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BASEBALL AND SOCIAL CONSCIENCE

Lester Rodney

Interviewed by Paul Buhle and Michael Fermanowsky

Completed under the auspices  
of the  
Oral History Program  
University of California  
Los Angeles

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## INTRODUCTION

One of the most galling of the many frustrations that nettled the staff of the Daily Worker was identified by Alan Max, our managing editor, in one of his characteristically terse observations. Alan, an honors graduate from Columbia whose dour mien concealed an irrepressible, though gentle, sense of humor, allowed that the paper at the zenith of its influence was the "least read and most quoted newspaper in the United States."

The Daily Worker's most ardent boosters never claimed a circulation greater than one hundred thousand, and a goodly portion of these subscribers were known to be FBI agents whose hapless assignment was to peruse the paper for arcane calls to action by the Communist party. The many fruitless conspiracy trials against the party confirmed that directives of this sort were Aesopian fables that existed only in the minds of paid informers.

I have often wondered what these government sleuths must have made of the back page of the "Daily." If they were like some of the fellows on my block in Brooklyn, it would have been the first, if not the only, page to be read. The front page would have had to banner a literally earth-shaking cataclysm in 120-point type to catch the eye of my street friends. The back page was our sports section,

culled, written, and edited by Lester Rodney. For a brief period he had a paid assistant, but the back of the paper was always Rodney's page as far as the editors and readers were concerned.

There were sports fans whose antipathy to the Communist party was as fervid as their devotion to the Brooklyn Dodgers, their beloved Bums. But in my neighborhood, during the baseball season, they would wait with three pennies in hand, and later a nickel, to purchase a copy of the Daily as soon as it hit the stands. Brooklyn could be up in flames on the front page, but the only thing that mattered to the sports nuts was Rodney's choices on the other side of the paper.

Then, in the pool hall or our candy store hangout, the disputes would start and last until the proprietor closed up. Did Rodney make the right choice? How did Roy Campanella stack up against other fabled catchers? Was Peewee Reese the best shortstop the Dodgers ever had? Was Carl Furillo's arm as good as DiMaggio's?

I had to make certain to read the proof of Lester's page before I left for home. The fellows would be sure to ask me about something Les had written. Occasionally I would be chagrined at nobody bothering to ask about all the stories of politics, labor struggles, civil rights crusades, and peace campaigns that crowded 90 percent

of the newspaper.

Les Rodney could have made it big as a sportswriter on any newspaper in the country. After he broke with the Communist party and resigned from the Daily Worker, he found work on a newspaper in a mid-sized city and became one of its most popular staff members. In a circulation drive by that publication, the publisher featured Lester on advertising posters and other promotions. He once again commanded a loyal readership on a beat that had been considered only slightly less dull than editing obituaries. Rodney wrote on church and religion.

Like most staff members on the Daily Worker, Rodney considered it an honor to be part of the Daily's editorial team. It may be difficult to imagine, but there was a time when many distinguished journalists admired the talents and devotion of the men and women who got the Daily Worker out each day. This was especially so in the thirties and forties when our staff and contributing writers included outstandingly gifted individuals whom few publishers could afford to hire. They regarded writing for the Daily at substandard or no pay as a contribution to the public weal and to what was perceived as the still-undefiled cause of socialism.

Lester Rodney was one of the most gifted of these staff members. His finest effort was his pioneering work to break

the Jim Crow barriers in major league baseball. His unremitting and gratifying crusade to win a berth on the Dodgers for Jackie Robinson, the first black player to be accepted into the big leagues, is now part of baseball and civil rights lore.

Like nearly all of us on the Daily Worker staff, Rodney decided to leave the party and the publication when it became clear that the movement to which he had given so many years had been traduced. Rodney's break with the Communist party did not mean desertion from striving for those objectives that have always motivated him, goals such as a peaceful nonnuclear world, the expansion of democratic rights to all, and a more rational and equitable economic order.

In recording the story of Lester Rodney, this project preserves an invaluable moment of our history.

--Bernard Burton  
October 1983

## INTERVIEW HISTORY

INTERVIEWERS: Paul Buhle, founder and former publisher of Radical America, editor of Cultural Correspondent and head of the Oral History of the American Left, Tamiment Institute, New York University. Michael Fermanowsky, Ph.D. student, American History, Department of History, UCLA.

### TIME AND SETTING OF INTERVIEW:

Place: Rodney's home in Torrance, California.

Date: December 29, 1981.

Time of day, length of session, total number of recording hours: The interview of approximately three and a half hours took place in a single afternoon session. Three hours of conversation were recorded.

Persons present during interview: Rodney, Buhle, and Fermanowsky.

### CONDUCT OF INTERVIEW:

Buhle brought to the interview extensive knowledge of radical politics in general and of persons who had been active at the New York offices of the Daily Worker in particular. Fermanowsky's studies had given him considerable background in the history of American radicalism. In preparation for the interview the interviewers had read a brief article about Rodney by Mark Naison which had been published in the socialist paper In These Times ("Sports for the Daily Worker," October 12, 1977).

The interview deals with Rodney's development as a writer and a radical, with the nature of the New York Daily Worker in the 1930s, 1940s, and 1950s, with Rodney's abiding interest in sports, and with his break with the Communist party.

Fermanowsky characterizes the interview as particularly smooth. The evidence of the taped material shows that the three participants were so engrossed in the conversation that tapes were usually not turned over or changed promptly, and there are, unfortunately, some lost portions of interview.

EDITING:

Editing was done by Connie Bullock, editor, Oral History Program. She checked the verbatim transcript of the interview against the original recordings and edited for punctuation, spelling, paragraphing, and the verification of proper nouns. Words and phrases inserted by the editor have been bracketed.

Rodney reviewed and approved the edited transcript, supplying some supplementary names and occasional amplifications. Bernard Burton wrote the introduction. Bullock prepared the rest of the front matter and the index.

The original recordings and edited transcript of the interview are in the University Archives and are available under the regulations governing the use of permanent noncurrent records of the University. Records relating to the interview are located in the office of the UCLA Oral History Program.

TAPE NUMBER: I, SIDE ONE

December 29, 1981

BUHLE: I think the best way to proceed is to start with the basic kind of life history, that is, background-- family and that kind of stuff--and how the fusion of culture and politics, and left-wing politics, was a consequence of that background experience.

RODNEY: Well, my family background has actually little to do with my eventual political life. My father was a staunch Republican. We were the first house on the block, I remember, with a black-bordered picture in the window: "We mourn our loss, Warren Gamaliel Harding."

BUHLE: What city is this?

RODNEY: That was in Brooklyn.

BUHLE: Brooklyn. What section of Brooklyn?

RODNEY: Bensonhurst. New Utrecht High School. So, I was never a young radical. Actually Joe [Joseph] Clark, whom you may know, was in New Utrecht. He overlapped with me, I think, in my last years. I'm a little older than he is. He was a student radical, and I was completely unaware of him. I was just interested in sports and girls, basically. I think they once put out a pamphlet. There was a big fuss about the price of milk in New Utrecht in the [high school] cafeteria, and they put out a pamphlet: "For five-cent milk, and defend the Soviet

Union." [laughter]

BUHLE: That was a very period piece.

RODNEY: I don't know exactly what you want. My family had nothing to do with the CP [Communist party]. I was in my twenties, and if I would go past a street corner meeting, riding in a car with some friends, I would say, "Comes the revolution--ha, ha." That's all it meant.

BUHLE: So what did you do when you got out of high school? Went to college?

RODNEY: Well, I got out of high school in 1929. We were wiped out. My father lost his job of twenty years. The company went out of business. It all happened in a flash.

BUHLE: What was the job?

RODNEY: He was a silk salesman. He had a little position with the company, and they went bankrupt. He was in his fifties and had to learn to drive a car and become a peddler of automobile parts, which he knew something about. He was mechanically inclined. So I didn't actually go to college. I took a few courses at NYU [New York University] at night, unmatriculated, when I worked as a chauffeur and [at] odd jobs: shipping clerk and all the things that everybody did in the thirties. And that was my college life.

BUHLE: Would you say you were picking up experiences?

RODNEY: Oh, I would say so, yes. I look back upon it

now as [my] having slowly begun a thought process, so that when I was confronted by Communists, who were quite persuasive those days (for very good reasons, I thought), I began arguing more and more stridently [with Communists] as my convictions weakened.

BUHLE: Even before you had any radicalization, did you feel like the system had failed? A lot of people felt that way, I know.

RODNEY: I don't really think I thought consciously of a "system." I just began feeling bitterly that things were wrong, that people don't get any breaks. I never confronted any Marxist thoughts until I was in my twenties, which is quite possible.

BUHLE: Did you have fears of anti-Semitism in America? Or were you in such a Jewish environment [that] it wasn't an issue?

RODNEY: My parents were both born here. I come from a different immigration wave. My grandparents came here in the 1860s. I knew all four of them. They were well into American life.

BUHLE: Rodney was your family name?

RODNEY: It got shortened somewhere along the line. The comparable English. Anti-Semitism wasn't much of a deal. Around Halloween we'd have Irish guys with stockings full of chalk come along, smacking us around, and we'd fight them. I didn't know much about it until the Hitler period.

BUHLE: Right. So the situation of the Jews in the Soviet Union was of the most abstract interest or of no interest at all?

RODNEY: No, I never heard of things like Biro-Bidjan and stuff. Probably, like many others, I suppose, it was just the rise of the Nazis that propelled me into any kind of Jewish consciousness.

BUHLE: And were you a fanatical sports fan in these days?

RODNEY: Well, that's a redundancy. The word fan is short for fanatic. [laughter] I like to see these redundancies. Jim Murray the other day, he wrote one of his usual attacks on the city of Seattle and the University of Washington team, and he got some letters chiding him. And one of them said that the suicide rate in Seattle is lower than that in Southern California; and Murray says, "Well, committing suicide in Seattle would be redundant."

[tape recorder turned off]

RODNEY: My natural chronologic instinct would now be: what turned me into a radical in the--and so on. I don't know if that's what you want.

BUHLE: Well, that's kind of the idea. It's just that usually people think about it more as they are going along, because what didn't seem to be influential on them, nevertheless, is part of your character, because

you were a certain person when you were fourteen years old and you were a certain person when you were thirty-five years old and there are certain things that continue, even if they are not the radical things--quote, unquote.

RODNEY: [You must realize that] I had never even heard of Sacco and Vanzetti, and they were executed when I was thirteen. Probably the words were in the headlines, and I just passed them by.

BUHLE: OK, well, let's talk about your sports enthusiasm. That's the way to start.

RODNEY: Well, when I was nine years old, in 1920, I skipped school one morning and took my battered bicycle and pedaled from Bensonhurst to Ebbets Field and became one of six kids who, lying on their stomachs, could look through. Under the clearance in the exit gate in right center in the old Ebbets Field wall, there was this much space, and six kids lying on their stomachs could look straight through center field, over second base at the pitcher and the batter, and that's all they could see.

BUHLE: It wasn't a great view.

RODNEY: No, but you could follow the game. I saw the Dodgers lose to Cleveland in the World Series in 1920, at the age of nine; so that tells you something.

BUHLE: How much were tickets then? Well, the World Series was high, of course.

RODNEY: The bleachers used to be fifty cents.

BUHLE: And was that a considerable amount of money, I mean for you?

RODNEY: The greatest present I ever had in my life, the one that gave me the greatest thrill, was on my thirteenth birthday. I woke up and there was this tiny little envelope at the foot of my bed. My birthday just happened to coincide with the opening game of the season for the Dodgers, and it was [for] a reserved seat in a lower box at Ebbets Field. I was the first kid there. I was there before they came out for batting practice. [laughter] All right, that's what you want.

BUHLE: Yes.

RODNEY: Was I really a sports fan? I played a lot of street ball. [In high school] I ran on the best track team in the city. I played some baseball in my senior year. Eighth man on the basketball team, which would be impossible today, at five foot, seven and three-quarters.

BUHLE: You mean, in other words, [that] being a professional athlete was beyond you, that you were in that gray area in between where sports really meant a lot to your life?

RODNEY: Right, there was a point I thought-- After high school I played some semipro-grade baseball, and I toyed with the idea that I might have been a minor league player. But I was limited in size, in eyesight. I was a

very good fielder--real fast. I am still quick. I can outrun most men my age. That makes me a competitive tennis player against people who are much better tennis players than I am. That is why one of the guys in the seventy-and-over competition, who was number one at UCLA, probably the hottest college player in the country--I can outrun him; so I can play even with him.\* This is all not very significant.

BUHLE: It is! This is the Mark Naison sports type. Actually, it's the scrappy athlete who becomes the political militant. Some guys are kind of--

FERMANOWSKY: Les, what's the first context in which you came up against Marxist thought?

RODNEY: Well, I inevitably encountered some of it at NYU at night when I went to Washington Square School of Commerce. I just selected a few courses that interested me: journalism, sociology, political science. And I began to just pick up vibrations. Naturally I was socially conscious. I knew from my own experiences what the Depression meant. I had seen my father turn into an old man overnight, and I had seen him never understand that it wasn't his fault. He died bitterly castigating himself for having failed his family. [He] never knew any social meaning, that he was part of a-- That's why

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\*I was officially ranked number seven in Southern California last year (1981) in the seventy-and-over category.--L.R.

people jumped out of windows. They really couldn't understand that this was a social phenomenon. They all thought that they had failed somehow.

BUHLE: That was a real thing.

FERMANOWSKY: What date were you taking these courses?

BUHLE: What year?

RODNEY: Oh, let's see. I finished high school in '29. This would be '30, '31 at NYU at night while working during the day. I chauffeured a wealthy family around town.

BUHLE: Did you have a sense of resentment while you were doing that?

RODNEY: No, they were nice people actually. And I wasn't that [politically] developed-- They weren't ostentatious. They weren't ugly millionaires.

FERMANOWSKY: What did you have the idea that you were going to do? Or did you have any idea of what you would finally really do?

RODNEY: Well, I thought of myself as a writer.

FERMANOWSKY: Ah ha! Where did you get that idea? Or when did you get that idea?

RODNEY: Oh, in my senior year. I hadn't gone into the high school newspaper because I was so busy with sports and I wasn't a very good student. I didn't pay much attention. I used to read enormously. I knew more history than my history teacher, and I had such scorn for

him that he flunked me. Of course, I refused to do dates and-- I had read every book [in the public library] about Napoleon [on my own. I never got good grades in school.] I didn't have the prodding by my parents to be a college boy as some of my contemporaries with immigrant parents had. It seems to take one generation for that steam to evaporate. They feel, "Well, you're an American; you'll do all right." I guess that's a generalization.

BUHLE: So you wanted to become a writer? It struck you that you might become a writer?

RODNEY: Yeah, in my senior year I wrote a few sports articles for the paper, which were well written. Then I began to write letters for the Brooklyn Daily Eagle, which was--

BUHLE: A historic publication, after all.

RODNEY: Yeah. And the sports editor, Ed Hughes, became fond of me, and he used to throw me little assignments on space.

BUHLE: You got paid some minimal amount for these?

RODNEY: Very small amounts. I spent three hours at a game, and I would write up an account. Altogether, I probably got five dollars for it.

BUHLE: Even so, you didn't move directly into straight sports journalism, because there weren't the slots open or you didn't have self-confidence?

RODNEY: No. I walked into most of the newspapers,

wistfully seeking a job. It was very tight in those days, of course. And they weren't about to pick up one kid. I wasn't particularly well dressed probably.

BUHLE: How did the reporters who were doing sports get the jobs?

RODNEY: That's an interesting question. People ask me now, "How do you get into the newspaper field?" and they expect a concise [answer]. That answer, it's something I find it difficult to give, because, again, writing on the [New York] Daily Worker was a very peculiar thing.

Anyhow, just briefly, I began to write my own little, short stories and fancied that I was going to write some great novels. I began to understand the social forces around me. And with two other guys, we rented a ten dollar-a-month cold-water apartment--flat--in Greenwich Village. I spent a lot of time there. We had a typewriter and drank muscatel on the roof and philosophized and wrote and critiqued each other's works. I sold a couple of things to the Street and Smith magazines, prostituting myself for it, as we looked upon it then.

BUHLE: Hacking it out.

RODNEY: Yeah, yeah. [laughter] Yeah, right.

FERMANOWSKY: At the point where you were in Greenwich Village and philosophizing, was Marxist thought part of

that?

RODNEY: No, neither one of these guys was-- In fact, one of them became a major executive at Standard Statistics and a Wall Street consultant and very carefully cut all memories of me out of his life. The other guy was Charlie, a dear friend who died in Santa Barbara. I wrote an article about his funeral. That was just romantic, Greenwich Village, would-be writers. Charlie had talent; he was a good poet. The way I got into-- When I became more and more conscious of Marxist thought-- At this time there was one little incident that really catapulted it. There was one person I remember. I was beginning to have discussions at NYU, and I would sneer and throw every anti-Communist argument--"You can't change human nature"--and so and so. [laughter]

BUHLE: Yes, right, at least in a short space of time.

RODNEY: "You can't change it abruptly or by decree," is what I excluded.

BUHLE: Right, right.

RODNEY: There was one day I do remember. Do you know New York City?

BUHLE: Yes, sure.

RODNEY: Do you know if you go down Forty-second Street to where the Grand Central main entrance is, there is an overpass there where the parking--

BUHLE: Right.

RODNEY: Well, right under there was a guy conducting a meeting. And he was-- If the Communist party were to have drawn a portrait of a guy they would like to have speaking-- He was a thoughtful man in his early thirties. He looked like a professor, a little tweedy; he wasn't shouting, and he just gave good arguments about how ridiculous it was for a "country as rich as this to have people--some of you I think are among them--out of work." And this: "Why do we need a system that needs recurrent crisis and then finds it needs war, or preparation for war, to restore its economy, not knowing why or how, but knowing that that's the way?" And: "Isn't there a better way than this?" And: "Yes, and this is the better way. Some of you may or may not have heard of it. This is--" I was so taken, and it just blew away some of the last things, and I realized I had thought more than I had consciously thought. I went up to him, and I asked him some question, some key question, that was nagging me. He probably looked upon me as a prime, young acquisition, and he said, "Why don't you have a cup of coffee with me, and I'll buy you a piece of cake," which was no small deal then. And he was great. I never found out who he was; I never saw him again. He was no official that I later came-- He was just a marvelous street speaker and a talker. I suppose it doesn't follow psychological patterns to say that one man, or one

incident, gave you a decisive push, but he really did, because then I suddenly began, instead of arguing at NYU with Communists, I began projecting his ideas against other people and becoming more and more convinced. Then I began to read, and then I discovered--

FERMANOWSKY: Did you begin to read the Worker and--

RODNEY: Then I began to read the weekend-- And, yes, I began to pick up the Worker out of curiosity. This is the paper that the-- And I winced at seeing--

BUHLE: Didn't it still seem to you to be kind of exotic and strange language?

RODNEY: Yes, very much.

FERMANOWSKY: Written somewhere else in the world?

RODNEY: Yes. They had a weekly sports thing, not daily. And there I felt I knew enough to be able to tell anyone. I felt embarrassed for them. I liked some of the pearls beneath all the heavy stuff. So I wrote them a letter, just modestly suggesting how to improve their sports section and the importance of it, and I made the mistake of having a return address. I immediately was summoned in. [laughter] I wasn't a Communist then. You know, it's like, as I said, a Cub master-- Or at a Cub meeting [someone] getting up and making a mild suggestion for improving things, and he immediately is made Cub master.

BUHLE: Yes, right, of course.

RODNEY: And head of the troop. Anyhow, they called me in, and they--

FERMANOWSKY: Who'd you see? Do you remember?

RODNEY: There was a guy there, Clarence [A.] Hathaway, was the editor. And he was a guy they used to shovel out of the gutter drunk every once in a while. But he was a very interesting guy.

BUHLE: Minnesota.

RODNEY: Minnesota, tough, pugnacious-looking guy, good drinker, and hale-fellow-well-met. He wasn't the caricature Communist at all.

BUHLE: Real indigenous radical type.

RODNEY: He was. Had he lived, someone like his type probably would have never divorced themselves from Russia. Art Shields-- People with Wobbly backgrounds and native American roots, deep roots, are the slowest to divorce themselves from--

BUHLE: Moral things.

RODNEY: They can't face the moral thing.

BUHLE: It's a moral thing.

RODNEY: It's not a political thing. Very much. That's right, a moral thing. I'll never forget Art Shields, immediately after I made the break, putting his arm around me. "Les, I will always cherish you as a person, but I can never really be your friend again."

BUHLE: Yes, I understand.

RODNEY: Which was something, to even put his arm around me. Of course, we had been pretty fair friends. Anyhow, [to go back], as far as the Daily Worker goes, I just began writing an occasional weekly piece for them.

BUHLE: Did they pay you?

RODNEY: Gratis.

BUHLE: Gratis, yes.

RODNEY: It was pretty popular.

FERMANOWSKY: What were your first pieces on? I think I may have seen them actually.

RODNEY: You know, I haven't seen the Daily Worker in years.

BUHLE: Yes, just the files on them.

RODNEY: I just discovered that they have the files at UCLA.

I just went back, and the first thing I was interested in was a fuss I had there, long after I had been there, when Dave [David] Platt was on vacation and I reviewed the movie From Here to Eternity. The ideological roof fell in on me; I liked the picture. Sidney Finkelstein and V. J. Jerome and Lloyd [L.] Brown--

BUHLE: The logic choppers, the great logic choppers.

RODNEY: Yes. But then we had a big meeting at the Jefferson School [of Social Science, New York] (the successor to the workers school), and I held up pretty well actually. It was a lot of fun. So I found that

sequence. I knew the dates it had to be. I went down to UCLA since I discovered it. I was just curious, more curious than you are, about what I wrote about in early days.

BUHLE: Both Mark and I remember looking at that, because your pieces, even your very first pieces, if I remember correctly-- I mean they're so qualitatively different in their concept of what sports is, what function mainstream sports plays in society. That's it--what function mainstream sports plays in society.

RODNEY: Well, there was a whole ideological question of whether mainstream sports was the direction they wanted to go in. The paper ran a reader poll actually: "Are you in favor of having sports on a daily basis?" And the results, to the astonishment of many people, was six-to-one in favor having it. This was a poll, not of the general public, but of the party people. Now, who are these people? They were beginning to have young workers who were not from Russian radical socialist backgrounds. Golly, as I think of it, in Local 65 [United Retail and Wholesale Warehouse and Department Store Union, CIO] at the time there was a whole strata of people who grew up loving sports and playing sports. It was still a part of their life, and they were a little unsure and embarrassed about being radicals and Communists and still maintaining this feeling for sports. And the healing of this gap was

a great event for them. Oh, a great sigh of relief that they were able to enjoy sports; and, more than that, they were able to see sports as part of America. You can't isolate anything from America. These are the people who took part in sports.

FERMANOWSKY: Did anyone violently object?

RODNEY: Yes. So, the poll was six-to-one, which was so overwhelming that even those who would have vigorously objected-- I remember Betty Gannett still continued to say, "Well, this is ridiculous. This is kid stuff." It's a hard-pressed paper, and to give one-eighth of a hard-pressed, radical paper to sports-- Had I known the percentage that l'Unità in Italy and l'Humanité in France [devoted to sports], I would have had a great argument. I didn't know about those papers. I had never even heard of them.

Anyhow, they called me in and said that they were going to have a daily paper, and they wanted to know-- They gave me sort of an ideological questionnaire, but it was kind of haphazard. I think they were convinced that I was all right. I had written for the weekend paper, now, for about six months, if I remember correctly.

BUHLE: They didn't have anyone else for the job?

RODNEY: I think that was the key. That was the clincher. So I took over. And I knew something about newspaper work. I had studied journalism and makeup and

layout [at NYU].

So we started the sports section in September of '36 if I remember rightly. I remember the first headline (the Yankees were to play the Giants in the World Series): "Giant Power Threatens Yanks." [laughter] In sixty-point railroad Gothic. The Yanks promptly mopped up the Giants. So much for Marxism in sports.

BUHLE: That must have provided a few laughs. The searchlight of Marxism, right?

RODNEY: Right. Heywood [Campbell] Broun wrote a funny column after we started the sports section. I wish I had kept it. He said, "The Daily Worker has begun a sports section. It will be interesting to observe what happens, because, so far as I know, you can't class-angle a box score."

BUHLE: Yes, right.

RODNEY: Later on, he wrote a column in which he, in his own style, was very favorable toward my treatment of some event, and John Kieran's treatment of it at the time, which was the firing of Mickey [Gordon S.] Cochrane by [Walter] Briggs, the owner of the Detroit Tigers. The poor guy had fractured his skull playing. He had brought the Tigers to their first championship; they slipped to third place, and he was summarily fired. He himself was bitter, I know. So I wrote a column about that, and Kieran wrote a column about it. I think I have a copy of

Broun's around. A big exciting day: "Hear what Heywood Broun said?"

FERMANOWSKY: So in a certain sense, what Broun felt was that you were saying things that-- It was good to have you on the scene, among the sports reporters? It was good to have that left--

RODNEY: Be portrayed, yeah. By the way, this was an attitude I encountered, finally, from quite a few sports-writers. If I was having a drink or two at the Newspaper Guild bar, quite often somebody would come over to me and say--you know, in a maudlin kind of way--"Gee, I really envy you in many ways. I wish I had the freedom to say-- And by the way, here's an item I can't use that I'd damn well like to see in print."

BUHLE: Right, and you wish you had their salaries.

RODNEY: But the next morning, they wouldn't wish that they had my freedom either; they'd prefer their salaries.

BUHLE: Right.

RODNEY: Well I was raised-- I started at twelve dollars and was raised to twenty dollars.

FERMANOWSKY: And you started when you were, what, about twenty-five, twenty-six?

RODNEY: That was 1936. I was twenty-five.

BUHLE: So you really were coming into it. Now, I did tape Sender Garlin. He's just a great, great person.

RODNEY: Is he still--

BUHLE: Absolutely. And he hasn't lost anything at all in his sense of humor, except that he's so pro-Russian that there're a lot of subjects he doesn't joke about.

RODNEY: Isn't that amazing how you can maintain a marvelous American sense of humor and dryness and still be pro-Russian?

BUHLE: What did he say? He said "I tickle them, and they torture me," or something like that. He still constantly kind of needles them for being the way they are. But he's not going to tell jokes about them behind their backs. See, that's the way it operates. With them he could be wry and so forth.

RODNEY: Oh, yes. Well, we used to have great sessions and kid around, kid about the pomposity of the ninth floor.

BUHLE: Yes, right. That's exactly right. That was the big source of humor.

RODNEY: This guy [Golos] was the composing room chairman (he had a heavy accent, you know), and he used to rail at us if we were five minutes late in our copy. One time he told Sender, he says, "I want you to copulate with me." [laughter] Oh, he played that to a fare-thee-well. He told Sender, he said, "You copulate with me, and I'll copulate with you." Every day after that-- [laughter]

BUHLE: Well, the question I was trying to get to was-- I think Harvey O'Connor said to me that he took a shot at

working with the Daily Worker in, like, the late twenties, like '28 or '29, and, apart from the fact that there was no money, the reason he didn't do it was he found it an impossible environment for a journalist. That is, when the paper was in its early days, it was, like, much too-- They didn't have-- They were rewriting the New York Times, everything was really haphazard, and it was like-- As a journalist, it was impossible to work. But by the mid-thirties it was a little bit--

RODNEY: It improved. There were some good journalists there. Harry Raymond was a very underestimated guy. A good reporter. Mike Singer was considered by--

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RODNEY: --foreign-oriented, early party, to people coming in on the basis of their own experiences. And these are the very people--also as a generalization--who left in dismay finally in 1956 and 1957.

BUHLE: In other words, in a certain sense, your being hired was evidence that the change had already substantially taken place or was in process?

RODNEY: I think so. I think so. Then there was a guy on the paper who argued against my-- I had to make a decision right away. You know, should my big headline be "Giants and Yankees" or [about] the working-class soccer teams--

BUHLE: Yes, exactly.

RODNEY: --where we knew we had readership.

BUHLE: Right, definitely, right.

RODNEY: And this guy, Joe Smith by name, who was just a writer there, he made a very persuasive case. He said, "Look, we have to place ourselves with our feet in where people, where radicals, are," you know, "where people are thinking and where our potential readers are. And they are in these very teams: the Yugoslavs play the Hungarians. And these are people who are going to look for their results and show it to their fellow

workers." It was not an inconsequential argument. It took a lot of argument to say that, if we are going to have any impact on this country, we've got to begin to-- If we ever want to be a big paper, we've got to begin writing it as if we were a big paper now. And then also what [about] the concept of sport? What is sports, and so on.

BUHLE: How far had you developed your own logic by that time?

RODNEY: Well, I developed it as I went along. And also the overwhelming clincher was the fact that there was nothing in the other sports sections about the discrimination that kept Negroes, as we used to call them, out of the big leagues, which is a very amazing thing. But, if you look back at the Post and [New York] Times of those days, they would have just straight covered the Negro leagues: "Satchel [Leroy Robert] Paige pitched for the Kansas City Monarchs." They'd cover it, respectfully and shortly, and never introduce: "Why isn't this guy playing? This guy beats the top big leaguers after the season." So it was the very first thing I did. I had it by default. I get credit for a great campaign, but nobody else did it.

BUHLE: Yes, right, a vacuum.

RODNEY: It was waiting, urgently waiting. The black weeklies, of course (the Pittsburgh Courier) I worked with

them, with Wendell Smith, in a series of articles. He interviewed some, I interviewed some, and we exchanged. I'd go down to the dugouts--

BUHLE: You mean in the white leagues?

RODNEY: Yes, the white big leaguers.

BUHLE: And ask them what they thought of--

RODNEY: Yes. "Did you guys ever play against Satchel Paige?"

"Oh, Satchel Paige, now you're talking about pitching." You know. "Bla, bla, bla, bla."

"And why isn't he in?"

And then you'd get different answers: "Oh, we can't have these guys in. We sleep in the same hotels, and we go on railroads and trains in the South. What are you talking about!" It was totally inconceivable. In fact, I remember when the Dodger manager in 1937, Burleigh Grimes, [who] was an ex-pitcher-- He respected me as a writer, by this time, because I didn't sensationalize things. I knew the game, and the--

BUHLE: You mean these guys were reading the Daily Worker to get the sports section? Every now and then anyway?

RODNEY: Well, he did. Yes, every once in a while. If I interviewed one of them, they were curious enough to get a copy.

BUHLE: Oh, I see, sure.

RODNEY: Or they'd ask me for it the next day, and then they'd pass it around.

BUHLE: Amazing. Somehow the idea of leafing through the Daily Worker and getting the sports page is kind of astonishing.

RODNEY: Well, it amazed me. Like, when we got Red [Robert Abial] Rolfe in 1938 to cover the World Series for us, which at that time was a sort of a new thing to do.

BUHLE: A coup.

RODNEY: Apart from Red Rolfe and the Daily Worker, the idea of giving a ball player the stature of presenting his own ideas, that was the real root of it. That's the way I approached it.

BUHLE: I see. That's great.

RODNEY: It just so happened he was a Dartmouth grad.

BUHLE: I don't know anything about Red Rolfe's background. What was his rationalization?

RODNEY: Red was the color of his hair, by the way.

BUHLE: That's the original source of the "Red" nickname?

RODNEY: He was just a tough New England democrat with a small d. He believed in fair play. He had the automatic distaste for the word communist, but he wasn't thrown into hysterics by it. He knew me from the press box and from browsing around the dugouts and knew that I knew baseball, and so on. And when I proposed it-- He had just married a young woman who graduated from Smith or

Wellesley, I forget [which], and he was kind of anxious to impress her with the fact that he was not just a jock, which he wasn't. And the idea intrigued him. I think he was also titillated by the Daily Worker. He was an individual.

BUHLE: Right.

RODNEY: He was a Yankee. He could do what he wanted--you know, the Yankee. He was a big man; nobody would give Red Rolfe any bullshit. The thing that irked me was that he really meant it. He wanted to write it. We had a very poor deadline compared to the other papers. I had to get to Yankee Stadium and get the game, and I'd have an hour to get back and write it and get it down the tubes. And so I had to rush to the dressing room and say, "Red," (you know, I'd try to hasten it) "would you say that when [Frank] Crosetti made the decision to go to third base instead of starting the double play, [that] was the key point in the game."

"No-o-o, no-o-o, I would not say that." [laughter]

Oh, God! I thought I had it written already and could get the hell out of there!

"No, I would not say that. This is bla bla bla bla bla bla."

You know. So I had to really handle him as a person.

But the fascinating thing was the next day, before the game, coming into the dugout and into the Yankee

clubhouse. Here they all are, reading Red Rolfe's article, passing it around. You know, young Joe DiMaggio and all the other guys, and [they'd say things like] "Hey, Red, where'd you learn that word," you know, so on and so forth. And "communist," "Daily Worker," it takes second place, really, to the story: Red Rolfe is in print; he's a writer. The other thing becomes an abstraction that falls away.

When I was in the Army, when they found out that I knew Joe Louis and knew this and that, Daily Worker fell [away]. "Did you really know Joe Louis?"

Or later on when I was religion editor in Long Beach, and somebody from the Red Squad wrote to the minister of the First Baptist Church--the old conservative guy--he says "Les" (he was from Mississippi, he was a brother-in-law of the Mississippi football coach), "is this true that you're a Communist?"

And I told him, "I worked for the Daily Worker, I am not a Communist anymore, and I'm not going to make any more apologies. I was as good an American--"

"That's good enough for me." And he said, "Are you a sports[writer]? Did you ever speak to--"

And from then on, that son-of-a-bitch, he called me every day: "Who do you like, Tennessee against Alabama? It's three and a half points."

BUHLE: Yes, an American thing.

RODNEY: Yes, it was amazing.

BUHLE: Did you feel you were different than the other sportswriters in some way, or did you feel you were just-- I don't know how to ask the question exactly, but you know what I mean.

RODNEY: Well.

BUHLE: Or were the mechanics the same, and some of the conclusions slightly different? That's what I want to ask. Technically speaking, did you approach the baseball game differently than these people?

RODNEY: Well, first of all, the Negro question made for a big difference right off the bat.

BUHLE: Yeah. Did you go to Negro major league games?

RODNEY: Sure.

BUHLE: On a regular basis?

RODNEY: When I could. They were not on a regular basis. It was very haphazard scheduling, but I'd catch them. They didn't play daily the way the white-- Once every two weeks there might be a game in one of the ball parks. But actually--

BUHLE: Were there other white people in the crowd?

RODNEY: A smattering. YCL [Young Communist League of the U.S.A.] members would go out there with blown-up copies of the Worker, including interviews: "'I'd play with them in a minute,' says 'Bucky' [William Henry] Walters of the Cincinnati Reds," "Hell, Josh Gibson is a better catcher

than I am," and "I wish I could pitch to Josh Gibson," which [were] things they'd said, these guys.

BUHLE: You've alluded a couple of times to what you thought was the important idea--of the importance of sports in America. What is the importance of sports in America as you saw it or see it now? Big question.

RODNEY: Well, that's a big question.

BUHLE: This whole thing is coming back to that question. It's a question that can't be evaded.

RODNEY: There was one Sunday when A. Philip Randolph was coming into Yankee Stadium. I was out there with our photographer, and the people were taking petitions addressed to Judge [Kenesaw Mountain] Landis, the Commissioner of Baseball, after the "Black Sox" scandal. Randolph--we quoted him at that time, and he was very conservative--he said, "You people are doing a wonderful thing here. I hate to say it, but nobody else is doing it." You know, something like that. Just about like that.

Well, part of the importance of sports is answered by this: Sports is a microcosm of American life. You can't isolate it and seal it off. Here's racial prejudice, and here are people with good instincts and confused by it who are playing ball--white players. Their sense of sportsmanship is stirred if they see a guy who can field a ground ball better than them. It bothers them. How do you

square that with growing up to know that "niggers" are inferior?

BUHLE: Yes, right.

RODNEY: There are all kinds of things that happened.

BUHLE: How did the Negro major leagues impress you in terms of the level of play?

RODNEY: Uneven. You know, you'd see three guys who would-- Undoubtedly they could become major leaguers--raw talent. But they used to clown a little. It was part of the style, sort of the one-hand catches (of course, one-hand is coming back). And fooling around. Big, drawn-out, pop flies sometimes.

BUHLE: Did it occur to you, or to them when you got in first contact, that the consequence of integration was going to be the end of the Negro major leagues? Did you know that question from the start?

RODNEY: I didn't give it much thought, but that emerged later. Effa Manley, who was the owner of the Newark Black Eagles, Mrs. Effa Manley, she engaged me in a spirited, angry conversation. She says, "What you people are doing: you'll get a few of our best players in there, and you'll wreck something which is meaningful to the Negro people. And do you think that's right?" I couldn't budge her from [it]. Isn't it more important to make America's national pastime even, so that in time any kid who has the ability can get to where the good pay is, and so on and so forth?

But all she knew was that we were wrecking what already existed.

FERMANOWSKY: Wrecking?

RODNEY: That the campaign would wreck, if successful. Which it did, and she was right.

BUHLE: Did you have political conversations in the Worker or in party circles about the Negro leagues?

RODNEY: No, I don't ever remember this question being considered.

BUHLE: In general, was it as if you were being granted a space because this was the sports section and they didn't make any claims on it, or were they pressing you on what was the correct interpretation of things?

RODNEY: It's strange, but people say, "Didn't you have political commissars breathing down your neck?" and so on and so forth. It was a sort of an independent, little dukedom.

BUHLE: Because they were ignorant of sports?

RODNEY: By the very nature of sports.

FERMANOWSKY: Right. That's right.

RODNEY: Although Bill [William Z.] Foster, oddly enough, was a sports fan. The oddest thing: Foster is the sectarian, the wild sectarian. Browder was: "Communism is twentieth-century Americanism." Foster used to come to me and talk sports endlessly, and Earl Browder didn't even know what a baseball was. He was a Kansas Methodist

intellectual.

BUHLE: A bookkeeper, an accountant.

RODNEY: And their personalities, by the way, were that way. Foster would come into the elevator with you, and people would say, "Hi, Bill. Hi, Bill." And he'd chat with you. And Browder would come in and tap his foot like this, all the way to the ninth floor. Very odd.

BUHLE: That's funny. So, in other words, compared to what David Platt in the movie department was, since everybody goes to the movies and everybody has their own ideological interpretation of movies--

RODNEY: That poor guy.

BUHLE: --in a certain way, he was put in this terrible position where his job was to condemn movies constantly.

RODNEY: He wrote a column-- He saw some Russian turkey called Admiral Nakhimov, [laughter] and it was a dreadful picture. So he permitted himself a little bit of negativism, hastily saying, "But of course, it is a picture to see. Go to the Cameo." But just saying, "There have been better pictures than this." Then, oh, he was attacked. So he, in his own words later, he cravenly succumbed and wrote, "I saw it again. I missed the real implications of the picture." The funny thing was, at the same time, this picture was being hooted out of existence in the Soviet Union. They couldn't even stomach it. [laughter] And here he was, cravenly apologizing for it.

I didn't have that problem. I can't even--

BUHLE: It seems like there's another disparallel that's also fascinated me because I was-- Platt sent me some of his old columns on racial matters, and almost all of them are really along what became the kind of New Left Marcusean--whatever--interpretation of race in American society, which was: every time you get the opportunity to say how the mass media is manipulating ordinary people's minds, you say it to a fare-thee-well. I mean on and on and on again.

RODNEY: In any context.

BUHLE: And what he had to say, personalities aside, wasn't real interesting after a while. Once you read that three or four times, you don't really need much more of it, but you had some way of handling sports in such a way that it wasn't just condemning baseball for--but something else.

RODNEY: No, people who expected the Daily Worker to have an antisports section, instead of a sports section, were disappointed.

BUHLE: It's what struck me, as almost an antimovie section, or, at least--

RODNEY: We liked baseball. We said, "We like it, and we'd like to make it what it really ought to be." Just as you could say you like America, if you will, and that's why you are fighting to throw this monkey of capitalist

exploitation off its back, whatever. But it's a concept that sports was able to promote.

BUHLE: Cut through.

RODNEY: And, of course, the readership was intense. Obviously it struck a nerve with readers that very little else in the paper did, and that got a response.

BUHLE: Max Gordon. You know Max Gordon? He [was the editor of] Viewpoint in Jamaica.

RODNEY: Oh, yes, sure, Max Gordon. Max.

BUHLE: Right. He said that he got the award for selling the most subscriptions in one year, like thirty-eight or something. He was working in a factory in East New York. He said having the sports column there, accessible, was like the greatest thing that ever happened for him, pushing the paper in front of the factory gates. Nothing even remotely compared with it. The only criticism he ever had was, he thought during World War II there was an opportunity to push the line so far: you could have a racing column. And if they could have had a racing column, he could have doubled his readership again, because they were not going to buy the other papers if they got the racing, the handicap.

RODNEY: The only quick memory that comes to me of an attempt to affect the content of the sport page--or pages as it was sometimes--was on the question of-- A woman tried out for a minor league team, and I didn't treat it

with the same hilarious contempt as the other papers, but I did point out that it's very doubtful if a woman could get to be a major leaguer. You know, there's physiological differences and so on. But, she ought to-- It would be interesting to see. Betty Gannett came in, and she tried to persuade the--whatever committee it is--that we should apologize for this and just simply fight for the right of women to be big leaguers and whatever; and I disposed of that pretty readily. In fact, they knew better than that. She was coming from the moon.

BUHLE: Yes, right. The ideological person.

Now, how much did things lighten up during the United Front period? Did you get more room or a sense of autonomy, or did anything change qualitatively? That's when Max Gordon says, "That's when we had a chance to make it a really popular newspaper."

RODNEY: We had more space in that period. There was a feeling during the attacks. I remember during the fifties, the Korean War, they shrunk our space and at one time held it to a column every day, no more coverage. Coverage was an awful burden for me. I used to actually go to Ebbets Field, Yankee Stadium, and cover a game and give a good, fresh story about it, and a second-day column about a chat in the dugout with some of the players--

BUHLE: So you were seeing a game every day during the summer?

RODNEY: Just about. And during the winter, I'd go to Madison Square Garden almost every night. A lot of work.

BUHLE: Did you feel uncomfortable at having to do everything, instead of just baseball? Did you feel like some sports you didn't really want to be doing?

RODNEY: I had to make some choices. The main choice came down between hockey or basketball. And I, my own--

BUHLE: You took the left-wing choice.

RODNEY: Well, actually, I came down on the side that corresponded most with the wishes of our readers anyhow. Basketball means much more to New Yorkers than a game played by Canadians. Kids in the streets of Williamsburg would play basketball, and so on. And, by the way, in college basketball we did get the respect of the college coaches. I got letters from Nat Holman saying, "You're the only one who knows anything about this game." Joe Lapchick's son, Richard Lapchick, down at Virginia Wesleyan, do you know him?

BUHLE: No.

RODNEY: He wrote a book about apartheid and sports, and its impact-- You know, South Africa. He wrote to me, telling me about his father, explaining how it was the Daily Worker which helped make it possible for the Knicks [New York Knickerbockers], which he then coached after coaching St. John's [University], to hire Sweetwater Clifton and so on--a change in the atmosphere. He told me

his father was a church-going Catholic 'til the day he died. He had this reluctant respect for what the Daily Worker had done. It was probably the single most startling tribute I've ever received.

BUHLE: Yes. Well, it's another example of people who were totally distant from anything else the Worker was, ideologically, but didn't get anything else in sports that represented that position.

RODNEY: Now, in 1938, that was a Popular Front period. That's when I got Red Rolfe. It was easier for him then, obviously, than it would have been at another time. We took a truck, a circulation truck, up to Times Square that night, opened the back of the truck, and shouted, "Red Rolfe covers today's World [Series] game. Red Rolfe on today's game," which was something. That night, at about eleven o'clock at night, [we] sold six thousand copies right off the back of that truck. Can you believe that?

BUHLE: That's amazing. And did you have the truck other places in the city or just there? That's the ultimate limit of logistics, right?

RODNEY: Ira Wallach, who was the circulation manager then under different names: he was Ted Tinsley, a funny writer; he was-- [laughter] He wrote Muscle Beach and did some musical comedies at the Phoenix Theater. He was pretty good. Amazing the kind of people who passed through that paper, who were attracted to writing for it.

BUHLE: What are some more examples of bizarre, extremely good writers who wouldn't seem to be the Communist type?

RODNEY: Well, we had a woman named Virginia Gardner. She was from Fort Smith, Arkansas. She could have got a job on any paper. She was just good. She never wrote a piece that wasn't careful and solid and vibrant.

BUHLE: As an investigative reporter, you mean?

RODNEY: Yeah. Abner [W.] Berry wasn't bad.

BUHLE: Yes, Abner Berry was not bad at all. What was your opinion of the columnists?

RODNEY: Hmm, well, the columnists. Alan Max could have been one of America's great humorists.

BUHLE: Quite right.

RODNEY: He was a guy [who] obviously could have stepped out of Columbia [University]. Rob [F.] Hall was a hell of a journalist, and he later went upstate and edited a newspaper, founded a newspaper. I think he was from Mississippi.

BUHLE: Yes, that's what I heard.

RODNEY: He was a southerner. There wasn't any doubt of it. I'll never forget the day: He was editing the weekend paper then, and he and Joe North and I were in the office with Eric Bert, and-- What a character!

BUHLE: Joe North and Eric Bert! [laughter]

RODNEY: Rob had three little kids. He had married a young woman five years earlier. And he suddenly threw up

his hands and said, "I'm just going to have to have a hundred dollars a week, or I just can't go on here."

A hundred dollars a week!

BUHLE: Yeah, a fortune. Did he get it?

RODNEY: I don't remember the exact outcome. He may have.

BUHLE: Did you get your paycheck every week?

RODNEY: No, but they made it up right away. We didn't really miss any pay. You know, sometimes when the money was slow coming in. I used to see these envelopes pile up from people with dollar bills, two dollars. It was touching.

BUHLE: Did you get much of a sense of what your readership specifically was outside New York? How much of the weekend-- Because I don't think the Chicago paper-- While it lasted, [it] was such a dreadful newspaper. It was just terrible, embarrassing as a newspaper.

RODNEY: Ben Burns went out there from the paper. I didn't like the Chicago paper at all. But the Daily Worker was often embarrassing, too, by the way. It came close to being a real good newspaper, at moments, and then they'd lapse.

BUHLE: Go back.

RODNEY: It always had this heavy pull on it to be mediocre.

BUHLE: Because of the possibility of pulling the political line on it.

RODNEY: I honestly think that I wasn't all that great as it seems, that part of it was the contrast to the rest of the paper. You know, there's any number of bright, young people in this country who could have done what I did if they knew sports. It was quite a contrast.

BUHLE: While I think of Eric Bert and Joe North and some of the other people, it gives me the impression of the editorial group as an uneasy coalition of logic choppers and journalists.

RODNEY: Yeah, you put these people in together with-- And Milton Howard was an interesting guy. I don't know if you know that name.

BUHLE: No, I know the name vaguely.

RODNEY: He didn't write that much. Who else was there?

BUHLE: Sender had a column off and on, which was kind of interesting.

RODNEY: Sender was good. He could write. I would think Rob Hall and Harry Raymond, who was a heavy drinker--drank himself to death finally--and "Mike" [Michael] Singer, Virginia Gardner, Abner Berry could have easily worked on any newspaper. And then Alan Max.

BUHLE: Most of the talented people were mostly your age; they just stepped into it in their mid-twenties?

RODNEY: Yes, Harry was a little older than I was; Mike was my age; Virginia--yeah.

BUHLE: They were fresh.

RODNEY: Just about that. I was never in the youth movement. Because I sort of came in full blown at twenty-five, I don't know people. My wife was seven and a half years younger than me. She grew up in the youth movement. I don't even know all her friends. I didn't have any common friends. The youth movement was another thing.

BUHLE: Well, what was the interrelation, as far as you could determine, between the party proper and the newspaper? How did they shape the newspaper?

RODNEY: Well, the way we knew it was the appointment of editors. They brought in somebody named Sam Don once.

BUHLE: Sam Don, I know that name.

RODNEY: And he was a ponderous guy. He was not a newspaper man. Morris Childs was another one. He was not a newspaper man. So there was immediate tension between him and the good people, him and Alan Max. Alan succumbed. He didn't fight these guys finally. Alan was managing editor.

BUHLE: Alan was managing editor, right. Is the sense that one could maintain a variable amount of autonomy, depending on how hard one fought for it, did that seem to be?

RODNEY: I think so. I think so. I think if Dave Platt fought a little harder he might have had some--to a certain limit. The limit being, you're never going to be critical of the Soviet Union.

BUHLE: Of course, naturally.

RODNEY: I wasn't particularly critical of the Soviet Union, but I was--

BUHLE: It wasn't on your sports beat either.

RODNEY: I was sincere about expressing some interest in their accomplishments. You never heard of athletes in czarist Russia, and here they are suddenly producing a bunch of athletes. And, you know, it's a very sound argument. Could a country that's so interested in building up stadiums and sports programs be expecting to go into a big war or to try to conquer the world? It made a lot of sense. This country seems to be oriented toward-- It's building itself up. And then I went to-- In 1956 I finally got to cover an Olympics. It was the Winter Olympics at Cortina d'Ampezzo. Every Olympics I would put in an application to cover it, and I was denied a passport. I made the usual heroic fight, you know. This time, to the embarrassment of everybody, because it is very costly to go there, I suddenly won. In '56 the Washington Post wrote an editorial. You know, I used to popularize these things and write to other newspapers and to schools of journalism and say, "Here's your freedom of the press, they won't let me go." (You know, I'm going to subvert the Olympics, and so on.) So suddenly I was granted--reluctantly granted--a passport to go in 1956. I had to go out and raise the money, making speeches, and I

brought back movies, which I showed at meetings. I did actually pay it all off. That was the first Olympics that the Russians had been in; so it made for some good stories.

BUHLE: I thought of one other analogy with your sports stuff, which is, some of the coverage of music, especially when you got into the spirituals, the swing concerts and that kind of stuff. Actually, because it was black--that is to say, I assume that's the reason--had that kind of space, where somebody could say something about music and didn't have to put the political line into everything.

RODNEY: And nobody, probably, even read it. "Oh, it's about black music, fine."

BUHLE: Yes, or, "Good, good. Of course, of course."

It's a sense also that the race issue gave you a kind of strength and autonomy that you never would have had otherwise.

RODNEY: I think when I threw the question of baseball discrimination at them, when I started, it was so overpowering that it probably lasted a long time and gave me clearance, but you could go through a week's sports pages and not see the word Negro necessarily. I covered sports, I really did. And I covered other aspects of it, and working-class fighters: Italian guys and whatever.

BUHLE: Leaving aside race, do you think you saw the ethnic angle differently than the other papers?

RODNEY: I did. I did. I think anybody-- I don't think you even have to be a Marxist to develop certain things. Like, for instance, in boxing, it appeared almost readily to me evident that the people on the bottom end of the economic ladder at any particular time supplied double their quota of great fighters and champions. At the turn of the century when "Irish Need Not Apply," you had [John L.] Sullivan and [James J.] Corbett and [Robert] Fitzsimmons. And then when the ghettos were teaming with Italians and Jews, you had [Tony] Canzoneri and [Lou] Ambers and Benny Leonard and Ruby Goldstein and all these guys. And finally, as they moved along and the Latinos came in, and the blacks, you could hardly find a white man in the ring today. It's a brutal thing. You have to be able to take hurt without panic and not care about minute hemorrhages in your brain or about the money; so you could draw a real parallel. That's a historic work that's never been attempted.

BUHLE: Yes, very important.

RODNEY: Just boxing, just show the ethnic people in the ring.

BUHLE: And how do you feel about your own--

RODNEY: Joe Louis.

BUHLE: Yes, Joe Louis; this is the obvious case.

RODNEY: Henry Armstrong was an amazing guy.

BUHLE: How did you feel about your own boxing coverage,

the Joe Louis issue aside?

RODNEY: I guess I succumbed in part to the fact--

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BUHLE: How do you see the microcosm of sport today in terms of focusing on important issues?

FERMANOWSKY: Since racism is not really a primary one any more--

BUHLE: It's not too minor when you can't have any black quarterbacks. It's a serious issue.

RODNEY: No, well, you have Doug Williams of Tampa Bay.

[John] McKay: he's been magnificent with that guy. He wasn't afraid. He got him from Grambling. He's a big, strong-armed kid, and he had a terrible team, an expansion team. He went 0 for 14 the first year, and the Tampa Bay team [Buccaneers] became a big joke. And everybody focused immediately on the quarterback: "Get a new quarterback and start winning." And McKay knew enough to say that, "A lot of these guys are racists, and this guy is the future of this franchise, and I'm sticking with him." He was right, and I hope they mop up America's team Saturday: Dallas [Cowboys]. But--

BUHLE: Back to boxing, yeah.

RODNEY: I think I deserted my responsibilities in focusing on Joe Louis in a purely exultant way, with little attention to the things that were wrong with professional boxing--

BUHLE: [Richard] Wright covers a little bit of that stuff.

RODNEY: --without dealing with what the hell boxing is.\*

BUHLE: The gory stuff.

RODNEY: How far removed is it from the Colosseum, where gladiators beat each other's brains out for the--

BUHLE: That's all true, but working-class people love it anyway.

RODNEY: I know. And, yet, he was a very meaningful person. He was a guy-- I'll never forget a little item I saw in the paper, where a guy in South Carolina was being led to the gas chamber or electric chair, whichever, and he cried out, "Joe Louis, save me!" Isn't that something!

BUHLE: And when Joe Louis won the title fight, those moments in Harlem--an evening in Harlem.

RODNEY: Oh, I went back to Harlem after he knocked out Max Schmeling.

BUHLE: Like a social revolution or something.

RODNEY: It was. And, you know, by the way, social too. People were marching down the streets and giving the

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\*I took Richard Wright with me to Joe Louis's training camp at Pompton Lakes, N.J., before one of Joe's fights. They had an intense, fifteen-minute talk about the black experience. Wright was impressed by Joe's ready intelligence so at odds with the picture of him as inarticulate given in the press.--L.R.

hilarious Nazi salute--you know, mocking, "Heil Hitler! Ha, ha." Boy, there was a real meaning to that fight.

Henry Armstrong was an interesting guy. I got to know him pretty well. I used to go to the training camps of fighters. This was organized through the Madison Square Garden. The boxing promoters would take sports-writers up. You know, it's free publicity for them, which is what sports pages are essentially, free publicity, which doesn't mean you can't have content. There are some very good sportswriters now.

I went up to Pompton Lakes, New Jersey, and he was going to fight Barney Ross [former welterweight champion]. Barney Ross was sort of "over the hill." I was chatting with Armstrong, and he says, "Come on in back. I want to show you something." He picked me out. He had written a poem; and he didn't know what the Daily Worker was, particularly, but he knew me, and he had enough keenness to know that he might be derided in the other papers, you know, for writing poetry. The poem was something about: Here on Pompton's peaceful waters, the whole world seems serene. And yet, what am I preparing for? A bloody combat between myself, a Negro, and Barney Ross, a Jew. But I'm not mad at him.

Can you imagine that! And I was privy to that, privileged to receive that because--

FERMANOWSKY: He knew what was coming down.

RODNEY: That's right. He knew that he wouldn't be-- You know.

BUHLE: You ran the poem?

RODNEY: Sure. I'll have to look that up, find that.

BUHLE: Did you get close to any other prizefighters? Or friendly with-- Get insights into their personalities?

RODNEY: Yes, yes. There were a few. Lou Ambers [was a] boxer, a lightweight champion at one time.

BUHLE: So you covered the lower ranges too, not just the heavyweights, but the--

RODNEY: Yes, I covered boxing pretty thoroughly. I used to-- Inside myself there was a conflict about boxing. The fact is that, once I left sportswriting, I immediately cut out boxing. I'm not interested in it. I don't want to see it. I don't want to know about it even.

BUHLE: We are a generation built on Mohammed Ali, and after ten years our interest in boxing was restored. Then, immediately, it disappeared again. He was like an irresistible figure. He would show up at antiwar rallies--

RODNEY: Yes, sure, just because he-- In fact, he became romanticized--unnaturally. Someone wrote a letter to the Nation saying, "He ought to be a senator. Why not?" And the Nation was even sucked into saying, "Well, you know, in his case--" You know, he's a very erratic guy: he's just as liable to support Reagan as anything. He had

some good instincts, and he had a little guts, but it shows how you can be led astray there.

BUHLE: Did you get close enough to Joe Louis to understand a personality?

RODNEY: Well, Joe Louis: when he was fighting in 19-- , just a couple of months after Pearl Harbor--I guess it was January, '42--I wasn't drafted yet--he fought Buddy Baer, Max Baer's kid brother, for Navy Relief. They asked him to do that. He also said that he had something to show me. He took me into his dressing room and showed me stacks of mail he had gotten from Negroes, either attacking him or questioning why he would fight for the benefit of the navy, an organization, an outfit, where a black guy couldn't get to be more than a mess sergeant at that time.

And I said, "What do you tell these people, Joe?"

Some of them were, like, on a piece of brown paper, torn from a shopping bag--a brown paper bag: "Dear Joe, I love you, but why do you do this for the navy where our people are--" You know, from Louisiana, from a rural address.

It's amazing, if you wonder: Do all blacks know that the navy discriminates? Boy, what a lesson that was. Joe didn't answer each one of them.

I'd say, "What would you tell them if you-- How do you explain it?"

He says, "Well, I try to say something-- I try to

tell them that--" And this later was broadcast on national radio. I heard the--

BUHLE: "A lot of things are wrong with America, but Hitler won't fix it."

RODNEY: "But Hitler ain't going to fix it." Yeah, right. And that was the way he felt.

FERMANOWSKY: But did he think deeply about things, or was it kind of--

RODNEY: Joe came-- I got him to attend the Newspaper Guild event. That's at the time before Communists got their comeuppance in the Newspaper Guild.

BUHLE: So you had a lot of progressive influence on the [News]paper Guild anyway?

RODNEY: Yes. By the way, during the Spanish war, I was very successful for the Daily Worker in promoting Games for Spain--top-notch basketball players, good college basketball players. Of course, Spain enlisted the passions of many more than Communists, many more writers than [just] Communist [writers]. Still, it was something that nobody else organized. Somebody had to do it.

BUHLE: And athletes themselves were sympathetic toward the Spanish cause?

RODNEY: These guys were, yeah.

BUHLE: Was it more among Jewish athletes that there was this consciousness?

RODNEY: No, not necessarily. I met with some of the

guys, and there was a good smattering of [ethnic back-grounds].

BUHLE: Just the kind of American love for democracy and hostility toward dictatorship and--

RODNEY: I think so. By the way, to go back to Red Rolfe --because of what you just said--he came under immediate pressure, of course. He got a lot of hostile letters; he was awakened with anonymous threats in the middle of the night. He was the kind of guy that this just immediately stiffened. And he told me, he says, "Can you imagine these people? Now I'm more determined than ever to write. In fact, I'm going to write for you every day next year." And the following year he began doing a-- Well, it wasn't actually a daily column, but he wrote periodically, until he regretfully told me he had to stop that, because his manager said--and he agreed, and I agreed--that it was diverting too much time during the regular season. You know what his manager's name was? Joe [Joseph Vincent] McCarthy.

BUHLE: Joe McCarthy. Of course.

RODNEY: The right Joe. The name had no meaning at that time.

BUHLE: What about other managers in the big leagues or other baseball players? Was there anybody who came even close to Rolfe in terms of real sympathy for the Daily Worker and you?

RODNEY: Well, Rolfe never expressed political sympathy, only sympathy for our right to publish. He perfectly understood what America was about, which is what some of the people don't understand anymore. He knew what the Bill of Rights was. He was a Dartmouth grad.

I had a little to-do with Dartmouth, which is probably interesting. There was a Dartmouth team ("Tuss" [DeOrmond] McLaughry was the coach), and they were a poor team and very rough, a bunch of thugs, in fact. I'm trying to remember what the year was. They came to Columbia, and they knocked the Columbia quarterback out with a broken leg on the second scrimmage play. Mitch Price was his name. They went down to Princeton, and Princeton had a back-- [Richard W. ("Dick")] Kazmaier was an All-American triple threat, and they brutalized him; they kicked him and all, to such a degree that Princeton was in an uproar. They were penalized eight times for unnecessary roughness. The Daily Princetonian ran a bitter attack calling for a rupture of relations with Dartmouth. Now, I had covered the Columbia game, and I wrote about these savages, the way they're coached and how little this has to do with football. And later on the Saturday Evening Post had a big article by a father and son about Dartmouth, "Why We Chose Dartmouth." Martin was their name, the father and son. (I think it was '52, just about then.) And I wrote a column-- Oh, in that Saturday

Evening Post they made reference to the Daily Worker attack on the Dartmouth football team, and they said, "Can you imagine these people distorting Dartmouth and trying to make something out of-- Trying to say that we're capitalist thugs here?" and so on. So I wrote a very measured column. One of the things I had mentioned at the end was, I raised the question of whether it was completely accidental that this kind of coaching and this kind of team took place at a place where a freshman, who was working for [Henry A.] Wallace in the '48 campaign, was beaten to death.

BUHLE: Really?

RODNEY: Yes, it was a big thing. Anyhow, I wrote a very measured column in which I, piece by piece, took apart the document. I said it sounded as though the Daily Worker invented the violence. I quoted from the Daily Princetonian and the Princeton players; and I had called their coach, and he even violated the in-fraternity thing of never-- He said, "I don't think that these boys were coached properly about roughness"--[Charles W.] Caldwell [Jr.] his name was--which is a hell of a thing for one coach to say of another coach. And I mentioned what had happened at Columbia--the whole thing. And then I finished that and showed how phony this Saturday Evening Post reference was, on the theory that "nobody read the Daily Worker anyhow; so they could say anything they

wanted." I said, "I'm now going to send this column, not only as usual to every journalism school in New York--the Columbia School of Journalism and NYU and so on for similar-- I'm going to send it to Dartmouth to the Great Issues class, which is a class at Dartmouth for seniors which focuses on the press, on its weaknesses and strengths." And I did that, and I got a letter of thanks from a Mr. Foley, who said, "I posted your material and the relevant sections of the Saturday Evening Post on the bulletin board and received some very interesting comments. Thank you very much for calling it to my attention. My Daily Worker subscription had lapsed, and I would have missed it." [laughter] And I got some letters from Dartmouth students.

BUHLE: That's funny.

RODNEY: It always made me feel glad; when I had bleak periods, I'd say, "You're doing some good, some little good."

BUHLE: Wasn't there a kind of contradiction in-- This is something I've never understood about the East, being from the Midwest, where public schools and universities are something that all classes of people go to. Isn't there a certain contradiction in coverage [of], and serious discussion about, Ivy League football for a working-class audience in the newspaper?

RODNEY: Yes. Actually, we didn't focus on the Ivy League

too much. We covered--

BUHLE: I mean your readership didn't go to college, by and large, although younger ones were.

RODNEY: Our readership was wrapped up in City College basketball teams, because these were kids from the neighborhood who had made their marks. They rode the subways and beat everybody else. They beat all these foundries. And we played them very heavily.

BUHLE: Oh, I see.

RODNEY: And LIU [Long Island University] and NYU: these are kids from the public high schools, Brooklyn and the East Side. So we really didn't-- We covered-- There was a certain interest about Yale and Harvard--

BUHLE: Yes, of course, naturally.

RODNEY: --and a little romance about a small guy at Yale, "Albie" [Albert James] Booth, who was 132 pounds and was great, you know.

BUHLE: Sounds like Grantland Rice. [laughter]

FERMANOWSKY: Well, that Robeson was, too. You showed me yesterday--

RODNEY: I did some research on Paul Robeson as an athlete and went back to the direct coverage of him by the New York papers when he played for Rutgers. Mind blowing! Did you ever read such tributes to an athlete on a purely athletic basis? Guys couldn't believe it. They said, "This giant roamed effortlessly and stymied every-- He

took the place of three men in opening holes on the offense. He was a raging tiger on defense. And then he ran down the field and caught forward passes with one hand, and--" You know, the greatest thing. Nobody ever saw a football player like this guy.

BUHLE: Amazing, amazing.

RODNEY: Wasn't that something? That was before he ever played in Othello. Do you remember the reference?

BUHLE: Yes, I do.

RODNEY: "This giant figure, as if from Othello," or something like that.

BUHLE: Incredible, absolutely incredible.

RODNEY: There's some real poetic stuff about him. The occasion was, when a book came out-- The original occasion for me writing this was when somebody [Deputy Director Edwin F. Lethen, Jr.] from the Voice of America was speaking to the Newspaper Guild [27 May 1954], and I challenged him. I said, "Here's your chance. You can speak about the fact that Paul Robeson has applied for a passport to go to London, and he's been denied it. He can't fulfill concert engagements. And, of course, being connected with the Voice of America, you will discuss this with the newspaper men, won't you? Won't you? Won't you? Has the cat got your tongue, Mr. Lethen?" I was able to do this. Sure enough, he didn't. I knew he wouldn't; so this was a moral triumph.

BUHLE: David slays another Goliath, or at least puts an injury in his ankle, opens up a small wound. Were you conscious, at all, of--like the City College and so forth --[that] to a certain degree you were playing a Jewish angle, for a readership that was Jewish?

RODNEY: Well, basketball in New York City was largely Jewish. The reason there: these were the kids who were a little smallish sometimes and fast. They played in the streets and were quick, and until the age of the giants came in in basketball actually--

BUHLE: Not consciously?

RODNEY: I wouldn't overemphasize playing to the Jews. We used to think more about trying to reach non-Jewish readers.

BUHLE: Of course, naturally.

RODNEY: So it was a great triumph whenever I interviewed Protestant athletes, I suppose. [laughter]

BUHLE: Yeah, right.

RODNEY: But then there were some interesting things that took place, that were public things, that were not dealt with by the other papers.

Like I remember when there was a game in Madison Square Garden, a big basketball double header, [University of] Wyoming was playing CCNY [City College of New York]. And from the press box, where I was, all we could see was-- At one juncture City College was leading in a close

game. They [CCNY] were a very good team. (They had recruited heavily from the coal mine districts of Pennsylvania.) We saw Nat Holman, the City College coach, get up and walk over to the Wyoming bench. He had a folded program on him and, angrily--you could see the veins, even from across the floor--at time out, shake that program right under Shelton's nose, Everett Shelton, say something, and walk back, shaking, to the bench and then speak to his boys. We didn't know what that was about until later [when] I spoke to Holman. City College then pulled away from them rather rapidly, which sounds like a story. And what had happened, Nat said, was that in the heat of the game some decision went against Wyoming that he [Shelton] didn't like, and he called out, "These Jews and niggers get away with anything in New York!" Holman had told him, "If I hear one word like that from you again, I'm going to hit you right here in the Garden in front of all these people." And Shelton just sat there the rest of the game. The next day, there was a meeting of the metropolitan basketball coaches, and it was moved by Joe Lapchick, the coach of St. John's, and unanimously approved by "Neil" [Cornelius] Cohalan, the coach of Manhattan, and all the other coaches--in fact, Holman was the only Jewish coach--that Shelton would never be invited back to New York by any New York college. And he never was. The University of Wyoming team would never be--

We played that to a fare-thee-well. The other papers never mentioned it. Our kids sold papers in City College you wouldn't believe--probably nine out of ten of those kids were Jewish I suppose--but also at Manhattan.

By the way, when the basketball fixes took place, and we spoke about the pressure, the hypocrisy of the sports sections, piously condemning these kids. And these were the very sports sections who run the daily odds--you know, CCNY three-and-a-half over-- What's a half? You can't score a half a point. A foul is one point; a field goal is two. It's just a gambler's device. And they are providing this ammunition for the gamblers, and then these guys come to the players and say, "Look, if you just shave the margin a little, you don't have to lose." So that's the way they actually got in with these kids, originally. I dealt with that and the ethics of capitalist sports in this sense. And several of the coaches told me that we were the only ones who dealt with this in an honest way, putting some of the blame where it belonged.

BUHLE: Is this the major time you went after the gamblers and after the corruption?

RODNEY: Yes.

BUHLE: You never felt nervous about doing that?

RODNEY: No. In fact, we printed the name and address of the central clearing house for odds in Minneapolis at the time which sent out the daily line.

BUHLE: How did you feel about the actual working-class betting on such a massive scale in sports?

RODNEY: Well, I was aware of it, and I knew that most of the money was workers', and that that's a part of the American tradition, and that there's nothing wrong with a little two-buck bet, and so on and so forth. But still, in this case, they were calling for severe penalties for the players, who were the victims of this shit, playing with this incredible pressure around them, knowing that there's gambling. So that's what I focused on. We had many things by default in the same sense.

BUHLE: This is why I want to come back to your question. It seems that the more I--and Michael and I were talking about this on the way out--that I, and I would say a dozen other people who are working on American radical history, and we couldn't get what we wanted to know from the ideological journals. They didn't have the answers. They were just the way Socialists and Communists saw things, with a certain kind of tunnel vision. And we started cracking it when we got into race and ethnic issues.

Because the obvious reason--that the way American capitalism really operates is as an elite which faces an immensely divided mass population; that's the nature of an immigrant country, America. And, on the contrary, the way the forces gathered themselves in opposition to that is, on the one hand, consciousness of themselves as a particular

ethnicity, especially where you are dealing with first-generation immigrants, and then, secondly, once they are conscious of that, or along with being conscious of that, then conscious of what are the problems and necessities in bringing themselves together in some kind of coalition, so that the creation of an idea of a cultural pluralism is probably the most socialistic vision that's indigenous to the U.S.A.

RODNEY: And most dangerous to the [chauvinists].

BUHLE: An incredible vision, but that one that always seemed to take the Socialist and Communist orthodoxies by surprise, like it was something which, on the one hand, kind of wasn't there, and, on the other hand, it was almost kind of something you'd feel anxious about, because you wanted to make such a big deal of yourself being an American movement, that even to raise that question in public--

RODNEY: Even old Socialists came here and immediately pushed their kids into learning English and becoming American.

BUHLE: Exactly, exactly. My own work-- One of the big divisions between the Socialist and Communist Jews who still spoke Yiddish was that, by and large, Socialist Jews were heavy assimilationists, and they believed that their own Yiddish was on the way out; and the Yiddish Communists were people who really wanted to hold onto the language.

They saw the Russian revolution as the way that Yiddish would be alive in the Soviet Union, and they'd be able to hold onto it in America until the revolution came. So communism equals cultural pluralism.

RODNEY: I think that the Jews in the Soviet Union--looking back upon it--probably saw the revolution as freeing Yiddish culture to flourish freely.

BUHLE: Yes, it was a real ethnic kind of--

RODNEY: And that's why some of them found it so hard to make the break.

BUHLE: Yes, yes. So what I'm coming back to is this idea that-- Like Lapchick, for instance, is a real classic case, in some kind of way, of an American sense of fair play being as radical an idea as you would find anywhere in the society, or potentially so, in the right kind of environment; and sports being a unique way to put that up on the screen.

RODNEY: Of course, he had the stature to risk this.

Another guy would have been-- Well-- This guy would make St. John's a little uncomfortable with this kind of talk, but he didn't care.

BUHLE: Right, right, right, and, as a practicing Catholic, he was no Bolshevik in disguise.

RODNEY: Yes, sure. He was the guy who could have put that notion forward. Nat Holman couldn't have prevailed about it, I suspect.

BUHLE: Yes. What about other sports figures who seemed to have that kind of larger vision, even if they didn't see it in any kind of conscious political way? And how conscious were you of articulating that? Was it just a kind of unstated premise in your work, like the ethnicity in boxing and so forth?

RODNEY: As you state it, I realize that we never consciously fully put that forth.

BUHLE: And yet, in another sense, it was what the Popular Front was all about.

RODNEY: It was what it was about, and we touched upon it, obviously, in talking about black/white relationships: that the average white big leaguer, once the abstraction of racism was gone, did accept.

Listen, I covered the Dodgers the first year "Jackie" [Jack Roosevelt] Robinson played. I used to go down to the dugouts. I'd hear the players talking, and it was amazing. See, Jackie was under these ridiculous orders to be quiet and take it, at least for one year, which was totally alien to his personality. He was a very vocal guy at Pasadena City College and UCLA, you know, the Eddie [Edward Raymond] Stanky type.

BUHLE: Yeah, right, of course.

RODNEY: A tough, aggressive leader, and this was turning him upside-down. So Enos Slaughter of the Cardinals came down on his heel once. Jackie was playing first base

(a lot of people forget that this first year Stanky was the second baseman), and he'd get pushed around. There was a guy named Lenny Murillo of the Cubs, a little-remembered shortstop, and he slid into Robinson and pretended that Robinson had done something and began to pummel him, jumped on top of him; and Robinson lay there passively until Murillo was pulled off. These kinds of things happened.

So I'd hear the Dodgers talking about this, the white Dodgers, and I'd hear one of them say, "Now, gee, this poor guy. Should we do anything?"

And somebody else would say, "Well, democracy means that everybody is equal. If everybody is equal, you treat everybody the same. So that's that."

So "PeeWee" [Harold Henry] Reese, who was from Louisville, Kentucky, he really cut a layer deeper. He said, Yes, democracy means everybody's equal, but Jackie's the only colored guy there is in the leagues; so he's not getting treated equal. So maybe it's up to us to make things equal by helping him. Not quite those words; I'm putting a little more-- But that was the basis of--

It was very interesting to see ball players discussing these things.

Carl Furillo, he was-- Who's Carl Furillo? He pounded railroad ties for fifteen bucks a week in Pennsylvania. He was one of the guys--and I never published it

because I didn't want to damn Furillo-- ("Dixie" [Fred] Walker was an outright racist, and proud of it.)

BUHLE: Of course.

RODNEY: Furillo used to say, "I ain't going to play with no niggers." I remember in '46 when they signed Robinson at Montreal. Here's a working-class guy, and it would have been very embarrassing to Communists to even grapple with this. You know, "You must be mistaken. Furillo wouldn't say that, a working-class Italian."

BUHLE: Yes, we should live so long.

RODNEY: But never in the army. [laughter] OK, now, it's amazing. It's like one of these phony dramas. Before a game, players come out and, while the other team is having their infield practice, a couple guys will loosen their arms up in preparation for taking their practice so they don't begin cold. And they'll stand on the sidelines before their turn. So guys pick other guys to throw with. And Furillo would never throw with Robinson. You could see that. Now what happened? You tell me what happened to Furillo, but here after a month and a half or so, here he is throwing to Robinson and finally the whole-- You know, you never would know that he ever had said that. And I remember in '55, when they finally beat the Yankees, won their first World Series, and I rushed down, after my story, to the Hotel Bossert in Brooklyn, where there was a big celebration. I saw Robinson come in, and Furillo

rushed over to him, and they embraced, cheek to cheek with tears streaming: "We did it, we did it, old buddy." What turned this-- It's amazing. Here's a guy who's a ball player, and he saw that Robinson meant something to him financially. But it was more than that, because he could say, "Well, I'll play with him because he's going to help me win the pennant," and so on. That didn't mean he had to put his cheek against him later and cry with him. So something happens. The abstraction fades away, in actual--

By the way, this is the sports story. All the time. You see guys wrestling with their instincts in baseball all the time. They're stiff at first and don't know how to comport themselves. Who was it, Paul Richards, the manager of Baltimore. He once told me--he was from Waxahachie, Texas--he told me that he found once blacks began coming into baseball--he said this proudly, as a southerner--that--

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RODNEY: More readily even and friendly and natural camaraderie with the black ball players than northern ones.

BUHLE: Because they played with them when they were kids; they played baseball together before--

RODNEY: Yes, and they had the same idiom.

BUHLE: Yes, right.

RODNEY: And they could punch them in the arm and kid with them once the poison was gone; whereas the [northern] whites would still be wondering if they were saying the wrong thing, the blacks wouldn't.

BUHLE: So the Alvin Darks were an exception, is that what you mean?

RODNEY: Yes. Well, I think so in that sense.

BUHLE: As a Giants fan all those years.

RODNEY: Well, the poison never fully left.

BUHLE: How did you cover the Cardinals strike at the time of the first integration?

RODNEY: Oh, well, I don't remember the exact thing.

BUHLE: You gave it to them?

RODNEY: Oh, yes. Sure. It was a good way to get to them. By that time, there were some other people doing the same thing.

BUHLE: Because it seemed so shameful that an America that

was emerging out of the Cold War and facing charges by Russia that this was a racist nation, and so forth and so forth.

RODNEY: Yes. And not only that, but black guys had died in the war and--

BUHLE: Yes, right.

RODNEY: Hy Turkin of the Daily News-- Well, he originally wrote in the News when I was in the army. And when Judge Landis made the statement that he had received two million signatures on petitions, and that, he said very irritatedly, "There is no rule of barring any Americans from playing big league baseball," Turkin wrote in the News, in his column, that a storm-- "A wind threatens to democratize American baseball, and much of it dates back to a little-known man named Lester Rodney, now at Fort Dix, who asked Leo Durocher about Negro ball players, and Durocher said, 'I wish I could hire some of these guys, and I damn well would in a minute,'" which Leo did tell me. Which Leo now can't remember. Once the pressure started, he back-pedaled; but in this rush of pure feeling, as we discussed it, he said it, and I printed it.

BUHLE: Do you think he was being purely opportunistic, or do you think he actually had some feeling for black players?

RODNEY: I think, as a ball player, his better instincts were speaking originally, because he wasn't looking for

any glory. He didn't want to stick his neck out.

BUHLE: He seemed like such a ferocious personality.

RODNEY: He was. [laughter] Well he was a French Canuck from Springfield, Massachusetts--very poor background.

BUHLE: He fought his way to the top.

RODNEY: He did. Sixteen kids. When he came on the Yankees, he was accused of stealing stuff out of somebody's locker once in his early days.

BUHLE: How did you handle the Mexican league, the play people jumping to the Mexican league and then coming back?

RODNEY: We sent Mike Singer down there. They decided they couldn't spare me because there would be nobody to do the sports section. Pasquel had offered any American sportswriter who'd come down there, he'd pay his way and let them cover some of the leagues. You know, when the American guys were jumping there.

BUHLE: Did you ever feel they had a chance to make a go of it, or was it a crazy bubble from the beginning? It's kind of unbelievable; it's one of these episodes you never hear much about.

RODNEY: It did. The guy was a multimillionaire from Mexico. Stan Musial was about to go.

BUHLE: I didn't know that.

RODNEY: He considered an offer very seriously. Max Lanier, his teammate, who was a very good pitcher on the Cardinals, went.

BUHLE: I know Sal Maglie went and a few others.

RODNEY: Yeah, sure. This is kind of an aberrant thing, though, in the history of ball playing. It was just using the attraction of decent money.

BUHLE: It was a premonition of the present era, right?

RODNEY: It's like the Federal League, just before World War I-- It was just pure calculation by some businessmen that they could beat the existing leagues by offering more money and luring the better ball players. And for a little while it worked, [but] the war disrupted it.

BUHLE: So how did you handle the treatment of these jumpers by the big leagues?

RODNEY: When they came back? Well, we defended their rights to make contracts and made a pitch for unionism in baseball.

BUHLE: How did you do fair coverage when the Giants were playing the Dodgers in, like, '51, let's say, or those kinds of tight situations?

RODNEY: Well, being a Dodger fan all my life-- I told you about myself at the age of nine; so you can imagine how that merged with my becoming a Communist.

BUHLE: The Dodgers were the first integrated team.

RODNEY: And then my team became the team that hired a black. So, obviously I was a Dodger fan. I wanted Robinson to do well. I wanted the Dodgers to win, which they did that year. He was Rookie of the Year. Two

seasons later he was Most Valuable [Player]. He also was speaking out, and he was probably most voluble, as he became himself. So I had a hell of a job being objective. I tried like hell, but I guess my bias showed.

There were some peculiarities. I don't know if you ever read a book by Mark Harris called The Southpaw.

BUHLE: No.

RODNEY: Do you know who Mark Harris is?

BUHLE: He was like a famous sportswriter?

RODNEY: No, he was a writer of biographies. He did some pretty good books. He wrote a book called The Southpaw, which just sort of caught the essence of baseball, what it was. I reviewed it favorably, and it started a tumultuous discussion. It was a discussion on ethics in sports, in baseball.

BUHLE: Among the wider baseball audience or among the Daily [Worker] clientele?

RODNEY: The Daily Worker. And what the argument was about was: if you are a big league baseball player and you slide home with the winning run and there's a cloud of dust and you know that you're out because the guy tags you, is it right to correct the ump and say "No, no, sir, I was out?" [laughter]

So, I had your reaction: I laughed like hell, and I said, "This is ridiculous."

I got all kinds of people saying, "This is exactly

where you're falling into the capitalist trap. This is the basic lack of ethics--anything for the dollar, the heart of capitalism."

And I said, "You can't do that. Even when I was a kid, and there was no money involved, I'd have been hooted off the team if I said, 'No, I was [out].'" I said the deception is part of the game anyhow. The pitcher throws a curve ball. Should you stop fooling them? Should you say, "This is going to be a fast ball"? Where do you draw the line?

It was fascinating. I've got to go back and look for that. That was a marvelous discussion. It raged on and on. Finally the people-- Howard Selsam got into it--you know, the philosopher.

BUHLE: The great hacks of the party thought.

RODNEY: David Goldway.

BUHLE: Yeah, right. The great, great hacks of Marxist cogitation.

RODNEY: David Goldway's chief claim to fame should be that he's the father of the militant mayor of Santa Monica.

BUHLE: This I didn't know. Really?

RODNEY: Ruth Yannatta Goldway. Her father was David Goldway.

BUHLE: Amazing.

RODNEY: I met her at a party for In These Times, at

which Pete Seeger and Arlo Guthrie came over from the Greek Theater to perform.

FERMANOWSKY: That was a few months ago.

RODNEY: Were you aware of that party?

FERMANOWSKY: Yes, I knew about it.

RODNEY: It was a hell of a party. And she remembered that we had--

BUHLE: That's fine, that's fine.

RODNEY: She's quite a girl. Well, I don't know if I'm--

BUHLE: No, listen, all these things-- Of course, naturally, as an old sports fan, I have to ask all these things, but the point is--

RODNEY: By the way, my tendency is to say the things that we did that other papers didn't so that everything comes out positive. I'm sure there's lots of wretched and slovenly work in the sports section, too.

BUHLE: You mean, for political reasons or just as bad sports coverage or both?

RODNEY: Well, I like to think I was a good sports editor, that I could have been a good sports editor for any paper. I was conscientious.

BUHLE: So, you got to the point where reporters worked under you, right?

RODNEY: Finally we got some volunteer kids, and then we took on-- When I went into the army, Nat Low came on.

BUHLE: How was he?

RODNEY: He was pretty good. He died shortly after. He got--what do you call that disease with bacteria on valves of the heart? [It was] something perfectly curable with penicillin, but it wasn't available. A guy named Bill Mardo, who was hired to work along with me during the open period, right in the rosy glow after World War II and [the paper] was retrenched-- I was always fighting to have a major sports section. After a while I also wanted to do something besides sports. In fact, I got a little tired of sports. You know, the big fight was won.

BUHLE: That's right, of course. So you're talking like by the early fifties?

RODNEY: Yes. I would have liked to have just written.

BUHLE: There wasn't any opening for anything else? You were key-holed?

RODNEY: You had to have a certain kind of political stature to be a Communist daily writer, a political background almost. I had never been an organizer. I had no great working-class credentials.

BUHLE: It wasn't even important for you to be a member of the party, or wasn't it?

RODNEY: At the time I came on? Well, I had to join.

Nobody said, "You must join because you're coming," but it was almost implicit.

BUHLE: You didn't have to go to branch meetings or anything?

RODNEY: Oh, I did. I was a member. Oh, yes, I was a good member.

BUHLE: Was your work discussed, or did they leave that out?

RODNEY: The branch meetings rarely discussed--

BUHLE: Because they had more important stuff to do?

RODNEY: Well, no, I heard some good things about-- In doing recruiting things, "Thanks to Comrade Rodney we have a good weapon to approach the masses [laughter] in a concrete way." You know, the old language. But I had all the acute embarrassment of handing out leaflets at subways. You had to do it: "OK comrades, let's go around the room. What are you doing Saturday morning? What are you doing?" You know.

BUHLE: So, how many hours a week did you put into your reporting?

RODNEY: Well, I worked every--

BUHLE: You worked seven days a week all told, I know that.

RODNEY: I got into a six-day week at the paper.

BUHLE: That's not even so unusual on other newspapers.

RODNEY: I had to work every Sunday because there's Monday's paper. I used to get Saturday off. We got the weekend paper put out on Saturday. A lot of that was done in advance; so Saturday was usually my day off. I worked a six-day week most of the years I worked on the paper,

which was from '36 to '42. Then I was out '42, '43, '44, '45 (half of '42). Came back early in '46, then through '57. Rarely had-- But, we began to have vacations, two weeks.

BUHLE: You were more or less expected to carry on your regular party agitation work despite the fact that you were this big-time--

RODNEY: In fact, if I hadn't-- If there was a bad report card for me as a member of my branch, I suppose they'd have had to seriously consider my continued-- Although I know somebody who never went to a meeting.

BUHLE: See, that's why I asked.

RODNEY: Yes, he never went to a meeting. He was above that.

BUHLE: That's like Len DeCaux. He would say he was a member at large, or something, and people would kind of let him--

RODNEY: Well, I believed in what I was doing. I was not a sports buff who briefly took advantage of the cover of being a Communist to write sports. I believed; I really did. I still believe. I don't join those who feel they wasted their lives. How can you waste your life being for a noble thing? No matter how foolish you-- Now that I've been out of that, I see how easy it would have been to really waste your life just trying to earn a buck, like all these young engineers, and get ahead of the next guy

or something without ever having a thought beyond your own advancement.

BUHLE: And your branch was your neighborhood?

RODNEY: Neighborhood branch. In fact, I became section education director for a time, which involved a lot of hard work, many late meetings.

BUHLE: Did you feel--

RODNEY: Well, I was almost challenged to be that by the fact that Clare was a leader in the youth movement. I don't think she'd have stayed married to me if I wasn't active.

BUHLE: But did you feel it drained time and energy away from you doing your sports? It drained time and energy away from everything else in your life?

RODNEY: In a way it took away. I didn't have time to write and all.

BUHLE: Did you have aspirations to write, as in sports books, that you just wouldn't have time to do?

RODNEY: I did write sports books, under a different name.

BUHLE: Really!

RODNEY: Sure.

BUHLE: Please! Man! This is going to be the end of my--  
[tape stopped]

RODNEY: Keep it on. It was [in] a series of Real Books: The Real Book about Lincoln, The Real Book about Snakes, The Real Book about Magic, and--

BUHLE: What made them "real"?

RODNEY: Well, they were well researched and good, popularly written. There's a certain writer who's still alive. I don't know whether I should mention his name or not. But I don't think he cares that much. He's seventy-eight and out of it. Anyhow, he was doing some of these. He had the connection with Doubleday and didn't know doodily about baseball.

So he came to me and said, "They want a book about baseball. We'll invent a name, and you write it. I'll edit it." And he said, "I'll take 60 percent. You do it for 40 percent."

I said, "What kind of money might be involved?"

He was talking about thousands of dollars. It blew my mind! So I did this book, and it quickly turned out that I didn't need his editing at all. Of course, he had written books [for] four-, eight-, twelve- and fourteen-year-olds. [It] didn't mean that I couldn't quickly adapt to what was needed.

Now, here's the contents of this one: "Our National Game," "Rules and Umpires," "Inside Baseball," "You and Baseball," "Batting and Base Running," "First Base," "Sec- . . ."--how to play each of these positions. And all of it was woven with anecdotes about big leaguers, which I was in a peculiar position-- Some recent stars, and so on. And I was able-- Nineteen fifty-one was the first

one, and then I did an update some years later. I got in something about Jackie Robinson and the fact that once there was a-- You know.

BUHLE: The political content of this was very subtle, extremely subtle.

RODNEY: Very subtle, but there was sort of a tone of respect for the players, which you don't find in the ordinary book of facts. Anyway, it was very popular, and unfortunately, for what it says about America, it immediately outsold the Real Book about Lincoln and . . . Magic and . . . The Flag and everything else by a wide margin. Well, my old friend, who was very left, he shamefacedly changed it to fifty-fifty, and I still got a big hunk of cash. I think it was originally seven thousand dollars in 1951.

BUHLE: That was real money in 1951!

RODNEY: Three years later I did an update and just changed some of the names, the stars, and I got another-- They made it a Bookfind Club [selection], whatever that is. And I got another eight thousand dollars at that time, and that's only half of-- So there's money to be made.

BUHLE: So why didn't you start pumping them out once you left the Daily Worker?

RODNEY: Well, first of all--

BUHLE: You're so much better than any of the other hacks

that write these popular sports books.

RODNEY: Well, when I left we were committed to moving to California, and I needed desperately to get a job. We were broke. Two little kids. And books is an iffy kind of-- I needed a salary. We came out here, and I was a guy without any resumé I could present. I came out here at the age of forty-seven from the cocoon. I was even wondering, "Can I cut the mustard in the real world?" I got a job on the Santa Monica Evening Outlook at a hundred dollars a week. My head swam! He said hesitantly, "We can only pay a hundred dollars, you know." Thinking big--I was an unknown guy--I put a little ad in the California Newspaper Publishers Association weekly saying, "Skilled journalist, forty-two." (I knocked off five years.) [laughter] "Can do anything on the editorial side," so and so forth; and just two days later I got a call from Santa Monica, just needed someone down there. It was complicated; they were easing somebody out, and they--

BUHLE: Well, how did you explain to them what you'd done all these years?

RODNEY: They hardly cared. I said I worked for the Brooklyn Eagle, and they didn't even know that the Brooklyn Eagle had gone out of business. [laughter] It's like the foreign legion out here. And I changed my name from Lester Rodney to Les Rodney (which didn't fool the Red Squad attorney).

BUHLE: Of course.

RODNEY: I remember the guy saying to me, "A hundred dollars a week."

I said, "Well, that's OK." My head was swimming. I had visions of Rob Hall saying, "I've got to have a hundred dollars a week," and me laughing raucously at him. That was '58.

BUHLE: So you didn't really get the energy, with a growing family, to write sports books?

RODNEY: No. So I had to work quickly-- Well, I should have. I probably could have written another book, but I don't know. There's a lot of hard work, by the way. They drained me, and I was younger then.

BUHLE: Yes, right, that's what they always say. So, what's the story on this other book?

RODNEY: Besides when you come to Southern California, there's sunshine and--

BUHLE: And you've got to go to the beach.

RODNEY: And I was a pretty good tennis player who had never had a chance to play all the time. Not the beach so much--the beach too--but tennis. I got to be a pretty good player just by virtue of being here and playing. Very frankly, the seventy-year-old guy you're looking at now could probably wipe out the forty-seven-year-old guy who arrived here, because I have more consistent stokes. Amazing. I wish I could arrange that match. [laughter]

BUHLE: It's like those great sports fantasies of the two greatest boxers of all time.

RODNEY: This was just next to it.

BUHLE: Dick Young, of course.

RODNEY: There was a series called the "Most Valuable Player Series" every year, and they gave it to recognized names. They wouldn't give it to me [to write], of course, but Dick Young on the Daily News (who still writes for them) had [the assignment to write] the most valuable [player] book on Roy Campanella. Now, he comes up to the question, "Well, how did you get to play in the big leagues?"

And Roy Campanella says to him, "Well, the Daily Worker was a--"

"Oh-h, no, no, we don't want to put that in the book!"

He says "What do you mean? You asked me the question. You've got to put that in."

So, we have this in this official book: "As the season got underway, agitation for the admission of colored players to organized ball was resumed. Roy found himself accosted by a man who introduced himself as a reporter from the Daily Worker--"

BUHLE: Communistic.

RODNEY: "--a communistic organ which pounded hard and unceasingly against the color line in organized ball."

Oh, that was a very good line. Of course, I wasn't accosting him. He knew me well, and I knew him from the black leagues before he-- But anyhow, this was quite something to get in.

"'Would you like to try out for the Pittsburgh Pirates?' a man asked Roy.

"'Sure, who wouldn't?' replied Campanella.

"The man went on to explain that he had arranged with the Pittsburgh club for a three-man tryout. 'Those men could--' and so on and so forth. 'You will receive a letter shortly from Bill [William Edward] Benswanger, president of the Pirates,' the man said."

That's almost accurate, yes.

"Roy dismissed the conversation," etc. etc.

"As the days passed, he forgot about the incident. One morning he received a letter from Mr. Benswanger. It told of the attempts made by the Daily Worker to create a tryout for him. It went on to say that the Pittsburgh club would be only too happy to arrange-- But he must understand that he'd have to start in the minors and come up through the system. It might take years." And then less encouraging. The guy was hedging.

I had challenged every owner, you know, on the record: "State if you believe in American fair play or don't you? Would you give a tryout to ball players? I will tell you the ball players who are good enough to

play, so--"

BUHLE: So, why don't you say a couple more words about Campanella. Were you closer to him than you were to Jackie Robinson?

RODNEY: Yes, Campy-- Much more. First of all, Jackie was married to Rachel, who was a very-- She was hostile to me. She wanted to keep Jackie clear of the radical movement. She was the one who pushed him down to Washington to testify before the House Un-American Activities Committee against Paul Robeson. Although the things he said--by the way, I went back and looked it up--were not too bad. He said, "I admire Mr. Robeson; but if he says that he would rather be a lamp post in Moscow" and so on and so forth, "then I think he's speaking foolishly. And if he says that no black racism--" and so on. And I did too, of course.

BUHLE: Right, naturally.

RODNEY: But the very act of appearing before the committee outraged politically sensitive-- But it didn't have that same meaning to him. The government--his government--what did he know about the Dies Committee and the history of this thing? So we jumped on Jackie a little unhappily then, and I was a little estranged from him, although, at the beginning, he was well aware of--

Campy and I had a very good rapport. Campy was a guy who told me-- When the Supreme Court decision on public

schools came down, he made the flat statement. He said, "Baseball had most to do with that of anything."

BUHLE: Ah, I never heard that before. That's interesting.

RODNEY: I said, "What do you mean, Roy? How can you say baseball had the most to do--"

He says, "Well, listen," he said, "everybody else just talked, but in baseball everything we did was the first. We were the first ones to stay in a hotel down South. We were the first ones to play ball in Atlanta. We were the first ones to play in Jacksonville. We were the first ones who did such and such and such and such." He says, "And sports fans--"

Then he told me this wonderful story about the Dodgers playing in Atlanta, an exhibition. Whenever the Dodgers did spring training, you'd play a series of exhibition games to help pay. You'd play in minor league cities on the way home. This was traditional. So this was 1949. Campanella was playing; Robinson was in his second year; and Don Newcombe had joined the Dodgers. They were the three blacks. They were still kind of isolated. There was still a question: "Was it going to break out?" Bill Veeck in the American League had taken Larry [Lawrence Eugene] Doby.

Anyhow, they had an exhibition game scheduled with the Atlanta Crackers--would you believe [that] was the

name of the team in the Southern Association?--and this was going to be the first game. I knew about it, and I wrote and said how the game took place, and the Dodgers beat them, and so many people attended. That's all I knew.

When the Dodgers got back and I was chatting with Campanella, this all emerged, and it was-- No, the Supreme Court thing came later. So what happened in Atlanta--Roy was telling me this--and he said, "Well, the first thing you've got to know is that the whole day before, people were coming toward Atlanta--colored folks, from all over the state--and they were coming on horses, carts, and on foot from outlying communities; and they lined up to buy tickets." And he said, "Now the colored section was only for five hundred people there; and the management didn't know-- Here they were with cash in their hands, and they didn't know what to do. So they shortened the field. They put ropes around the outfield and packed them in; and there was also a sort of a terraced fence where you could sort of cling to it. It was a sea of black up there, and then the white people were in the regular grandstand." He said, when they got off the plane, somebody showed them the Atlanta Constitution with a story where the Grand Dragon of the [Ku Klux] Klan had said, "This game must never take place." And he told me PeeWee Reese said--you know, there's cameras and

photographers and reporters--PeeWee Reese went to a rock, literally picked up the rock, and said, "Where is that guy? Where is that Grand Dragon?" [laughter] It was marvelous.

BUHLE: And this was a guy from Chattanooga, is that what you said?

RODNEY: Louisville. Anyhow, I said, "What happened when you first came on the field?"

He told me, "Jackie was the first one out, and then I followed and the whole team." He said, "First there was a roar from our people."

I said, "What kind of roar?"

He said, "You wouldn't believe it!" And then he said, "Another thing started to happen. Some booing and hissing began from the white section."

Can you picture this! This night game, you know, this little wonderland; and here's Atlanta, and here's this crowd erupting with these noises.

I said, "How much booing and hissing would you say, Roy?"

He says, "It's hard to say. Maybe about a third of them." He says, "And then another thing happened."

I said, "What was that?"

He said, "Some of the white folks began to stand up and clap to differentiate themselves."

BUHLE: God, that's amazing in the South!

RODNEY: So the question: Who the hell [are] those people?

BUHLE: Who are they? Are they sports fans? Are they decent people?

RODNEY: Yes, or are they just people who are baseball--

BUHLE: Who want to see the game.

RODNEY: Here's baseball: the lines are-- Fair's fair, foul's foul, and you must treat-- You're the host.

Here's a visiting team; it's impolite to boo. And I am sure there were tumultuously mixed feelings; and maybe the same guys may have ridden with the Klan the next day.

BUHLE: That's right.

RODNEY: May have, but at the moment they stood up to differentiate themselves. This is the baseball field, maybe. This is not the place for-- Who the hell knows! So anyhow, there's this tremendous tumult going on, just by their appearance to take batting practice before the the game. This roar of greeting from the blacks, this immediate booing and hissing, and then the whites standing up.

And I said, "Was it ten, fifteen, twenty?"

He says, "Oh, no. Hundreds of them."

BUHLE: It's a vivid visual image. What about Willie Mays and the Giants? Anything to say about that at all?

RODNEY: Willie-- You know the Giants--

BUHLE: The Giants' ownership was always chauvinistic and

racist.

RODNEY: If a white guy, like Willie, comes into the big leagues and he's happy-go-lucky and he laughs like hell, he's just an apolitical American ball player and a nice guy; and if you ask him weighty questions [he says], "Hi, I'm just a ball player." That's the way Willie Mays was. He was a ball player, which doesn't mean that he didn't know that he was black and that he owed gratitude to Campy and Robinson. Campy never thought too much of Willie, because Willie would never say anything with content, and yet his father was a steelworker down in--next to Birmingham.

BUHLE: Third-generation ball player; third generation finally made it out of the steel mills and into the fields.

RODNEY: Sumner, wasn't it? Big steel mill in Birmingham? He never did anything bad. He never sucked up to the whites, and he was proud, but he was just a ball player. I don't think he ever had too many serious thoughts in his head. If I had put that in the Daily Worker, I'd have been-- Ben [Benjamin Jefferson] Davis would have come down on me like a ton of bricks, because a black guy isn't permitted to be like another American who's a great ball player without a serious thought. He liked women and--

BUHLE: How about any of the other early black players?

Any of the other early black players really impress you with their acuity, and so forth?

RODNEY: Larry Doby.

BUHLE: He was one I was going to ask about, yes.

RODNEY: Larry was a very thoughtful guy. He, unlike any of the others, he carried the burden with him. He was almost morose toward whites.

BUHLE: Was he from Cuba? Where was he--

RODNEY: No, no, he was an American black [born in Camden, South Carolina].

BUHLE: I always thought he was Latin.

RODNEY: No, not Doby. And he felt that he was discriminated against, that he was never considered for a managerial position. And when he finally did get to manage, he was yanked after a half a season and never considered again, whereas there's this musical chairs business with all of the white managers.

BUHLE: One team or another, right.

RODNEY: And he's not in that. Well, that's beginning to change. Frank Robinson was finally taken on by the Giants. But that's an individual up there, an interesting individual.

BUHLE: What I saw when I was ten or twelve and a Giant fan was that the black thing had already kind of happened, even though Willie Mays was like an idol to me. But the fascinating thing in the mid-fifties was that Latinization

that began to take place.

RODNEY: Orlando Cepeda and all. Juan Marichal.

BUHLE: And how did you see that? Did you know any of those--

RODNEY: Toward the end. I didn't really get my teeth into that too much. I can't really tell you much about that.

BUHLE: You didn't have anybody, a stringer or anything, to cover the winter leagues?

RODNEY: No. No, that would have been good.

BUHLE: Sort of an international spectrum of baseball.

RODNEY: Well, Roy used to tell me about playing down in Venezuela and around and about the old days. Roy is mixed. His father is an Italian grocer in Philadelphia, and a black mother, which is the opposite of Franco Harris, [the Pittsburgh Steelers] back, who had a black father and white mother, white Italian mother. Kind of interesting.

BUHLE: Yes, it is interesting.

RODNEY: Roy is not as coal black as Jackie, and the question always-- I did ask Roy one time when we were chatting: "What threw you in as a kid with the black side?" You know, I said, "Why weren't you an Italian? You're Roy Campanella with an Italian white father."

He says, "I didn't make that [choice. It was made for me!"]

TAPE NUMBER: III, SIDE ONE

December 29, 1981

BUHLE: What did it mean to you in terms of what the sports section and the whole sports culture might mean in postwar America, and how were you disappointed or not disappointed by what happened in the Cold War and all the political pressure on the paper and the party?

RODNEY: Disappointed with what happened in the country or the party?

BUHLE: Well, it's kind of a paradox for you, because other political people, other cultural people say, "God, we had all these great aspirations and the Cold War came, and they knocked us cold. And we really didn't get anything we were expecting." But for you the situation is subtly different, because even though the Cold War came and the party was murdered, still the things that you held up carried through in popular sports.

RODNEY: That's right, except I was not immune to the fact that the climate was different. There was a little tightening of the belt around the paper. That was the time they got rid of the second sportswriter and began constricting sports. The general feeling being: "Hell, this is no time for you to talk about ball games. We're fighting for our life, and fascism may be on the way."

BUHLE: Did you share the five minutes to midnight--

RODNEY: No, I did not.

BUHLE: What made you different? Do you think because you have a little more feeling for America?

RODNEY: I think, having been in the army, I got a little better sense of the basic good sense of the American people, that when push came to shove they were, I would now say, they would reject any extremes finally. When they finally saw what Joe McCarthy looked like on television, it was thumbs down on him.

I defended the right of the so-called Nazis to march in Skokie, not only because it was consistent with the Bill of Rights but because of the obvious thing that if we earn the right to say, "These guys can't march," sooner or later [someone else will] say, "Well, these guys oughtn't to march either." Also, I felt it was giving too much importance to a little group of "sickies," and that they were not representative.

I get into arguments about this, and Clare doesn't even like to hear it. I think, and my experience tells me, that people of more immediate European background think in a more European context, especially people who know about Germany or who were in Europe and for good reason. I can throb with sympathy with that. [They] tend to vibrate with wild exaggeration at anything that happens. Some twelve-year-old kid can paint a swastika on the side of a synagogue in Redondo Beach, and it can mean

nothing more than that, and they say, "My God, it's happening here!" And they will write letters to newspapers. It has nothing to do with-- They don't know the fabric of this society. They don't know about [the] Haymarket [Square riot]. They don't know the trade union struggles. They don't know that this is a tumultuously complex society, that it never had the iron authoritarianism of Germany, that it can't happen quite that way. It might happen under a different guise, and more subtly, but there's always going to be a hell of a fight before they can just-- [claps hands] I even said in that column I wrote to the Long Beach paper, I said the fact is that nobody wearing a swastika could be elected dog catcher in any city, town, county, or state of the United States. So, the element of contempt for this, which is not shared by people who say, "That's what they said in Germany, 'They're a bunch of clowns, a Bavarian beer seller,' and all"-- But they're talking about something else. They don't know America.

So part of that is the reason I would differ with Foster. In fact, I wrote a passionate letter to him saying, "How can you say the things you're saying about the guys who fought in the war having really played a role, as it turns out, to place American power in a position after the war to do--" You know, we were in the war for the best possible reasons, and so I got short shrift from

that.

George [Blake] Charney: I went to him and said, "Foster says I'm wrong, but you know better. You were in the army too." He was in the Pacific. He was a foot soldier.

He says, "I do." And he says, "What can I tell you? You're entirely right. What are we going to do, drop out of the one good thing there is that's fighting?"

And that was the ultimate dilemma, which people don't understand: Why did you stay in such a structured thing where people told you what to think, where your brains were usurped?

BUHLE: Yeah. What were the choices?

RODNEY: My choice was--

BUHLE: Not to be in a fighting organization.

RODNEY: So I didn't share that view. Now, what effect did it have, or was I as disappointed as the cultural people? It's hard to single that out for me. From the beginning of 1956 the whole thing began tumbling in all directions. I wrote a column expressing my view of Hungary, saying, "The Soviet action is indefensible." I met a guy later, after I moved here, Irv Goff, who was a veteran of the Lincoln Brigade, and he grabbed me by the shirt and said, "Les, I'm glad to see you, but, you dirty bastard, your column on Hungary did more damage because your stature as a sportswriter--"

FERMANOWSKY: Could you say something about some of those major figures in the New York office of the Daily Worker, say, between '45 and '55, and the Young Turk movement?

RODNEY: On the paper?

FERMANOWSKY: Yes, John Gates and the continuing attitude towards Khrushchev?

RODNEY: Johnny was not a newspaper man, you know. He had been a commissar in the Spanish war, a very young one. He was stationed in the Aleutian Islands. They thought that would be a safe place for him during World War II. And then he volunteered to join the 101st Airborne, which went over to Holland. He was quite a guy.

Actually, I knew Joe Starobin best of all. Are you familiar with him?

FERMANOWSKY: Yes. Could you talk about him?

RODNEY: Joe used to disturb me very much when he'd come back from-- Long before the Twentieth Congress and the Khrushchev revelations, Joe used to get together with me and Joe Clark and a couple of others.

FERMANOWSKY: Did George Blake Charney [agree with Starobin]?

RODNEY: Yes, but I'm talking about the paper. George Charney would have been included, but he was in the New York office.

By the way, George had this reputation of-- You

could always go to George and not get a bromidic reply; you'd get sympathy. And somebody who was falsely accused of white chauvinism could come to George, and George would say, "I know, and you know, and let's do the best we can. That'll change; it has to be secondary in the big fight." But he talked about--

But Joe Starobin was the first one I remember who bothered me very much, coming back from his travels and saying, "Listen, there's something very--not too good there. Our party has got a very narrow, mechanistic view of things, taken from the Russian experience. The Russians are nationalists, and we are confusing international solidarity with the defense of Russia. And everything they're doing isn't so good." And he told me some things about the [Nazi-Soviet Nonaggression] Pact in 1939 which made what hair I had then stand up: [Vyacheslav Mikhailovich] Molotov's role and turning people over to the Nazis, and it wasn't just to defend--

I used to defend-- I used to say the following thing, for years. I'd say, "As an American I was a damn fool to welcome the pact." I should have said that nobody should make pacts with the Nazis, and regardless of what the Russians do, or for whatever reasons, we have to continue to place as number one the fact that the Nazis are no good. But, if I were a Russian, I could easily explain it. These bastards, [Neville] Chamberlain,

[Edouard] Daladier, had sold them out; and it turned out the Russians wanted to go into Czechoslovakia with the Allies, and they said no. And the Mannerheim Line was fifty [miles from Leningrad]. And I could still make a case.

FERMANOWSKY: And what did you, in fact, say during that period?

RODNEY: Well, I parroted Earl Browder's lengthy rationale, which is kind of fuzzy when I look back at it. I convinced myself psychologically for the same reasons that many of us did. You're under this enormous thing where you know that you're on the right side historically, in great outline, and that you know the Times-- I can show you how the New York Times lied about the Soviet Union time after time. It was very confusing. They lied about them, and yet they were right when they were about the purge trials. Undoubtedly they were right about Trotsky and everything.

BUHLE: Yes. Right. Sure.

FERMANOWSKY: During your war experience, did you maintain contact at all?

RODNEY: No, nor was I expected to. I was expected just to be a good soldier. The party wasn't that crazy.

FERMANOWSKY: You didn't even know about a Communist Political Association change?

RODNEY: Oh, I heard rumors of it in the Pacific.

FERMANOWSKY: What did you think?

RODNEY: When I came back, the first thing I said was, "Well, what do you expect? All the Marxists were overseas." [laughter]

Every guy coming back said the same thing. At first. But then I became interested in Browder's theory, and it was hard for me to take the [Jacques] Duclos letter and Browder. I got a little fond of Earl. Here, again, was a major psychological crisis.

By the way, Joe Starobin, even then, used to bother us.

BUHLE: Really?

FERMANOWSKY: What did he do?

RODNEY: Well, you know, we'd have a Chinese luncheon in Union Square with him and Joe Clark and Abner Berry, Alan Max; and Alan was very disquieted and thought Joe was wrong. Alan would argue with him. The rest of us felt, uneasily, he may have known something. Long before the Khrushchev revelations, Starobin confronted Foster. He confronted him physically. He'd go up to the ninth floor and argue with him. He had a funny kind of stature that--

BUHLE: That he was able to do that--get away with this?

FERMANOWSKY: Was he a very brilliant man?

RODNEY: He was a very brilliant man. He went up to [the University of] Toronto as a professor--

BUHLE: I knew him late in life. I was very close to his

son.

RODNEY: Oh, you knew his son?

BUHLE: And then I met Joe-- I guess I met Joe at the time his son had died, and then I met him again later, and he seemed very bitter.

RODNEY: He was devastated. You know how devastated he was.

BUHLE: Yes, totally. An only child, and everything.

RODNEY: He changed. He became cranky. He never [had been].

BUHLE: Really?

RODNEY: Yes, it took too much out of him.

BUHLE: Because when people would come down really heavy on Vivian Gornick for her portrayal of him, I went to his place and talked with him, when his son was still alive, and even then there was one side of his character that seemed like that to me. There was another side of his character that wasn't like that.

RODNEY: Basically, as he appeared to us at the paper, he was a little candle of reason and conscience in advance of anyone else. Believe me. If you go back and read his book, From Paris to Peking, you'll see it now. I didn't see it then, and I see it now. He was trying to stay inside and say what he could. But at the moment when the shit hit the fan, he was far removed already, because he had really been-- He had drawn his own conclusions, and

none of us had. We all had to go through one stage after another.

Joe Clark had been eaten away a little more, but part of that was psychological because he had spent three years in Moscow, and he saw enough to know the isolation of the foreigners and their lack of a real-- It bothered him.

Izzy [Isadore F.] Stone bothered me. I respected him as a journalist, as a writer. I remember him writing in-- Was it the [National] Guardian?

BUHLE: Probably.

RODNEY: He said, in his first sentence-- He went to the Soviet Union for the first time, and he said, "There's something terribly wrong here." Stone said that? "And what's this about?" And this was also before-- Then it rouses all your loyalty, and you dredge up, bitterly, all the phony accusations. And you were right, and everybody else was wrong on Korea; and you were right, and everybody else was wrong about unemployment insurance, about Spain, and about all the-- You know, so on.

FERMANOWSKY: So where would you place yourself then, let's say in the late forties, ideologically? I mean, you talk about how Bill Foster was very affable, and you talked to him in the elevator, and everything; but what did you think of him?

RODNEY: I admired him as a great leader of the American working class. Still. After all, he was not a guy who

came out of a college classroom and began to spout theories. And in my mind, that weighted some of the things he had to say. I felt Bill was going a little overboard in his view, but, by God, he's a guy who knows! I felt a little humility about arguing too much with him. At the same time, my instincts were with what Browder was saying. In retrospect-- I've seen people expelled from the party, you know, and being confused at what they were accused of, and so on. I never was a hatchet man myself, but I came close to it by silent acquiescence. But the major shame in my life is to think back to the unknown heroes who left at the time of the pact and who were castigated when Browder went out. My God! And these people went--

BUHLE: These people who were destroyed.

RODNEY: --went through far worse agonies than we did.

BUHLE: Ruth McKenney is a good example.

RODNEY: Ruth McKenney--

BUHLE: It's the best example I can think of, because she's one of the greatest writers in the left, and she was destroyed.

RODNEY: My Sister Eileen, yes.

BUHLE: And her husband too.

RODNEY: It was easy. We went out in a wave of triumphant morality: "We are still-- We're leaving for the same reasons we went in." Which is true. There is a certain

consistency. And we went through agonies, and it had to be gradual. These people who had the guts-- I wish you would look them up and find out--

BUHLE: It's tragic. My wife just last week-- Ruth McKenney's last book of herself and Bruce Minton's [pseudonym of Richard Bransten] life together, and she never understood it. She was a great writer who never understood why these people did these things to her, why they were so vicious towards her.

She couldn't figure it out.

RODNEY: Even a sophisticated guy like Albert Maltz was almost jangling like jelly for years after he mildly suggested that art can't be just a weapon, that it must be art.

Oh, and Sam Sillen: savage. The interesting thing is that Sillen was one of the first to scream, "It's a nightmare. I'm leaving a nightmare!"

I always had the feeling that people who-- By the way, Howard Fast was one of the most embarrassing pro-Russian sectarians. Whenever he spoke-- I always think of it as somebody who is leaning fully against a door, like the door is support of Russia, uncritical support of Russia. The door flies open; they are the ones who fall on their faces and run away screaming, "I'm coming out of a nightmare," as though the nightmare isn't nuclear weapons and capitalism and discrimination. The nightmare

is this relatively puny group attempting to right things and being silly in the process. So that's the nightmare. The degree of sectarianism before and also--

Well, Joe Clark is another example. He was a very loud-mouthed and big, dogmatic guy in his time, and he was, as a Moscow reporter, unrelieved by any good sense. And for a while he violently went the other way. He began to justify the Vietnam War. He's backed away from that. It was finally natural forces that gravitated him back, but--

FERMANOWSKY: He was also from Brooklyn, wasn't he?

RODNEY: Yes, he went to Brooklyn College, in fact.

FERMANOWSKY: Is there any sort of parallel you can draw between these people who joined the party in, say, the mid-thirties from New York cultures?

RODNEY: Well, Joe comes from a different background. He comes from socialist-minded, immigrant parents. So I don't know. I don't fall quite into that category, but I don't know how much they shaped anything, except it was a--

FERMANOWSKY: Was that like a little clique of people? Were he and Starobin close?

RODNEY: I would say before the Twentieth Congress that you would find a group making wry inner jokes about the Politburo and-- You know, natural with people with a sense of humor and so on. And some funny remarks about

them-- You'd find Starobin and Clark and myself and Abner Berry, sometimes Alan Max. But Alan was sort of inhibited by being managing editor. He was a very unhappy man; he was a very torn man. He died of a tumor of the brain finally, and I've almost been converted to some of these mystic explanations for-- That psychological propensity. I don't really believe it.

BUHLE: Well, cancer--

RODNEY: Who the hell knows?

FERMANOWSKY: He was so torn, was he, you say?

RODNEY: He was a brilliant guy who was a leading writer for the Spectator at Columbia. He edited the Spectator and wrote a marvelously funny college column--while he was a Marxist. And then he came out, and he came to the Daily Worker, and he just had flashes of pure humor and brilliance. He became a hack finally. He was broken.

BUHLE: You didn't know this humorist for the New Masses, [Robert] Forsythe [pseudonym for Kyle Crichton], did you?

FERMANOWSKY: Hysterical guy.

RODNEY: Oh, yes.

BUHLE: Another guy who's autobiography was called [Total] Recoil?

RODNEY: Yes, yes. Forsythe. Did he have a son?

BUHLE: I don't know. I've always been interested in him. He's not alive or anything?

RODNEY: No, he died.

BUHLE: But a talented humorist, a delight.

RODNEY: And then we had a different group on the paper. Art Shields was a marvelous guy. He and Elizabeth Gurley Flynn were great Americans, but they were unswerving; they were limited. They felt finally that any apologies, any tempering-- Any apologies for American capitalism, imperialism, any attacks on Russia, whether justified or not, were playing into the hands, ultimately, of the imperialist enemy and that the-- You know. The final conflict is underway, as far as they were concerned.

FERMANOWSKY: At the time-- Trying not to think in retrospect, but at the time, what did you think? Did you think they were very unswerving, and ridiculously so?

RODNEY: No. These are latter-day terms. I wouldn't have said that. I would--

FERMANOWSKY: Where did you stand in between on those two extremes then?

RODNEY: Now, you're stratifying it a little more after the fact, as though I had a choice: "Do I belong to the Flynn-Shields camp or the Starobin camp?" A little more fluctuating. I could get into a-- I could argue. It depended on who I was arguing with.

BUHLE: But you did argue all the time, going back and forth?

RODNEY: Yes. Well, local sportswriters would come along

and say, "Hey, what's this business with all these fucking statues of Stalin in Russia. I thought that communism was supposed to be-- You know.

BUHLE: It says something about--

RODNEY: To my shame, I began to explain, "I know it looks lousy--"

BUHLE: Explain patiently.

RODNEY: Patiently, right. [laughter] I had to educate them: "If you realized who they were, and that the czar-- And what this man represented and all. It's really not just for the person, but it's an expression of love and--" Oh, my God! It makes me puke when I think of it.

BUHLE: Oh, well.

FERMANOWSKY: Did you know Eugene Dennis?

RODNEY: Oh, yes, I knew Gene.

FERMANOWSKY: And what did you think of him?

RODNEY: [laughter]

BUHLE: The colorless functionary.

RODNEY: He was a nice guy, and you always felt he would have been a great politician in American life. He was like a litmus paper, like Carter and people who govern by first taking a poll, not by leading. He would never take a decisive stand. He would sense a trend. He even sensed when Foster had gone too far, and during the fight he tried to carve out a middle ground of rational-- And his wife, Peggy Dennis, who's otherwise a brilliant woman,

can't see that. She's befuddled by him. Because he was her husband. She thinks he was a good man who began to see the clarity but who-- He never did. I gave up on him in a sense. I didn't have much respect for him intellectually. Starobin thought he was a nothing.

Joe--why was Joe still in the party. Joe really had hopes, and so did Johnny Gates, by the way. In fact, after we all left and even into '58, Johnny used to seek out campus appearances. He was convinced that there was a big, ready audience waiting to hear what he had to say and that a new American left would grow rapidly, divorced from Russia and so on. It took a long time for him to realize that this wasn't going to happen. I remember I went with him to Fanueil Hall. It was during '57. The place was packed with college students. I suppose this was very heady stuff for Johnny, because he was editor during the time when we were-- If they'd cut off the money, we'd have been out of luck. And the people were draining out, just the way-- I always thought of the parallel, which I came to know something about, of Vatican II and the Catholic struggles, where the new, idealistic, young priests and nuns, who were very hopeful, began to see that it was mostly words and began falling out from the bottom. So, the very people [whom] the passionate people remaining inside, [who] fashioned reform, were trying to reach were deserting in droves. Exactly as what happened in the

party. The very people we, finally, were writing for and to were leaving us in dismay, looking back, and saying, "Oh, Foster's going to take over anyhow." And they were right.

BUHLE: Quite right.

FERMANOWSKY: But, at the time what did you think? Did you--

RODNEY: I remember David McReynolds wrote-- I wrote a letter to the New York Times, and I got it back without publication. The letter was-- [Milovan] Djilas had been jailed by [Josip Broz] Tito, and the Times wrote a pious editorial about him. And I wrote a letter saying, "My name is Lester Rodney. I'm on the Daily Worker, and I'm sure that the Times has been right, unfortunately, many times in showing up the inconsistencies of American Communists who decried oppression and injustice here and overlooked it in other countries. However, it's always easier to point a finger at another country. It's much harder there. And here, for instance, Gil [Gilbert] Green and Henry Winston are still in prison." So I said, "Now I, who work on the Daily Worker, unequivocally condemned the thought control imprisonment of Djilas and called for his freedom. Will the Times join me in calling for the release of Djilas, Green, Winston, and thought control prisoners anywhere in the world, no matter what the regime is called?" And I got that letter back, and I immediately

fired a copy of it off to Harrison Salisbury with a little covering note-- Salisbury and I had just had a little exchange of letters, a debate, about relative freedoms. I had challenged him on something he had said, and I said, "I had the freedom to say that blacks weren't in the big leagues," you know, and "did you have the freedom to do so and so?" And "I wrote a letter my paper--" That was in 1957. I was being a little demagogic. Anyhow, in this letter, where I said we have just been talking about the relative freedoms and moral positions, I said, "I recently sent the following letter to the Times. It was returned to me two days later." In the meanwhile they ran a letter from Louis Budenz, some ghastly thing about some actor. And I said, "Would you say that your paper, the Times, has a superior position to the Daily Worker and myself in this connection?" Two days later my letter was in the Times.

BUHLE: Really? That's fascinating.

RODNEY: I never even got a reply from Salisbury. That was the reply. He probably stormed into their office.

BUHLE: And said, "Run it."

RODNEY: He was a very decent person in that way.

BUHLE: He wrote the introduction to the [Wilfred G.] Burchett autobiography, didn't he? Burchett's autobiography, [At the Barricades], just appeared, and some famous person wrote the introduction; it may have been

Salisbury. It was a Times book--that's what made me think of it--which surprised me, too, because it was a tribute to--

RODNEY: Did you read his Nine Hundred Days: The Siege of Leningrad? A classic book.

BUHLE: No.

RODNEY: A very able guy. A patrician.

BUHLE: What did you think of the Guardian and the People's World as papers, as journalism?

RODNEY: I liked the Guardian when [Jack McManus and [Cedric] Belfrage were there.

BUHLE: The first days.

RODNEY: Yes.

BUHLE: Did you see it as competition to the Daily Worker or inherently broader and therefore--

RODNEY: No. First of all, it was a weekly that didn't pretend to cover-- We thought of ourselves as a newspaper; we really covered news. It was a daily paper. We had to compete on the news thing. It was always a nagging question, because of our lack of resources: Should we give up this almost futile attempt to compete with coverage--and in effect it meant sports, too--and with a sigh of relief, get rid of that, and just write feature articles and comment? We sensed we often fell in between and did neither. I'd run an occasional box score, but that's not coverage. Whenever I had an off day or it'd rain, I'd

fill in all the standings and everything so that people who just read the Daily Worker could at least keep up. And there were some who just read the Daily Worker and who had become interested in sports. I used to have people come to me and say, "You know, I never read a sports page in my life"--women, you know, people with foreign accents--"I never read a sports page in my life until the Daily Worker, and now I read you all the time. And it's really wonderful, and it's given me insights, and all." So all the people-- And by the way, this was also presented to me once by some young person who spoke about the generation gap between the first generation, playing baseball and doing all these things, and the fathers not understanding that at all. He said, "The great blessing of the Daily Worker sports section is that it helped close that gap." The fathers began to see that baseball was part of the class struggle.

BUHLE: In the broadest terms.

RODNEY: Yes, right. This guy was once telling me a story of when he was a little boy, he went to Central Park with his father. His father was an immigrant. He barely spoke English. Somebody was kicking a soccer ball, and the ball rolled over to his father. He said, "My father was an old foreigner to me. And he stood up, and he called me, and he said, 'Watch this.' He threw the ball up in the air, and he hit it with his head, and it went right to me in

the most skillful way." But that's his words now. He says, "At that time, I thought-- I was embarrassed. I said, 'You hit a ball with your head? [laughter] What kind of thing is that?'" And his father came to life as a vibrant person to him. This is the guy who later told me that it helped close the gap, that his father became interested in the Daily Worker sports section and began to read about baseball.

BUHLE: The reality is you were writing for especially the politicized section of the audience, for a first- and second-generation audience.

RODNEY: That's a role I never really thought of or appreciated, but it came to me time and time again.

BUHLE: You were helping to Americanize them.

RODNEY: I remember an old woman who ran the Workers Book Shop on Thirteenth Street, Rose Barron, and she was one of these sturdy, little petals of the movement. A real devoted woman. She worked long hours in that bookshop and went out late in the streets and canvassed for [Vito] Marcantonio, with rheumatism.

BUHLE: A Lazarus type, yes.

RODNEY: All these people. There were so many people like that. And she said to me once, "You know I don't know from baseball, I don't know from football, but I know this is a wonderful thing you're making." You know, "You're helping us to be American." I was very embarrassed by

this. First of all, I didn't accept that it wasn't American, which it wasn't. But she was trying to say something, and it came out clumsily, but that's all right. But this kind of thing was a tribute I got often.

Starobin: the reason why Starobin would stay in when he already saw clearly what we were all to see painfully, in my mind, could only be that he saw a real future for a new American socialist movement. And he indeed was early on in the middle of all kinds of little discussion groups, and he stimulated them.

Max Gordon was an old buddy of mine--

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RODNEY: Joe Starobin was a heavy drinker.

BUHLE: But that's the newspaper trade.

RODNEY: Long before his son's tragedy. Then he just became almost an alcoholic. But we'd have marvelous discussions with him. You know, Joe and Norma stayed here; and some nights, when they were in New York, they stayed with Bernie [Bernard] Burton, if you know who Bernie Burton is.

FERMANOWSKY: No.

RODNEY: Bernie was-- He worked for the People's World, and he left, and he went to work as a proofreader for the Times, the Los Angeles Times. And when the [Representative Francis] Walter Committee [House Committee on Un-American Activities] came here in '59, he was called in by [Norman] Chandler, the old Chandler, and told that they, reluctantly, had to let him go.

FERMANOWSKY: I've got his testimony.

RODNEY: Oh, you know Bernie.

FERMANOWSKY: I don't know him, but I've seen the testimony. I saw that.

RODNEY: See, now, I had a different experience in Long Beach. I went to work for the Long Beach Independent Press-Telegram, which is a Knight-Ridder newspaper.

Knight was a chain. It was Ridder combined with Knight later. They didn't know who I was, or they wouldn't have taken me on. I already had marvelous credentials from the Outlook. It broke the Outlook's heart when I left. They gave me a big farewell party. They never knew who I was.

BUHLE: The FBI never called them up and--

RODNEY: No. They called me once. I could tell an FBI call, and it was obviously just to place me, to know where I was. But they were satisfied that I was no longer political, because I hadn't joined anything here. I was aloof from the CP. Not aloof, I was friendly with Dorothy Healey and still am. Boy, I think she still has illusions I don't share.

FERMANOWSKY: She's very down on John Gates. Why was that so much?

RODNEY: Well, there was a reason for that. Johnny did, in the early moments [after leaving the party], swing a-- He and Joe Clark, in their initial zeal to cleanse themselves of all error, began to say, "Maybe we were wrong about the Rosenbergs [Julius and Ethel]. Maybe we were wrong about Spain." And they began to pick out what was wrong in Spain: "There was a commissar who was a son of a bitch," and "there was a Russian guy there--" But, still, historically--

FERMANOWSKY: They did this in what context? In praise?

RODNEY: I've got a file folder this fat of bitter arguments between myself and Joe Clark.

FERMANOWSKY: This was all part of it?

RODNEY: Basically, I was saying, "What are you talking about? There never was any espionage or sabotage by the Communist party." I said, "The FBI infiltrated us, it turns out, and what would they most dearly have loved to have? A hard piece of evidence that we were involved in espionage." I said, "Not only have we not committed it, we've never even been accused of it in court." And Joe says I'm being naive, and he told me some murky stories about Russians who were here and who asked-- But they were really ideological things. I met a Russian once. He came to me, and he wanted my opinion as to how the Russian basketball team could best beat the Americans. [laughter].

BUHLE: That would have been disloyal.

FERMANOWSKY: Very disloyal.

RODNEY: And I was very strongly-- You know, when I covered the Olympics, I made a big point of covering it as an American sportswriter. I hailed the friendship with the Soviet Union. I spoke about this marvelous sight of all the Italian balconies with the American and Soviet flags intertwined, what a poignant thing that is, the memories of World War II. But I interviewed American athletes; I recall Dick [Richard] Button and Tenley

Albright, a brilliant woman in figure skating. She had a real sense of the international significance-- Oh, an American skier [Art Devlin] I interviewed, who said, "These Olympics do more for world friendship than the UN or anything." And I quoted him at the time, during the 1956 Winter Olympics. These were pretty good stories to be sending back, because they were American. They were our athletes, and here they are walking through the streets of this fairyland town. And a Polish skier would come by, and they'd throw their arm around him and try to talk to him. You don't see anything like that now. That's why I opposed-- I wrote an [article] in the Long Beach paper opposing the boycott of the Moscow Olympics. You know, yielding second to no one in my-- I found as one who thinks the Russians ought to get the hell out of Afghanistan and Czechoslovakia. Still, is the way to go about it to cancel the one place where young people have a chance to express the underlying instincts of--

FERMANOWSKY: That's one of the reasons why he cancelled.

RODNEY: Of course.

FERMANOWSKY: Did the people at the World have a sports section?

RODNEY: Yes. They had just a column.

BUHLE: So it never really amounted to much?

RODNEY: They just sort of took some of our stuff.

FERMANOWSKY: So tell me about your relationship with

people here in Los Angeles, because that's really what I'm working on.

RODNEY: People in Los Angeles?

FERMANOWSKY: Yes, when you came here. It was informal--

RODNEY: You mean left people?

FERMANOWSKY: Yes. And CP people.

RODNEY: Informal. Oh, Ben Dobbs came to speak at Long Beach State [California State University, Long Beach], and he drove the nail into any thinking I might I have that, "Gee, if the party ever gets sensible . . ." He was dreadful. Even Dorothy couldn't take him. Dorothy is tumultuously mixed up yet, in my opinion. She has one foot in the past that she can't-- Which makes her all the more courageous. It's easier for me, who's beginning to question whether the word socialism really means anything. I have yet to see any evidence that anything that calls itself socialist has solved some very basic thing, although I like the concept. I no longer speak of myself as a socialist. I'd like to associate myself with democratic socialists. That's the closest to my thinking, but--

BUHLE: Yes. I've got you.

FERMANOWSKY: Was Ben Dobbs a very hard-liner?

RODNEY: Very, very dogmatic.

FERMANOWSKY: Did you know Pettis Perry in New York?

RODNEY: Oh, I sure did.

FERMANOWSKY: Can you tell me a little about him?

RODNEY: Gee, I don't know if I ought to. Pettis was a phony. He had stuff written for him under his byline, which made him look like a great leader. He made a pass at a young woman, and when she recoiled in amazement and horror, he laid on the--

FERMANOWSKY: White chauvinism.

RODNEY: Yeah, "the reason you're doing this," and so on. He's gone and dead and--

FERMANOWSKY: But he was considered someone who had quite a leadership position. He had credentials from Alabama.

RODNEY: Yes, he did. But what happened after that could only have happened in the party (which says something about paternalism) to a black guy: to have gotten a reputation for being keen and insightful and a leader, with absolutely no merit.

Ben Davis, with whom I violently disagreed, was a man of stature. A tough guy. I liked Ben. And he was a hard-liner. I had an easier time understanding black hard-liners than white hard-liners, because they're still black in America.

FERMANOWSKY: Yet there still seems to be quite a lot of--

RODNEY: And Russia is so irrelevant to them: "So what? What are you talking about?" They didn't come in because of Russia. That's why Paul Robeson was so silly, at that time, brilliant man that he was.

FERMANOWSKY: There seemed to be a lot of black hard-

liners, when it came to the crunch.

RODNEY: Yes, some of the hardest-liners, but also some intellectuals.

BUHLE: Yeah, because it was an abstraction.

RODNEY: Yeah, that's right. V. J. Jerome's wife, Alice Jerome. She spawned two kids who--

BUHLE: Became PLers [members of the Progressive Labor Party]. Yeah, I know the family.

RODNEY: I remember that in the 1957 party convention, she walked down the aisle and made a speech--and you could almost see the blood flowing--and in that dainty, cultivated voice [she] said, "There must be no mercy, no tempering of our steel quality!" It just sounded like Ayatolla Khomeini, "Death to the infidels!" Boy! And they looked at her and-- This is the thing that happens.

I meet people whose concept of being a Communist and what was going to happen, to my amazement--honestly, my amazement--was very different than mine. I meet others who have mine, too. But I meet people who say, "But weren't we going to kill thousands of people?" I say, "What the hell are you talking about? I was not going to kill thousands of people. I don't believe in killing people." And we look at each other. And I was a Communist, and he was a Communist. So nothing is ever as monolithic as it looks from the outside, of course.

BUHLE: That's the most important lesson in the rewriting

of American Communist history in the last ten years.

RODNEY: I think so.

BUHLE: Nothing is as monolithic as it looks from the outside.

RODNEY: My wife and I have major differences in evaluating our pasts. She grew up in a family where they used to wear red bandanas and emulate the [Young] Pioneers. And they'd stick pins in the cops' horses and hoot at the Boy Scouts and Girl Scouts.

BUHLE: As Amy Swerdlow said to me the other day, when she went to grade school and she heard about fractions in arithmetic class, she thought it was a revolutionary concept. [laughter]

FERMANOWSKY: Are there any generalizations you could make about people who are YCLers [members of the Young Communist League]? Or are they just as diverse as any other group? I mean, you say you had disagreements with your wife.

RODNEY: Well. [chuckles]

BUHLE: Maybe if you grew up inside the party movement from the very first day, it jells you at an earlier-- You bring less that's outside of that milieu into it.

RODNEY: People who had really been critical of Stalin before, who rejected [him], were not thrown head over heels by the revelations. In fact, they saw it as a hopeful development. If you go outside our ranks, somebody like Isaac

Deutscher, who-- He knew who Stalin was, and he hailed the revelations and wrote well about the Soviet Union, and hopefully.

BUHLE: Very, very much. Absolutely.

RODNEY: Whereas other people said, "Oh, my God. This place has been a horror chamber. And I must question everything I ever did."

FERMANOWSKY: And you, where did you see it?

RODNEY: I had tumultuously mixed feelings, as you might imagine. I tended to lean toward-- I began reading. I read [Arthur Koestler's] Darkness at Noon for the first time. I read The God [That] Failed, and I really tried to fuse this with-- You know. I knew what we could be, now that we'd gotten rid of--as I saw it--the Russian monkey on our back. We were really enthusiastic at the Daily Worker in 1957. Hopeful.

BUHLE: But you were such a small group. Didn't make any difference, you were starting over.

RODNEY: But it seemed-- We didn't know that.

FERMANOWSKY: But you weren't a small group; a majority, wasn't it?

RODNEY: For a while, until the attrition began.

FERMANOWSKY: If people hadn't left, you would-- Gates would have captured the party.

RODNEY: I think so. But there was too much a sense of dismay, too many people had-- I know some people who say

to me, "I wasted my life." A guy named Herb Signer who was a youth leader.

I met Ella Winter in London and she says to me-- We were chatting with her and Donald Ogden Stewart, her husband, and I said, "I know some people who said, 'I wasted my life.'"

And she whispered to me, "I feel that way. But don't say it in front of him because-- Let him die in his element. He's semi-senile and still thinks in the old terms."

FERMANOWSKY: Was this Carl Winter's wife?

RODNEY: No. No. She was Lincoln Steffens' wife, actually. And then she married Donald Ogden Stewart, who was a playwright.

FERMANOWSKY: Donald Ogden Stewart, right.

RODNEY: They both died.

BUHLE: Very shortly ago.

RODNEY: And one after the other.

BUHLE: That was tragic. He would have been been a great person to interview for Hollywood, the Hollywood left. I always thought about that, but there he was across the continent and too far away.

RODNEY: Really a great guy.

BUHLE: Obviously a really talented writer. One of the most talented writers ever to be in the left.

RODNEY: And he was still full of the nobility of the

left, and so on. Have you spoken to [Ring] Lardner [Jr.]?

BUHLE: To Lardner, no. I always thought he was too-- I thought he'd be hard to contact, that he's such a big fish.

RODNEY: How about [Albert] Maltz?

BUHLE: Likewise, I never-- I'm not in L.A.

FERMANOWSKY: He's somebody [who] has written a lot about Hollywood; so that's not what I'm after.

RODNEY: When we came back-- Clare had a sabbatical leave in 1975 from the university where she worked, involving studying as many European countries and different social systems as we could get into. It was her project. So I retired then. I was going to be sixty-four; so I would have been sixty-four and a half when I came back after I went to join her. And we were in Czechoslovakia and Rumania, where she found the little town where her mother was born. It was very emotional. But I was also horror-struck at Czechoslovakia. And we had some experiences there and I realized the-- Rumania is a mixed picture; there are peasants there who are so much better off, and who were not sophisticated. But Czechoslovakia was an advanced country; and they knew-- They felt that they, not Bulgaria, not Poland, not Hungary, could have really made a showcase, could have really rescued the word communism. I believe it.

BUHLE: Yes. I know. It's true.

RODNEY: Some movies they were beginning to put out. And they have a high standard of manufacture, which has gone downhill. They made the best shoes in Europe, the best everything.

Anyhow, when I came back I had regards to Maltz from Martha Dodd. I don't know if you know her. She was the daughter of the ambassador to Germany, William Dodd, during the Hitler period. She had a romance with Thomas Wolfe, the writer, which she wrote about. She is exiled in Prague because her husband, [Alfred K. Stern], was indicted under the alien/sedition laws (some phony rap); so they live in Prague. She asked me to "Please give Al my regards." And I called Al, and he asked where I was. I don't know him well. We knew of each other.

And he said, "What do you think of Eastern Europe? I don't get to speak to many people--"

I told him, "You know the mixture in Rumania, the mixed feelings I have. Even in these terrible countries, you see where children are highly regarded and old people are taken care of. You don't see terrible extremes of wealth and poverty. I kind of liked the trafficless cleanliness of the streets of Bucharest. At the same time it's a police state. A poet poured out his soul to me one night, 'Should I defect, or should I stay? I love Rumania.' All this heartbreaking stuff. But in Prague, it's total hopelessness, total bleakness. People just

don't care; they're just crushed, totally crushed."

And I said, "Al, I'm going to say something that will shock you. I have come to the conclusion--and partly, I suppose, because I spent time as a newspaper man--that I prefer any open society, meaning a place where the newspapers are not run by the government, where some information is available even if the papers reflect class bias, any open society to any closed society, by whatever other other names you want to give them."

And Al says, "I agree with you 100 percent." He said, "That's where I am too. That's where I've come to."  
BUHLE: It's hard to be a professional writer and not come to that conclusion.

RODNEY: And yet if you read Naming Names [by Victor Navasky], Al makes the first interesting explanation of the psychology and the logic of remaining a Communist under the bludgeoning he took. That's why I think he would be a marvelous candidate.

FERMANOWSKY: There was an interview with him, it was in the L. A. Weekly.

BUHLE: But like the book on Hollywood [The Inquisition in Hollywood] by Larry Ceplair [and Steven Englund], there's so much more to that story. Of course, you go and get into this crazy Hollywood stuff and glamour and everything, but--

RODNEY: Al in a sense was the Joe Starobin of the cul-

tural world, only he pulled his antennas in and didn't have Joe's toughness and wiliness. Joe knew how to maneuver to keep his stature and credibility. Joe was an infighter, too. They knew that they couldn't have gotten rid of him without getting hurt. Joe wouldn't go quietly. Whereas Maltz would have crept out silently.

BUHLE: Returning to the sports thing again, it must have been somewhat unreal writing a sports column in the shadow of people thinking it was five minutes to midnight and the party leadership going underground and all that stuff.

RODNEY: It would have been if I'd believed that ideologically. We used to make jokes about it: going underground. There was a guy named Stretch Johnson that--

BUHLE: I know Stretch Johnson, a teacher at New Paltz [New York].

RODNEY: Right.

BUHLE: A great, great guy.

RODNEY: And he was a tall guy. What was he? Six-two?

BUHLE: At least, maybe more.

RODNEY: OK, so he was underground, and I was going up to the Polo Grounds to cover a game, and there was Stretch-- [laughter] you know, underground. Six-foot-two, skinny, black guy.

BUHLE: And these guys were visiting their wives every week.

RODNEY: And they couldn't refrain-- The Dodgers were

playing the Giants that night probably.

FERMANOWSKY: You have to come overground for that.

RODNEY: And I went over, and I began to say, "Stretch." and he goes, "Uh uh," and I walked past him. It was so funny; so I never took it seriously.

FERMANOWSKY: Did anybody, other than him--

RODNEY: Oh, yes. There were people-- Clare's sister, Bea, and her husband, Phil. They went underground for several years. He got work in foundries, and it just happened to coincide with her losing a baby. And oh, boy, yes.

BUHLE: That was a terrible time.

RODNEY: Personal tragedies. And he's a very able guy. The minute he was out of the party, he became rich, just by talent. He developed a machine that others never thought of. You know, food processing, and then he sold it to Hercules Company in Minnesota. He's practically a millionaire now.

BUHLE: So it was almost the contradiction of you holding onto the vision of reality and much of the party slipping--or leadership slipping into something else.

RODNEY: Others obviously had to share my feelings.

BUHLE: People who lived in the neighborhoods and continued on day by day.

RODNEY: Yes, yes. "What is this fascism?" By the way, the Daily Worker was also a newspaper. Newspaper people

almost by definition are skeptical. They see a lot of big pronouncements that are meaningless. We don't give a shit what somebody says. "Let's check it out." You know. So some of that rubbed off on us. "Dennis said it, but we don't give a shit what Dennis says. Let's see what reality is."

BUHLE: How much did the paper suffer as a paper in those years?

RODNEY: Gravely. I think we could have been a great newspaper if it hadn't been for this.

BUHLE: Do you mean you were getting better through the forties, because you had learned or because you were growing?

RODNEY: I think we were a good newspaper, considering our limitations, in the Popular Front era.

BUHLE: And the United Front era.

RODNEY: And the United Front era. Yes. We were reaching out. But the people would argue and say, "But where is the socialist education?" But it was there, too. And you take people where they are and move them up to the next step. It's enough of a job to throw them into thought and conflict with the great verities that are unchallenged. If that isn't the first step toward socialism, I don't know what the hell is.

BUHLE: But I want to ask you again: What did you think of the People's World and its attempt to be broader and

less dogmatic and--

RODNEY: I didn't see enough of the People's World. I'm not a student of the People's World.

BUHLE: Yes. Well, it was a different climate and--

RODNEY: By the time I came here I was--

BUHLE: So, what do you think the best year of the Daily Worker when you were working on it was, as a paper? When did it really hit its peak as a journalistic--

RODNEY: I think there were two periods. I think by '37, '38, just before that, and up [to] '39 before the pact. That's when Red Rolfe wrote for us. But the rest of the paper, inevitably, was a little better in tone, too. And that's the years of the CIO organizing and so on. We had people everywhere in real life, and the paper couldn't kid them; so it had to respond to them. So they just couldn't get away with a bunch of cliches, redundancies about the workers' paradises, whatever. And then secondly, up to the McCarthy period, after the war.

BUHLE: Like '46 to '51?

RODNEY: I would say it was, generally, up to the Korean War. Although, oddly enough, I think we played an honorable role and had some meaning with many people during the Korean War, because we were very lonely at that time.

Except--

BUHLE: For the Guardian.

RODNEY: Nobody else was talking about the fact that

Syngman Rhee said he would--and that Dulles was--before--  
A whole lot of things.

BUHLE: That must have cost you readership that was afraid  
of--

RODNEY: It did, and yet it caught the eye of some others.  
We got some response from academics. I wrote a column--I  
could put my hands on it easily; that's one I clipped--got  
out during the Korean War about the realities of that war,  
not politically. I took a little excerpt by somebody [Hal  
Boyle, Associated Press] who was on the battleship where  
they pulverized the city of Sinuiji, and then somebody  
else [Jim G. Lucas, Scripps-Howard] about dropping bombs  
and obliterating [Chongjin]. In fifteen minutes after the  
roar of the propellers first alerted the city, 90 percent  
of the Communist nest was wiped out. And I wrote about  
what would happen on the ground there. The kids would  
brush their teeth and comb their hair and then be-- And I  
said, "Where is the protest? Where is Mrs. Roosevelt?  
Where are the ministers and rabbis? Where's the Council  
of Churches?" Nobody was saying a word about Korea; so  
the Daily Worker played an honorable role there in that  
connection, only because of the sins that were being com-  
mitted. You see, that kind of thing gives you the re-  
inforcement to go on through some of the doubts that begin  
to gnaw at you. That's exactly the answer. Nobody else  
gave a damn about massacring Koreans; so nobody's going to

give me a moral lecture. And Jimmy [James] Wechsler, who's Joe Clark's new idol, who refused to take a paid ad [in the New York Post for the transcript of the Rosenberg trial so that readers could judge the case for themselves (L.R.)] and who ran a hatchet job [on the Rosenbergs] by Oliver [R.] Pilat and had this fucking Max Lerner write these punditry articles about the--

It's fantastic. These guys never reexamined themselves. These guys never said, you know Jimmy Wechsler never said, "Maybe we were wrong about the Rosenbergs; maybe the Post could have said something different instead of uncritically following Truman into Korea and so on." We at least wrestled with our fucking souls. So I have no apologies in many ways. My apologies are to other socialist-minded people whom we treated like the boors we were, and to scholars who were quietly doing parallel work of meaning, whom we rejected out of hand. That's my apology. When I speak to them, I speak quite differently about my past. But to any American of the type [who said], "Commies were Russian agents," I say, "Fuck you. I was more of an American than you were. I did more for this country than you did." So, I have two approaches.

BUHLE: My friends who have been through newspaper strikes and are working at the Waukeshaw Freeman, these small town papers these days, they, in spite of everything bad that's happened, they still have a real vision of the

possibilities of socialist journalism or radical journalism in America reemerging in some way, and does this seem to you like something that's up there?

RODNEY: I don't know. I'd like to think so. I don't think In These Times there's--

BUHLE: No, that's not it. My friends say that, as journalists, as professional newspapermen, they are embarrassed by In These Times as a newspaper, as journalism. They say the best stuff is by the professors, and that's embarrassing for a newspaperman when the best stuff in the paper is by the professors.

RODNEY: And yet, every once in a while, they're valuable because you can't get the information anywhere else. There is a vein in American journalism that hasn't yet been struck.

BUHLE: That's why people read [Alexander] Cockburn in the Village Voice, because they feel this is the only left-wing journalism.

RODNEY: Going back to people: I never satisfied you for the record. You know, Abner Berry. You know, Abner's family was the famous Berry Brothers, the dancers. If you know anything about vaudeville and the old--

BUHLE: Only what I heard from Stretch.

RODNEY: Well, the Berry Brothers were famous. Abner's a real guy, rollicking sense of humor, and he was acutely embarrassed by Harry Haywood and the black nationalism,

which called for a separate black country.

FERMANOWSKY: Yes.

RODNEY: And he said, "Holy gee, when will they ever stop this nonsense?" He stayed aloof from it, and he as much as said that "We'll never get a significant black membership, or at least stop the turnover, until we get rid of this nonsense of telling them that they ought to have a nation when they want to be part of the American dream and get a piece of the apple pie." So, Abner had this long--

John Hudson Jones I remember.

Harold Cruse worked there for a while. You know him?

BUHLE: Yes, I know his stuff. He had a bitter--

RODNEY: Very bitter. He was a brilliant guy.

BUHLE: Yeah, I'm sure.

RODNEY: Who else? Personalities at the time?

FERMANOWSKY: Well, Harry Haywood, why was he so-- How did these people accept this black belt after all these years in the face of overwhelming reality?

RODNEY: Well, these were people-- I think Harry went to the Lenin School in Moscow.

BUHLE: That's right.

RODNEY: And there's a certain stamp that school put on people that departed from reality. You know, you'd read Stalin on the national question, and that became your bible.

BUHLE: That's exactly right, but Haywood's autobiography

is Black Bolshevik; and he really saw himself as a black bolshevik.

FERMANOWSKY: I think he saw Foster as a revisionist.

RODNEY: It was kind of hard to talk to him. Abner had vibrations, umbilical cords to the black community, and Haywood didn't, or if he did-- You know, well, you can't-- Everybody's who's black knows more than we do about being black, but he became a Lenin guy, not a black American.

George [Charney]. I loved George.

And there was a group around the New York state offices. There are some names that probably won't mean anything to you. There was a secondary leadership and they left early, good hardworking guys who came out of the trade union movement and who--

FERMANOWSKY: I was going to ask you about the trade union. I don't know how much contact you had with people in the CIO and that aspect.

RODNEY: Not with the CIO. I tell you, for a while we began to cover quite extensively a left-wing trade union sports movement. At its height they'd get like seven hundred per game between the Transport Workers--Mike Quill's union--and the Fur Floor Boys. Good basketball sometimes, on at least a high school level. And I began to run box scores.

BUHLE: This was the post-World War II thirst for popular

sports?

RODNEY: Yes. And then the question came: How much more should I give to that? And finally I had to sort of hold it down so it didn't eat up the Yankees and Dodgers and Joe Louis and CCNY, because I had to make a decision that it had no more promise than the whole concept of left unionism had to begin with, and that if we really were serious about not being a happy, little, warm paper, we had to keep that in perspective. So I narrowed that down amidst howls of anguish from some.

BUHLE: We are at the end, just coming to an end. Unless you have anything more--

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