years at Berkeley, but I'm willing to do that. I—

20-00:66:13

Lage: Can we just stop for a minute?

[Audio File 21]

21-00:00:00

Lage: Okay, we're recording again. You were just showing me Bob Middlekauff's new book, and I asked you if you read your colleagues.

21-00:00:09

Levine: I do. Certainly my colleagues in my field. I definitely do. But I have read my colleagues' books in many fields. One of the wonderful things about the

Berkeley History Department is there was a lot of reading; I think there still is a lot of reading, which is a lot of work. When we hired people it wasn't left to a small coterie of a committee—that led to problems, of course, but they're good problems—it wasn't left to a small coterie to read the work and decide for the department, and the department comes in and says, oh yeah, Joe and Bill and Jane are on that committee; I trust them. The department actually read the work, and I think you have an obligation to do that because—especially if you hire more advanced assistant professors, who are closer to tenure, and then they have a book pretty formed and the department could have read it but it doesn't, and then two years later, they come up for tenure, the department votes against them. It's happened once or twice in this department. But on the whole, the department read. You can tell from the discussions. Now, there are some times you say, "Oh, come on." They say, "Oh, in chapter three"—and then you wonder, did they read more than chapter three—"in chapter three, they do this, they do that." You get some of those kinds of Talmudic readings of—but on the whole, it was a wonderful atmosphere. People read, they were erudite, it was very good.

One of my favorite anecdotes was—Joseph Levenson, who was a wonderful person, who died young; he drowned in the Russian River in 1970, I think. We were appointing somebody, and Joe got up and talked about this person's work. It may have been a promotion to full professor; I don't remember, or to tenure. Joe got up and discussed this person's work and said why he liked it so much, and sat down. Someone else got up and said, "Well, that's the book Joe would have written" [laughs] "if Joe had written this book."

21-00:02:18

Lage: Oh, I see what you mean. Funny. Was this an arena where discussions took place about kinds of history?

21-00:02:30

Levine: Sure, it could be.

21-00:02:31

Lage: Were there conflicts over the new cultural history versus more traditional sorts?

21-00:02:36

Levine: There was no question there. This department, it seems to me, from the outside now, is moving much more into the political realm.

21-00:02:43

Lage: More political?

21-00:02:44

Levine: Oh, absolutely, more solidly. That's how it seems to me, I don't know. I don't pretend to know all the new people in the department; I don't know them at all, in fact, and I haven't read their work.

21-00:02:54

Lage: But what about the years when you were active? Was there a trend?

- 21-00:02:57  
Levine: There was tolerance for the stuff I did and stuff other people did. I think there was tolerance.
- 21-00:03:05  
Lage: But was there more than tolerance? Were people interested in the cultural history?
- 21-00:03:08  
Levine: Yeah, they were.
- 21-00:03:09  
Lage: Did anyone say, "We've had enough of this crap"?
- 21-00:03:11  
Levine: No, I don't think so. I don't recall all the things people said. People say all kinds of outrageous things, including me, in hiring sessions and all.
- 21-00:03:25  
Lage: Was this a place where any kind of tension about new kinds of history played out?
- 21-00:03:29  
Levine: I don't recall that. I think there were tensions here and there, like the tension I mentioned about Yalta. But no. Look, there's no question that people have a sense of what is valuable and what is not valuable, and sometimes you have to convince them—would they have hired me if black culture had been, or parts of it, or if I had written on slave spirituals, would I have gotten that initial job at Berkeley rather than writing on William Jennings Bryan? Probably not.
- 21-00:03:58  
Lage: At that time, but maybe you would have ten years later, or fifteen years later.
- 21-00:04:00  
Levine: Later, I got a full professorship out of it. Yeah. Well, I was a full professor, but they were very pleased with the book when it came out. But it still wasn't everyone's cup of tea. There's no question about that. It was just a necessary book to write. All these books were necessary. The attitude towards Africa in the sixties in this department was that there was no history. I said that before. I won't point to specific people, but people told me there is no history there. Even recently, Arthur Schlesinger, Jr., wrote, he says that barbarism and famine, that's what Africa is. It's totally ignorant. And he's such a good American historian. He should stay away from things he doesn't know about. It's a totally ignorant view of a culture they don't know. They don't know the art, they don't know the music, they don't know the religions. They just don't know.
- 21-00:04:56  
Lage: In the department, when they're judging hiring a historian of Africa, do you get that kind of—

- 21-00:05:04  
 Levine: They've hired so few of them in my time here. I haven't got a pattern for you.
- 21-00:05:09  
 Lage: How do you judge someone so far out of your field?
- 21-00:05:13  
 Levine: I think you can. What you can't judge is the contribution they're making because you don't know the literature, but you can judge the work.
- 21-00:05:23  
 Lage: You can judge the quality.
- 21-00:05:25  
 Levine: Sure you can, if you extend yourself. But what is much harder—you give me a book in a field I know, I can tell you, after I read the book, what this contributes and what it doesn't contribute, et cetera. But I can't do that in Kenyan history, because I haven't ever read anything in Kenyan history. All I can say is, this is a good book, but it may duplicate, that kind of thing. That's where it's difficult, and that's where you need experts who tell you, this book does this for the field. That's what you want. You want to hire people who are contributing and not just going over stuff that's been gone over fifty times and not saying anything new. We *are* reliant on them, and we go outside the department when we have to; we bring in people. Then, often, you go outside the department anyway. That is one of the pains in the neck about the profession. When you get to be a senior person, you're asked continuously to help departments—
- 21-00:06:26  
 Lage: Elsewhere.
- 21-00:06:27  
 Levine: Elsewhere. Would you read so-and-so's work? He's up for tenure. This kind of stuff.
- 21-00:06:33  
 Lage: A lot of reading.
- 21-00:06:33  
 Levine: It's very time-consuming. I've done a lot of it. And presses do this, too; "Would you read—" Everyone's got to be vetted. No one has confidence in their own institution. Departments do this a little too much, and Harvard and places like that *really* presume to do it. When I was offered a professorship at Harvard, three people, all of whom are major people—John Hope Franklin, David Brion Davis, and Herbert Gutman—were brought in to vet me. What a waste of their time. Harvard has enough good people, and I had enough work. They could have read my work and made a decision.
- 21-00:07:14  
 Lage: Does Berkeley do that also?

21-00:07:17

Levine:

They don't bring people in and make them come to Cambridge and sit—I guess Harvard thinks it's a great honor to be forced to come to Cambridge. They don't create a committee where they make them—Berkeley does write letters: "We are thinking of hiring so-and-so." Harvard not only does this, but Harvard has another—not only Harvard, but a number of Ivy League schools—they'll send you a letter in which there will be ten names, and you're supposed to say how this person relates to the names on that list. I always write back.

21-00:07:49

Lage:

You mean, kind of rank?

21-00:07:51

Levine:

Yeah. I write back and say, "That's your job. I'll tell you what I think of this person's work, and it's your job to rank them." As if you have to hire the best person in the world. You want to hire someone who's good, who does what you want. There's a lot of pretension in the field. Berkeley doesn't do that. Berkeley will simply write somebody and say, "We are making an appointment of so-and-so." There are two ways to do that. One is a known person, and you ask them for letters, or if you're appointing Woodrow Borah to a chair, *yeah*, you write and ask people what they think of Woodrow Borah's work. If you're making an appointment of someone who has an unpublished manuscript you might ask people if they would look at it. That's a lot of work, and I've done a lot of that for departments, who are very unappreciative on the whole. Often, I have never even gotten a letter from a department saying, thank you for your—sometimes you get letters, and sometimes you don't. They're very unappreciative. I'm amazed at that, because to ask someone to read a manuscript of a young person, in addition to all the work we do—which, I don't know if I've spoken about this, but since I have a venue here, I'm going to speak about it.

The academic world is a very deceptive world, because to the outsiders it looks as if you have no work at all. You meet classes for four or five hours a week, and you give a few lectures. The students don't even understand it. They don't understand what goes into a lecture. You get up there, you talk. "It's pretty good, it's funny He says interesting things. Gosh, I wish I could do that." They have no sense that it could take you twelve hours to prepare that lecture, or indeed that the lecture is the product of years and years and years and years of experience and everything else. Why *should* they know that? They don't know that. So it looks like an easy job, and it's so deceptive, because I think there probably aren't many jobs that take more work to do this well. A lot of the teaching we do, the departments themselves don't recognize it. I, for years, tried to get Berkeley to give credit for the dissertations your students produce, which you've put an enormous amount of effort into. I happen to be in a field where there are lots of dissertations. The great enemy of this—it sounds like he was my enemy, and he wasn't, he was my friend—but the great enemy of this was Bob Brentano, who himself had a lot of students. So I can't say it's because he was in a small field and had no students. He was in a small field, but he had lots of students. Bob

used to get up and say, "Micrometer calipers will measure all the teaching we do." No, he was against giving any extra credit for anything.

21-00:10:40

Lage: Don't Americanists tend to have more doctoral students?

21-00:10:43

Levine: Americanists do tend to have more, and the department, in fact, has just voted to do this, this year. They are now going to be giving credit for other things you do.

21-00:10:52

Lage: When you say credit, you mean towards your teaching load?

21-00:10:54

Levine: Well, I mean teaching credit. That's right. If you're the first reader on x number of dissertations you get a course credit. Every ten dissertations. It's like you've taught a course, and then you get a course reduction. If you've had x number of junior seminars, tutorials, where—I did an enormous amount of that. I'd sit with undergraduates, meet them every week. I do that now at George Mason. That's a lot of teaching, where you meet every week with one or two students, and you go through a syllabus with them and discuss things with them. Or where you have dissertation students who are constantly sending you chapters. I've worked very hard this spring, when I'm supposedly not teaching. I've got three students finished their dissertations, and I struggled like hell to read them before my health ordeal begins.

So here it looks like I'm doing nothing but my own work, when in fact I'm reading dissertations and other things. Students send me their lists of books. They're preparing for their orals. I get into discussions about what they should read. All done by email, which makes it easier than letters. But it still takes a lot of time. It takes a lot of time. Before you finish your dissertation, you may have read these chapters four or five times, depending on how good they are. It's a lot of work. It is a lot of work. I just finished three dissertations which are the product of many years of work, and I read the final versions. Then there are going to be defenses. It's work. So you should get credit for this stuff. People at undergraduate schools who teach more often don't have any sense of how—though they also can teach tutorials and senior theses and junior theses and things like that, I guess. It's just a much harder job than it looks. But so much of it is done by yourself, sitting down, with what looks like leisure time.

My own father had problems, as proud as he was. I may have said this. He once came home from work very tired. I was a graduate student, still living at home. He sat down heavily in a chair and he said how tired he was. If he had been a drinking man, he would have then had his martini. But he wasn't, and didn't. I said, "Yeah, I'm very tired, too." He looked at me with amazement and said, "But you only read books all day." And why should he have known that that could be hard work?

21-00:13:31

Lage: It's a different kind of tiredness.

21-00:13:33

Levine: Well, it's a different kind of work. I guess it's a different kind of tiredness, sure. It's the kind of work he didn't fully see as work. He saw it as, "Great, those guys get paid for reading books. What a job." He wanted his son to have one of those jobs, but he didn't want his son to equate it as work, because he knew what work was. And that wasn't work.

When I was a young man, being paid okay—better than I ever thought; when I got my first academic salary of \$6,000 a year at City College of New York, that was more than my father had ever earned in his life. It caused a little tension, because I was so young by his standards. I was, was twenty-six. And I was getting \$6,000 a year, and he was not getting \$6,000 a year. By my standards, I was earning pretty good money, living in nice houses, living in lovely neighborhoods. I grew up looking at the Arrowhead Garage, and now I was looking at the bay. For me, it was a big step up. But nonetheless, it took a lot of work, and I never had much money. We had three kids and the like. So I didn't go to conventions very often. I went to conventions when I was invited to conventions to give a talk, but I never went. Leon Litwack *loved* to go, and he went. In those days, if I was at a convention with Leon, you couldn't walk across the floor because everyone knew—"Hey, Leon! Leon!" But I did not go most of the time. I didn't have the money to go, and there were a lot of little kids around to help with. I didn't go to them.

Therefore, I built up no store of credit in these organizations. I've walked through the American Historical Association, the Organization of American Historians, and knew very few people, didn't know how they worked. I remember, one year, you have to give, for every promotion you get, whether it's a big promotion from one rank to another, or, more likely, a smaller but nonetheless essential promotion from one step to another—these ranks have big steps. The full professor had eight steps, and now has nine. Ultimately, I ended up above scale, and then discovered that you still had kind of invisible steps. So every few years they asked you what you had done, and they recommended whether you should be promoted to the next step, visible or not.

Then you'd hand them things. Every once in a while, they'd hand you things back. Your books, your articles that you gave them. They did housecleaning, and the administrative assistant gave them back to you. One year, she gave back a pile of stuff to me, and I brought it home, and there were Xeroxes of articles and whatever. Xeroxes of articles and other things, my teaching. In it was a letter from a senior person at another institution. I should not have seen that letter, that was an accident. They don't give you the letters people write about you. They went outside to ask this person what he thought of me. He wrote a very fine letter, though it was an arcane letter. He thought my most important book was the Bryan book, and the black culture book was interesting but not as important.

That was wrong. But that's okay. That was his view. It was a very complimentary letter, except for one thing. That I was not a good member of the profession because I didn't go to conventions and was not an active member of either the AHA or the OAH, and that's too bad. I shouldn't have read that letter. I should have, I guess, instantly given it back, but I'm human, I read it. I instantly felt a sense of injustice here. What's he talking about? I *couldn't* go. We're in California, and it's expensive to go to these conventions. Most of them are in the East or in the Midwest, and you've got to get planes, and it costs money and takes time.

So by the first part of my career, well into my career, I was not much of a convention-goer. Then one year, because I guess my work was known, I was asked to run for the—I don't know what they're called. At the American Historical Association, the governing board is called the council. In the American History, it's called the executive board or something like that. They have elections. I ran for it and I won. Now *they* pay your way. They pay your expenses to come, since you're now a member of the board. So I served three years on that board, and then I got a similar thing on the council of the American Historical Association, a similar thing on—I think it's called the council of the American Studies Association. So I suddenly found myself going to conventions for the first time, and getting into these associations. I was nominated to run for president of the American Studies Association. I forget the year—and I lost. Beaten by Linda Kerber, who was a good friend of mine. I was delighted, if I had to lose, to lose to someone I respected and liked. Interestingly, Linda Kerber just beat Leon Litwack for president of the American Historical Association. So she has a habit of beating Berkeley people. Very nice woman and a good scholar.

Then I was asked to run for the American Studies Association again, and I said no, I don't think so. I lost once, and that was okay, but I don't want to lose twice. I was running for the presidency of the Organization of American Historians, and I didn't want two presidencies. Then I was asked a third time. Then I was asked a fourth time. And it began to occur to people that Larry Levine—see, there's no historical memory. When I told people I ran for this six years ago and lost, they said, "What?" They should have known. They should have had a list of people who run since they're on the committee to ask people to run. So there was that thing. Then I was asked, in 1992 or '91, to run. I served from '93—I served in ninety—

21-00:20:03

Lage:

Ninety-three is what I have down.

21-00:20:04

Levine:

Yeah, it's a whole academic year. Ninety-three, yeah. It was '93. I served in '93. I was president in '93, so I must have run a year or two before that, because she served one year as vice president. So I got into the associations through running for office.

21-00:20:25

Lage: And you won this one.

21-00:20:27

Levine: Then in 1984—and I will get back to the story—I won several of them. I was on the council, the executive board, the council. Those were all elections, and I won them all. So I did. I just lost one election. I may have lost several times if I kept running, but I decided not to. See, I decided that to lose once is okay. I just thought that if I lost twice, it might begin to bother me. It didn't bother me losing once, so I wanted to keep it that way, because I like the American Studies Association. I wanted to remain liking it. I don't particularly like to serve, to do this. I do have a sense of duty. I think most of us do. And it was interesting.

I did one good thing as president of the Organization of American Historians. I guess I was about to tell another story and never got there. I did one good thing as president of the American Historians. You've got to have one thing you want to do. I thought we ought to incorporate community college teachers. They're college teachers, and we had ignored them. So I started a program, which has really taken off, and it's wonderful, of making them part of the Organization of American Historians. More and more of them joined. There still aren't as many as I'd like to see. The organization reaches out to them. The members of community college faculties sit on the council now and run for office. It's good. I think it's a good thing. I'm very pleased with that. They gave me a venue for venting. I had my presidential address, where I could talk about the profession.

21-00:22:24

Lage: What did you vent? Did you have something—?

21-00:22:26

Levine: I was defending the profession and the university against the attacks, which were rife in those days.

21-00:22:36

Lage: That led to your—

21-00:22:37

Levine: That led to my book *The Opening of the American Mind*.

21-00:22:41

Lage: Is the OHA—?

21-00:22:43

Levine: OAH.

21-00:22:43

Lage: OAH. It's hard to keep all those straight.

21-00:22:45

Levine: It is. It was the Mississippi Valley Historical Association, and then it turned into the Organization of American Historians.

21:00:22:52

Lage: Then the OHA is the Oral History Association, which is in my mind. So OAH. Is it a site at all for negotiating these different trends in American history? Or do intellectual—?

21:00:23:06

Levine: They have many papers, and I think, increasingly, maybe always, but increasingly, there's a lot of methodological stuff and arguing. Yes. The papers are not published, so if you don't go to the sessions, it's hard to know what was said, but the papers are venues for that, sure. I think so. I think the conventions could be brought up to date, and a lot of people have tried. My colleague and friend, Roy Rosenzweig of George Mason, has tried to vary the papers, so sometimes you just have sessions where people talk spontaneously, and sometimes you have papers prepared in advance and people read and then they can discuss without having to hear the damn thing read, so there's more time. But nothing works. Somehow, they stay with the old-fashioned and sometimes boring thing of people getting up and reading papers, which leaves very little time for discussion.

21:00:24:08

Lage: They're mainly read, I've noticed.

21:00:24:10

Levine: They're read.

21:00:24:10

Lage: Rather than presented.

21:00:24:11

Levine: They're read. Yeah, they're read. It would be much better for people to look at the schedule, say, "Here are six sessions I'd like to read the papers of," and read the papers, which could so easily be available on the internet, and then go and discuss them. That would be much more—

21:00:24:30

Lage: That would be.

21:00:24:30

Levine: A person gets up and summarizes what she or he had to say in a few minutes, then sits down, and people discuss. The problem is that people don't get their papers done on time. I've been on so many sessions where people come at the last minute, finishing their papers, and you're supposed to write a comment on the papers. I was on one session where no one finished the papers on time, and one woman—it was American Studies Association, and it was mainly on anthropology, and because I do anthropological kind of work, I was asked if I'd comment. One woman sent me three or four papers she had published, and they came to well over a hundred pages. "If you read these, you'll get the gist of the paper I haven't finished writing."

21:00:25:17

Lage: It's amazing what people expect.

21:00:25:19

Levine: Yeah. There is that problem, but I think having the papers done in advance would be great. For instance, at the conference they're doing in my honor, in Virginia at George Mason University, in a few weeks, all the papers will be online, and people can read them. So no one is going to read a paper.

21:00:25:40

Lage: That's good. Let's finish this by talking a little bit about that conference, how it came about and who's going to be there.

21:00:25:46

Levine: For some years, some of my students, ex-students—I have a lot of ex-students who are faculty members—said, "We'd like to do a festschrift for you," a volume of essays. You can only have a festschrift done for you while you're alive. Then it becomes a memorial volume; poor Dick Hofstadter got a memorial volume because he died so young, fifty-four. "Or we'd like to do this." I've always discouraged them; "Oh, let's wait." I remember once I told some of my students, "I have this whole group of really great students now. Wait until they finish, and they can be part of it." Finally they stopped asking me, and they told me a couple years ago that we're going to give you this thing, and they decided to do it at George Mason University. It's a conference on the state of cultural history and my contributions to it. It's a two-day conference.

The first day is focused on me. I was supposed to give a paper on my career. I may yet write one. I haven't written it yet, because I've had illness problems. Then there are going to be two talks. Leon [Litwack] is introducing me, or talking about me, because I won't be there, as it turns out. Then Nell Painter of Princeton and Jean Agnew of Yale are going to give talks about cultural history and my contributions to it. Then there's going to be a dinner, at which a lot of my students will talk, former students. Then the next day is going to be a whole series of sessions on the state of cultural history. No one will read a paper. The first day, there will be papers read, because they're going to be centered on me, and then toasts, I guess, at the dinner, which I'm missing. But the next day, there are about four sessions, serially, so you can attend all of them. There are going to be papers posted on the Internet. You can read them and come and discuss them, which I think is great.

21:00:27:50

Lage: Sounds fascinating.

21:00:27:51

Levine: Sounds fascinating. It's heartbreaking that I won't be there.

21:00:27:54

Lage: I know, that's really—

21-00:27:57

Levine: But life deals these things, and you roll with them. They were willing to try to postpone it, but it seemed— [pause tape]

21-00:28:10

Lage: Now we are back on, because we realized that, for such a complex, interesting oral history, we kind of had a dribbling ending.

21-00:28:25

Levine: Yeah. Let me say, we ended by talking about this conference in my honor, which is wonderful, and while some of these students are students from George Mason University, the vast bulk of them are from Berkeley, and it surprised me that they chose George Mason University. One of those students is my colleague, Michael O'Malley, who teaches at George Mason. Another one of the organizers, though he was never my student, is my friend Roy Rosenzweig, who was very important. He was the guy I contacted. Then two of the others are students of mine: Larry Glickman, who teaches at South Carolina, and Jay Cook, who teaches at Michigan. They're the organizers of the conference, and they chose to go, maybe not surprisingly, to George Mason, which opened its arms to it, so that's very nice. The conference is not a bad way to end, because in a way it's a product of all the years I was at Berkeley.

I hope it doesn't sound maudlin to say this, but since part of the ending of this last interview has to do with my dissatisfaction and my leaving Berkeley, I just want to say that I can't imagine a better place to have spent the bulk of my career than the University of California, Berkeley. I think I said that earlier. It was just a great department to be in. I made wonderful friends. I had terrific students, who got better and better every year. They were just wonderful. I learned so much from them. I think I've already said this; I am addicted to the truth that teaching is a reciprocal process and that you learn. If you're a good teacher, you're learning from your students. And I've learned enormous amounts. I was so blessed to be at a place that had such good students and such good colleagues. So I do want to end on that note. It's an interview at Berkeley, and I want to make it clear that, however crotchety time has made me, I recognize what a wonderful opportunity, and really honor, it was to be at a place like this. Good.

[End of Interview]

## ANN LAGE

Ann Lage retired in 2011 as a research interviewer for the Regional Oral History Office in the fields of natural resources, land use, and the environment; California political and social history; and the history of the University of California. She directed projects on the disability rights movement, the Department of History at Berkeley, the UC Office of the President, the Sierra Club, and the Point Reyes National Seashore. She is a member of the editorial board of the *Chronicle of the University of California*, a journal of university history, and the former chair of the national Sierra Club History Committee. She holds a B.A. and M.A. in history from Berkeley.