A TEI Project

Interview of Helen Slote Levitt

Contents

1. Transcript

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CEPLAIR:

> What I'd like you to start with is your biographical background, when and where you were born, your parents, your family, etc.

LEVITT:

> Fine. My grandparents all migrated here from Poland. Though my paternal grandmother was born in Dublin; she was a Polish Jew. My paternal grandfather [Samuel Slote] went to parochial high school and then to med[ical] school and became a doctor, as did my father [Louis H. Slote]. They were both GPs [general practicioners] in Brooklyn all their lives—all their adult lives. My maternal grandfather [Louis Greenberg] had a clothing store all his adult life, and the family lived above the clothing store. So my roots are solidly

middle-class, Jewish, Brooklyn, out of Poland. My mother [Augusta Greenberg Slote] was actually born in Poland, but she lied to me. She was brought here as an infant. At her funeral when I was seventeen, I saw on the coffin that she was two years older than she had always told me, because she was two years older than my father, and that she was born in Poland, not here. Because those things were very important in the world that they lived in, which was of assimilationist Jews who were very busy becoming Americans. I had very little relationship with my grandparents. I saw them a little the first seven years, until we moved into an upper-mobility neighborhood in Brooklyn called Crown Heights, where everybody was richer than us. But my father being a doctor, I was socially accepted into a circle of very wealthy girls. I never had as much money as them, but it wasn't a problem.

CEPLAIR:

You often hear about problems between German Jews, who had come here earlier, and Eastern European Jews. Did you experience any of that?

LEVITT:

Oh, boy, did I ever. Because my father's ambition for me was for me to, marry a rich German Jewish boy. That was the only thing that would be acceptable. And two very wealthy German Jewish boys fell in love with me in my teens, when I was about seventeen—sixteen, seventeen. In both cases their parents broke it up under threat of disinheriting them, and it was very upsetting to go through. One of them I really liked very much. At that point I stopped doing it for my father, and selecting Al [Alfred Levitt] was really part of the normal rebellion against parents who you loved. I loved my father very much, but at a certain point I rebelled. Now, the thread that interests me in looking back was why I always took things so seriously and why I always cared. You know, I've tried to trace that in my—not for you, but in my own thinking about my past. I was a very serious child from infancy on. In fact, one of my father's girlfriends gave me the middle name of "Joy" as a joke, because I was never seen to smile. I was never a happy, outgoing, cheerful child. I was born worrying, born serious, and I really lacked a sense of fun most of my life. I always was very strong in terms of feeling a sense of responsibility for everything. My social conscience I've joked about. You know, I've said that, well, it came from being a [Brooklyn] Dodger fan all my life, and you had a relationship to the underdog

if you were a Dodger fan. My father would take me to the ball games from the time I was about three, and I knew the Dodger and the [New York] Yankee batting order before I knew the alphabet, literally! So I was a sports fan with my father. And I became a sports fan with my husband. In other words, I was the kind of sports fan, and still am, of a woman who does it in relationship to a man. So I've always known the games much better than women—as a spectator. I've always been a disinterested athlete. I don't like sports. I don't like physical movement unless it's to music. My father raised me. He needed an intellectual companion, which my mother was not, and he just—he and my grandfather delivered me at home. My grandfather's name is on the birth certificate as the doctor of delivery, because I don't believe it was legal for a man to deliver his own wife. I don't know who did most of the work, but I know they really put my mother through, I think, like forty-eight hours of labor, because my father didn't approve of forceps. He was protecting my head, but not my mother—he was not protecting my mother. My father just took me over. He bathed me. He developed one of the formulas that became a standard formula for infants, because none of the formulas then in existence agreed with me. So he invented a new one for me, and it became one of the—

CEPLAIR:

Did he market it? Or was it just—?

LEVITT:

He never did anything that made money. He just did it! But that was kind of a family tradition. My grandfather built his own X-rays, his own diathermy; he used hypnosis for anesthesia; he performed abortions, not for money but for caring, in terms of little girls who got in trouble. He got in trouble because a fourteen-year-old died on the table, and there was a lawsuit that a member of our family had to fix. We had a Republican politician in the family by marriage. And I guess it was the publicity of that abortion which kept my father out of the Jewish hospital, which was a source of great bitterness to my father. Because a Jewish doctor at that time who did not have a connection with the Brooklyn Jewish Hospital was at a great disadvantage. So he was very bitter about his father. Also, his father had remarried after his wife's death, so that was a sad and unpleasant relationship. But my father was a very disappointed man.

CEPLAIR:

Can I stop you and ask you a few questions?

LEVITT:

Sure. Sure.

CEPLAIR:

What was your father's name?

LEVITT:

Louis H. Slote. My grandfather just made the name [Slote] up. It had no relationship to any name, when he came to this country he made up a name.

CEPLAIR:

Do you know what his name was in Poland?

LEVITT:

No, no. My father said that it meant "mountain of gold," whatever the Polish was for that. That's all I know. I don't know what the name was, but he just—he came off the boat with a new name.

CEPLAIR:

What was your mother's maiden name?

LEVITT:

Greenberg. That's a very common Jewish name. My mother's name was Augusta Greenberg.

CEPLAIR:

And were you an only child?

LEVITT:

No. Both Al and I have younger brothers who have suffered tremendously having been raised in our shadow. My poor brother [Leslie Slote] is still overachieving as he has been all his life, to try to impress my father so my father would notice him. Because my father just had no interest in him at all. I

was seven when Leslie was born, and my father handed him to my mother and said, "You two dummies keep each other company. You good-natured, sweet dummies keep each other company. Don't bother us; we have got more interesting things to do." My father was doing my Latin homework, trying to force me to take Greek, and we were off in an intellectual world which totally excluded my mother and my brother. And I didn't question it. I didn't dislike my mother. I just—I pitied her. I always knew she was a deeply unhappy woman. My father felt that monogamy was not the natural state of man, and so I always knew that he was always unfaithful. And I knew this from a very early age. Things were not kept from me. My father really did not believe that ignorance is particularly useful to anybody, so he told me everything. I mean, I knew things that other girls' parents could never discuss with them—which I think has served me well, I think he was right. But they used to have screaming fights. Those first seven years I remember, because that was—this was in Williamsburg [neighborhood in Brooklyn], where I was born, on Pulaski Street and Tompkins Avenue. My grandparents all lived in Williamsburg, but that was—where they lived seemed like a very poor neighborhood, an old neighborhood. This seemed like a transitional neighborhood. It probably was upper working class, maybe even lower middle class. And I lived there for seven years, sleeping in a crib in my parents' room. But at seven, we moved into a new neighborhood, where the apartment house was brand-new, the school was brand-new, and everybody was into making it. But this was 1923.

CEPLAIR:

What was the address there. Do you remember?

LEVITT:

In fact, Walter Bernstein used our street in this new picture of his, The House on Carroll Street. Because that's our—he means our house. He always uses something of my brother's as a little good-luck thing, because my brother was his front during the blacklist. Thirteen sixty-five Carroll Street, corner of Kingston Avenue. My father had a sign on the building, his doctor sign, and he practiced medicine there for thirty-five years. He died in this apartment. And we moved there when I was seven; it was a brand-new apartment. It was a doctor's apartment. The corner apartment on the first floor, at that time, was usually set aside as a doctor's apartment. The layout was supposed to be for a

doctor—I guess that was it. It was an all right apartment. It wasn't, you know, an extreme, either upper or lower. It was just—it was all right. It was kept very clean always, and when my mother was alive it was mostly servants. When she died, my stepmother [Bertha Waxman Slote] did it herself.

CEPLAIR:

How old were you when your mother died?

LEVITT:

Seventeen. But she was ill for two years. It was a kidney infection, Bright's disease. And my father knew she was going to die for two years, and he made medical miracles to keep her alive and, well, not suffering. But he didn't tell me till two weeks before she died that she was going to die. At seventeen we had two years, my father and I had two years, when I was the lady of the house. I got the master bedroom while my father and brother roomed together in the children's room, and I ran the house. My father always did the cooking. He was a great gourmet cook, as is my brother, and we had fun. We bought new furniture to cheer me—to cheer ourselves—up, and we got along fine. He married another woman for money—he had married my mother somewhat for money. Stepmother was more for money, but he never got any of it. It was a terrible marriage. And actually he liked my—he loved my mother. He said she was the best lay of all the ladies he had ever slept with, but one just wasn't enough. And she was considered very beautiful, although I never considered her beautiful, because she didn't radiate the confidence that a beautiful woman does. But I remember when she went to a formal affair and everyone mistook her for Gloria Swanson. That was quite exciting for her. But during the twenties, they were really yuppies. They had show business friends, and they would go to speakeasies, dancing with Aunt Mildred and Captain Peabody. Mildred was Captain Peabody's—Captain Peabody, he was chief of police of New York. And Aunt Mildred and Captain Peabody invented a tango called the Peabody. And the idea, you know—the chief of police was dancing in speakeasies! [laughter] And, you know, the cynicism—my father was an iconoclast. He had been a pacifist during World War I, and he was a fan of [H.L.] Mencken's and [James Branch] Cabell's and all the iconoclasts of the twenties. He was a very intolerant man, intolerant of anybody who was religious. He was a very militant atheist. He was very anti-Catholic because of

the role that they played in New York in the political scene, and also as a kid he had been beaten up by the Catholic kids. There was a lot of street hostility between Jewish and Irish Catholic kids. But why did I care. Why did I care? I noticed things, I reacted to things. There are certain incidents that I remember, that really stayed with me all my life. One was a birthday party that Helen Shapiro had. She was the richest of the kids I knew. She lived around the corner. It was two blocks on President Street; it was called "Millionaire Alley." They were all four-story, detached private houses. They had a billiard room in the basement and a ballroom on the fourth floor, with separate servants' quarters, and they had five live-in help. And she was really the poor little rich girl. But they had a birthday party at the Brooklyn Hebrew Orphan Asylum. Her father was head of the Brooklyn Jewish charities—they were very social rich people, very charitable. And so here all we little rich kids went to this terrible, dreary Dickenslike place, and a show was put on. All the little orphans were brought in and they could watch the show. And then all the little orphans were led away down these dark halls. There was a horror to it that never left me. Then about when I was eleven, I wrote, produced, directed, and acted in a play for money. We took the money and we bought a Thanksgiving basket, and my father found a charity which recommended a poor person to deliver the basket to. I remember going down a basement, and there was this ugly old lady with this strange son of hers, who I realized as I thought back later was probably retarded. And we gave her the basket, and there was no sense of gratitude or pleasure from her. We expected to be thanked, and somehow or other I knew that there was something awful about what we had done, that it was not a good thing. So the whole sense of "lady bountiful" and charity was just laid bare to me. I said, "No, that's—." In other words, I kept seeing things. I said, "No. That's not what I want, that's wrong." And I dreamed of building an orphan asylum. I spent many, many years thinking about an orphan home that I was going to build someday, and each little child would have their own beautiful room of their own. I kept furnishing it and thinking of all the wonderful things. And this was a childhood dream that lasted for many years—I guess until I started dreaming about boys, which started about when I was fourteen.

CEPLAIR:

When was your birthday? I don't think we got that down.

LEVITT:

December 6. I was born December 6, 1916.

CEPLAIR:

Was there any Jewishness in your life? I mean, aside from the secular nature. Was there any religious Jewishness?

LEVITT:

Yes. There were two seders a year, one at my grandfather's and one at my Aunt Sadie [Halpern]'s. First and second seder. That was it. I never went into a temple except to dance. They used to have young people's clubs, and occasionally I would be included at a young people's club, at a temple that somebody else belonged to, to go dancing. Oh, at eleven I rebelled against my father's atheism and asked for a Bible for my birthday. So he said, "Of course." He gave me the Old Testament, unexpurgated. You know, the—and I got to page one and a half, and that was the end of religion. [laughter] I didn't understand it, it was—that's how he was so shrewd, see. He just out maneuvered me. He didn't argue with me. "Oh sure, here it is!"

CEPLAIR:

Lucky he didn't give it to you in German or something.

LEVITT:

No, he was too smart; he was not being obvious. It didn't occur to me that there were other options. Al studied the Bible as literature in college, so he has a sense of the poetry and the beauty. I never read the Bible. That did it for me, and of course I've regretted it. I know it's a part of literature that I missed. But I've missed a lot of things. I guess everybody does. I don't really have regrets like that. I just say, "Too bad I didn't do everything."

CEPLAIR:

Was your father a political person at all?

LEVITT:

Yes, he was what you'd call a "parlor pink." He and his friend Harry Silver would fight the revolution in our living room.

CEPLAIR:

The Russian revolution?

LEVITT:

No, no, just the revolution. They were not communists. No, no, they were—he liked Norman Thomas and Eugene Debs. But they were not into Earl Browder at all. They would have these violent political discussions. The women would sit there so disgusted, because these two guys couldn't make a decent living and here they were talking about changing the world. The women were so patronizing. I realized fairly recently, in looking back, that those two guys were doing that for my benefit, because they knew that there was one person in that room who was listening, and that was me. And so my father, what he would say to me is "Don't get involved." He gave me a picture of life: that you get through life, keep your nose clean, and don't get involved so you won't get into trouble. I didn't listen. Because I really took that iconoclastic cynicism and turned it into something constructive in my life. But I was raised with no illusions about the system, because New York—and I've studied this for projects—in the twenties and thirties was such a horror of corruption. I've studied the [James J.] Walker administration, and the things that were going on then really were pretty terrible.

CEPLAIR:

Did you read newspapers in those days?

LEVITT:

Yes, I read the [*New York*] *World*. That was our paper. Heywood Broun. He [her father] was a big fan of Heywood Broun's and was bitter about Broun turning to Catholicism and the end of his life where his wife had conned him into that. He really was very intolerant of people who lost their courage at the end and turned to religion. And he took great pride in the fact that he wouldn't. And he didn't—he didn't.

CEPLAIR:

Were you aware of Sacco and Vanzetti when you—?

LEVITT:

Oh, yeah.

CEPLAIR:

Did that move you, or is it just something that was—?

LEVITT:

I was pretty young but I was aware of it. I was not political yet, really, but I was very much—now, what year were they executed?

CEPLAIR:

1927.

LEVITT:

Well, I was eleven. The first political thing I remember was—I think I was in my last year in elementary school, and I wrote a composition on the subject that criminals were sick people and should be treated as sick people and not punished. Now, I think that was a pretty political statement—and naive and simplistic, but it gave an indication of where my thinking was going at that point. I probably was around thirteen. My father was very much involved in my schoolwork. I had a rather complicated problem of dealing with my—the fact that I was a very good student, partly because of lack of courage. I was always intimidated by authority. I was the smartest girl in the class from the day I entered school, officially. Because I could read easily. I mean, reading just—I could read as soon as I picked up a book. I never had to learn to read. And arithmetic was easy. So I remember I was always called on to read in front of the class. None of my teachers liked me. In fact, some of them disliked me, which made me very unhappy. I guess it had to do with the fact that all the kids in our class were these bright Jewish kids, and the teachers were all Irish Catholics. And they didn't like us, and particularly they didn't like me. I'm not sure why. I had one Jewish teacher, and she adored me. Oh, and the school was divided between rich Jewish kids and poor Italian kids. There was a neighborhood adjacent to ours of Italian immigrants, very poor. They had goats on the street and the little run-down shacks. And those kids were kept in different classes from us—we never mingled. I remember being afraid of them. They were a menace. And that was the ethnic composition of that school. They were the tough kids, the kids who were always in trouble, and we

knew we were in the smart classes and they were in the dumb classes. No Italian kid was ever in our class ever. There were two Irish Catholic girls who lived on our block, the only family that wasn't Jewish and they were teacher's pets. They were the queens of the school. They carried little purses and white gloves and they dressed differently. And the teachers just adored them. They were always the monitors and teacher's pet, and they never talked to us and we never talked to them. I lived in a totally Jewish world. I never had a relationship with anyone who wasn't Jewish until I came out here at the age of twenty-two. My elementary school was—I was among Jewish kids. In high school at Erasmus [Hall High School], my social life was entirely among Jewish kids. There was a large Jewish population at Erasmus. At Brooklyn College there were a lot of Jewish kids; I was in a Jewish sorority. And I started going to camp when I was eleven. From the time I was eleven to the time I got married, I went to camp every summer, private camp in the Adirondack [Mountains], which was a Jewish camp. So I never dated a boy who wasn't Jewish; I never had a girlfriend who wasn't Jewish. It was a world that just—you kind of accept the situation where you are.

CEPLAIR:

Did the Depression have much of an impact on your family?

LEVITT:

Oh, yeah, my father was just devastated. Because they were really yuppies in the twenties, really beginning to have fun. They had money. He was in the stock market, and I guess they were getting along pretty well. And he was practicing the piano—he was a good pianist and he loved music—and we were enjoying radio. He had money on margin in the stock market, and he was wiped out in terms of his stocks. I remember the stocks: Standard Oil of New Jersey and Hahn Department Stores. And it got worse, because his practice, which was never a very big, successful one, was really very badly affected. In the first place—people hesitated to call a doctor, because the three dollars for house calls and the two dollars for an office visit during the Depression actually seemed like a lot of money. And also, people paid very slowly, if at all. So he was very badly hurt. Until Prohibition was over, I know he was selling liquor prescriptions to the druggist across the street. And of course my mother

died when I was seventeen. So what year was that? It must have been about 1933.

CEPLAIR:

'Thirty-three.

LEVITT:

'Thirty-three. So that was really at the depth of the Depression. It was my first year in college, and I remember the first of the German boys, Cliffie Bachrach, had invited me to a house party at Cornell [University], to a ZBT [Zeta Beta Tau] fraternity party for junior week. That had been my father's fraternity and that was very important to my father, because that was the fraternity of the rich Jewish boys, particularly rich German Jewish boys. I remember my father handing me twenty-five dollars in cash, and he said, "That's all the money I have in the world. Take it over to Klein's and Orbach's and get yourself an evening dress and an evening wrap to go to Cornell with." And I did it for twenty-five dollars. But that's how we were living, really, just—we had no help during that period, so my father and I were just doing—he was doing everything. And my brother was very young. I was seventeen, my brother was ten. We were alone for two years before he married this dreadful lady, who was a great housekeeper, but she was just a terrible woman. They hated each other very quickly. But that's a very unimportant part of my life.

CEPLAIR:

Was there much suffering around you? I mean, the Jewish people who lived around you, did they suffer?

LEVITT:

Well, I wasn't aware of it. They really didn't, not the first [inaudible], not that I knew. Everybody continued to live in the same houses as they did; everybody ate well. Even we ate well. I mean, we never cut down. The only things we ate were the things my father liked: porterhouse steak, prime ribs of beef, lamb chops. You know that was it. We never changed that. Nobody ever changed the way they ate or the way they dressed. Now, Helen Shapiro, in later years, told me that they had to fire most of those five servants. I wasn't aware of that, because they continued to live in that big house, and I'm sure Mrs.

Shapiro never did any housework. She just took singing lessons and got into her formal clothes and went to the opera on Fridays. And I'm sure they didn't give that up. I had no sense of seeing people suffer around me. I was just aware that it was happening, that men really were on the street selling apples. I read about it, and I was just—you know, there was a pall over the whole country that I was very much aware of. I don't remember specifically, but when I was nineteen—no, was it that old? When was it? I became a junior counselor at: camp when I was seventeen, and that was my first intensive exposure to politics. The girl who was the counselor in the bunk that I was the junior counselor in was two years older than me, and she was a radical. I just adored her. Because she had all the superficial things that I valued at the beginning of the summer. She was beautiful. I was never resentful of beautiful girls. I really liked to be their friend. I don't quite understand. It was kind of pleasant to be like the maid-in-waiting of popular, beautiful girls. I was quite satisfied with that role. And I always was the best friend of some wonderful girl. My best friend at camp, Margie [Weiss], was the most popular girl at camp. Everybody adored Margie, but I was her best friend, which I felt was a kind of reflected glory. And I adored her. And my new friend Inez came to camp. She was beautiful. She turned down an opportunity to go back to the city to be the bridesmaid at a wedding at the Central Park Casino, which just seemed like such a glamorous thing to turn down. She got these incredible love letters from her radical boyfriend in New York that she would let me read that were just so romantic and political. And when we went back to the city, she took Margie and me to meet him on a night that he was making a speech from a soapbox in Manhattan. My friend Margie got a tomato thrown in her face by a hoodlum, and we heard this charismatic Arnold make this incredible political speech. That was where I was exposed to the Young Communists [Young Communist League (YCL)]. They got me into a Marxist study group, and I did not take to Marx at all. I really was way over my head, and it didn't capture my interest at all. But I started becoming involved in things at Brooklyn College. There was an antiwar demonstration being planned, so I got my sorority to send me as a delegate to the organizing committee, and I turned up and announced that I was the delegate from my sorority. (I don't even remember the name of my sorority anymore.) They couldn't believe me. I mean, I asked questions, you know, and I didn't really understand what was going on. And for those Young Communists I was a pain in the neck. I mean,

some of them are right here now. I still see them, [laughter] and they remember me, because after—nobody recruited me; I just joined myself. I went up to a leader and said, "I want to join the YCL." That was before Brooklyn College had a campus. The college was renting rooms in office buildings in downtown Brooklyn. So we had a headquarters over a storefront, over an empty store, and under a black whorehouse. And it was a rat-infested building. I would make sandwiches every day and sell them, and that was how we paid the rent. So when I look back—I frequently said, "I've done women's work in the revolution." That's true. That's the kind of thing I have continued to do till this day, and they still remember my sandwiches, better than I do. But after I would get out of the kitchen, the rats would take over, and I could See them. The women organized a Head Start Program for the black kids in the neighborhood. We went into the tenements and invited people to send their kids to us on Saturday mornings, and we'd tell them stories and play with them. I wasn't afraid of blacks. I don't think people were then. There was no sense of menace about blacks at that time. I had had no firsthand experience with blacks, we did not have black servants; we had young Irish immigrants work for us. [tape recorder off]

CEPLAIR:

Okay, when you went to Brooklyn College, what was your plan and what were you going to study?

LEVITT:

I never had a career drive toward a specific career. I always assumed I would work—the idea of a woman not working didn't appeal to me at all—but I never wanted to be anything. There was just no thing that I wanted specifically to be. I majored in English and minored in psychology because those subjects interested me. I always loved literature. I loved the theater—I was exposed to the theater from the time I was eight. I saw everything, in the thirties, on the Broadway stage. I was not interested in movies. Before I started dating, I went to matinees every Saturday with my girlfriends, so I really was there for the golden age of Broadway theater. But I saw serious plays, not musicals. When I started dating with boys, I would go dutch, and we'd sit in the fifty-cent seats up in the second balcony and see everything. And I just was mad about the theater. I mean, that was my passion. I had a

little gift as an actress at camp. I was the best actress at camp, and I did have some kind of nice experiences acting in camp. But I decided that only pretty girls could be actresses, and so at seventeen I just cut it off and just lost interest in becoming an actress, although, as I say, I had a small gift. Boy, there are no regrets about that, because the life of being an actress I was not equipped to handle. Now, about my attitude toward being female—that I've thought about, naturally, and that is—see, my father loved women, really adored women, and my father adored me. And if you have a father who really adores you, you grow up thinking that it's marvelous to be female. And I have never questioned that. You know, that's why I just absolutely could not accept Freud from the word go, because if there's one thing I've never envied, it's a penis! Because I really have always thought that being a girl—I remember when the song came out "I Enjoy Being A Girl," I said, "Yes! That's what's fun is being a girl!" I've thought in terms of other women who have not had fathers who adored them. I feel that they have a certain problem in dealing with men that I've never had. I've always been comfortable with men. I've never been popular in terms of—I never was a girl who a lot of people asked to dance. Although that was what I wanted more than anything in the world, I never had that. But in looking back, from the time I was thirteen, there were always boys who really cared a great deal for me. Boys have always been very kind and very good to me, very protective. I have never sought to hurt other people, certainly not men. I've always thought men were wonderful. And it's worked both ways. I've had an extraordinary experience in that relationship.

CEPLAIR:

What about with women your age? How were your relationships with them?

LEVITT:

I've always gotten along. I have not had bad relationships with people. My son [Thomas A. Levitt] has pointed out that some women resent me very much. There's probably a certain smugness that they sense in my relationship with Al, women who resent the sense that I have it all. Because women do like Al, and he handles it very well. I mean, our relationship has always been very open and honest—I mean, we don't cheat on each other. I mean, we have not been faithful, but it was by prearrangement. During the war [World War II] we decided not to be. And we tried it, and we decided it didn't work for us, but

we're very comfortable about that. But the idea of sneaking off, you know, having affairs behind each other's back, simply has not been part of our life. We have not always gotten along well. There have been very difficult periods where the strain of our life has pressed down on our relationship, but we have never meaningfully hurt each other. Although, without meaning to, I know he has hurt me. He's gone through very difficult periods. But we've gotten through them, and at this particular moment we have never gotten along better. We work together very well. The collaboration is a dream, because I really defer to him. But it's valid, because I have always respected him, his writing, tremendously, from the time that I first saw it when I was fifteen. He was writing letters to a bunkmate when we were fifteen, and when his letters would arrive, everyone would gather around to hear his marvelously funny letters. And then when he went to college, when we were dating, he was writing a daily sports column for the New York University paper, and it was brilliant. It was just so delightful, a really funny sports column—knowledgeable, literate. So I've always known how good a writer he is; I've always related to his work, he's always consulted with me on his work, and this is very important in a writer's family. I mean, if a woman doesn't really have confidence in a man's writing, I think that would be very difficult, and I know there are such cases. So that when he asked me to collaborate with him, there was no question about his seniority in the relationship. And I never wanted to be a writer. I never wanted to be anything. Now, in my latter years of college, I had planned to go to the New York [New] School for Social Research to become a social worker. But it was not a big drive—it was not, "Okay, I'm going to give up social work." He gave up medicine. Now, that was a little sticky, because his rich aunts and uncles had paid for his college education. They were prepared to pay for his med school education, and if—he couldn't get into an American med school because he had cut all his science classes in order to edit every publication on campus, because he obviously wanted to be a writer. The family had selected him to be the doctor, and he would have had to go to Scotland. And I said, well, we knew that if he went to Scotland, I wouldn't wait. I couldn't wait, because a girl had to get married. But I said, "I will not let you give up medicine for me, because that, you know, will eventually sour our relationship." And he said, "Well, it's clear to you that I really don't want to be a doctor, and I wouldn't put that on you." So I accepted

that, and I think it was true. I don't think that—he obviously did want to be a writer, so that never was a problem.

CEPLAIR:

Let's back up for a second. You said a girl had to get married. Was that something that was just clear?

LEVITT:

Oh, everybody was going to get married. I mean, the idea of not marrying just never occurred to me! I would get married for love. That was the point. Only for love, not for money. No other considerations. Not for German Jews, you know. Not for [what] color they were, what they looked—but it was—

CEPLAIR:

Were you going to be a career person too, or were you going to be a housewife?

LEVITT:

Now, I was never going to be a housewife. Well, see, I never had any tradition of seeing women do housework. My mother never did anything, but my mother was useless.

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CEPLAIR:

You were talking about your mother and her sort of useless, boring life.

LEVITT:

Well, in terms of what I aspired to as I approached marriage to Al—his career as a writer, our life would be organized around that. But I would always do something. And I realized as soon as I got into it, even though he got me a job at Terrytoons with him in order for us to be able to get married when he came out here—gor a job for $75 a week, there was no feeling of my needing to work. So I did volunteer work. I went down to the Hollywood Anti-Nazi League and did full-time volunteer work. I have never really felt the separation, as many women do, of a need to earn money, unless we needed the money. When we needed the money, I did my—I was the breadwinner here for

several years. And it never bothered me that he was home writing while I was out working for money. So whoever had to work worked, and whoever didn't have to work did something which was socially useful. I always needed to do something that was worth doing. It just never occurred to me not to.

CEPLAIR:

So it sounds as if you didn't really think about—you just sort of went on doing—

LEVITT:

Well, things happen. My whole life has been that way. It's always been somebody asked me to do something, I did it, and I always did much more than was asked of me. That was the story of my life. But you want a love story. We argue about who saw each other first. We met through camp. He had been going to that camp, the boys camp across the lake, since he was eight, and I started when I was eleven.

CEPLAIR:

What was the name of the camp? Do you remember?

LEVITT:

Oh, it's still there. I visited a few years ago. The boys camp was Camp Balfour Lake, and the girls camp was Camp Che-Na-Wah. The girls camp is still there exactly as it was on Balfour Lake, and the boys camp has been replaced by another boys camp. We've kept in touch with the girl I knew who bought it and owned it until last year. And we have kept up very close relationships with the kids we grew up with at camp. He started going at eight; I started at eleven. The first year I was there, there was a pageant at the boys camp, and all the girls went over to watch the pageant. He was in the pageant. We sat up on a hill, and down there dressed in some kind of costume was Al, but I did not single him out. He had stopped going to camp just as we started the senior dances, because his family couldn't afford to send him. My father made great sacrifices to send me every year. At thirteen, there was a camp reunion at the Hotel McAlpin. I don't know whether it was just the girls camp or the girls and boys, but some of the boys came, and his friend Gil Cutler asked me to dance. And he claims he noticed me. But he didn't dance—he couldn't dance—so we

didn't talk. At fifteen, we were going up to camp that year on the Albany night boat. We went different ways, sometimes by train, sometimes by Albany night boat. My father had complained about the music at the lodge where the parents stayed. So the camp director said to my father, "You hire the orchestra." It was a little combo. My father held auditions, and I remember him coming home once and he said, "Gosh, I hated to turn this group down. But it was led by an Irish-Filipino boy named Casey, and they were all wonderful musicians, but as an ensemble they didn't work." And he said they were so disappointed, he hated to do it. I remembered this. So I get to the Albany night boat and there's my bunkmate Funcy [Florence Ritter], the most popular girl at camp even at fifteen, and there's this handsome, dark-skinned boy, with the saddest face I've ever seen in my life, saying good-bye to Funcy. And she doesn't introduce us. And somehow or other, I thought this was Casey, the Filipino-Irish boy that my father had turned down. I felt so guilty because he looked so sad. We all got up on the boat. All the parents and this young man were down there waiting to wave good-bye to us, and they discovered that my cousin Hazel [Halpern] had forgotten the key to her trunk. So my Uncle Dave [David Halpern] had to go all the way back to Brooklyn to get the key to her trunk, while all of us stood there on the boat and the parents stood there on the pier, for what may have been almost an hour. And there was this sad boy with these big, sad eyes looking up at us. I don't know where, at what point, I discovered that that wasn't Casey, but that was somebody named Al Levitt. And that was the summer he was writing to Funcy—these wonderful letters. From then on we knew who each other were, because he dated my best friends and I dated his best friends. I was going with his best friend Cliff Sager for about a year and a half, and he was going with Mickey Mann's sister, Ruthie Mann. So our paths would cross New Year's Eve. The boys would—they had a kind of fraternity—rent a hotel room. And so we knew who each other were.

CEPLAIR:

Did you live near each other?

LEVITT:

An hour away, by subway. He lived at the top of the Bronx and I lived in Brooklyn. Nowhere near. We did not socialize except New Year's Eve, if there

was a big—there was a big party, and I had broken up with Cliff. I was going with Danny Posner, the second and last German Jewish boy. That was the night his mother read the riot act to him. There was this big party at a hotel, and Al was there with Ruthie Mann, who got drunk and they had to rent a hotel room. And I saw Al was running in and out worrying about Ruthie, and I was there with other boys. That was the summer before we started going together. I was just nineteen. I was going out every Saturday night with Irving ["Gotts"] Gottsagen, who was a great dancer. We used to go out dancing to Benny Goodman's orchestra at the Madhattan Room of the Hotel New Yorker. We'd nurse a fifty-cent drink all evening and dance. I was a very good dancer and I loved to dance. And Gotts assumed that we would be dating during the summer, but there was nothing going on between me and Gotts. He was just someone who—he would ask a girl if he could kiss her, and you can't do that, because a girl has to say no. And how could I say, "Gotts, you shouldn't ask, you just do it." Although I had done some pretty serious necking with Cliff, he had given up just—see, the boys were so nice! You know, I've carried a certain guilt about Cliff all my life, because Cliff broke off with me saying that he was no more interested in me, and then I learned later that that was not the reason. The reason was I was driving him crazy because I just didn't have the courage to go all the way, as they used to call it, and I was making a nervous wreck out of him. So it was so gallant of him not to just say, you know, "Put up or shut up," but he just backed out of it thoughtfully. That was something I've had a certain guilt about—no regrets, but a certain guilt about. Cliff is still—he's in the East. He's a distinguished psychiatrist, and we're very much in touch with him. We see him and his third or fourth wife. But the summer that Al and I started to go together, we went up to camp on the train. The counselors were all standing together looking each other over, and Al and I played a funny game. He said, "Oh, God, I'm so tired. I'm not going to take my nights out. I'm just going to sleep all summer." And I said, truthfully I said, "I've got a trunk full of political literature which I plan to read this summer." And I did. I had it all there. I was really going to study. And I think I had recently joined the YCL. Gotts turned out to have the wrong nights out, so he was going to change it to my nights out. Meantime, before we had our nights out, there was a Saturday night dance for the campers, and there weren't enough boys to dance with the campers. So the boy counselors were told that they had to go to the dance and dance with the girl campers, but the girl counselors had to

stay out of the social hall. So I was in the library next to the social hall, obeying the rules. I look into the social hall, and there's my cousin Hazel, who is already going with Harry [Zankel] whom she eventually married, standing with Lollie [Lorraine Weiss] and Julie [Julian Lavitt] and Al. I was furious! I mean, you know, Julian and Lollie were going together already, and they married, but what was Hazel doing with Al? So I walked into the social hall and joined them. Hazel slunk away without my saying a word, and Julian said, "Why don't the four of us take a walk." Well, the rest—it was incredible. You know, we took a walk into the woods, which is where you walked then, these incredible pine woods, and we smoked cigarettes to chase the gnats away. By the end of the evening, we had agreed that I would tell Gotts not to bother to change his night off, that I would be going with Al. And within six weeks, we decided we were in love and we started sleeping together—never expecting to marry, because he was a premed student. Which I considered a pretty brave thing to do, because I assumed my life would be ruined. I would have no future, but for love that's what you did. You made that kind of sacrifice if you were a girl.

CEPLAIR:

Were many of your friends sleeping with their boyfriends?

LEVITT:

Oh, sure, but it was a big deal to keep it secret. Lollie and Julian already were. After Lollie died, I told her daughters so they would get a sense that once their parents really loved each other. [laughter]

CEPLAIR:

Was Al in the YCL?

LEVITT:

No, I was in before him.

CEPLAIR:

So you were more political than he was.

LEVITT:

Just before, I was, yes. And I always was politically more rigid than him. I was very—I kind of accepted authority.

CEPLAIR:

Would you have considered yourself a Stalinist?

LEVITT:

Of course!

CEPLAIR:

And you never questioned anything that sort of came down from above?

LEVITT:

Oh, yeah. I put up fights on the party line. I hated the switch in the mid-forties, when [William Z.] Foster decided Browder was wrong. I loved the Communist Political Association, where we weren't going to have a revolution and it was all going to happen peacefully, because I really came in on a wave of pacifism. I have a deep streak of pacifism, and I hate violence. And I went into the YCL really—they had promised me that they didn't mean violence.

CEPLAIR:

How did you handle the Spanish civil war?

LEVITT:

Oh, I was passionately involved with that.

CEPLAIR:

For the Loyalists. And that didn't bother you, that that—?

LEVITT:

Oh, no, because they were being attacked! And I was filling Christinas stockings for the children, saying good-bye to boys from college who went and didn't come back. There's still a glow. God. We had a reunion a couple of years ago at Long Beach of the fifty-year anniversary of the American Student Union and the twenty-fifth anniversary of SDS [Students for a Democratic Society]. It was mostly the fifty-year people who came, a lot of them from New York, including George Watt, who I remember as such a hero of the Spanish war. And, you know, there's still a glow around him, although he's led a very ordinary life as a social worker. I was very political, you know, once I really

bought it. I understood Engels. I liked Engels, and I liked Lenin. See, Stalin really didn't do much writing. And I remember some of the things that Lenin wrote now. The party in Hollywood just disappeared with the [Nikita] Khrushchev expose of Stalin. My position was I felt that the party in the United States should disband. I felt that it now stood so discredited in the eyes of the American working class that it had no place. We middle-class people who had formed the party were not about to lead this country to socialism, and if the American working class ever decided that they wanted socialism, they would have to figure out their own way of getting there. So that was my final position.

CEPLAIR:

So you were in the American Student Union when you were—

LEVITT:

Yes, I was a secretary in Brooklyn College. I was always a secretary, never a leader. Always women's work.

CEPLAIR:

Did you do any union organizing at that time or go on strike with workers?

LEVITT:

Well, I joined a sympathetic picket line of longshoremen while I was at college. They called on students and the League of Women Shoppers. It was several middle-class organizations which joined a picket line. We were picketing an ocean liner which was about to leave. I remember I had certain things that I did. A lot of the left-wing girls rebelled against establishment clothing. They wore flat-heel shoes, leather jackets. They wore their hair in kind of bohemian styles. I felt that was wrong. I always dressed like a sorority girl, which was the way I was raised. I remember what I wore on the picket line. I had a navy blue dressmaker suit with matching hat, gloves and shoes—I felt that it was counterproductive if you stood for something which was not a popular position. I felt you hurt it by setting yourself apart, by dressing a way that most people are not comfortable with. So we were picketing, a group of us. Some of us knew each other from Brooklyn College. And at the moment that all the people who were sailing were on the ship and all their friends and

relatives were on the pier, because the ship had not sailed yet—so there was nobody on the street except the pickets. Mounted police attacked the picket line with clubs, and bashed in the heads of the leaders. They were very selective; they obviously knew whose heads they were bashing. These horses' hooves were coming at me. So I was very calm. I just proceeded to walk like—I knew what I looked like, and I just walked away from the scene. I didn't run, I didn't panic, and nobody touched me. And then after the ambulances had come and taken the victims away, the pickets reformed on a side street, and you could sense the changed tenor, the militancy and the anger. And they told us to go home—they didn't want us anymore. On the way home with my friends we stopped off—I guess we stopped off to eat something, but at one point we picked up a newspaper—or maybe it was the next day—and the newspaper said specifically that it was policemen on foot. And suddenly my whole feeling about the press was all kind of laid bare. And then when we went to work at Terrytoons after we were married—we started work before we were married in order to get married, but it was a matter of weeks—we contacted the Cartoonists Guild to try to organize Terry-toons.

CEPLAIR:

This is still in New York?

LEVITT:

Yeah.

CEPLAIR:

When did you get married?

LEVITT:

April 2, 1938. It will be fifty years this April 2.

CEPLAIR:

So you had both been graduated from your respective colleges?

LEVITT:

He graduated six months before me.

CEPLAIR:

From NYU [New York University].

LEVITT:

Yeah, NYU Heights, which was a boys school, which had a little more cachet than NYU downtown and which he had been sent to to help him get into a med school. He immediately got a job through his Uncle Arthur [Kalfus], who did the voices for Terrytoons. He got a job as a writer at Terrytoons for twenty-five dollars a week.

CEPLAIR:

What was Terrytoons?

LEVITT:

An animated cartoon company. It was one of the pioneers. Paul Terry predated [Walt] Disney. A very reactionary man, artistically as well as politically.

CEPLAIR:

Al just wanted to be a writer?

LEVITT:

He just wanted to be a writer. He had been writing special material for his uncle, who did nightclub work. In those days, at that time, there were no help-wanted ads in the newspapers, none. I mean, you took any job you could get. So that was a great break for him. Then, when I graduated six months later, he did an incredible thing of getting me a job with Terrytoons. He really conned Paul Terry and told him that he knew this girl who had an offer on a newspaper in Philadelphia, and, boy, if he could get her, she would be so terrific. And they needed a story research department. Paul Terry said he'd love to meet her. Al wrote a letter to Paul Terry like it was a letter that I had written, and in it he put all Paul Terry's pet theories. He showed Paul Terry the letter, and Paul Terry said, "I'd love to meet her." And Al scripted that interview. He knew exactly what Terry would say, and he coached me as to what to say. So I got a job to organize the story research department—$20 a week. So we were making $45 a week. A couple of months later we decided to get married.

CEPLAIR:

Had Al become a communist by that point?

LEVITT:

Oh, yeah. He was recruited to YCL in college by one of his—not by me. No, somebody at NYU did it. I remember when he told me and I was very pleased, but it was not what they used to call a "prick conversion." No, he did it himself.

CEPLAIR:

Then did you end up in the same group or branch?

LEVITT:

No—or not until we were married. No, I was in my college YCL. But then when we got married and moved to New Rochelle, then we were both in the same group together in New Rochelle. And there were meetings in our house.

CEPLAIR:

Was it other young writers, or just anybody who was in the neighborhood?

LEVITT:

New Rochelle, it was New Rochelle. And that's where I got to meet some incredibly marvelous black intellectuals. There was a middle-class black community in New Rochelle, and there were some very intellectual blacks who were communists. So it was really my first exposure to blacks, and they were very kind to us in terms of helping us to get used to them. Which has served me well in my current involvement with the blacks in the Writers Guild [of America]. I'm practically the only one who really can relate to them.

CEPLAIR:

So at Terrytoons, you did some union organizing.

LEVITT:

We made contacts with the Cartoonists Guild, but we were only at Terrytoons for less than a year before we were fired. There was a layoff of about one-third of the plant, and we had no seniority, so we went. And Al wrote to all the

animated cartoon companies and got an offer for Merrie Melodies out here. I mean, the last place in the world we ever thought we would go would be Hollywood. We had no aspirations in terms of Hollywood or anything that it stood for. But it was a job, for $75 a week, so that's what we came for.

CEPLAIR:

So when was that?

LEVITT:

It was our first anniversary—we were on the road. So it was April in 1939 that we arrived here, the first week in April. Because I remember we were in Rollo, Missouri, on April 2. We knew one person who was a communist here, who had been Al's counselor at camp when Al was a little boy. Al hadn't seen him in like ten years. We had his name because Al had run into his brother in New York, so we looked him up. It was very hard to get a transfer into the party, you know—a lot of security out here, because they felt very vulnerable. So it took months before a transfer was arranged for us to be in the party here. I think we had to go through a new-members class. But, as I say, we had this contact through camp of one couple. [tape recorder off] To find out what we were involved in, you just have to be aware of—and I don't have the dates of what was happening politically at that time, because we were—our position was the position of the party at that point. I remember arguing with the rabbi in New Rochelle, because we joined the young people's group at the temple, which was across the street from us, to get to know people. And the rabbi took the position that the Jews should not oppose Hitler because we don't want to antagonize him. If we don't antagonize him, maybe he'll leave the Jews alone. And we argued with him very strongly because we felt that he was very wrong. We cared passionately. I remember hearing on a radio in an overseas broadcast, I think it was [Maxim] Litvinov, making a plea for a united front. And this was between April 1938 and April '39. Because I remember we were in the apartment when we heard that broadcast.

CEPLAIR:

What would you talk about at your meetings, assuming in New Rochelle you were in the regular Communist Party? You were no longer in YCL. What would go on at the meeting? What sorts of things would you talk about?

LEVITT:

God, I don't remember what we talked about in meetings, because I never liked meetings. And my concentration, when I'm hearing, is not good. I really have to read. I read *Political Affairs*. It was so hard! Very hard, I found that stuff really very hard.

CEPLAIR:

Did you read the *Daily Worker*?

LEVITT:

You know, I don't remember—I don't remember. Here I know we read the *People's World*. I don't know if we read the *Daily Worker*, in terms of where we would get it.

CEPLAIR:

How would you deal with, say, information about the Moscow trials or the fact that there were lots of reports coming out of Spain that the communists were killing—?

LEVITT:

I didn't know, I didn't hear that. Now, see, the general attitude we took in terms of any attacks against the Soviet Union was that the establishment here had so much at stake in undermining any success in the Soviet Union that you couldn't believe anything. Because there was such a premium on anybody saying anything negative that anyone would say anything, because there were rewards for that. So we really didn't believe anything. We believed only good things. We believed nothing—we justified everything. The Nazi-Soviet Pact did not bother us. We really trusted Stalin, that he knew what he was doing.

CEPLAIR:

Did it worry you to be a communist? Did you try to keep people from knowing that?

LEVITT:

Oh, we had to. Oh, God, yes. And I was sorry about that. I wished it didn't have to be, but I understood that it had to be. There was no way you could function in this society as an open communist, not out here.

CEPLAIR:

But what about in New York in '37?

LEVITT:

Well, not in New Rochelle you couldn't. And also I was underground even at Brooklyn College. They wanted me to keep my sorority connections. And because of my ASU [American Student Union] position I had to be underground. I was always underground.

CEPLAIR:

So if you had been branded as a communist, your effectiveness would have been—

LEVITT:

We would have—right. And out here you couldn't make it, you know; there was no way to make a living. There were no open communists here, no one. There was no spokesman for the Communist Party. We were all underground.

CEPLAIR:

So you arrived in the spring of 1939. Where did you live when you first came here?

LEVITT:

Well, the first few nights at the Hollywood-Roosevelt [Hotel]—and that's a very funny story which I'll let Al tell you. It's his story. Oh, there was a relative of a relative whom we looked up, and they said, "Well, you have to live in the Fairfax district. It's the only place to live." So we said, "Well, of course, of course." So we rented an apartment on Cochran [Avenue] near Wilshire [Boulevard], $45 a month. It was—I think it's called a single. It was a living room with a Murphy bed and a full kitchen, and the $45 a month included daily maid service. It was furnished. A very nice apartment building, very nicely furnished. Then in six weeks Al lost his job for which we had come out here. Somebody took advantage of him—he'll tell you about it. Incredible, in terms

of his trusting people. I had been doing volunteer work for the Hollywood Anti-Nazi League, so I got a job working for the Motion Picture Democratic Committee. We decided he would stay home and write. So we moved into a cheaper apartment, for $35 a month, on Lexington [Avenue], also in West Hollywood. It was one very small room, with a couch that opened up and a kitchen. Well, the girls in the office of the Motion Picture Democratic Committee were not being paid. There was a young actor named Richard Fiske, whose real name is Tom [Thomas] Potts, who used to come into the office. He was on the board—he was a young contract player at Columbia [Pictures Corporation]. He used to sit there and read the newspaper and didn't say anything, but he was noticing what was going on. He was the only one—not Melvyn Douglas, not Phil [Philip] Dunne—who worried about the fact that Betty Anderson and I were not being paid. And we both had would-be writer husbands whom we were supporting. So Tom, as we always called him, invited Al and me to move in with him and his wife, to their house in the [San Fernando] Valley. They paid $95 rent, but they insisted that we not pay half, that we pay like $35. We needed a larger place because Al had bought a little duck, and the little duck had become a big duck. We named the duck Joe for Joe Stalin. He had been named Joe, but when he started laying eggs we dropped the "e." But Al was very devoted to the duck. He used to take the duck walking every day. [laughter] So the place in the Valley had a lot of grounds, so it was grand for Jo. We moved in with Tom and Marge [Marjorie], and that was an incredible intercultural experience. Tom and Marge came from the state of Washington. She was Marge McGregor. She had been raised on a wheat and sheep ranch, ten thousand acres of wheat and sheep, and Tom had been raised in Washington. His parents had been divorced. He spent his summers with his father and his father's Indian wife, whom his father wouldn't marry because he wouldn't marry an Indian, but he had a family with her. So he spent his summers with the Indians and his winters with his schoolteacher mother. Tom and Marge had met at the University of Washington. There had been a strike up there and they had all been kicked out, and they had come down here to Hollywood. Tom had been signed to play the lead in Golden Boy as a result of a test that Marge had taken [as well]. He took the test with her. Marge didn't get the contract, but he did. Then Harry Cohn discovered that Golden Boy was a lightweight and so went to William Holden instead of Tom. But meantime Tom was under contract. And

Tom was an extraordinary, extraordinary young man. We lived with Tom and Marge until—into the war,

CEPLAIR:

Shortly after you went to work for the Anti-Nazi League and the Motion Picture Democratic Committee, they would have now been breaking up over the Nazi-Soviet Pact, right?

LEVITT:

I only did volunteer work for the Anti-Nazi League for the six weeks that Al was working, so I didn't have a long—I just went in and did filing. But the Motion Picture Democratic Committee, I was there during the big tumult. I read about it in Phil Dunne's book [*Take Two: A Life in Movies and Politics*], and I really don't remember the details of those political fights—I just remember the screaming. And I remember that, just from my end of it, of running the office—we were going to have a big banquet. Justice [Frank] Murphy was going to be the guest of honor, and he cancelled at the last minute. But it had to do with [the fact] that things were changing. I remember there was this ghastly heat wave in September. And then Betty, who ran the office, went off to a peace conference in Chicago, leaving me to close up that office, because we were going out of business. That was a miserable experience, but I don't remember what everyone was fighting about. But it was the liberals, Phil Dunne and Melvyn Douglas, against the party members.

CEPLAIR:

Because they wanted to be interventionist, and the communists were going to stay out of this imperialist war.

LEVITT:

It was a grave period, but actually—well, ask Al about the play that he and Tom wrote overnight once when the party line had changed. There was a playwriting contest. The party line changed, and they wrote a play the last night. And everybody else's was dated, so they won!

CEPLAIR:

Did you feel isolated politically in the post anti-Nazi-pact days, after these committees are all now breaking up?

LEVITT:

No, because the party was intact.

CEPLAIR:

Was party life here different than it was in the East for you?

LEVITT:

Well, yeah, our party life in the East was so brief. It was just different. The people in the party here were marvelous people. They were our life. Here we were meeting these just incredible people, and the relationships you had with party members were quite wonderful. I mean, for the young people who were just meeting them—and I won't, I can't tell you which ones were party members and which weren't. But it was so wonderful to be young and in love and sharing this tremendous, passionate political commitment. Because we really believed we were making a better world—for everybody. We just were so caring and so unselfish, it was incredible, the people. And we had all come out of the student movement, most of us, and carried our commitment from the student movement into this incredible organization that was here in Hollywood. We were just always doing good work, at least what we thought was worth doing.

CEPLAIR:

So it was your whole life in effect. I mean, your social life and your cultural life just revolved around the people you knew in the party?

LEVITT:

Well, but of course Al was never as rigid as anybody else. Al always had relationships outside the party. He was not a party-liner, for which I was always critical of him. He didn't accept things as readily as I did; he really questioned things. We had relationships with people who had no connection with the party who had a lot of respect for him. He always had a lot of respect out in the community wherever he was. When we decided that he better get to work, go back to work and make some money, he started as a reader. First as a freelance reader, and he was very good, so he quickly moved up and became a regular reader at Paramount [Pictures, Inc.]. And in those days, men who were readers were always considered being groomed to be writers, and

they all became writers. Not so women. It was quite different. Women became career readers, men did not. So he had a lot of friends at Paramount, both writers and readers, most of whom did not have any political connections. People who he still has warm relationships with today. He was a reader at Paramount who was just about to get his first chance as a writer when he was drafted. He did not volunteer, he was drafted. He volunteered to go overseas eventually, but he did not volunteer to go into the service. He was drafted.

CEPLAIR:

What were you doing between the Merrie Melodies job and his being drafted?

LEVITT:

He was working as a reader from the house in North Hollywood on Emelita Street with the big backyard. We had to leave that house at some point. Al always found the houses. He found a marvelous house up off Woodrow Wilson [Drive] on Pyramid Drive. A wonderful old Spanish—furnished, for $75 a month but really a beautiful house with a beautiful view. And Tom and Marge and us moved into the house. It had two bedrooms, and it was really a luxurious house. Al was a reader, and Tom was making $75 a week at Columbia. At first we didn't have help, we rotated the household jobs. You cooked one week, did the dishes one week, cleaned the upstairs one week, or cleaned the downstairs one week. And the four of us rotated. Because the boys were really pretty good about male chauvinism. I mean, we just assumed—it wasn't that "Girls, you must do this." The boys assumed that they would do it. And of course Marge was a terrible cook. We had nothing but cling peaches and sausages on her week. She was allergic to housework. And then I started hiring servants, because that's what I assumed everybody did. I mean, if the boys were making $150 a week, we could afford servants. So we had housekeepers come in and do the cooking and do the dishes.

CEPLAIR:

I'm just curious, were they black or Hispanic?

LEVITT:

Always black, always black. And Marge always worked on them to convince them to stop doing housework and go do something else. And they adored us. You know, we were really—it was a fun job, because we never told them what to do. We just said, "We want to eat at night." And I ordered my groceries by phone always. I never went marketing. It just seemed to be that we really had more important things to do. It wasn't that I was doing it in order to be a woman of leisure. I was busy making a revolution. I remember I was sitting in the big chair in the corner of the living room, and Tom came over and sat on the footstool. He was a breathtakingly charismatic character, incidentally, breathtaking. And brilliant and articulate—he really had everything. He came over and sat on the footstool, and he said, "Helen, I need a favor." There were a group of actors coming out of a thing called the Hollywood Theatre Alliance, which had put on a play called Meet the People, a musical, which had made quite a splash, which we had all adored. And they had been talking about an actors' center, a place where young professionals could work at their craft. Not a theater, because at that time little theater in this town was all vanity theater. People would pay to get parts which agents could then come to see. The closest thing to any theater was the Pasadena Playhouse, which was limited by the staidness of the community. So there really were no—theater in this town didn't exist. The road companies even that came through were really second-rate. So Tom said, "We're trying to organize the Actors Lab, and we've got a problem. Mary Virginia Farmer, who will be the one paid teacher, is asking for more money than the tuition that we can charge will bring in, and we don't know how to handle it. The actors want to do it by themselves, but would you come and work for us for six weeks"—I think for $10 a week—"to help us get started. And then we'll do it ourselves." And this really has been the pattern of my life: Somebody says, "Will you do this?" And I say, "I'll try." You know, there was no reason not to. It seemed like—

CEPLAIR:

Had you been a theatergoer to the left theater when you were in New York?

LEVITT:

Of course.

CEPLAIR:

Did you know the names, like John Howard Lawson, at that time?

LEVITT:

Not John Howard Lawson, no, no. Clifford Odets, Albert Maltz. Oh, God, Al and I had wanted to take a short-story class with him at NYU, but we worked on Tuesday nights at Terrytoons, so we couldn't take it. But we saw the things that Albert and George Sklar wrote. I saw all those.

CEPLAIR:

Were you there that famous night of *Waiting for Lefty*?

LEVITT:

I saw *Waiting for Lefty*, but not a famous night, no.

CEPLAIR:

Where everyone jumped up in the audience and [inaudible]?

LEVITT:

No, no, no. But even at an ordinary night it was pretty exciting. We saw *The Cradle Will Rock*, but we didn't see it all together, because some of it we had seen before we were going out together. I don't know whether we saw that much theater together, because we were awfully busy spending our weekends in bed at our friend's house in the Bronx. He would tell his parents he was going to Brooklyn. My father knew where I was going, but his parents didn't.

1.3. TAPE NUMBER: II, SIDE ONE (MARCH 4, 1988)

CEPLAIR:

I wanted to ask you if when you were going to left theater or thinking about becoming involved with Actors Lab, you had been talking, or thinking, with the people you knew about theories of theater or theories of screenwriting or theories of movies. Was that something that was a part of your conversation or life?

LEVITT:

I was not particularly interested in theories of theater; I just passionately loved theater. The left theater, I used to float out of those productions as a teenager

in New York in the thirties, ready to—very stimulated, but I was not interested in—I just didn't think about how it all happened. It was really what it had to say, the content. And when something had something to say to me, I was just very much involved. I was not interested in movies; motion pictures did not interest me. I was a theater snob in the worst sense of New York theater snobbery. When I came out here I looked down my nose at motion pictures. I had seen very few motion pictures. On Saturday nights, when I was dating, I did not go to the movies—I went to the theater. That was the art form I loved most. I loved novels. I loved fiction, starting from "Uncle Wiggly" on a crystal set that my grandfather [Samuel Slote] made for me probably around 1920. And I loved storytelling, like my husband [Alfred Levitt]. I was an avid reader, you know, of the Bobbsey Twins. When a new book came out, my father [Louis H. Slote] had to get it for me immediately. And it was really, I guess, the way today's kids follow TV series. I had to know what happened with the Bobbsey Twins. And of course before that there was Bunny Brown and Sister Sue. My mother [Augusta Greenberg Slote] read me Greek mythology when I was very young, and I found it very frightening. But as soon as I got started to read, which was early, I was reading all the time, as was Alfred. We both to this day love to read. When we go to sleep at night he reads to me every night. We're now reading the Arthur Miller book [*Timebends: A Life*].

CEPLAIR:

Oh, how is that? Oh, I shouldn't ask you that. It's off the subject.

LEVITT:

That is indeed off the subject, and I will not give you an opinion on that. I wouldn't want Arthur to know what I think of it.

CEPLAIR:

So the Actors Lab—what was your response to Tom [Thomas Pott]'s request?

LEVITT:

Well, it was no big thing. I understood that it was a nice thing, the idea of actors being able to work together seriously on their craft. I sympathized. Tom hated what was involved with his career as an actor; he was doing just terrible, degrading things. He always played the kid brothers in Westerns, the

kid brother who got killed. And in shorts—his work was terribly unrewarding. He hated the business of being treated like a hunk of cattle. They bring you and they look at you and—the dehumanizing thing. So I had sympathy for the actor at that point. I thought it was fine, but it was not a big deal. Fine, if Tom wanted me to do it. I adored Tom—we adored Tom. Al and I really loved Tom.

CEPLAIR:

They were going to pay you?

LEVITT:

Ten dollars a week! It wasn't that we needed the $10 a week so much, but they felt they should. I said fine, so I would interview the applicants for the Lab and I would work it out with Mary Virginia Farmer. So I met with Mary Virginia Farmer, and I said, "We don't have enough money. This is how much money we have, and this is what you have to take." And Mary Virginia Farmer said, "Fine, I'll take it." I interviewed all the applicants. We had a headquarters. It was over a store on Franklin Avenue near Gower [Street]. And there was a big room with a stage on it—we never could figure out how it happened to get there in a little office building—and two smaller rooms, all of which would be classrooms. And, you know, six weeks came and went and then one year and then two years. I guess it went on for about five years. The first classes we had volunteer teachers. J. Edward ["Joe"] Bromberg taught the beginner's class and Jules Dassin taught the advanced class. The advanced class were all young professionals. Interesting people: Willie Wyler's wife [Margaret Tallichet]—there were a lot of fun wives in there—Cecil B. DeMille's daughter, Katherine DeMille, and Lloyd Bridges and Larry Parks. They were interesting and very serious young people. And the teachers were extraordinary—I mean, Jules Dassin and Joe Bromberg were just extraordinary. And it was really the introduction to Hollywood of the Stanislavsky method, which very few people knew or had even heard about out here. Because I gathered from my reading that Stella Adler brought it from Russia in the thirties, to the Group Theatre. Joe Bromberg was a member of the Group Theatre. I had seen all the Group Theatre people on stage in New York, and meeting them was kind of interesting. Jules Dassin came from the Yiddish theater, and Mary Virginia Farmer, I don't know where she came from. She's still alive I heard—must be about 120. [laughter] I never really got to

know her, and I really can't speak of her. I have no idea how she was as a teacher. I think we only had three classes, three or four classes, and we charged $12. 50 a month. I think they met a couple of times a week at night, and I would be there at night when the kids were there. I would collect their money and interview applicants. Then we lost our place to work and I had to find a place at a fencing studio. And then in less than a year I had found the theater—I don't know whether I found it. One of us found it on Laurel Canyon Boulevard right behind Schwab's on Sunset Boulevard. We found this great little theater. We don't know how it got there, but it was a wonderful little theater with a building in the back with rooms for classrooms and a little office for me. And that's where we stayed for the rest of the life of the Lab, which lasted after I left. I left in September '45. I'm just an overachiever, you know; what I made out of that thing, with a lot of help from some wonderful people, was extraordinary. And, you know, when I meet people who had anything to do with the Lab—and to them I symbolized the Lab, you know—they just—you see such feeling of something. A kind of Camelot for actors that existed here for a little while and then just disappeared. And it happens sometimes at funerals, where I run into them. But the understanding at the beginning—well, Tom was the first chairman. But he went into the army within a year. But I remember the night, when we were still on Franklin, of the first blackout in Los Angeles. We were that night scheduled to do the first production we had ever done. We were not supposed to do productions, because once we did productions there was all kinds of corruption that was inevitable. This was a place where actors would work, not get up on the stage. So we were going to do a reading of *Paradise Lost* by Clifford Odets. And because of the blackout, not everybody could get there. I got there and most of the cast got there, but one key member didn't, so Tom got up and read a part cold. And he was incredible. I remember we put up black drapes to cover the windows, and we worked with one little light bulb on the stage. And "Bud" [Roman] Bohnen got up and made a speech about—an act of defiance, by golly. You know, the show would go on. Bud Bohnen joined the Lab well into the first year, and he really took over. Roman Bohnen came from the Group Theatre, and the Lab became Bud's life. Extraordinary man, who unfortunately I was in conflict with a lot, because he found the party a pain in the ass.

CEPLAIR:

Was he—?

LEVITT:

He was not a party member.

CEPLAIR:

Did the party have any connections with this?

LEVITT:

Well, the party came in when we tried to fire a body-work teacher and the party wouldn't let us do it. And it was none of the party's business. That was really the one time that—well, actually, there's one thing I should say for the record. When the Lab was being organized, after I was in it, the head of the party here, John Howard Lawson—I'm sure you know that. I can't hurt Jack by naming him, because that's pretty much known. There was a meeting at which Jack wanted the Actors Lab to affiliate with the New Theatre League in New York. And I felt vehemently that that was a terrible mistake and that would really cut it off from the Hollywood community. I put up a fight with Jack and I convinced him. I have never forgotten that about Jack, that he was that open-minded, that he would listen to me from my really very junior position and be convinced. I know that's not people's impression of Jack. So we did not affiliate—there's no question that it would have been a mistake. And it was a place to go. Serious Hollywood kids who had no political-left orientation came pouring in, because this was the only place where you could get incredible work in a workshop, incredible.

CEPLAIR:

And there was no party line in it.

LEVITT:

Stanislavsky was the party line! It was committed to Stanislavsky. Not because he was Russian, but because the Group Theatre felt that that was the way. It's like Freud—there are lots of different approaches to Stanislavsky in this country. I guess the keeper of the flame out here is Jeff Corey, who has a big picture of Bud Bohnen in his study, over his desk.

CEPLAIR:

Did the Hollywood communists feel special, different, from other communists? Or did you have connections with L.A. communists?

LEVITT:

Well, the L.A. communists I felt had a shitty attitude toward us. They really looked down on us. They shared the prejudice that the whole world has about Hollywood as tacky and superficial and rich and corrupt, and so they always were very patronizing. It was really outrageous. Their attitude really was wrong. But, you see, it is the attitude worldwide of communists, as well as any empowered group, toward their cultural people, and they're right to use their political position to dictate culture. So things are tough all over the world always for writers, because people want to use them to serve a political purpose. This is a battle which has always existed and I guess always will. And terrible things happen between the cultural workers and the politicos. We had family in the old party downtown, and their attitude toward us was always very patronizing.

CEPLAIR:

Can you give me some examples of those terrible things?

LEVITT:

Well, in terms of the national party, I remember one of our very talented writers here who wrote a play, a wonderful, funny play about blacklisting. This was in the forties. And he showed the play to the national leadership of the party, and they massacred it. They said, "Change this, change that"—and they just viscerated it in terms of the humor, the charm, and it ended up as being nothing. Nothing ever happened with it. I have never forgotten that, because I remember he read the play to us once before he had submitted it to the party. How widespread submitting things to the party was—I assume it was voluntary. Certainly things that were done for money, for the industry, were never—I mean the party had no control over that. The party really did not try to influence the work that people did for the industry.

CEPLAIR:

Were you and Al in a writer's branch?

LEVITT:

We were in many different groups. There were times when I was with the actors; there were times when I was with Al with writers. They kept reorganizing on different bases. But I was in many different groups at different times, so I got to know an awful lot of people. We all knew who each other were.

CEPLAIR:

Did you do anything else during the war of a political nature, aside from the Actors Lab?

LEVITT:

Well, because of my job in the Actors Lab, Abe Lastfogel, who was head of the USO [United Services Organization], asked me to produce all the legitimate shows for the armed forces through the Actors Lab, and the USO paid my salary. They upped my salary from $25 a week to $75 a week. And there was a big decision I had to make. When Al went into the army as an enlisted man, I had to make more money. So somebody offered me the job of working as a secretary for John ["Julie"] Garfield part-time. Garfield had never had a secretary. His nurse had been handling his fan mail. So I took the job for Garfield for $25 a week in the mornings and the Actors Lab for $25 a week in the afternoon, and that was enough for me to support myself. Because I had a big house, which we were sharing with various people who would come and go because of the war. Wives whose husbands were away, single women. I ran the house, and I had a servant who did the cooking. [laughter] And it didn't cost anybody hardly anything. It was a beautiful house in the Hollywood Hills off Beachwood [Drive]. So Garfield had become increasingly dependent on me; I was really very helpful to Garfield. And he asked me if I would please quit the Actors Lab and work full-time for him at the same time that Abe Lastfogel asked me to leave Garfield and work full-time producing the camp shows. We had on our own in the Actors Lab been doing camp shows for the local camps, for no money, you know, just with volunteers from the Lab. I had been putting those together, and I was stage manager of all those, so I would go to all the camps and stage-manage the shows. The people who ran the Lab were not really interested in the camp shows. They felt they should do it, but that was not where their heart was. They were happy to let me do it, and I loved doing that. They were busy making *Volpone*, which was going to turn out

to be the greatest thing that's ever been done in the American theater, bar nothing. Nine months in rehearsal. So that was going on while I was just turning out the local camp shows. When Abe Lastfogel asked me, it didn't take me long to decide. There was no question it was more important to do the camp shows. So I left Julie, and he was devastated. He kept begging me to come back, and I said I would break in a new secretary for him. I broke in five secretaries in a row—each time he begged me to come back. Then I really was in business. That was a really incredible period. I took four weeks. Every four weeks from the time I selected the shows—the William Morris office would communicate my selection to somebody in the Pentagon, or whatever it was, or the War Department, and they would approve it. No play I suggested was ever turned down. And four weeks from the day the play was selected, the play left for overseas. Which meant I had to get a director—I had a list of volunteer directors from the Directors Guild [of America]. I had to cast it with actors willing to go overseas for $200 a week. And I just picked out of the *Players Directory*. I just called people and said, "Will you do it?" And I had to get them clearances on security and passports, get them rehearsed, get the costumes, get the scenery that could be packed in two suitcases, and ship them off. Every four weeks another show went out someplace in the world.

CEPLAIR:

You were an impresario at the first word, weren't you?

LEVITT:

Yes, I really was. [tape recorder off] I became very famous in theater circles. I used my maiden name, Helen Slote. Up to that point, I'd always used my name professionally. There just never was any question of my not. And I remember an actor coming back from New York during that period saying, "God, I went to New York and I tried to impress people by dropping all kinds of glamorous Hollywood names. But," he said, "when I mentioned your name, that really got a rise out of people." They said, "You really know Helen Slote?" Because in theater circles I was, out here, as well known as Cheryl Crawford was in New York. In other words, I was theater. People came into my office wanting to meet me, and I didn't have an awareness of my importance. And now people still remember that I was not nice to them, because I wasn't aware that it was important to them that I be nice to them. But I was just totally occupied with

the job that I had to do, and it was a challenge. I had associate-producer credit on *Volpone*. I was offered my own show by CBS after the war, to produce a kind of Theatre Guild of Hollywood, because I knew all the actors. But I was pregnant, and when I walked into that office pregnant, the CBS executive turned green with horror.

CEPLAIR:

So you didn't have time, then, say when the Motion Picture Democratic Committee reorganized or the Hollywood Writers Mobilization—you couldn't have time for those, could you? Or did you?

LEVITT:

Well, the Motion Picture Democratic [Committee] went out of business.

CEPLAIR:

But then it reformed.

LEVITT:

Well, different organizations formed, but I was not a part of it. I went into the Actors Lab, and I was totally involved in the Actors Lab until September 1945, at which time I retired.

CEPLAIR:

Why?

LEVITT:

To have a family. Al was in Europe and was coming home, and I went to New York to meet him in September. He did not get home until December, and I was pregnant by February. My father wouldn't let me travel in the first three months, so we got stuck in New York for three months.

CEPLAIR:

This was the early part of 1946?

LEVITT:

This was '46. No, I guess it was '45, so I must have left the Lab in '44. No, no, it was '46, because Tom [Thomas A. Levitt] was born in November '46. So we

came back here—we figured that Tom was conceived the weekend of February 22, 1946. So you figure March, April, May—so we came back here in May. We had no place to live. I'd had a very rough housing time during the war, camping out in various people's—cots behind people's bars. Because I could have bought our house furnished for $9,500, and Al said don't do it.

CEPLAIR:

Was it difficult to readjust to one another after that? How long had you been separated? How long had he been gone?

LEVITT:

A year and a half. See, he was stationed here in Hollywood, although he had been away for his basic training. He had made trips. He was stationed at Fort Roach, in Culver City, and then he volunteered to go overseas. Ronald [W.] Reagan tried to prevent him from going. He managed to go. I don't know. It was hectic. It was hectic.

CEPLAIR:

He had been in Europe?

LEVITT:

In Europe. All over Europe.

CEPLAIR:

Why or how would Ronald Reagan have tried to keep him from going?

LEVITT:

He [Reagan] was personnel officer, and he wanted to keep him from going because he was a radical.

CEPLAIR:

But wasn't Reagan himself in those days?

LEVITT:

Guess not.

CEPLAIR:

Because he was in the—

LEVITT:

Not by then.

CEPLAIR:

No, I think up until 1945 he was still considered a liberal in the Hollywood Democratic—

LEVITT:

Well, it's Al's story to tell you about. He was there the day that Ronald Reagan turned, changed.

CEPLAIR:

Okay. But you're saying that even in the early forties Reagan was already becoming—

LEVITT:

I'm not saying the early forties; I'm saying '43. Al will tell you the day. He was there, he claims.

1.4. TAPE NUMBER: III, SIDE ONE (MARCH 8, 1988)

CEPLAIR:

I didn't ask you last time your stepmother's name. I guess for the record we should probably have it.

LEVITT:

Her name was Berdie Waxman. Yeah, for Bertha, right. "Berdie" for Bertha.

CEPLAIR:

And did they stay married?

LEVITT:

She had a married name. I think it was Kornbluth or Kornfeld, but her maiden name was Berdie Waxman. She was a young widow with a daughter. Yes, they stayed married until my father [Louis H. Slote]'s death.

CEPLAIR:

I also would like to know the names of the schools you attended. I think we have Erasmus Hall High School and Brooklyn College. Do you remember the name of your grammar school?

LEVITT:

Oh, yes, it was the PS [Public School] 161 on Crown Street, I think, and Brooklyn Avenue in Brooklyn. I was there the first day the school opened, and I started in 1A. And two of the boys who were there that day and I were the first ones from that class to graduate six and a half years later. And the three of us were the valedictorians, so we were the smartest kids in the school.

CEPLAIR:

Was your father a Franklin D. Roosevelt Democrat?

LEVITT:

Yeah, of course. Everybody we knew was. My cousin Hazel [Halpern] married a Republican, and the idea of a Jewish Republican in the thirties was really—he was quite ostracized by all the young people, including those who were not radical.

CEPLAIR:

Were you yourself in favor of Roosevelt?

LEVITT:

Oh, yeah, I cast my first vote for him. He was running I think when I was twenty-one. Oh, yeah, I was quite enthusiastic about him always. Yeah, never any question about that.

CEPLAIR:

Did your father and brother [Leslie Slote] know that you had joined the Young Communist League?

LEVITT:

I don't think my brother did. He was too young. He was seven years younger than me—still is seven years younger. I think my father knew. My father knew

everything. I never kept anything from my father. My father knew I was sleeping with Al [Alfred Levitt]; I knew whom he was sleeping with always, even when he was married. When he was married? I'm not sure, I think I did.

CEPLAIR:

Was it a subject of discussion between you that you had joined the Young Communist League?

LEVITT:

No, because I wasn't consulting him. He worried about me, about everything, but he really kept it to himself. Because he did an incredible thing, which I try to do with my son [Thomas A. Levitt] and daughter [Annie Levitt]: he really knew when he lost his vote with me and he didn't try to push it. And even though I understood the things he worried about, I did what I felt that I had to do, and I got no disapproval from him ever. Anything that I did was okay with him, and he really gave me, at a certain age, an enormous amount of freedom in terms of both boys and politics. He never said, "Be careful" after a certain point, once I was involved. Really I guess he had a certain respect for me. There was a lot of mutual love and respect, in spite of his dippy attitude toward women, which to me was a dippy attitude. I adored him all my life. He had enormous influence on me until his death, as well as all my life, because a lot that he gave me I'm just terribly grateful for.

CEPLAIR:

That must have been great just to have felt so accepted, no matter what you did.

LEVITT:

Oh, right, yeah. And I gave that to my son. I had a very privileged childhood from that point of view, and I think that was the most important thing. And he really understood. He was a really first-rate intellectual—extraordinarily bright man and extraordinary understanding. And so, you know, you never had a feeling, well, "Oh, he couldn't understand." He might disagree with it, but he could understand. We fought, we argued—we fought in a nice way. I would be angry with him. I remember when he said that Marilyn Bader was going to die. I remember that so vividly. Because he was so smart medically, if he said

someone was going to die, they died. And Marilyn Bader, a schoolgirl from camp, had a mastoid operation coming up, and he said, "She's going to die." And I just was furious. I said, "How do you know? How can you say such a terrible thing?" He says, "I know that hospital in Far Rockaway, or someplace like that and I know the surgeons there and I know that surgery, and I know that little girl isn't going to make it." And Marilyn Bader died. He looked at Roosevelt a few weeks before he died, in a parade, and he said, "That man, that's a dying man." You know, if he said they were going to die, they did. His patients never died, except one little girl with strep throat. He had a remarkable record, and I respected him. I thought he was a genius as a doctor, and I respected his opinion, even though I disagreed with him. And he respected my right to disagree with him. So that was quite extraordinary. And, you know, none of the girls that I knew had any kind of relationships with their parents of mutual respect, but the girls I grew up with were not intellectual girls. I really did not like my best friends. I didn't respect their values, but we related in the way that girls do in terms of boys and clothes and parties and that kind of stuff. And that was enough until I became a radical in college. Then I did drift away from my friends, although I saw them at camp. We saw little of each other in the city, because we were dating and the guys we knew didn't know each other. We didn't date in the city.

CEPLAIR:

You said that Paul Terry was a reactionary in that his cartoons were reactionary. What sort of work did Terrytoons do? What kinds of cartoons did they make?

LEVITT:

I forget. They had one of the first characters, you know, I think before the beginning of—he was one of the very first of animated cartoons. And I forget the characters. My husband remembers, but I didn't, because I wasn't really interested. But he didn't believe in—he was the last one to go into sound, the last one to go into color, and when [Walt] Disney did a feature, Paul Terry said, you know, "That's the end of Disney. He's through. Nobody's going to sit through a feature." In that sense he was—and in terms of unions, he said if we ever organized he would just go out of business—he would close down. He was violently antiunion. He had not kept up with changing times. He was back

in pre-World War I values. But we didn't have trouble with content in terms of the film, because animated cartoons—we did not do political material.

CEPLAIR:

Yeah, there must not have been too much room for it. Was there a feminist sensibility in the YCL [Young Communist League] and in the Communist Party? Or did the term have any currency?

LEVITT:

Oh, yeah. Male chauvinism and white chauvinism were part of the party line. Most of the men just gave lip service to it. Al was better than most of the men that I met in the party, in terms of his personal life. Al was very comfortable helping me with the dishes. I mean, we played the male-female roles comfortably, because I really wanted to. I had wanted to learn to cook when I was at home, after my mother [Augusta Greenberg Slote] died. I said to my father, "Well, I'm going to take over the kitchen." And my father said, "No way, practice on your own husband," and he took over the kitchen, which he had always run anyway. I had never done housework at home, and the idea of playing house as a newlywed seemed like great fun to me. So it was kind of a big adventure learning to cook, which Al's mother taught me. And playing house was fun. We used to go marketing together and do a lot of things. We'd go shopping for clothes together. We did everything together. We would go to work every morning, walk to work at Terrytoons (we'd taken an apartment in New Rochelle). We used to go to work holding hands. And we would stop and market on our way home, and I would cook and then we would do the dishes together. We went to meetings together; we just did everything together. But there was always a very unusual relationship. There was none of his sitting back and saying, "Get me the ashtray." There was no sense of expecting me to wait on him ever.

CEPLAIR:

One thing I've noticed in other interviews when I've interviewed a husband and wife together is that the husband will frequently dominate and the wife will defer to him, even though in my estimation she might be smarter or more articulate. Is that typical?

LEVITT:

Well, if you interviewed us together that would happen—that might happen. And if it didn't happen, he probably would be irritated. In public situations, he tends to dominate. He's always been more socially articulate than me in a mixed social group. He's the raconteur, he tells stories. I never tell stories or jokes. And when I'm in a situation without him, I'm much more articulate. But I discovered this is general with husbands and wives—in fact, it was at a party in our previous house when I was starting my role as the hostess for the blacklisted people. We had a party for sixteen in the backyard of our previous house, and I decided to separate all couples, because it was an even number. When you have sixteen you can do that. With eight and eight, you can break up all the couples. I was at the same table with Cleo Trumbo, and it was the first time I heard the sound of Cleo's voice. And she was so interesting! And a bell rang. I said, "Never will husbands and wives sit at the same table." And it's true: the women just blossom when their husbands aren't there listening and censoring them. I think that's pretty universal.

CEPLAIR:

Well, would that happen at party meetings? Would the men just tend to talk much more than the women?

LEVITT:

There were some women who were pretty articulate, I guess. I don't really remember. I don't remember that aspect of it, but I know that male chauvinism was considered a no-no. But, you know, as I look back on the men—well, the men were quite good about career wives. I mean, party men couldn't say to women, "You stay home and give up your career." That was really unacceptable. I just didn't have a particular career drive, so if I had to work, I worked, and when we decided to have babies, I stayed home and had babies—although I had not planned to stay home with the babies. I had planned, as I told people, to take six weeks off to raise a family. I took twelve years, but I had not expected that. You know, you just didn't know what having children was. Our men were better than other men, I think, of that period. I know Mike [Michael] Wilson expressed great indignation about the male chauvinism that Zelma [Wilson], as an architect, met in the outside world and I know was very supportive of her career. He was writing at home, running the house, you know, with a housekeeper, and he was the one who

was there when the kids came home. Zelma wasn't there. And I'm sure it created problems, but there was no question about her right to have her own career and pursue her own career.

CEPLAIR:

What about in terms of race prejudice? You said that party members gave lip service to getting rid of their male chauvinism. How hard was it for party members to be racially correct?

LEVITT:

Much easier, much easier.

CEPLAIR:

Why do you think that?

LEVITT:

Because it was not a gut thing that they had to face with every day. I mean, male life for thousands of years has been based on the oppression of the women, of the women who totally submerged their needs to take care of the men. That's how men have lived! To give that up is an extraordinary sacrifice to ask. And some women, like me, were just terribly lucky and within that oppression managed to put together very nice lives, if they were married to exceptional men and didn't have very strong drives of their own. But white chauvinism was absolutely verboten. In New Rochelle there was a dentist who made a racial, slightly questionable remark to a woman communist in his group. I was present when this all was happening—something like saying, "Good morning, you all." He spoke to her with a southern accent. It was nothing more than that, but he was brought up on charges, there was a trial, he was censured. I mean, that was like he had committed an absolutely terrible sin. It never would have happened if it were an incident of male chauvinism. I never knew of the party calling anybody up in relationship to male chauvinism. The leadership was too male dominated. There was just one woman in leadership in the Hollywood party, and she was like a paid functionary. She was in charge—ran the party when we first got here. She was kind of like a professional, although she had some connections with the industry. But the leadership was all male. But we were very good about blacks.

We were way ahead of anybody. I mean, we really tried. And some of the communist writers did a couple of marvelous things in their pictures which the [House] Committee [on Un-American Activities] never noticed. Only communists in the forties would have done them. You know, actually having a sympathetic black kill a white on screen, things like that. John Howard Lawson did it, and all of us said, "Oh boy, isn't that wonderful what Jack did?"

CEPLAIR:

One more question about your party life. You said you and Al had decided to be faithful to one another. Was there an emphasis on being faithful within the Communist Party? You often hear that it was a very puritanical organization, that it did not like its members who were playing around. It wasn't keen on homosexuality.

LEVITT:

Homosexuals were not allowed in the party, and I was told to keep homosexuals out of the Actors Lab, which was difficult because I knew nothing about homosexuality at all and had no strong feelings against it or for it. It had never been a part of my life. Lenin had written—I think it was Lenin—about the dirty cup of water, against promiscuity. There was a quote, a famous quote of Lenin's, discouraging communists from being promiscuous. It's hard for me to testify on this, because Al and I were really so straight as compared to most other people in this community. Possibly because of our background, the fact that we had married each other from very similar backgrounds. Fidelity, among most people, although not in my family, was taken for granted. I know that our contemporaries, the kids that we know who got married, most of them probably were faithful all their lives. They really were not fooling around kind of people, coming out of that era—except some of the men. But, you see, there was a lot of infidelity out here, because we lived in a certain community, and I think the communists, like any community, were part of that community. I feel that they were certainly not more promiscuous than people in their similar position in the industry who were not communists. It's more likely that they were less promiscuous than more, because the party did discourage—there was a kind of subtle discouragement of—and I didn't know a lot that was going on. I learned some of it in retrospect, of how widespread infidelity was. I really didn't suspect that our best friends were

cheating on their wives. I guess it was the community, where it was expected and where the opportunities for men were just extraordinary. And the opportunities for the women were not equal.

CEPLAIR:

If party leaders or organizers knew that a member was fooling around, would they make a point to tell him or her about it?

LEVITT:

I don't know. I really would not be in a position to know. I can't picture them doing it. Well, in the first place, they probably wouldn't know, and secondly it would just open up maybe too dangerous a kettle of fish.

CEPLAIR:

When you came to Hollywood, did the national leadership tell the branches what to do? Or were the Hollywood branches pretty much left to decide what they were going to do by themselves? In other words, was there autonomy?

LEVITT:

Well, you know, one of the problems from your point of view, is Al and I were never involved in party work above the lowest level. We never served on—I think it was called the section committee. There were the individual groups and then there was some kind of committee above it, and I don't remember just exactly what it was called. But Al and I attended all the meetings conscientiously. We never had a leadership position. He never held any office. I was occasionally a secretary in a group, because I was secretary of anything. So we really were not privy to how anything functioned above. We do know that there was a party line that came down from someplace that we had to discuss and somehow or other cope with. And we would discuss it passionately within the group, and the approach was we'd kind of eventually have to buy it, even after a lot of tough discussion. But Al and I, our main activity was in organizations that generally were considered worthwhile. I mean, that's what we were good at, that's what we liked to do. Al was on the executive committee of the Hollywood Writers Mobilization during the war. And I didn't tell you much about my role. I was on the committee that organized the Hollywood Canteen, which was no small potatoes thing to do,

with Jules Stein and Bette Davis. There were only about eight or nine of us who organized the Hollywood Canteen. I was there on the basis that Jules Stein really organized it, and he put Bette Davis and John Garfield on it. But Garfield was away on location during most of that period, and also it wasn't considered a great idea for him to take too public a role, which would advertise the fact that he was not in the service, so I served in his stead. Bette Davis and I ran the premiere of a picture called *Talk of the Town*, which raised the money on which the canteen was based. And Jules Stein to this day, from up there, still has the money—that money is still making money. They're still figuring out a way of getting rid of all the money that he made for the canteen, I guess by taking the money and putting it in the right places. And it just grew and grew and grew.

CEPLAIR:

Now, the canteen was, what, like a nightclub?

LEVITT:

A nightclub where the soldiers would come and be fed and dance with actresses. And it was marvelous. It was a marvelous operation. I didn't stay much after we opened it, but I was involved in all the meetings until after we opened, in getting things set up.

CEPLAIR:

So you'd go to a meeting, and there would be someone there who would say, "Okay, this is what we're going to do this week"? Or "This is what we expect you to do this week," like picket here or—

LEVITT:

Oh, no, not Hollywood.

CEPLAIR:

No?

LEVITT:

Nobody told us what to do. No, we discussed theoretical things, but we didn't discuss the work we were doing in the community at all. Nobody discussed with me or told me what I should be doing in the organizations that I worked

in. I mean, the Actors Lab, which I ran—except for that one thing, where the party came in from the outside and said that we shouldn't fire our body-work teacher, which created a big pain in the ass in the Lab, because the nonparty people were furious and with good reason. They felt they should be able to hire a body-work teacher they felt served them best, and they really should have. That was the only time. But I was on my own in the Actors Lab.

CEPLAIR:

There was no faction of Communist Party members who met within the Actors Lab to talk about it and what was going on there?

LEVITT:

Not about the Lab, no. The party did have, God, one wild thing, where they had all the actors—and this had nothing to do with the Lab. The party called a thing to decide between which was better, the Stanislavsky method or what they called result acting, which was kind of the Leslie Howard school—and some of our party people followed it—which did not believe in Stanislavsky and all that internalizing, but results are what counted. You could be on the stage talking about something else while your back was turned, and if the audience believed you were doing something else, that was all that counted. So I took notes on that thing, and God knows what happened to them. It was really grotesque that the party did this. And of course they came to no conclusions, and it was not for the party to do.

CEPLAIR:

Was there a debate within the branches about the party's position following the Nazi-Soviet Pact? You know, when the word came down that this was an imperialist war and communists would be opposed to it, did people critique that or try to resist it in any way?

LEVITT:

I don't recall that. I think it was just a question of trying to rationalize it. I don't remember resistance within the party to accepting the Soviet Union's position.

CEPLAIR:

Or anyone leaving the party over it?

LEVITT:

Nobody that I knew. Although during the testimony a lot of people said they left over various political things that had happened, I don't remember firsthand ever witnessing that happening.

CEPLAIR:

Was there a generational gap in the Hollywood party? I mean between, say, the older generation, people like [Albert] Maltz or [Samuel] Ornitz or Lawson, on the one hand, and the Levitts, [Ring] Lardner [Jr.], etc., on the other?

LEVITT:

Not that I saw. Sam Ornitz was marvelous to the young people. He taught a class that we took at the Hollywood Writers Mobilization in public speaking, and I really learned the basics of public speaking from him. He was incredible. I think he loved working with the young people. A lot of our older people taught writing classes and enjoyed working with young people, even as the people at the Actors Lab loved working with the younger actors. They were very generous with us, and I don't remember hostility from anybody but Lester Cole. When Al came home from the army, Lester said something simply dreadful to him about "I suppose you young people coming back think we all had your jobs. Now you're going to want our jobs." It was just so awful. Al had just gotten back, and here he was just mean-spirited. That was Lester. That was not true of the generation. We never got it from Jack or Albert.

CEPLAIR:

Did you look up to those older men?

LEVITT:

Oh, yes. Oh, yeah. I had no antagonism to any of the leadership; I don't remember any negative feelings toward any of them. We didn't like Lester, but Lester was hard to love. We were very busy doing things outside the party that we considered, generally—see, this was the period of united front, which was a very comfortable one for us. I mean, we were ideal people for the united front kind of work, because we were comfortable working outside the party and we were really not comfortable with party work. The theoretical stuff really didn't hold our interest.

CEPLAIR:

What about in the period between September 1939 and June 1941, when the Communist Party was opposed to the war? There were a lot of attacks made on the communists. They were trying to get them off the ballot in many states, and the Smith Act was being passed. Did you feel vulnerable or isolated during that period?

LEVITT:

No, because we had a very cozy group here that was in it together. I mean, socially, you know, we were all in it together.

CEPLAIR:

But there was no more united front, right? Didn't you miss that?

LEVITT:

No, I—see, I just arrived here in '39, so it was—the whole thing around the Motion Picture Democratic Committee was unpleasant, but I wasn't in the thick of it. I wasn't on the executive committee. I was a secretary in the office who was taking notes in meetings. I was not in on the discussion, so I just heard our leaders yelling against their leaders, and it was unpleasant, but there was no question of my loyalty.

CEPLAIR:

I can understand that.

LEVITT:

I mean, they were wrong and we were right I It never occurred to me that we were wrong about that, never for a moment.

CEPLAIR:

Did you breathe a sigh of relief, as it were, when the Germans invaded the Soviet Union and sort of a united front came back together again? I mean, the communists were now once again in the mainstream.

LEVITT:

Well, life was pleasanter in a way, yeah. Because Al was sitting at a table at Warners [Warner Brothers Pictures, Inc.] next to Jack [M.] Warner, and he heard Jack say that he was looking for a communist writer, because he had a particular movie to make that he felt that a communist would bring a better point of view to it. I mean, it was that— That was kind of nice to be in style and to be very accepted. You know, that whole period was comfortable. I loved the whole Communist Political Association period of [Earl] Browder. I fought against the changes that [William Z.] Foster wanted in terms of calling off the Browder—

CEPLAIR:

Well, we'll get to that in a little bit.

LEVITT:

Yeah. It's hard for me to remember the details of life within the party. I cannot think of what we talked about at the party meetings. Those things obviously didn't really stay with me. I guess they weren't that important to me, because I was just so involved with the Lab. That became my life.

CEPLAIR:

Now, let me ask you a question. Who actually ran the Actors Lab? Were you the actual sort of executive officer of it?

LEVITT:

I was. I was the executive director.

CEPLAIR:

Did you have to report to anyone?

LEVITT:

Well, there was a board that I was in charge of. I called the meetings, I took the minutes, I planned the agenda. There would usually be a chairman. Dick [Richard] Fiske [stage name of Thomas Potts] was the first chairman. He didn't last long because he went off to the army. Then there was, I think, Elliott Sullivan. And at a certain point, Roman ["Bud"] Bohnen really took over. Roman Bohnen really devoted his life to the Lab, and Phil [Philip] Brown was his assistant. They were volunteers, and they were around all the time. And

Bud really was the artistic director of the Lab. Eventually Mary Tarcai replaced Mary Virginia Farmer, and Mary Tarcai became the head of the school, of the whole educational end of it. But I ran it—I ran it. But I ran it with an executive board. I would bring everything to them, they would discuss it, I would get their opinion, and I would do what they wanted. I don't remember sharp disagreements or problems, because I would pretty much define the problems.

CEPLAIR:

You didn't get involved in the curriculum decisions, did you?

LEVITT:

No, I wasn't.

CEPLAIR:

You just basically did administrative—?

LEVITT:

Yeah. I took a class once, because I really wanted to understand what they were doing in those classes and what the hell that Stanislavsky method was about. Because it was new to Hollywood. Nobody knew what it was. I interviewed all the applicants, so I felt I had to be competent in explaining to them what we were doing with that new method which nobody knew about. But then once we got into production, I was more involved. The first thing we did was three one-act plays: *Pound on Demand*, with Bud Bohnen and Art Smith, extraordinary production; *The Bear*, a Chekhov play with [Ruth] Nelson and Morris Carnovsky; and Lee J. Cobb did *The Evils of Tobacco*. And it was an extraordinary evening. And Sam Levene, who was working with us for camp shows, went out and sold the tickets to Hollywood people, and they all gave them away to their servants instead of coming themselves. But then the word began to spread that we had something quite extraordinary. By the time we put *Volpone* on—and you can take my word that *Volpone* was one of the greatest productions in this country of this century. There has never been anything before or since—it was extraordinary. They had some of the greatest actors in the whole world, who had come here as refugees, combine with the Group [Theatre] actors and Norman Lloyd from the Mercury Players. I mean,

the cast was not to be believed. And Morris Carnovsky directed it. As I said, they were in rehearsal for nine months. And it was extraordinary. Hollywood was at our feet. We had a spread in *Life*. And the Little Theatre was filled with stars every night, and I met Hedy Lamarr and Joan Fontaine. It was the place to go. And they had never seen anything like it. So I ran the front of the house, and I did not get involved in the production itself, although they gave me an associate producer credit (I may have cast one of the parts). I just loved the idea of making it possible for all these just talented people to do their own thing. It was very soul-satisfying for me to do all those things that made it possible for them to do their thing. Which is really what I've always done for Alfred, which has been very soul-satisfying to take care of every other aspect of his life so he could write, including helping him when he needed it in terms of his writings. He always showed me what he wrote; he always wanted my opinion. And I think I found a way of always giving it constructively. The camp shows were going on simultaneously with *Volpone*. While they were in rehearsal, I was sending these camp shows out. And we got into doing the legitimate shows for the California camps before we got into the overseas thing. I would go out with the shows and stage-manage and do everything that had to be done. Nobody asked us to do it; we just found a way of doing it ourselves. And as a result of that, they asked me to do the overseas shows. I loved the theater, so I thought it was very worthwhile to introduce hundreds of thousands of GIs to theater, live theater, which they had never seen. I thought that was a good thing to do. The party never told me to do it; the party never discussed it with me. I just assumed that was worth doing—never questioned. The last thing I did at the Lab—I don't remember whether it was Bud Bohnen's idea or mine—it may have been Bud's—that we do a production with—professional actors who had been in the service would be the whole cast, so it would be reintroducing them to Hollywood. They had just come back from the army. Their careers had been interrupted for a few years, and we thought if we could get a similar Hollywood audience that we had gotten for *Volpone*, it would help them pick up the threads of their career. It didn't work. It was a good production of *A Bell for Adano*, and they did a very good job, but nobody came. Because suddenly—we didn't realize it—the climate was changing. The cold war had started, this was the fall of '45. Abe Lastfogel stopped calling me, and the honeymoon was over. I didn't know it was happening to us. It was the same thing like the Motion Picture Democratic

Committee. The cold war had started, and the Actors Lab was about to go out of style just as I left.

CEPLAIR:

So then you felt a chill as the war was ending.

LEVITT:

I had no idea what it was. I didn't know what it was.

CEPLAIR:

But you knew something was—

LEVITT:

Something. It was an uneasiness.

CEPLAIR:

So you didn't feel terrific. The war was over, we had defeated fascism—

LEVITT:

Oh, I had a tremendous letdown. Because in the first place, I assumed when the war was over that Al would come home. In April it ended, and here was September and he was still stuck in Europe. And they had a point system, and there was talk he was going to the war in Asia. It was a terribly painful period for me, just awful. Then in September, right after *Bell for Adano*, I left the Lab and went to New York to meet him. He actually didn't get back till December, so I was in New York three months just waiting for him, totally unconnected with anything. I was staying with the family, and—

CEPLAIR:

So there was maybe about a five- or six-month hiatus in your political life.

LEVITT:

I had no political connection when I was in New York. When Al came back, after he got out of the army, we went to one large meeting of communist writers in New York. So we know that some of the important writers who have sworn before the [House] Committee [on Un-American Activities] that they were not communists were. That I won't tell you.

CEPLAIR:

That's okay. [tape recorder off] Okay, because it's going to be important for your future testimony, let us talk about your relationship with John ["Julie"] Garfield.

LEVITT:

When Al was about to go into the army, the $25 a week I got at the Lab for a half-time job would not have been enough to support me. He had been making $75 a week as a reader. I never had to look for a job—as I needed a job, a job turned up. And one of the women involved in the Actors Lab who was a friend of Garfield's wife, Robbie [Garfield], said that Julie needed a secretary. He had never had a secretary—the nurse had been handling his fan mail—and I could have a part-time job as his secretary. And she arranged an interview for me with Robbie and Julie. So I went over to their house, which was then on Longridge [Avenue] in Sherman Oaks. It was a weird experience, because Julie was on—he was performing to impress me! And I says to myself, "I can't believe this. He's the movie star. I'm the one who wants the job, and he's trying to impress me. This is a very funny fellow." And I was puzzled, but I talked to—Robbie really conducted the interview, and there was no problem. I was hired at $25 a week to work mornings, and I went in every morning. And I kind of set him up in business as a movie star, and I did a very good job. You know he had no idea how to handle the mechanics of being a star. And I had, as I did most things, strong opinions about it based on one fan letter my friends Mabel [Fisher] and Hazel [Halpern] and I had written when we were about twelve years old. We wrote a letter to an actor out here named Stanley Smith, whom we had seen in a musical in New York. We wrote a passionate fan letter, a joint letter, and got back a form picture postcard with a price list for photographs printed. I was appalled—in fact Al worked on a short story once on that subject—so I said to myself, "This is not what Julie is going to do. If you're a movie star, there's a proper way to behave. Anybody who writes you a letter is entitled to get a letter back which gives the illusion that it's a personal letter." So I developed a variety of form letters, which I would continually update so I could refer to his latest picture, and I would have different forms that would be appropriate for different types of letters. I didn't particularly like to type, so Julie hired Jeff Corey's wife, Hope [Corey], to do my typing for me. I would take a batch of forms over to her, and she would type

them up, so each was individually typed. And I would sign Julie's name—I signed all his photographs. I imitated his signature. I learned how to do it with his approval. [laughter] I set up files for his fan letters. And I worked with the woman at the studio who was in charge of fan mail publicity, and I met with the people in publicity about Julie—and was appalled at the attitude of Warners toward him. I thought it was not very good. He was obviously not treated with what I thought was the respect he was entitled to as a performer. I worked at the house most of the time. I found him kind of a nice person. He was very kind and warm and friendly to me. I didn't respect him, but I felt very protective of him. Even though he was older than me, I thought of him as kind of a kid brother. He was clearly not an intellectual, not very bright. Not stupid but, you know, he was not well schooled, not literate. I suspect he had dyslexia in looking back, because he had a classic dyslexic personality. And I never had any witness to the fact that he could read. I read all the scripts that were sent to him and wrote the letters back to the writers. I sat in on all the story conferences with him when he met with writers who wanted to sell him stories and discuss them with him. And when he had scripts that he was doing, I would go over them with him. I would tell him the changes to make to suggest to the studio. And Al would write articles for him in his name. We had a very comfortable relationship. I found him awfully energetic, kind of hyper, which I always find exhausting, so I was more comfortable in the mornings when he wasn't there, when I had my little office where I worked on the fan mail. I would have lunch with Robbie and the two servants. I had a relationship with Robbie that I enjoyed very much. She treated me kind of like a kid sister. She gave me books about marital sex, you know; she treated me like a young married lady, which I was. For Christmas she gave me my first cashmere sweater.

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LEVITT:

We had very little opportunity to discuss politics. Most of the time I worked at his home without him, although sometimes I would get to the house and he'd be there. When he was on a picture, he would always have me come to the studio once on the pretext of working. I think he probably liked the idea of the other actors knowing that he had a secretary, since he hadn't had one before.

So we'd go into his dressing room in between takes, and I'd show him—I'd always tell him what I was doing with the mail. I actually wrote his personal letters for him. So I was on the set of all the pictures he was on. I never found set life particularly interesting; I found it pretty dull. I never was starstruck, or Hollywood involved, from the day I arrived here. Sets seemed like very dreary places, which they are. I could just picture poor Humphrey Bogart sitting there looking so gray faced and bored. They're just killing time waiting for the lights to be moved around. So going to the set was not glamorous, but it was not a burden, because I would go once on a picture and that was about it. But he certainly was not a communist. I don't think he ever had been. I don't think he was intellectual enough to have ever been a communist. When I worked for him, he was anti-party. He did not like the party. We didn't discuss it much. I don't think we really ever discussed the fact that I was in the party. I mean, we just didn't in those days. Although he may have suspected it, it just probably was not considered relevant. But we did have one serious political discussion. I was very protective of him; I was very loyal to him. I felt he needed protection because he wasn't very bright. I felt as a star he was in a somewhat vulnerable position. He asked me to keep him company when he had to go downtown to be fitted for a uniform, because when a star went overseas he had to wear some kind of uniform. So he had to have a fitting, so he asked me to go down and just to keep him company. So we had a very serious conversation, and I told him that I thought that as a star he really was too vulnerable to take, in public, unpopular political positions. Because I had seen a couple of actors in the Motion Picture Democratic Committee whose careers had been wiped out, I mean, Gloria Stewart and Maurice Murphy. Their careers were wiped out. I saw Gloria Stewart for the first time in over forty years last fall and spoke to her about those days. She seems to have survived very nicely. I felt that someday the political situation might change in this country so it would be possible for people like him to take overt political positions. But I felt that, at this time, I would not advise it. Now, that was the most political discussion we ever had.

CEPLAIR:

So he wasn't particularly active as a political person.

LEVITT:

He was not active at all. He was not active at all.

CEPLAIR:

So it would just have been his association with people who were, say, from the Group Theatre days that caused the cloud to be over his head.

LEVITT:

Right, yeah, the Group [Theatre] people. And before I knew him in the thirties, he and Robbie may have—their names may have been used in liberal causes at a time when everybody's was. But he didn't go to Washington with the Committee for the First Amendment. He was not involved with the blacklist people at all. In fact, I ran a party for the Hollywood Ten and he and Robbie had a table, and at the last minute he canceled it. But that was after '47. The guys were on their way to jail.

CEPLAIR:

Did you stay in contact with him after you ceased being his secretary?

LEVITT:

Well, during the five secretaries that I was breaking in! Oh, in my war letters—this is what's interesting. In my war letters to—the connection with the Actors Lab is critical. He knew when he hired me that I was the secretary of the Actors Lab. There was never any question about that. And I was reminded in rereading my war letters to Al of his constant nagging for me to find something for him to do at the Actors Lab and my brushing him off and saying, "Go away, there's nothing for you to do here." Because the Group Theatre actors did not consider him a serious actor. There were lots of guys like him, like Tony [Anthony] Quinn and Sheldon Leonard, who were just—their tongues were hanging out to do something at the Lab. And the Group Theatre people were such method snobs. I mean, these commercial-success people just couldn't get in the door with them! And Julie was not respected by them. I don't think they were socially close. No, I don't think they—because they were all having a terrible struggle. And Julie had deserted early because he was the one who Hollywood—him and I think Franchot Tone, they were the ones who Hollywood grabbed. I had seen Julie at the Group Theatre, and I thought what he projected on the screen was really very good. When he was good he was

really very good. He had a certain charisma in life which the camera really picked up, and a kind of vitality and enthusiasm which was very commercial. The fan mail was very interesting. He had something new and fresh in terms of a kind of working-class hero that a lot of people really enjoyed. And Warners was terrible to him. They really treated him like somebody who they knew—they "knew him when." And he was underpaid. He was paid $1,250 a week, which was incredibly low for someone of his stature. His billings stank, and I was very dissatisfied with the treatment he got at Warners. And meantime, back at the Lab, which is what's relevant, he kept nagging me and he kept finding excuses to hang around the Lab. I had produced his overseas show, and it was considered the best star turn done in the war. He one day told me he wanted me to see the thing he was going to do overseas, so he put on this show for me. It was ghastly. He had a group of hangers-onners—pugilists, pimps, writers—who would protect him, front for him. Beards—the people who take care of movie stars' every need. One of them was a writer. And they had given him a really sleazy burlesque comedy routine that was so terrible for him. He wasn't good at it—the material was sleazy. And I just hit the ceiling. I said, "That's just insulting to the soldiers for someone like you to go over there and really insult them with this crude material which you don't do well." I said, "It's all wrong." So I said, "Let me introduce you to someone who will write you what you need." So he said no, no, no, and I said, "There's a new writer from New York named Arnie [Arnold] Manoff," who had just written a book, *Telegram from Heaven*, about Bronx characters, which was brilliant. So I introduced him to Arnie, and Arnie wrote an incredible piece of material for him. It was a letter from a taxi driver who was a GI to his girl back home, which was just brilliant. It was a beautiful piece of material—the best thing that was written for a star during the war. He was marvelous in it, and it just developed a whole relationship with him and Arnie. And he met Abe [Abraham] Polonsky and a whole group of people who then got involved in the one picture he made that was all his, which was Body and Soul. After I had left Julie—that's when Julie was really turning up at the Lab all the time, after I had left—hanging around, asking me to break in another secretary. I gave him something to do, finally. We were putting on *A Bell for Adano*with a cast of veterans. And when I did a camp show I always got a name producer to act as producer, in name only. I would say, "You don't have to do anything. Just turn up at rehearsals and watch a rehearsal or two and say hello to the cast to

make them feel good. That's all you have to do as a producer." So I gave him that job on *Bell for Adano*, because I felt that the GIs who were coming back to Hollywood, having Garfield as their producer, would feel good about that, and also it would put his name on the program. I actually did the producing, but I always put one of those guys in front for morale purposes. So he was the producer of *Bell for Adano*. That was the last thing I did at the Lab. The question is whether I should go through and fast-forward to the whole Garfield story up to the end.

CEPLAIR:

No, I think we should wait.

LEVITT:

We should hold it. Would you remind me to come back to it?

CEPLAIR:

Absolutely.

LEVITT:

So I left for New York and—

CEPLAIR:

Okay, I wanted to go back before you leave for New York and pick up with the issue of the Communist Political Association and the fall of [Earl] Browder and those issues, if we can.

LEVITT:

Well, I just loved the Browder period of the Communist Political Association.

CEPLAIR:

I think that was 1943. Why did that appeal to you so much?

LEVITT:

Because I was just not a—as a pacifist, who really doesn't like confrontation, I loved the fact of the peaceful transition and being acceptable, not having to be so underground. It was very comfortable for me. I mean, I loved it. I hated it when Foster came out and said, "Cancel it."

CEPLAIR:

Okay, well, in May of 1945 there was what is referred to in party annals as the Duclos letter. Jacques Duclos of the French Communist Party wrote a letter that was then translated and I think appeared in the Daily Worker, which criticized the Communist Political Association. Was there much to-do or debate around that?

LEVITT:

Oh, yeah. Oh, yeah, there was a lot of carrying on around that.

CEPLAIR:

And you of course were against the Duclos letter.

LEVITT:

Well, I just remember fighting against Foster. I guess Foster took up the Duclos letter.

CEPLAIR:

Right, because it was a way to get rid of Browder.

LEVITT:

And I fought that within my group.

CEPLAIR:

So then you would have been in New York when the next major event occurred, which was Albert Maltz's article.

LEVITT:

Yeah, we were out of that, because we were in New York. Because Al was not in the party, you see. The boys in the service left the party. They were not communists in the—

CEPLAIR:

So I realize at the height of the quarrel, you kind of were somewhere else.

LEVITT:

Totally removed into our personal life. While I was waiting for him, I had no contact with the party. I was with his parents.

CEPLAIR:

Did you hear any echoes of what was going on?

LEVITT:

Yeah. I would visit my friend Inez. Inez and Arnold had been the couple who had put us up before we were married, and their house was a center of left-wing activities. So I would escape from my in-laws, where I was—I stayed with my father for a while, but I couldn't stay very long because of my stepmother. So I moved up to his parents', which I found very restrictive. I mean—they were watching me like a hawk—they were so afraid that I would be unfaithful to their son. It made me sick of telling them when—I went out to a movie with Inez's brother once, and they really were uneasy about it. And I would go down to Inez's, and there I met interesting people. I met—what was his name? He was a black communist member of the city council. What the hell is his name? Ben [Benjamin] Davis [Jr.]. And then I met Bob [Robert] Thompson. He was the winner of the medal of honor—what is that thing they give? The highest decoration?

CEPLAIR:

Oh, Congressional Medal of Honor.

LEVITT:

Yeah. And he went to jail on the Smith Act and was murdered in jail—a very young man, I just met these people passing through. And I met Howard Fast, who I dated during that period a couple of times. His wife was away. So there was a whole interesting world out there. They had three kids, and people were always turning up. Because all these guys were in love with Inez, and she really just held court. She really didn't do anything, but she was supposed to be a painter. Eventually she became the curator of the Hirshhorn Museum in Washington. After her marriage ended, she developed a career as curator, first of the Cornell [University] museum and then at the Hirshhorn in Washington. I'm still in touch with her. But that was kind of where I would escape to and find out what was going on in the world, because that was a

center of radical activity. I guess that was my only connection. And then Al came back in December, but he was still in the army. He was finishing his film, the film that he made with [Henri] Cartier-Bresson about the repatriation of French prisoners of war, which he was doing for the State Department. So he came back and was still in the army for a while, and we lived with his parents. Which was not great.

CEPLAIR:

Well, when did you come back to Hollywood? When did you arrive back?

LEVITT:

I was in my third month, and if I conceived February 22—I guess in May.

CEPLAIR:

Okay. So you would have arrived back a few months before the major Conference of Studio Unions strike, which broke out in September.

LEVITT:

No, there was a strike of the painters that I was—

CEPLAIR:

But that was the Conference of Studio Unions.

LEVITT:

That was before '46.

CEPLAIR:

They had one strike in '44; then they had a second strike in '46.

LEVITT:

Bell for Adano was September '45, and the cast of *Bell for Adano* all got arrested picketing Warner Brothers with the painters.

CEPLAIR:

Yeah, that was the '45 strike.

LEVITT:

'Forty-five!

CEPLAIR:

They settled that strike, and then the studios set up a separate company union among set decorators the next year. And the conference went off on strike again in September '46.

LEVITT:

Well, in the '45 one I was very much involved. I was an observer on the picket line—six o'clock in the morning with Warners. And the kids in the cast of *Bell for Adano* were there on a mass picket line and all got arrested, got their pictures in the paper. Jack Warner sent a truck to take the scenery back and his daughter [Joy Page], who was in the thing. So we had to get new scenery, we had to recast the thing. I guess that was the beginning of the left-wing publicity that the Lab was starting. Because I had kept the Lab out of any politics up till then. But, see, I was just about to leave. Joe [Joseph] Papp was just a kid then. Joe Papp became very active in the Lab after I left, but he was just a kid pulling curtains when the GIs—the school became qualified under the GI Bill and really became big. Mary Tarcai was running that even at the time I left. But Joe was just one of the youngsters who was just starting then, and I gather they got into a lot of political things after I left. It was a different Lab after I left. They were just doing plays; they all wanted to get up on the stage. They were doing what I found kind of second-rate productions just to get themselves up on the stage. And I feel that they had lost the thing that we had started out to do.

CEPLAIR:

And so that strike was considered a very important event, the '45 strike.

LEVITT:

Oh, yeah. I remember we had at Warner Brothers—with the police with riot guns—hundreds of them lining the streets—up on the roof with hoses, there was a real tension and a feeling of violence. And truckloads of workers were coming down Barham Boulevard in support. There was a lot of passion in that strike, although I'll be damned if I really knew what was at issue. But I knew which side I was supposed to be on. I was out there at six o'clock in the

morning, and I'd never liked to get up early. And I dragged poor Rose Hobart with me. I really got her involved, which I've always had a little guilt about. Where were we?

CEPLAIR:

Were you aware of the Motion Picture Alliance for the Preservation of American Ideals? It was a right-wing organization.

LEVITT:

Yeah. I don't know at what point I became aware of it. But when they got publicity in the community, I would know it.

CEPLAIR:

Did they worry you? Do you remember if it worried you much?

LEVITT:

Nothing worried me. I was never frightened.

CEPLAIR:

Were you aware that the FBI [Federal Bureau of Investigation] and Un-American Activities Committee [House Committee on Un-American Activities] investigators were nosing around?

LEVITT:

No, not before the [Hollywood] Ten. Now, the Ten made the qualitative change.

CEPLAIR:

Well, what was Hollywood like when you returned in the spring of '46?

LEVITT:

You couldn't find a place to live; you couldn't buy a bed; you couldn't buy a refrigerator. We didn't have a place to live. We had been renting all these marvelous houses and made the mistake of not buying the one we could have. So after we had lost that wonderful big house up in the Hollywood Hills, I had a very rough time in the latter part of the war just finding a place to live. One of my girlfriends from the East had come out with a baby, so I had a

responsibility to them, so we managed to sublet one house. And then I rented a room from a family near the Lab, in the hills above the Lab, and I just had rented a bedroom and bath. They were very kind to me, let me have chopped herring for breakfast, which I adored. They were very sweet. And then I spent a long period camping out in Morris Carnovsky's rumpus room. He had a big house on Selma [Avenue] near Sunset [Boulevard], and the whole downstairs was a big paneled playroom with no furniture and a wet bar. So we set up a cot. I assembled a closet, and there was a bathroom, and I lived in the corner of the rumpus room. And when the Actors Lab had parties, we would just fold up the cot and we'd have the party in my room. And then there was one interesting adventure: Rose Hobart shared a two-family house with her sister and brother-in-law near Barham and Ventura [Boulevard], up in the hills. She offered to let me have one of the two apartments, and she offered to move up with her sister and brother-in-law, because we had become very good friends. And it was terrific, because I had a whole gang I was responsible for: I had my friend Margie and her baby. And there was my friend Marge [Marjorie] McGregor, who was now widowed—Tom Potts was killed in the war. She was with Arnie Manoff by then (I don't know whether they were married yet). And there was me. And we really had no place to live, so Rose let us have the apartment. I set up a cot behind the bar and gave the two couples the bedrooms, including one baby, because Cliff, who had the baby and the wife, was in the service, so he would come in and out in terms of coming home for leaves. And Rose, sometime later, told me that what had happened was the FBI had come to her sister and brother-in-law and asked them to move out for the weekend, because they wanted to have some surveillance of those of us down there. They had moved out, and the FBI had moved in. And they were tiptoeing around in slippers, monitoring what was going on down below.

CEPLAIR:

Why didn't she tell you that this was going on? Why would she have allowed that?

LEVITT:

Well, she wasn't political, and I guess she was pressured by her family. But at that point she was not a political person. She had done a play at the Actors Lab, and she was just beginning to become active. I found out later she got

more active and she eventually was blacklisted. She now lives at the motion picture home [Motion Picture and Television Country House, Calabasas, California]. I saw her at the [reunion] party [for blacklist victims] at Barnsdall Park, and we had a very warm few moments. But I don't remember how much later it was before she told me.

CEPLAIR:

Did Al go right back to work in the studios?

LEVITT:

He had never written before. And he decided he was not going to take a job as a reader; he was really going to try to write. His career took off quite quickly, within a year. Because *The Boy with Green Hair*—he got back here in '46, and *The Boy with Green Hair* was '47. He had had a couple of jobs before that, leading up to that, and from there he went to Metro[-Goldwyn-Mayer, Inc.] on a long and very lucrative assignment, on a weekly salary. And he had—it was either six credits in five years or five credits in six years. He was really a very hot young writer. He was really doing well. Everybody liked him; everybody liked what he did. He really was at the start of what would have probably been a very flashy career, because he wrote well and he handled himself well. People he worked for liked him. There was no bullshit. He really was—and a lot of people really appreciated—his experiences were mostly quite good.

CEPLAIR:

And what were you doing? I mean, I know you were being pregnant, but were you doing anything political or career—?

LEVITT:

Well, in that period I was at home with Tom. Well, not very long. Tom was born in November '46, and we had a rough time finding a place to live. When we came back here, we moved into Morris Carnovsky's rumpus room. Mary Salt had bought us a spring bed, because you couldn't get a box spring mattress—one of those beds that's like a cot with a little mattress. And we furnished the rumpus room like a little apartment. Then Al found a two-bedroom apartment in Toluca Lake. He had to pay $500 under the table and a very inflated rent. And we couldn't buy a refrigerator. We had it all set up

before the baby was born. And I had the housekeeper whom I had had during the war, who didn't sleep in, but she was, I think, there every day. I had the baby, and he took a lot of time. But then I was quite active in my party group—that was the one time I was secretary. I had party meetings. I don't know whether we were in the same party group at the time, but I was able to be active in the party. But then the Hollywood Ten was '47, and from the day that the Hollywood Ten happened, I have devoted myself primarily to the blacklist all these years.

CEPLAIR:

All right, let's talk about that. Let's see, let me get my dates straight. Okay, in May of 1947, J. Parnell Thomas comes to Hollywood to hold hearings. Do you remember that or how people responded to that?

LEVITT:

Al was more involved than I was at the very beginning. He was the one who was getting terrific people like Richard Powell and I think John Huston, people like that, to sign petitions for the Hollywood Ten.

CEPLAIR:

There was no Hollywood Ten then. I mean, this is in May, when they're just starting to nose around.

LEVITT:

Yeah. Well, we wouldn't have been directly involved. The ones we knew best were the Hollywood Nineteen, who were never called, like Waldo [Salt].

CEPLAIR:

So, well, in September—

LEVITT:

And I think Waldo was in New York. I don't remember a firsthand connection with those first hearings. We were not close to Ring [Lardner, Jr.]. These were people who were either older or—none of our close friends were. These are people who became our friends later.

CEPLAIR:

So when the subpoenas were issued in September, you still weren't involved. You knew what was happening, but you weren't—so your involvement comes after the hearings, when the Ten were—

LEVITT:

Yeah. When everyone else had deserted them, that's when I was there.

CEPLAIR:

All right, well, what happened? I mean, what did you begin to do? What sort of activities?

LEVITT:

Well, there was an office at the Crossroads of the World [office complex, Hollywood]. The Hollywood Ten had an office, and Herbert Biberman presided over it. When Tom started going to school—so we're talking like about—probably not until about 1949. See, I probably was not active in the very beginning. It's very hard to remember. What was I doing? What was I doing? Because Tom went to nursery school very young, about two and a half. The school for the North Hollywood Co-op and then the Country School in the [San Fernando] Valley. And he went to Haskell's Rascals, which was a kind of day camp, and then to Oakwood [School]. Well, he was in kindergarten in Oakwood probably when he was four and a half. That's when he started kindergarten. He was in the first kindergarten class at Oakwood. Because we spent a lot of time building Oakwood! We were out there with the parents every Sunday. Al was hammering and Al was on the executive committee. We were always involved with the schools, and I never left Tom with somebody. I didn't leave him with people. We went away a couple of times for weekends and hired sitters, but that was very rare. I guess I was home! I guess I was home!

CEPLAIR:

For most of 1948.

LEVITT:

Yeah. I don't remember doing things. I remember buying my first seventy-five dollar dress to wear to the first Writers Guild [of America] award affair. That was forty years ago. The awards dinner this year is the fortieth anniversary.

CEPLAIR:

Were you worried about yourselves?

LEVITT:

Never. Never.

CEPLAIR:

You didn't think that the Ten was going to expand.

LEVITT:

I didn't think either way, but we never—never for a moment did we turn to each other and say, "Oh, my God, it might happen to us." When it happened we were very accepting. We never said—and this has been a deep philosophical conviction of mine. It's true of me and my attitude toward having a retarded daughter. And it's something I taught my son when he came home and—there was no seat for him in the classroom, so he had to sit in a chair. And he told me to go to fix it, go to school. So I said, "That means taking somebody else from the seat and putting you in their seat." And I never have had the attitude of "Why me?" Because that was my father's attitude. Everything that happened to him: "Why me? Why me?" And my attitude has always been—it was very conscious—"If not me, who?" I consider my retarded daughter as one of the things that happens as a result of progress in medicine. If not for the progress, I never would have been able to carry to term. And as part of that progress, there were going to be a certain number of retarded children born. If not me, somebody's got to [have it] happen. And I've never, never in terms of the blacklist said, "Why us? How might we have escaped it?" Certainly you can check it with Alfred, but certainly I never felt that.

CEPLAIR:

So you didn't have a sense that this was the beginning of something much bigger. You just didn't think—

LEVITT:

There was just so much to do! This was something that had to be coped with.

CEPLAIR:

How helpful or involved was the national party in the Hollywood Ten defense or trying to keep them out of jail or—?

LEVITT:

I really don't know. There were left-wing lawyers involved out here, as well as non-left-wing lawyers. Bob [Robert W. 3 Kenny, who was not a communist, played a very important role. And I got into a terrible conflict with the lawyers at a certain point later on in history, which I still carry a certain bitterness in relationship to.

CEPLAIR:

This is in '51, in relationship to your appearance?

LEVITT:

It was late in the fifties. It was in relationship to a lawsuit that the blacklisted people had sometime in the fifties, which is—I might tell you about it. Then again, I might not. History can forget it.

CEPLAIR:

Okay. Now, when the Hollywood Ten went to jail—

LEVITT:

Now, that was some years later.

CEPLAIR:

That was 1950.

LEVITT:

Yeah. So the campaign was up to '50. And they had an office in Crossroads of the World, and over a period of a couple of years—Tom would go to school; I would take a taxi to the Crossroads of the World. Because Al would be off to the studio in his car, and I never liked to drive anyway. There would be a housekeeper, a sleep-in housekeeper at home, who was cleaning the house and getting dinner ready. And I would take a cab to the Hollywood Ten office and work until the afternoon and would take a taxi home when Tom came home from school. I worked doing just mechanical office work, as a full-time volunteer. That's what I did.

CEPLAIR:

Now, when the Ten actually ended up going to jail, which I believe was in the fall of 1950, I assume the office closed down. I mean, there would have been no more need for it.

LEVITT:

Well, I had Annie, my daughter, December 26, 1950. And I was pregnant when we gave the last money-raising affair for the Hollywood Ten. I guess the guys were on their way to jail at that point. But that was the one where the Garfields canceled their table at the last minute. No Hollywood people came. And I remember sitting at the table checking people in with my big—oh, no, it must have been very early in my pregnancy, because with Annie I had to go to bed for five months. So that must have been the spring of '50. By the time I had to go to bed for five months I couldn't do anything, because there was something very wrong with the pregnancy. So I stayed in bed in order to save it. So the last affair must have been in the spring of '50. And then I went to bed for five months and I couldn't do anything. When Annie was born in December of '50, I had a full-time nurse in addition to the housekeeper, a nurse who I kept for—well, she would have stayed a year at least, but I had to let her go in September, after we testified. Because Annie was born December 26 and we had a subpoena by about May. May or June we got our subpoena, even though it was not made public until Al took an ad in the trades during that summer. We testified in September of '51.

CEPLAIR:

Were you aware that in 1950 people like Richard Collins and Leo Townsend and Sterling Hayden were making secret deals with—?

LEVITT:

No. It was not until we heard the testimony from Washington. Al was working at Metro when the hearings were held in Washington, in the spring of '51.

CEPLAIR:

Yeah, in March a new set of subpoenas came.

LEVITT:

Yeah. We didn't know anything about—we knew who was going. We knew that Waldo and Paul Jarrico were going. We knew some of the people who were going. But Al was at the writers' table at Metro, and Allen Rivkin had a friend in Washington. Because of the time difference, while the writers were eating lunch at twelve o'clock, Allen would get a call—at Washington time, three o'clock—or he would call, and he would read off the list of people who had been named that day to the writers' table. Al was sitting there hearing a list of our friends being named.

CEPLAIR:

Well, what was interesting, as I look back, is that you—Al appeared the day before he was named publicly for the first time. Martin Berkeley names him on September 19, but Al already appeared on September 18. That was curious. So obviously they had a list of names long before this all began that they had collected.

LEVITT:

Well, the studios must have had the list in the spring. Because Al was on a picture at Metro, an original that he had sold to Metro. He had finished the first-draft screenplay. Dore Schary had read it and said, "Don't change a word. I love it as it is." It was for Deborah Kerr and Cary Grant. That was May. They called it Dream Wife. And it was April or May when his producer, Sidney Sheldon, called. Now, Metro was entitled to a rewrite for no money. I mean, the deal had included a second draft. Sidney Sheldon called to tell him that they wanted a few changes because there were a couple of things that Grant objected to, wanted changed for him. And so Al said, "Fine, I'll do whatever needs to be done." So they say, "No, we think that maybe it would be good to get a different point of view in." Which was very strange, because it didn't cost them anything. So we didn't suspect what it was, but obviously Metro already knew, because the rewrite—Herbie [Herbert] Baker was hired—assured Al that he was going to protect his credit. He went through, changed single words on pages in order to get a replacement page in a different color, which would make it seem like he had made more changes. And Al was very hot. He was being interviewed for jobs by top producers, and the jobs would just evaporate. Strange things were happening, and we didn't suspect anything.

CEPLAIR:

When the first subpoenas came again in March, did people begin to get together to form a strategy as they had done with the Ten? Or a support group?

LEVITT:

They may have, but we wouldn't have known because we weren't involved. We didn't know.

CEPLAIR:

When did you actually get your subpoena?

LEVITT:

I don't remember when. Sometime in the spring.

CEPLAIR:

You both each got one?

LEVITT:

Yeah, at the same time. The first one was to come to Washington. They came by telegram. Then we got a change to do it here, and I think they changed the date a few times. But they didn't publicize it. You see, they let the studios know who was going to be named. Now, Martin Berkeley may have released his own list, I don't know. But the studios knew. It was clear in terms of Al's employment. Strange things were happening.

CEPLAIR:

Before his testimony?

LEVITT:

Before his subpoena. He actually took an ad in the trades to announce that he had a subpoena—he was the first one who did it—so that we could start going to the community for support. It was not to our interest for it to be kept quiet any longer.

CEPLAIR:

What effect did the ad have? Did a support group come together?

LEVITT:

No. Not in the industry.

CEPLAIR:

But what about among the communists or the left wing?

LEVITT:

Oh, the communists were supportive. Yeah, they supported us.

LEVITT:

But it wasn't like with the Hollywood Ten. It wasn't that quality of—

LEVITT:

No. Because the Hollywood community was terrified, just terrified. You could not get any Hollywood—Hollywood people wouldn't come near us! We got a call from our best friend the night we testified, "Don't come to the party Saturday night." People we spent every weekend with told us not to come to their house. Nobody called us, nobody came near us. We were totally isolated.

CEPLAIR:

You must have felt like lepers.

LEVITT:

Yes, indeed.

CEPLAIR:

It must have been a terrible feeling.

LEVITT:

It was awful. The loneliness and the isolation, I think, as I look back, was the most painful part of it.

CEPLAIR:

Did you get a lawyer as soon as you got a subpoena?

LEVITT:

Oh, yeah. Ben Margolis and Bob Kenny were assumed to be our lawyers. They had represented the Ten and the previous Hollywood people, although some of the Hollywood Ten had different attorneys. I think Bartley Crum was used by some.

CEPLAIR:

Was it obvious as soon as you got the subpoena, to you, that you would use the Fifth Amendment? There was no question about that, no discussion? "We're just not going to tell them anything."

LEVITT:

The lawyers explained to us that the First Amendment had been effectively abolished for the time being, and if we tried to take the First we would go to jail. Although, as I look back, I wish to hell we could have taken the First, even risking jail. But they assumed we didn't want to go to jail, that we shouldn't go to jail. The party didn't want us to go to jail. Most of us had young kids, and we assumed that we wouldn't want to go to jail. Though you know the Ten's jail experience wasn't that terrible. I mean, they had more fun telling those jail-house stories.

1.6. TAPE NUMBER: IV, SIDE ONE (MARCH 14, 1988)

CEPLAIR:

Okay. You want to go back and talk about your past with the Young Communist League.

LEVITT:

Yes, I think so. I feel I didn't, to my satisfaction, explain it so that I could understand it, let alone somebody else fifty years from now. The kind of question I ask myself is, where does compassion begin? And I try to trace it back as far as I can. And the first seven years, which I can delineate because that's when we moved from Pulaski Street and Tompkins Avenue to Carroll Street—I don't remember anything in those first seven years in terms of a special compassion or caring about anybody, because I was probably very spoiled and very self-preoccupied. But somewhere along the line, after seven—I remember that every Christmas the *New York Times* had a feature

called "The Hundred Neediest Cases." They sought contributions, and they listed the name of everybody who contributed anything, starting I think from five dollars. They gave, in each day or each week, actual cases of poor, suffering people. And I never missed reading every one of those cases. And I agonized as I read them. My father [Louis H. Slote] encouraged this. Every year he sent five dollars in my name, and my name was printed. So he indicated that was a good thing to do. Then I remember little things in which I reacted against my father, whom I always adored, although I took exception to certain things he did. In the years when we could afford to, before the Depression really hit hard, we had young Irish immigrant women as servants. When we moved to Carroll Street, my brother [Leslie Slote] was born within the first year. And during his first years there was always a young Irishwoman working for us, who acted kind of as a nurse for my brother and as a housekeeper, although she never was allowed to cook because my father cooked. I remember her coming in from the kitchen and holding her plate while my father, who always served—dinner was always quite formal—always cut off the tail of the porterhouse and gave it to her. And it was a source of discomfort to me. I thought it was awful of him. I never said anything, but I squirmed. There were a couple of things that my father did of which I was very ashamed, in terms of his not wanting to get involved. And of course this was the one thing he tried to preach to me. Although he preached radical ideology, he simultaneously preached, "Don't personally get involved." For instance, if there were accidents on our corner—it was quite a busy corner, and I remember specifically if there was a car accident right at the corner, I would be instructed to go to the door and say he wasn't home. And when there was a murder in our building, he told me to tell them he wasn't home, which I did. But I was very ashamed. I thought it was dreadful that he did that. The awareness of the Depression and the general suffering in the air—I read the newspapers—I guess was very painful. So when I was first exposed to Marxism—it was probably around my junior year in college, when I was seventeen. No, it was earlier, because I was only about seventeen. So it was before I joined. I joined probably about eighteen, and I was exposed at camp, as I referred to it. It really rang a bell, because it was clear that capitalism wasn't working. Life is unfair, but the fact that life is unfair was a concept I didn't grasp. I mean, I found unfairness of life unbearable and assumed that, God, if it were fixable, how wonderful. And the fact that there was a country,

the Soviet Union, which was really trying to fix it seemed quite marvelous to me. I remember what a tremendous impression it made on me when I was going to Brooklyn College, before we had the new campus, when it was still in the office buildings in downtown Brooklyn—we were sitting around a cafeteria table, and there was a merchant seaman who was with us, I guess a young radical. Somebody had gathered him up. He was telling us that when his ship had landed in the Soviet Union, the guys had all asked, "Where are the women?" in the way that they assumed, as sailors, women would be accessible to them. And they were told, "Oh, sorry, fellows, we don't do that in this country. Here you're on your own. You're dependent on your own charm. It's something you can't buy." Well, I thought that was just so marvelous. And I believed it. Today when I read they're still coping with prostitution in the Soviet Union, I want a solution to that [more] than almost anything that Stalin did. [laughter] I may be repeating myself, but looking back—Al [Alfred Levitt] and I have discussed this recently. Young people who were on the campus, either on the East Coast or in California at that time, who did not get involved either with the Young Communists or the Young Socialists [Young People's Socialist League], either weren't bright enough—because it was heady stuff. I mean Engels and even Lenin—I mean, Marx is impossible to read, but Engels was comprehensible, but very—well, it was a challenge to read, but I was very impressed with Engels and Lenin. They both were extraordinary minds and incredible writers, so it took a certain intellectual ability to understand that stuff. I don't know how working people were supposed to—the young people who didn't get involved either didn't have the intellectual capacity or the courage. Because they were exposed to it. It was there; it was in the air. It was like kids on the campus in the sixties who just didn't get involved. But the brightest and the most beautiful were leading the young radicals. I mean, they were the most dazzling figures on campus. They were the most brilliant professors, no question about it. The only courses that I remember were taught by Marxist professors. They were absolutely brilliant. I learned only recently they were all fired in 1940 in New York. But the thing that held me back, that bothered me, was my abhorrence of violence in any form. I'm a deeply rooted pacifist. It's partly maybe a lack of courage. The idea of offensive violence—defensive I can understand. But to take the offensive, to go out and kill people, is just something that I react to very negatively. And they really promised me that the [Communist] Party really didn't stand for

force and violence, that it was the other side that would probably start violence if the working people wanted socialism, as happened in Spain. So that was the one thing that I had a very negative concern about, because the party was associated with force and violence—bomb throwing. And Lenin did make it clear in his writings that individual acts of terrorism were not countenanced by—I think it was the Third International that Lenin led. So that was the way in.

CEPLAIR:

Well, it's interesting to hear you talk. Why wouldn't you have joined the Young Socialists League? After all, Norman Thomas was perhaps the leading pacifist of his generation.

LEVITT:

Well, because the YCL [Young Communist League] was in. I mean, the kids who really had it were in the YCL. It's the people you met on campus. The YPSL kids, the Young People's Socialist League, they just were not an effective force on campus. The people who were doing things, really out there fighting the good fight, were the Young Communists. And also, my father had been a pacifist during World War I. And the thing that I understood separated the socialist and communist parties was that the socialists had supported their own imperialist governments in World War I. And I could understand that that was wrong and that the communists were right. So it was on that theoretical basis, for one thing. And I didn't meet any Young Socialists. I don't know what campus Joe Lash was on, but he was a leader nationally in the Young Socialists, I think.

CEPLAIR:

Joseph Lash?

LEVITT:

Yeah. But our national leaders were just dazzling. You know, we knew them personally, and they were brilliant, brilliant and effective. And they just had more guts! Although I've always been a coward on the small level—like I'm afraid of mice and snakes—on the larger level I really have always had a great

deal of courage. I've never been afraid of big things, like revolutions or earthquakes or things like that. I'm very good at the big things.

LEVITT:

Were you impressed with the writings of the American communists, like Earl Browder or [William Z.] Foster? Or did you not pay much attention to that writing?

LEVITT:

Well, I thought *Foster's Pages from a Worker's Life* was pretty good. I found that interesting. I think Lenin was the most impressive. Of course, I read *Political Affairs.* It was hard reading, but I read it. And I didn't—it was pretty dull. I read the *People's World* out here and was embarrassed by much of the writing, embarrassed—for instance, in *New Masses*—Joy Davidson I think her name was. The movie reviews would just enrage me. Any of the cultural stuff was dreadful. And there was nothing we did about it except whine and complain, because we had no control out here of it and nobody particularly wanted to take it on. So that's about all that I—it's not much, but I just wanted to kind of fill in a few little gaps there.

CEPLAIR:

Okay. I guess it would have been different if you maybe had grown up on the East Side of Manhattan, where, I guess, either the anarchist or the socialist tradition was a stronger one than it was probably in a Brooklyn middle-class neighborhood.

LEVITT:

Oh, mine wasn't just middle class, it was upper middle class. But there were radical kids among those. The poor little rich girl around the corner [Helen Shapiro], of four-story mansion and five servants, I made a communist out of her! I mean, it just was in the air. She met a rich boy at the Atlantic Beach Club, which was a very chic club, I gather, that both parents had taken them to. And the two of them on the beach—one of them hummed the "Internationale." From there they got married, and they're still married. But I mean that's the kind of thing that was happening. So, you know, there are certain similarities to the sixties. I understood certain aspects of the sixties,

and the "crazies" particularly, based on something I remembered of Lenin's, *Left-Wing Communism: An Infantile Disorder*, describing the young middle-class revolutionaries. It was impatience led them to acts of terrorism. I remembered that, and I said, "Here they are again."

CEPLAIR:

Yeah, Weatherman.

LEVITT:

Of course! They were rich kids! It's poor people like the Chinese peasants who have the patience to work for years to make revolutions. Not rich, middle-class kids.

CEPLAIR:

I want us to go back to March 1951 and sort of go through, almost day by day if we can, from when you first received your subpoenas to your testimony. If you would talk about your responses, the lawyers you saw, whatever strategies you dealt with. Now, as I think I said last time, in March 1951 eight people received subpoenas: Larry Parks, Gale Sondergaard—

LEVITT:

Is it only eight?

CEPLAIR:

Yeah, at first. Eight were announced, and Larry Parks was going to be the first witness. I think Paul Jarrico was in that group. Richard Collins, Waldo Salt, and Gale Sondergaard. When did you receive your—?

LEVITT:

Anne Revere.

CEPLAIR:

And Anne Revere. When did you receive your subpoenas?

LEVITT:

We can't remember the date, whether it was—I guess it must have been May. My guess would be May. It's only a guess.

CEPLAIR:

And someone came to the house and delivered them?

LEVITT:

Little Davey—no, Davey [David] Forrest didn't deliver the subpoena. No, Davey Forrest delivered a telegram, but not a—Davey Forrest, little Davey Forrest, delivered something. See, we got two things.

CEPLAIR:

Who was Davey Forrest?

LEVITT:

He was a kid who was an acting student at the Actors Lab. A terrific actor who wasn't going to make it because he was too homely, whom I worried about, because he was so talented and he didn't have any money. Actually, I got him a job in a pilot that didn't sell. I don't know what became of him. But he delivered one of the things to us, and we acted as if we didn't know each other. It was such a terrible moment.

CEPLAIR:

Were you at the Lab when this happened or were you at home?

LEVITT:

No, at home. I was long gone from the Lab. I left the Lab in '45 and never went back.

CEPLAIR:

That's right, that's right.

LEVITT:

I was at home in 1951. I had had a baby December 26, 1950, after five months in bed with a grotesque pregnancy. I had more water than any woman ever delivered at Cedars [of Lebanon Hospital]. I had bigger measurements. There was something wrong with the pregnancy, and I had to stay in bed five months to save it. And my life was in very serious jeopardy when they induced labor, because of the amount of water. And Al knew—they told Al—things still

keep coming out. We talked about this recently. He says he knew from the beginning that there was something wrong. They just told me that she [Annie Levitt] had a heart murmur; they didn't tell me anything about the brain damage. I learned that accidentally about a year later. I'd had this five months of labor and had the baby. And I had a nurse, a full-time, live-in nurse, who really took care of the baby completely.

CEPLAIR:

Did you know the baby was brain damaged right away?

LEVITT:

No. I think the baby was close to a year before I knew. I just happened to sit next to a heart specialist at a dinner party—it may have been even at my house. Someone may have just brought him or something; people were bringing people to parties. I don't know, but I seem to remember it was at my house. I told him, you know, my baby had a heart murmur, and he said, "Would you like me to call the doctor and find out more about it?" I said, "I'd be delighted." And he called back and made reference to the brain damage. I said, "What brain damage?" So then I questioned the doctor further, and the nurse told me that the doctor, my doctor, had decided not to tell me, because he didn't expect the baby to live for a year. So there was no point in my knowing, I knew the baby was developing slowly, but I assumed it was because of the—he said because of the heart murmur. And the heart murmur was not to worry. And I was so concerned about Tom [Thomas A. Levitt] not suffering from sibling rivalry. I really spent no time with Annie at all, except on the nurse's day off. Because the nurse shared a room with the baby. They had their own room and bath quite a distance from the rest of the house. And Tom was very time demanding. And I guess I probably went right back to work for the Hollywood Ten. Because that was—sure I was. That was still going on, I think.

CEPLAIR:

No, they'd have been in jail.

LEVITT:

No, right, that was over. That ended in the early part of my pregnancy, that's right. I remember I was pregnant during the last big affair. So I don't know what I was doing. I was puttering around, supposed to be doing exercise to get my figure back, which Al would nag me about, which I couldn't understand why that was so important. So it was like January—it was just a few months before the subpoena arrived. We were at the [Writers] Guild [of America] awards dinner in April, at Jerry [Jerome] Davis's table, as always, and it was a great party that year.

CEPLAIR:

And who was Jerry Davis?

LEVITT:

He was Al's front. He's a producer who was really a very nice front. Al will tell you about Jerry.

CEPLAIR:

Oh, he was Al's producer before—

LEVITT:

No, no, no, he's a producer now.

CEPLAIR:

Oh, what was he—?

LEVITT:

They were both writers at the Metro[-Goldwyn-Mayer, Inc.] table. But let Al tell you what he wants about Jerry. Things were really going along very nicely, you know. We didn't know—I didn't know how much trouble I was in with the baby, and I had a housekeeper. The live-in housekeeper no longer lived in—she went home at night. But it was the same housekeeper who did the cooking. And I had to negotiate between the housekeeper and the nurse, because the nurse didn't want to eat in the kitchen. And I didn't want her to eat with us, so the nurse ate in the baby's room, and the housekeeper ate in the kitchen. So it was kind of a jolly life. And then when they came to the door with the subpoena, it was kind of a cold chill, because I knew it was all over.

CEPLAIR:

Now, was this a subpoena to appear publicly, or was it a—?

LEVITT:

A subpoena to appear publicly in Washington.

CEPLAIR:

Now, you didn't appear until September. Was it clear—? Did it say in May or was this for September? Or was this for something—?

LEVITT:

I think the date may have been changed. I don't remember. I think Al has his subpoena, so you can check the date with him. But he keeps the records back in his study. The committee [House Committee on Un-American Activities] did not announce the names, and Al will—I think Al should tell you how it affected him, because he was working at the time. He had just a few months before sold an original to Metro and had completed the screenplay, and they were entitled to a rewrite.

CEPLAIR:

Yeah, you said that on the last tape. Well, so what was your response?

LEVITT:

Well, "Let's see what we have to do." And immediately the people who had subpoenas immediately did not consider cooperating. The machinery was all in place because people had been through it before. So we immediately started meeting with lawyers, with Bob [Robert W.] Kenny and Ben Margolis, to discuss two things, our strategy in terms of testimony and our public-relations/ money-raising activities. I was totally involved in what had to be done. Not with my personal life. My personal life was running—I had the two servants we kept until we testified, so the house ran itself with minimal supervision, and I was—the blacklisted people, I don't know at exactly what point, organized themselves. It may have been after we testified. I'm not sure. But Michael Wilson became the chairman and I became the secretary. So it really—that became my main activity.

CEPLAIR:

Let's stick with the testimony before we get into that. What was your, and the other's, response to the stool pigeon phenomenon? I mean, Larry Parks named twelve names on March 21. And then within the next month, you have Sterling Hayden, Richard Collins, Meta Reis Rosenberg, Marc Lawrence, and Edward Dmytryk. And they're all naming names. What was your response to that?

LEVITT:

Well, fury. Rage!

CEPLAIR:

That was unexpected, I assume. I mean, no one expected that that was going to happen?

LEVITT:

I don't know. I mean, it happened in April, and it wasn't that "Oh, my, we didn't expect it." I wouldn't say that. I don't remember that as a reaction.

CEPLAIR:

Did you know any of them well? Had you been close friends with any of them?

LEVITT:

Oh, God, I knew Larry so well it broke my heart. He was such a dear boy. He was at the Lab, and he used to come to me when—he was going to get the part in *The Jolson Story*. They were dangling it in front of him. He and Dick [Richard] Fiske [stage name of Thomas Potts] and Lloyd Bridges, the three of them were under contract to Columbia [Pictures Corporation] on these $75-a-week contracts, with little raises each year, you know, nickels and dimes. When they offered him *The Jolson Story*, they tried to get him to sign for seven years at very little money. And they threatened not to give him the part unless he would. So he would spend all day at the studio with his agent and Harry Cohn beating on him to sign that contract. And he would come to my office—Al was overseas at the time. Larry would come into my office—he was not married to Betty [Garrett]—in fact I don't think he had even met Betty yet, because he met her at the Lab—and he had no one to talk to but me. He used to come in and I used to buck him up for the next day. I'd say, "Don't sign." I said, "Obviously if they're putting this much effort into it, they're going to give

it—they want you, but they're trying to get you cheap. And there's no reason why you have to do it!" He'd come in battered and I would just—but when one day he came in—I remember this so vividly. "God," he said, "it's in the trades—John ["Julie"] Garfield wants the part. They told me they're going to give it to Garfield." He was terrified. So I said, "I don't believe it," picked up a phone—I was no longer working for Julie—and I called Julie. And I said, "I've got Larry Parks here. They're trying to beat him down at Columbia, and they're using you as a threat by saying that you want to do the part." I said, "You don't, do you?" And he said, "Of course not. It's just made up." I turned to Larry and said, "No, they're making it up." Which just shows how desperate they were. And he held out! And he got a terrific contract. But I had gotten him the house that they lived in for many years. He was just such a sweet, decent, very strait-laced boy. He was taking care of his sick mother, and he was very faithful to Betty even before they were married. And he was just a decent, decent—not terribly bright—he was not an intellectual—but not dumb! But a kind, decent boy. And what happened to him just broke my heart. For years I would dream about him with such sadness. That's why the thing with Betty Garrett and the Judy Chaiken film [*Legacy of the Hollywood Blacklist*] just moved me so, because—and I never ran into Larry all the rest of his life. But we went to his funeral, which I knew would mean a great deal to the family, that we were there. But I could never be angry with Larry because of what he did. It was too terrible, because he lost his career anyway. That was what was so horrible, that he lost his dignity and his career. So I knew him best. I knew Martin Berkeley only very slightly. I remember he was one of the first reds I met in Hollywood. He supported restrictive covenants in terms of homeowners needing that protection, and I was shocked. Well, we were offered a deal by the committee. They sent a message to us through one couple who was considering cooperating and had met with [William] Wheeler. And Wheeler sent the message that if I would testify against Garfield, they would quash Al's subpoena. He wouldn't have to testify, and so he wouldn't be blacklisted. And we just, you know, didn't consider it for a minute. My testimony would have sent Garfield to jail for five years. We never for a moment considered cooperating with the committee. Not just on the basis of not naming names, which we never would have considered, but in terms of cooperating with what they were doing, which we considered totally illegal and unconstitutional. They were holding trials without the due process that's

involved in a trial and in areas that they were not authorized to legislate. They weren't investigating in order to make laws—that's the legislative end of the government. The whole thing was so grotesquely a sham. We understood what they were doing, which was so cynical. And to become a part of the process—in any cooperation, you became a part of the process. So there never was a moment where we looked at each other and said "Should we or would we consider it?" It just was unthinkable.

CEPLAIR:

Did Wheeler ever come to talk to you personally?

LEVITT:

No. No, we indicated we were not interested in any deal. And I feel that Garfield—did I tell you about Garfield's testimony? Because it's hard for me to remember what I've told you. I think Al might not have been called quite that early, in terms of his importance in the industry, if not for the Garfield thing. It may have been a little later. But the fact that we were on that Berkeley list, which was a very elegant list!

CEPLAIR:

A hundred and fifty-five names.

LEVITT:

Yeah, but it was the cream! It was Dorothy Parker, Lillian Hellman, and me! But they wanted Garfield, because publicity was so important. To get a movie star behind bars would have been really a coup. And they had him, they had him. But I was the key to getting him. I just learned recently that he had Louis Nizer for a lawyer. I had always thought that it was Sidney Cohen. And I had held it against Sidney Cohen, because I felt he got very bad legal advice. If there's one thing you don't expose yourself to, it's any possibility of perjury. Because that's five years. And even if you get up and say, "I was not a communist," even if you were not a communist you're in terrible danger of perjury in that ambience. Because it's so easy for them to tell somebody to swear that [you are] a communist. Because people did! David Lang named Al. Al never saw David Lang in his life! Which was true of almost everybody on David Lang's list. Nobody understands how that happened. Obviously they

gave David Lang a list, and he just read it off. They had trouble getting people to name Al. People who had obviously agreed in an executive session to name Al, when they got up on the stand pulled back, because people really liked him. That's different from some of the other party people who had been more active in the party and had antagonized more people. But Nizer, who had advised him—I saw Garfield's testimony about me. It was about three pages, and it all had to do with "Did you know that your secretary was involved in the Actors Lab?" And Julie denied it. Well, it was a matter of record that he was there. He produced a play. It's on the program. He was hanging around all the time. And I just came across, as I mentioned, a few years ago—when I read my war letters just a couple of years ago, all throughout the war letters Julie is nagging me, hanging around the Lab, to find something for him to do. So he was there because it was a place where he wanted to—you know, his old Group Theatre buddies were there, and he wanted to have some kind of connection with that wonderful part of his past. So he was there. And when, after I left him—he'd come back each time he wanted me to break in a new secretary. He'd follow me to the Lab. So all they had to do was say to John Garfield, "No, you were involved in the Lab" and they really had him on perjury. And just before he died there was an item in one of those right-wing Broadway columnists' columns saying that he was going to testify and he was going to blame everything on his secretary. Now, that actually would kill Julie. Because Julie really—I think he liked me. I think on a certain level he really appreciated how much I did for him and how loyal I was to him. And I think it would have been just terrible for him to get up there in public and in any way attack me, put blame on me, which would have been totally dishonest. I mean, it would be totally perjuring himself. He could say that he knew I was in the Actors Lab, but he couldn't in any way say that I had influenced him to do anything political, because it wasn't true. But there was no way that I was going to cooperate in that.

CEPLAIR:

But you knew that that decision meant blacklist. That was clear to you in '51, wasn't it? That if you weren't going to testify—?

LEVITT:

Well, when the subpoena came to the door, I knew that Al's career was over forever. That we would ever, ever go back to work never occurred to anybody. You assumed his career was ended, and when I took that subpoena I knew his career was over.

CEPLAIR:

Was he bitter about that? Angry?

LEVITT:

Bitter and angry about what? I mean, it had happened to—we lived in a world where this was happening to people. And if it happened to them, why not us? You know, there was no feeling about "Oh, God, if only they had skipped us." It was a question of, if not you, who? It was just a question of—no, that was the situation.

CEPLAIR:

That was just the politics of the time.

LEVITT:

It was the politics of the time. And when I was at the Writers Guild [of America] meeting—now, how I got there—I suspect that somebody said to Al, "It's going to be a hot meeting. Bring Helen." Somebody sneaked me in, because it was a closed meeting. And I saw Dore Schary come down the aisle at the Hollywood-Roosevelt [Hotel] and say, "Give us these ten and there will be no more."

CEPLAIR:

This was after the '47 hearings?

LEVITT:

Yeah, when they were getting the Guild to throw the Ten to the wolves. Which they did. It was in the air, it was all around us. And in the spring hearings—we were very close to Waldo by then, because Waldo had married Mary [Davenport], who was one of our earliest, closest friends here. When Mary had left her first husband, she had come to our house and we had taken care of her. We were very close to Mary, who was his wife of longest standing, and so we were very involved with Waldo. In fact, that was the first blacklist party I

gave, that summer of '51. I gave a big party, a farewell party to Waldo, who was moving to New York and his family was to follow. And that was the beginning of my career as a blacklist hostess. But all the left-wing people were there, all the writers.

CEPLAIR:

Were you nervous about your testimony, about going to Washington and getting up—?

LEVITT:

Well, getting to Washington was my only concern, because at that point I had a fear of flying. There was no way they could get me m a plane. But I assumed I'd go by train. The going to Washington was more of a problem than the testifying. The logistics, in terms of my kids and so forth, became simpler once it was in Los Angeles.

CEPLAIR:

They switched the hearings to Los Angeles?

LEVITT:

Yeah, so that just made it physically simpler.

CEPLAIR:

Where did you testify? Where was it?

LEVITT:

In the Federal Building.

CEPLAIR:

In downtown?

LEVITT:

Yeah.

CEPLAIR:

So this was on September 18.

LEVITT:

I don't remember the date.

CEPLAIR:

Who testified first?

LEVITT:

I think I did. I think I did.

CEPLAIR:

How long were you on the stand?

LEVITT:

Well, a very short time. The only question they only really asked me was 'Did you know John Garfield?' The lawyers had devoted a great deal of time to figuring how I was going to answer that question. Did I have the basis for taking the Fifth [Amendment]? And they finally figured out that I had a basis. The fact that John Garfield had been called, had been subjected to this inquisition, indicated suspicion of his left connections, so any association with him would jeopardize me. So on that basis I could take the Fifth, they felt. So they asked me if I knew John Garfield, question number one. I said, 'I decline to answer on the ground that it might tend to incriminate me.' I was so cool up there, I can't believe myself. Because I really, in those days, was painfully shy. It was extraordinary—this was a committee of Congress. And I was very calm, very composed, turned to my lawyers when I needed to. And then they did a funny thing. The only other thing they did was—of course they asked your name, your address, and so forth—spell your name—before they asked the first question. They asked me if I had been at two or three meetings in downtown Los Angeles—Communist Party meetings. Now, I had no recollection. But it didn't make any difference, because I took the Fifth anyway. But I thought about it afterward when I read my transcript, and it's different from all the others. They must have gotten FBI [Federal Bureau of Investigation] files on me to use. Which was kind of an honor, that they treated me with such—well, see, I obviously was targeted for a very specific job which they hoped I would do for them. They spent a lot of time with Al discussing the Korean War, whether he would fight if he was called—he'll tell

you about his testimony. But I have footage of us in the hall in the Federal Building minutes after we came out of the hearing room. Judy Chaikin found it. She gave us a copy, which was very gracious. And I'm so pleased with it. Not only do we look so young, which everybody is young before they get old, but I'm laughing! We're in such good spirits. There's no sense of people who have been through an ordeal, but people who have done something difficult, you know, and they did it! There's something positive when you act out on a conviction and pull it off, kind of. And so I don't remember it as being upsetting. It was like going to have a baby. You know, you want the baby. You have to go through the labor, but I always went to the hospital in very good spirits. It was something that I wanted to do. And this was something I wanted to do properly. I wanted to—so that was the testimony.

CEPLAIR:

Okay, afterwards, five people named Al. And Al mentioned their names—because I'm curious if you knew any of them well. Martin Berkeley, Melvin Levy, Sol Shor, David Lang, and Leopold Atlas. Were any of them friends of yours?

LEVITT:

Not personal friends, no. David Lang we had never seen in our lives. But this is true of most of the people on David Lang's list. Al was driving down Ventura [Boulevard] the next day and someone, one of the other named people, had pulled up. The guys were talking across the cars and one of them said to the other, "Who is this guy David Lang?" And the other said, "I never saw him before in my life." And that happened. But they did not succeed in getting anybody else to name me in public. They tried to get Betty Wilson to name me in public. Her husband [Richard Wilson] came to Al before Betty testified and said they were putting pressure on her to name us and she was resisting the pressure. Al said, "I don't care about who you know. That doesn't cut any mustard with me." And we found out in some roundabout way—Al may have the patience to tell you—that Betty named us in executive session. But I don't think anybody named me in—but I don't think it was that important to them to have me named; it was more important to have Al named. Because at that point I was not working, so it was not a question of being blacklisted. They wanted to be sure that Al's blacklisting was—see, I think they felt that for

everyone named by Berkeley, they needed confirmation, because Berkeley had been under a cloud as an almost admitted perjurer. Because when they first gave him the subpoena, when first named, he denied being a communist.

CEPLAIR:

So the day—let's just assume it's September 19. You've testified—

LEVITT:

Incidentally, Lee Atlas and Mel—I don't know if I told you—both applied for blacklist supplementary pensions.

CEPLAIR:

Oh, really?

LEVITT:

Yeah.

CEPLAIR:

It's interesting the way people function. Had you decided what you were going to do with the rest of your lives, now that Al's professional career was at an end? Or is that something you'd not been thinking about too much?

LEVITT:

Well, the first thing we did was fire the servants.

CEPLAIR:

Of course.

LEVITT:

And because of those months that we were under subpoena with no income, because the studios obviously knew that we had a subpoena—

CEPLAIR:

Was Al fired outright from MGM [Metro-Goldwyn-Mayer, Inc.]?

LEVITT:

No. I want Al to tell his own story about—let Al tell the employment story. What were we going to do? Well, we hadn't had time—we were just so terribly involved. And Al was one of the first into the "black market." One of the very first. I mean, people came to him almost immediately. He was working on the "Colgate Comedy Hour" for a front who approached him. And it was such an unpleasant relationship; he was so badly exploited by this guy. The guy was such a callous, greedy man. But Al developed a writer's block, so then we went—

1.7. TAPE NUMBER: IV, SIDE TWO (MARCH 14, 1988)

LEVITT:

I don't know how it developed. There was nothing formal about it, but after we—I think it was after we testified. It was a very informal thing, but people who received subpoenas in the following years who did not want to cooperate would just come to see me, just for kind of hand-holding and comfort. And I remember a couple of guys particularly. John Hubley particularly, he was green with terror about what was going to happen to his children and his family, really terrified. Now, see, we were never frightened. Sometimes we think maybe because we always had a kind of shared courage. We kind of did things together and on a very gut level. But I would just comfort people. Because I admitted the fact that nothing terrible had happened to my kids, that somehow or other we were managing. And I developed I guess those first muscles, which I have gotten better through the years, of knowing how to give other people courage. And in later years it's been with sick people among our friends. Plus I kind of ran a "USO" for blacklisted people. I gave the farewell parties and the welcome-home parties as they came and went, and I wrote the letters to keep them posted when they were far away. But I've been doing that all my life, I guess. I don't know why.

CEPLAIR:

Did your political life come to a stop as well? I mean "political" in the sense of being active in causes.

LEVITT:

Yes. There was a campaign, an election campaign, in which Donald Jackson of the committee was running for Congress or Senate or some seat. And his opponent was a liberal. Some stupid campaign person got all the blacklisted people to sign some kind of ad for this poor candidate. So Jackson put out a big flyer listing all the blacklisted people who had endorsed this candidate, indicating when we had testified before the House Un-American Activities Committee and who had named us. And that's where I found out that Betty Wilson had named me in executive session. After that, it became clear to us that anybody we supported, or any cause we supported, was like the kiss of death. So it was really like losing our citizenship. I have never signed anything since. In the last couple of years Al has signed a couple of things, but we really lost our vote in a sense, in terms of our ability to be effective on the political scene.

CEPLAIR:

What happened to the Communist Party in Hollywood?

LEVITT:

When the [Nikita] Khrushchev letter came out on Stalin, it disappeared.

CEPLAIR:

Was it still active in '51?

LEVITT:

Oh, yeah!

CEPLAIR:

You still went to meetings?

LEVITT:

Oh, yeah, the party was not affected. The party functioned as always. The party continued to function.

CEPLAIR:

With fewer people, of course.

LEVITT:

No, no.

CEPLAIR:

No?

LEVITT:

No. Why?

CEPLAIR:

Well, some fifty people had informed, so they probably no longer were in the party.

LEVITT:

Some of them had left the party already. That is one of the things that's fair to say. I don't know how many, because I don't know all of them personally, but I know that certainly some of them had already left the party—for some out of political disagreements and some maybe out of fear by then. And some people started leaving the country quite early. But you didn't have a sense of a big change within the Hollywood party. It continued to function. None of the people we were close to dropped out.

CEPLAIR:

You didn't think it was dangerous to be a communist at this time?

LEVITT:

It always was!

CEPLAIR:

But even more so now?

LEVITT:

No! The FBI [Federal Bureau of Investigation] came to our door regularly, you know; it didn't upset us.

CEPLAIR:

What were they after?

LEVITT:

Don't ask me. They just wanted to know if we were ready to talk. And we said, no, we wouldn't talk to them without a lawyer, and they went away. We said, "No, we're not interested."

CEPLAIR:

Would they sit outside your house in cars?

LEVITT:

No, no. When we moved here in 1963, they visited our neighbors. Our neighbors just told us last year—it took them a little long to tell us. The FBI visited them and told them to keep an eye on us. They said, anything suspicious, to let them know.

CEPLAIR:

So in other words, the fact that so many leaders of the party had gone to jail under the Smith Act, the fact that the Rosenbergs were going to be killed, none of that frightened you more than—

LEVITT:

It just made you more determined. It has the opposite effect on people. You know, it didn't make you—that wasn't my reaction. One of the things that Al has expressed, which I guess is true: he feels that many of us stayed in the party much longer than we would have because they challenged our right to do it. And that was really what was operating. You didn't think right or wrong or disagreement, but how dare they do what they were doing.

CEPLAIR:

Did you have a sense, sort of a perspective, that this too shall pass and that—?

LEVITT:

No. Oh, forever.

CEPLAIR:

Forever.

LEVITT:

Forever, forever. The blacklist we thought was forever at that point—yeah, in the early fifties. I don't know when we thought there would be a possibility—well, it's going to be hard to track the time down when we were having the meetings on the lawsuit, when we decided to try to get Joe [Joseph] Welch in on the case, hoping that the studios would ask for a settlement. And the lawyers wouldn't allow us, because we had gotten Joe Welch. He was very interested in us, and we thought that the studios were ready for that kind of move. Well, it was before '63, because the meeting were at the old house. The meetings would alternate between my house and Anne Revere's house, and they were always breakfast meetings. And there were six people, because I remember they fit around the dinette table.

CEPLAIR:

You're talking now about the lawsuit?

LEVITT:

Yeah.

CEPLAIR:

This is *Wilson v. Loew's*.

LEVITT:

Yeah. We always had lox and bagels and cream cheese for breakfast, although there were very few Jews on that committee—we were outnumbered. But everybody was eating lox. But, of course, [Dalton] Trumbo was the one who let us back into the industry. He really did an incredible job, on his own shoulders, of fighting his way back in and opening the doors for us, the rest of us, very consciously.

CEPLAIR:

Okay, well, let's hold that for a while.

LEVITT:

Okay. Back to '51.

CEPLAIR:

Back to '51. There are so many things I want to talk about, professionally, politically, and personally.

LEVITT:

You organize it however is most comfortable for you.

CEPLAIR:

All right. Let's look at the personal side of being blacklisted. I mean, what kinds of strains did it put on you as a person and on your family?

LEVITT:

Well, we continued to live at the same house for probably at least a year. It was kind of a nice house.

CEPLAIR:

And this was where?

LEVITT:

On Adena Drive, up off the old Cahuenga [Boulevard] near Lankershim [Boulevard] and Ventura [Boulevard], south of the boulevard, just a few blocks up on a hillside. It was a rented house, a very pleasant house, and I still had help—I had someone come in three times a week to clean. I took over the care of Annie, who I finally began to get to know, and it was very time-consuming. So I was largely involved with being a housewife. But with help, with some help—now, I don't know—Tom would remember, and I could look up my old income tax. [tape recorder off]

CEPLAIR:

So 1952 is the first full blacklist year, and your income that year was?

LEVITT:

It was $3,956.

CEPLAIR:

And what was the source of that income?

LEVITT:

It was $5,000 writing the "Colgate Comedy Hour." I see by the name that the—his front is on here. He wrote the guest-star sketch for each of them and the front took 50 percent. And here I see Michael Wilson, which means that was the year that he collaborated with Mike Wilson on the screenplay, I think, of *The Two-Headed Spy*. Mike needed some help on something, so he asked Al to work with him.

CEPLAIR:

Was that a substantial drop from the previous years?

LEVITT:

Yes, yes. He had been working steadily. Now, in '53, the income was $3,377. Oh, this indicates the move. In '52 we were living at Adena, and in '53 we moved to Fredonia [Drive], which was a two-family house. It was quite nice, but it was not a private house. It had certain problems with the landlady, who lived underneath. The income here was similar: $3,377. Oh, he got a job doing filing for a man in the oil business who he'd met through Oakwood School, a very rich fellow. He wanted to help Al, so he gave him a job, for which he called the "research assistant," for which he got $722. He's still working on the "Colgate Comedy Hour" for $1,800, and—there's money from his collaboration with Mike. And I see he's starting to do photography for $191.

CEPLAIR:

A studio photographer?

LEVITT:

Well, his office was in a little building. And there was a professional photographer there whom he became very friendly with and who started training him to do high-fashion photography with him. They did the Sears Roebuck catalog. They shot the lines for Rudi Gernreich and James Gallanos, who were unknowns at the time. And Al was very enamored of the photography; he just loved it.

CEPLAIR:

You weren't out working in these years?

LEVITT:

No. I had no help at all, and I was finding it very, very difficult. I only have Fredonia here down for one year, '53. Well, that was a terrible year. That was the year that Al developed a writer's block, which I didn't understand at all. The relationship with the guy on the "Colgate Comedy Hour" was just so dreadful that he just couldn't cope with it, and so he said, "No more." He said, "I'm going to become a photographer." And I was totally unsympathetic and quite angry. We were doing incredible things. There was a name here that at first I didn't remember, but suddenly I remembered what that was. Friedman: Jesus! I think that was the thing where we were using a saxophone player as a front for a job with a correspondence writing school. Here's a sum of $256. After the kids were asleep, we would set up two typewriters in the living room and correct papers from this correspondence school. Thirty-five cents for the first lesson and a dollar for the last lesson, which was a full short story. And that was a terrible period in our lives, because I really was not with him. I did not support his desire to become a photographer. I did not think it was economically viable, and we really did not have enough money to run the household, at $3, 300. When his parents came out to visit us that year, for two weeks, we tried to hide from them how terrible things were. When they left they gave us thirty-five dollars for their food, and I had to take it, because if I hadn't, there wouldn't have been a—there wasn't a dime in the house. Because I had tried to make things seem better than they were. And that was very rough. Annie was not toilet trained, although she was four years old by then. She was still drinking from a bottle, waking up two or three times a night, so we were constantly exhausted.

CEPLAIR:

How did this affect Tom, do you think, or did it?

LEVITT:

I think he was pretty protected.

CEPLAIR:

You think you kept him apart from whatever anxieties you had?

LEVITT:

Oh, yeah. Al and I have never raised our voices to each other in front of those children. In fact, we never raised our voice because we just—we never would. Our children have never heard us speak sharply to each other. And we never spanked our children; I never yelled at my children. And maybe that may not have been the smartest thing to do, but that's the way we did it. But '53 was the pits. Because he was just blocked. Well, except here it says—oh, something for $600 from CBS. He did something else on the black market. That may have been a science program that he worked on. He's got a gross of $4,400, so—I don't know. We should have been able to manage on $4,400 with two kids.

CEPLAIR:

I can't imagine how.

LEVITT:

Well, I did, you know. I did.

CEPLAIR:

Yeah, one does.

LEVITT:

I did, I did.

CEPLAIR:

But looking back you must wonder how you—

LEVITT:

Well, I know I learned how to make pot roast out of beef heart. I learned that from Tiba Willner. And I would clean and cook brains. And Al insisted that we switch to margarine. You had to color it then—it would come white—and I found that pretty repulsive, but I did it. And there were just no luxuries in our lives. We got a lot of hand-me-downs for the kids from rich friends who were not really in the industry, so they felt it safe enough to come near us. We must have been living on Fredonia through '54, but by the time the tax was filed we had moved to La Maida [Street]. But this is the worst year of all, the '54 one. Let me see what the total was. The total I see is—income from salary was $1,800, and professional income was $1,800. Let's see, how much—?

CEPLAIR:

That's $3,600.

LEVITT:

And another $400 from our saxophone player. So how much are we up to now?

CEPLAIR:

That's $4,000.

LEVITT:

And then that's it—$4,054. I guess that's—'53, '54 was just—but he was making $1,100 as a photographer.

CEPLAIR:

As a basis of comparison, what did he earn in his best years as a screenwriter?

LEVITT:

Let me see. The best years probably were when he was working at Metro. I'm trying to work my way back here. I wasn't looking at grosses. You know, I thought it was more than it seems to be. Income as writers—he really was making between $10,000 and $20,000. But I don't know, it just seemed like it was a lot of money, because we were really living high on the hog, as they would say.

CEPLAIR:

So your income was cut by at least three-fourths.

LEVITT:

Yeah. And of course the cost of living was probably going up.

CEPLAIR:

Yeah.

LEVITT:

So that takes us to La Maida. It's '53 and '54, but he stopped writing in '54. And here we are in '55, his writing income is $5,000 and his photography income is $2,700. So that he's making—you know, the crisis is over.

CEPLAIR:

Yeah, so that's a relatively flush year compared to the other two.

LEVITT:

Yeah. It's those two years—it was really two years that we were just really wiped out. We were coping, at that point, with facing the fact of Annie.

CEPLAIR:

Thinking about institutionalizing her?

LEVITT:

Never. We were advised to by—when she was five we went to the diagnostic services of Children's Hospital [of Los Angeles] hoping to get a cerebral palsy diagnosis so she could get into a particular school. [tape recorder off]

CEPLAIR:

You were talking about Annie and getting a diagnosis.

LEVITT:

In the course of our going through Children's Hospital, one of the people who tested her said that we should institutionalize her, and Al and I just—not for a moment did we consider it. We didn't go home and talk, should we, shouldn't we. It just was not what we wanted to do.

CEPLAIR:

Okay, well, let's go back to '51 again. I'd like to talk about how you became involved with the Oakwood School and then how you departed from the Oakwood School.

LEVITT:

That's I think more your curiosity than history, [laughter] but it's part of Oakwood's history. We were in from the very beginning, when the daddies used to go to the site on Sundays. The whole family would go up bringing

picnic lunches, and the daddies would be hammering and sawing and putting nails in. They actually were physically doing things on that empty lot. And the classes, I think, were at a temple. They had their kindergarten classes—Tom, I think, was in the first kindergarten class.

CEPLAIR:

How did you get involved in it?

LEVITT:

Everybody was involved in it.

CEPLAIR:

I think Robert Ryan was one of the main people behind it, wasn't he?

LEVITT:

Yeah.

CEPLAIR:

It was supposed to be this progressive kind of school?

LEVITT:

Oh, it sounded like just the kind of school that—we assumed that our son always needed very special schools. I don't remember the individual who involved us. But we just knew about it, and we immediately said, "This is for us." Now, this was before we were blacklisted, so there was no question of our ability to afford to go. So Tom immediately went to the kindergarten before the school was built. And we were involved in the building of the school. Al became very active. He was on that first executive committee of parents that hired the first teachers, and he was in charge of interviewing parents who were applying for their children to be admitted and was very active for the first few years.

CEPLAIR:

Did Tom get a scholarship after you applied?

LEVITT:

Yes, he did after Al was blacklisted. And so did Rebecca Wilson. There are different stories on what happened when Tom was expelled. Every member of his family tells a different story. On this point, Al gets so furious with me when he hears my story that I forget which is my story and which is his story and which is Tom's story. But it was around the firing of all the teachers—at a certain point they decided to fire all the teachers. We were very happy with the teachers; we had gotten very fond of them. The headmaster [Bryson Girard] was from a Quaker school. He was a very gentle fellow. He worked in projects, and they would be building a bridge or something and they'd have all their subjects around building a bridge or something. And I thought that was darling. Meantime, Liz [Elizabeth] Harmon had discovered that [Marie] Spottswood at Ethical Culture [School], which was where Liz had gone to school, was available. And Liz could get Spottswood and her girlfriend, whatever the reading teacher's name was—she wouldn't come without her girlfriend. I forget the reading teacher's name, but she played an important role in Tom's life, because she and Tom didn't get along. She used to carry him kicking and screaming out of the classroom and throw him out. Because he knew how to read and he was bored. So Liz had her heart set on getting Spottswood, and the leadership then wanted to fire all the teachers. And we were involved in organizing the parents to defend the teachers. The teachers tried to organize into a union, and they were all fired as a result of their organizing a union. I forget what the order was. And we actually had meetings with the parents to support the present teachers. So they were fired and Spottswood was brought out here. And Tom was kicked out on the grounds that he needed what they didn't have to offer him. They said he should go to the Lawrence School, where each kid had their own psychiatrist to work for them, because he was just too nutty a kid. There's no question in our mind that it had something to do with our—they were angry at us. I mean, here they had given him a scholarship and they had been so nice to even let us around in our condition, and we had been so ungrateful.

CEPLAIR:

It had nothing to do with the blacklist then? The fact that you were blacklisted people didn't affect it at all?

LEVITT:

What was the name of the woman who ran the school at the time, Cedric Belfrage's current wife? She had been married to a murderer.

CEPLAIR:

I don't remember the name. [Mary Bernick]

LEVITT:

Well, she claims that Rebecca and Tom were kicked out because we were blacklisted people. So everybody had a different story. Tom insists he was kicked out because he was such a nut—he liked to think that. And I guess Al thinks it was because of our involvements—I don't know what Al and I disagree with on that. But the people there, some of them were wonderful to us, including Bob Ryan. Bob Ryan said, "How much money do you need?" He said, "I assume you're having trouble." And Al said $1, 500. No one ever did that to us. We borrowed money but we had to ask, except for Bob. That was so touching. Jessica [Ryan] hated us. She was not sympathetic, because we had fought her—the school was her baby, not Bob's. And Ross Cabeen, who was the oil man who hired Al, who was lovely to us, and some of the people whom Al had interviewed who had come to the school were the only people with higher connections who would have us to the house.

CEPLAIR:

Was Rebecca thrown out at the same time Tom was?

LEVITT:

Yeah.

CEPLAIR:

For a similar reason—that it just wasn't the right school for her?

LEVITT:

I don't remember what excuse they gave for throwing Rebecca out. But she had a scholarship, too, I believe.

CEPLAIR:

Now, you would have been involved then, at this time, with both the lawsuit and the *Hollywood Review*, the magazine. Why don't we talk about the *Hollywood Review*.

LEVITT:

Do we know the dates of it?

CEPLAIR:

Yeah, the *Hollywood Review*—the first issue was January 1953, and the last issue was June 1956. There were nine issues that were printed. How did you get involved in that?

LEVITT:

Well, I was in from the beginning. I guess, sitting around, somebody said, "Let's put out a newspaper." And if somebody said, "Let's do it," I would put it together, kind of.

CEPLAIR:

Do you remember who had said it or who was behind it or who thought it would be a good idea?

LEVITT:

No, no. But I know Sylvia Jarrico and I really served as editors. I mean, we were meeting regularly. And Mike [Wilson] was very much involved, and Al was involved. And then we organized a whole committee of non-Hollywood people around us who did the dirty work. Because we had to mail it out ourselves, and we mailed it from my living room. We were doing it on Fredonia, so that indicates that your years are right. So we did everything.

CEPLAIR:

Do you remember why you were doing it? I mean, what was the purpose behind it?

LEVITT:

It just seemed—I don't know. I don't remember the original impulse. Maybe when you get to talk to Sylvia you can ask Sylvia. She may remember. But I just remember doing it—I don't remember starting it. I remember we had some

newspapermen involved, two blacklisted newspapermen who later committed suicide: Darr Smith, who wrote a column for the *Los Angeles Daily News*, and Holly [Hollister] Noble, who was also a journalist. Both committed suicide later. They both were alcoholics. But they became active—they were not in from the beginning. See, we brought more people in as we went along.

CEPLAIR:

What kind of readership did you have? Do you know the extent of your readership?

LEVITT:

Well, we sent it, I think, to college libraries, and I think we had about a thousand subscribers. It was very modest. It was mostly academic-type people.

CEPLAIR:

Did you enjoy doing it?

LEVITT:

I guess so. No more, no less than I've enjoyed everything I've done in my life. I mainly focused on getting the job done. You know, I'm very pragmatic. I'm creative, I guess, but I'm also—it was a very concrete thing to do.

CEPLAIR:

For a historian looking back and reading it, it's a unique journal. Mainly, Sylvia's piece on women as killers is so far ahead of its time in terms of feminist analysis of media. And Michael Wilson's two articles—one especially I remember on war movies, the new type of war movies. I mean, so far above what passed for left-wing criticism in those days. Were you aware then that this was something special or different?

LEVITT:

I took it for granted. Well, you see, Mike was my leader. And if Mike said do it, I would do it, in everything. Mike and I worked together very closely politically in a lot of things. Starting with the blacklist, he and I worked together, and I always liked to work for somebody. I didn't like to be the authority figure. And Mike was my authority figure, really. He's the one I had the closest

relationship to who was in leadership. I worked with him on the blacklist, I worked with him on the *Hollywood Review*, and I worked with him when *Salt of the Earth* came to town here and played in Hollywood. He asked me to work for them. Then I actually took a paid job working for the distribution of the picture. And we worked well together. Well, I work well with almost anybody if I'm convinced that this is something worth doing.

CEPLAIR:

It was my impression that he was one of the very brightest of the Hollywood communists.

LEVITT:

No, I've never thought of myself—I felt that it was a relief in a way to be here, where finally, as different from my childhood, I was not only not the smartest one, I couldn't be—I wasn't in the same class with these women intellectually. I'm talking about the women. The men were all way up there. But even the women, like Sylvia—and Beatrice Buchman was a brilliant physicist. I mean, these were—and Zelma [Wilson] is an architect, you know. Now, Zelma's not very bright, though.

CEPLAIR:

But Michael Wilson was.

LEVITT:

Oh, what a mind. He had a [inaudible] mind like a crap-cutter. You know, he really could cut through. Oh, a razor-sharp mind. And we had a very interesting relationship. We really enjoyed working together, so it was a good relationship.

CEPLAIR:

Was it his idea to launch the lawsuit? Or was that the lawyer's idea?

LEVITT:

I don't know. See, I don't know what was happening in this section of the party. I don't know where these things came from. Mike would say to me, "Let's make a newspaper." If Mike would say it, I'd say, "Okay, I will make a newspaper."

CEPLAIR:

What was your involvement with the lawsuit? Did you do any work for them?

LEVITT:

Yeah, I was one of the people—Al was one of the—

CEPLAIR:

Plaintiffs.

LEVITT:

Plaintiffs. The plaintiffs were chosen in terms of people who have the strongest case, who could prove employment up to, and then no more employment. So he was one of the plaintiffs. And there was a committee, most of whom were not the plaintiffs, who really ran it. But the running of it was for money raising and public relations, not for the lawsuit itself. That the lawyers were doing. So the committee was Trumbo, Adrian Scott, Paul Jarrico, Eddie [Edward] Huebsch, Anne Revere, and myself. We had breakfast meetings regularly at Anne's house or mine, and we were mainly discussing how to raise money and to get up publicity for the case. It was there that I think I got the idea of sending Anne Revere to meet Joe Welch, to send her back there. I knew she would bowl him over and get him for us, because—and everyone just loved the idea except Paul. Paul and I are only beginning to get over our tension about that, because it was a bitter battle. But he felt that we couldn't do that to the lawyers. And our lawyers kicked and screamed. They wouldn't let us do it.

CEPLAIR:

In other words, they thought they were being pushed out?

LEVITT:

Yeah. And they wanted to be up there at the Supreme Court to win the case. They thought they were going to win the case. And I said, "Who needs to take a chance? They might get a settlement, they might just—" At that point, it seemed to us, with our finger on the pulse, that they would have loved to have an excuse to settle. And Joe Welch coming in with that kind of prestige at that time, they could do business with him.

CEPLAIR:

So they just said no, and Anne Revere never went back to talk to him?

LEVITT:

She did!

CEPLAIR:

Oh, she did.

LEVITT:

Yeah, we had him all lined up!

CEPLAIR:

And they said no.

LEVITT:

They wouldn't allow it.

CEPLAIR:

This was the lawyers who said no? Or was it the party leaders?

LEVITT:

It was lawyers. And Paul supported them.

CEPLAIR:

Sometimes I get the impression that after '51 Paul was sort of what John Howard Lawson had been before '51, kind of the unofficial party leader in Hollywood. Is that true?

LEVITT:

Not as far as I knew. Ask him. You see, I really can't judge that. I just knew the people in my own group. I didn't know who was in on the section committee.

CEPLAIR:

So then the suit was dismissed.

LEVITT:

We lost in the lower court, and the Supreme Court wouldn't hear it. It was dismissed on the basis that there had been no blacklist.

CEPLAIR:

Right. So you got no money from it.

LEVITT:

Nothing.

CEPLAIR:

And you were angry about that.

LEVITT:

Disappointed, disappointed. Well, we were covering the personal aspects. Okay, would you like to know what happened on the day we testified in 1951?

CEPLAIR:

Sure.

LEVITT:

That night the radio was on, and all of a sudden there I am testifying on the radio. I was not televised; television didn't start until several days later. Our son is in the room, and he says, "Why is Mommy spelling her name on radio?" So we quickly turned it off, and I don't know what double-talk—but, see, how could we explain to a four-year-old? So he picked up this word "blackblist" that we'd whisper. And he's wondering what's "blackblistered." He was probably six or seven before I found an opportunity to explain the blacklist to him. But that's in one of the books. He came home from school one day and asked why they had been told to close their eyes when they voted for class officers. He didn't understand why they had to put their heads down and not look. So I used that as an opportunity to explain the basis of the secret ballot and the congressional committee and what we had done and that nobody has a right to ask you. And if people know how you—starting from the classroom, if kids knew how you voted, they might be angry with you. It might influence the way you voted. Then I went into what we had done and opposition—and then at a certain point I said, "Oh, God." I said, "Why am I—? You're too young to understand this. But someday you'll understand this and be very proud of

your parents." And he looked at me with these big, serious brown eyes and, "Oh, but I'm so proud of you now." So he understood quite a bit of it. So from then on it was out in the open. And our best friend called that night [the night Levitt testified]—the ones that we had seen every Saturday night previously in Brentwood, that we went [to see] so regularly—and said, "Don't come to the party on Friday night." That was a terrible moment. And it was a major social issue that raged for weeks. Beverly Hills was split and Brentwood was split wide open between people who were outraged at his having done that—he had a basis, because Rosemary Clooney was bringing a reactionary columnist from one of the trades, Jim Hennigan.

CEPLAIR:

Did you lose a lot of friends?

LEVITT:

All our friends.

CEPLAIR:

All your nonparty friends.

LEVITT:

All our nonparty friends. Never heard from them again for years.

CEPLAIR:

I know you're not a bitter or angry person, but weren't you outraged at all then?

LEVITT:

I was lonely, lonely, lonely. It was so sad. We were so lonely. We were invited out maybe once or twice a year. There were two families we had met through Oakwood; one was in the industry and one was not. And they each would invite us to their house for dinner once during the year. There were no Hollywood people there. It was blacklist night when we were invited. A couple of people through the years would invite us, but it was always blacklist night. Another blacklisted couple would be there, period. We were never invited to integrated affairs. Somebody was taking us to something after some exhibit, and suddenly there was hysteria. My God, they discovered Mike [Michael]

Blankfort would be there, and we might not be nice to him. Was it okay with us? And in the hysteria and the calls—so we said we would be nice to Mike Blankfort, because he only named his wife and his cousin.

CEPLAIR:

And committed perjury, I think, but—

LEVITT:

Yes, of course. Thirty-five thousand dollars it cost him.

CEPLAIR:

Really?

LEVITT:

Yeah.

CEPLAIR:

Well, how did you happen to know—? You had said, when we were off, that you knew there was a payoff list of people.

LEVITT:

It was just generally known around town. Because there are no secrets in this town. Everybody knew Martin Gang was the lawyer for all the stool pigeons. You knew the psychiatrist who handled the stool pigeons, psychiatrists who didn't, and everybody knew.

CEPLAIR:

Was it clear that there was a price that the committee would—?

LEVITT:

Well, there were different prices. We knew how much people paid.

CEPLAIR:

What did the price depend on, their earning power?

LEVITT:

I don't remember. I just remember that Michael Blankfort's was only a $35,000 dollar one.

CEPLAIR:

Was that cheap?

LEVITT:

Gee, I don't remember what Sidney Buchman paid, but his wife [Beatrice Buchman] denies it and is furious that in the [Victor] Navasky book [*Naming Names*] it's implied that he did. I think she's sore at me.

CEPLAIR:

Now, in 1956 you not only have the—when and why did you leave the Communist Party? I guess that should be our next—

LEVITT:

Oh, it just disappeared after the Khrushchev letter, the Khrushchev report.

CEPLAIR:

The so-called secret speech.

LEVITT:

Whatever. I mean, the party just disappeared in Hollywood. We didn't leave formally, "We're leaving," because there was no party. It just overnight disappeared.

CEPLAIR:

What was your personal response when you read the speech?

LEVITT:

I really don't remember. I just remember, as I've indicated, my last position in the party. Oh, we did have meetings to discuss it. And I took the position—Herbert Biberman and I took the position—he was in my group. We took the position that the party should disband. Because we felt that we were so discredited in the eyes of the American working class for our slavish acceptance of the Soviet position that there was no function for the Communist Party—this Communist Party in this country. And if the American

workers—I think I've given this before—ever decided they wanted socialism, they would have to find their own way to it. But this group of middle-class intellectuals were not the ones who were going to lead it.

CEPLAIR:

Did you feel embarrassed having supported the Soviet Union?

LEVITT:

No, no, no. But now that I knew, there was no question that the party was finished, and so that was it. But there was always something to do. I was always involved in something. Oh, because that's when Al's career began to pick up, and let's get to—

1.8. TAPE NUMBER: V, SIDE ONE (MARCH 21, 1988)

CEPLAIR:

Okay, Helen is going to go through the income tax returns from 1947 through 1960, giving gross income and the sources of that income.

LEVITT:

Shouldn't we start with '46? Because that's where he [Alfred Levitt] had his first writing assignment was in '46. He was separated from the army in '46, and I see he worked for Columbia [Pictures Industries, Inc.] his first job. And the income for the year from that assignment was $3,336. The following year, in '47, there was a job with RKO [Radio Pictures, Inc.] for $3,499. And here he did a thing with Eddie Albert, the first film on sex education made in this country. He got $750 for it. It was called *Human Growth*, and they're still, I gather, redoing it in different versions on his script. '48—here they begin to break it down, but I don't think that makes much difference. Income as a writer: Metro[-Goldwyn-Mayer, Inc. (MGM)] $9,600; UPA [Productions], $500—

CEPLAIR:

What was UPA?

LEVITT:

It was the cartoon outfit that John Hubley—when they separated out from [Walt] Disney [Productions], they did Mr. Magoo. That was kind of avant-garde, a new approach to animation. And another $250 for Irving Lerner. But it came to $10,433.

CEPLAIR:

Was that writing income or was that—?

LEVITT:

All writing. He was doing nothing but writing for income at that point. Now, in '49 all the income was writing, and it was $17,541. Metro, Universal [Pictures], and Regal Films: these were all screenwriting. I don't think they were—nobody was doing television yet. In 1950 it was all screenwriting, and it came to $13,800. '51—which was only a partial year, because we were blacklisted probably from about April. So it was just three months of '51 before we were blacklisted. So there was $7,500 from MGM, which is where he was working at the time. In 1952, the first full year of blacklist, let's see where the money came from. From the front, who took half the money, he got $5,100. And for a collaboration, in which the collaborator I think actually was a front, there was $1,200. You see, he was in the black market immediately. So his income was $6,460—$6,460, all writing. Now, '53: for CBS [Columbia Broadcasting System, Inc.] he did something under a pseudonym and got $600. Then $1,800—he's still working with that same front. He got $1,800 from him. And he has about six different fronts there, but he's lumped that with his work as a research assistant for somebody who he had met at Oakwood who had nothing to do with the movie business. And also as a photographer. I mean, that started to be—he got about $800 for that. So the total was $4,486. But that was a combination of black market and beginning to do photography. The following year—

CEPLAIR:

That's 1954.

LEVITT:

Yeah. He actually made $1,100 as a photographer. The rest was all writing using fronts, though in CBS—here another $600—he was using a pseudonym. But it all added up to—it's a combination of $1,800 and $1,200. That's $3,054.

CEPLAIR:

Gross income.

LEVITT:

Yeah. In '55, the gross income was $8,300. We don't break it down in terms of the jobs, so I guess we were being very careful. Just writing income. And he made $2,700 as a photographer. So the gross for the year was $8,300.

CEPLAIR:

So that would have been about $4,700 as a writer?

LEVITT:

No, $5,575 as a writer. In '56, the writing income was $4,700 and the photography income was $2,500, making a gross of $7,300. In '57, writing income was—now he was working with a front quite regularly. And he was working in television and was really starting as a television writer under the pseudonym which he was using by '57. That's $7,600 writing, $882 for the photography, and $250 for his songwriting royalties.

CEPLAIR:

So what would be the gross on that? Do you have a total?

LEVITT:

That's $8,700.

CEPLAIR:

So it sounds like he's cutting back on photography as he's doing more writing.

LEVITT:

Right. Right, that meant that's winding down. Now, I think we started working together sometime in '58. And our writing was $11,908. King Brothers, Columbia Broadcasting, Briskin Productions: these are all television. Bachelor Productions—there was "Bachelor Father." Screen Gems—that was "[The]

Donna Reed [Show]." And he was winding up his work with his collaborator and starting to work with me that year. '59 was the year that we were collaborating fully. It's all writing, and the income is $21,459. Now, in '60, the income is $19,878, and that is all writing. Oh, and they've divided the income between the two of us, I guess for tax purposes. Because that's how it comes from the studio. The studio paid us separately.

CEPLAIR:

So that by '59 and '60, the two of you were a going concern again as writers.

LEVITT:

I had never written before.

CEPLAIR:

No. But you were working together, and you were earning about four times as much—almost five times as much—as you had in the mid-fifties.

LEVITT:

Right.

CEPLAIR:

Well, could you say, then, the blacklist was over for you?

LEVITT:

God, no. God, I mean the only way we could function was under a pseudonym. Nobody knew who we were.

CEPLAIR:

Well, we'll talk about that in a minute. So when did the blacklist end for you? When can you say that you were no longer blacklisted in Hollywood?

LEVITT:

It never ended.

CEPLAIR:

Never ended. I mean, you think to this day there's still—

LEVITT:

Oh, no question about it. There are people who are not comfortable working with us, people who have said they will not work with us.

CEPLAIR:

But why is that?

LEVITT:

Guilty stool pigeons who became producers, people who—and the main point is the momentum that is lost. And of course, see, Al was a screenwriter, which is quite different—in those days it was quite different from a television writer. Though he eventually did some screenwriting on a much lower level, in a sense, than where he was, in terms of the kind of assignments he was getting before he was blacklisted. I mean, he had just completed a picture for MGM for Cary Grant and Deborah Kerr, when he was blacklisted. And that was on, what, a four-year career. I mean, he was really a hot young writer whose career really would have exploded in terms—there's no question about that. I mean, it's—I discussed it with [Dalton] Trumbo, who had said Al really was the one who really had it. And among the blacklisted people there was a kind of slight elitism of talent. The guys respected each other on the basis of their talent, and Al was—his talent was always very respected. It was awful for him to go into episodic television under the pseudonym. And my main job was to make it more bearable.

CEPLAIR:

So, in effect, he's really never been a movie screenwriter again.

LEVITT:

Yes, he has written movies. But he lost his momentum as a screenwriter. Because in order to make a living, we've done, as you see, hundreds of episodic—that list I gave you. It lists one show, but we may have done fifteen episodes of that show. And we did pilots. And there was a lot of foot-dragging about giving him a job as a hyphenate. On the very first show we were on, "The Donna Reed Show," certainly it was considered, but people who really were in charge mostly knew who he was but didn't admit it. Elaborate games

were played. But people were afraid to give him the job. The first one who gave him a hyphenate job, interestingly enough, was a stool pigeon.

CEPLAIR:

When you say "hyphenate," you mean writer-producer?

LEVITT:

Yeah. Or story editors—those are hyphenates. But the first hyphenate job we were offered was by a stool pigeon. Annie [Levitt] was still home so I couldn't take studio jobs. So he took the job without me and I wrote scripts at home. I don't remember whether they were just in my own name or whether we collaborated on those. But I didn't take any studio jobs until Annie left, which was in April '73. She was twenty-two. But the—

CEPLAIR:

Well, today you write under your own names, right?

LEVITT:

We haven't written anything since 1981.

CEPLAIR:

But between '60 and '81, could you write under your own names without any problem?

LEVITT:

He started at a certain point putting his own name on screenplay assignments. Not television, but screenplays; he did a few screenplays in his own name. It was very important to him to use his own name. I felt it was questionable from a professional point of view, because we had established a lot of credits under the August name and nobody remembered the Levitt name. And I feel that the confusion of whether he was August or Levitt was not commercially good for us, in terms of who we were. I mean, "That's Al Levitt, who was really Tom August, you know." [tape recorder off] We were talking about what I consider very important. Right! The blacklist, how long it lasted. I just feel that Al's career was crippled; there was no way that he could catch up. He had not been a screenwriter quite long enough. See, Mike [Michael] Wilson and Ring Lardner [Jr.] and Waldo [Salt] and Dalton had had enough opportunity to

establish themselves before the blacklist, so that they were able to really climb back and get really good assignments. He just had from, what, '46 into the beginning of '51. And he had, what, five or six credits in that period. But he hadn't gotten to know enough people and all the interconnections. And the fact that he did as well as he did in the black market was very unusual. Nobody did better than him, except Trumbo, in terms of functioning in the black market, in terms of ease of getting fronts and people willing to work with him. So he was really one of the first ones into the black market. But all the people I mentioned had careers before the war. His was, of those people, a postwar career, and very few of the blacklisted people had started after the war. Because they tended to go for the more important people who already had established careers and big credits. His picture for Cary Grant and Deborah Kerr was not out yet when we were blacklisted. He had just finished the script. So I would never probably have become a writer if not for the blacklist. I would have done something, I don't know what. But why he asked me to collaborate with him I don't know. I guess it was because he liked the idea. And I didn't mind the idea, and it really worked out very well. Because I just learned to do everything that was hard for him, to make it easy for him. He's a perfectionist. I had no ego stake in the writing, because I—see, it's quite different if you have never wanted to be a writer. Never in my life for a moment have I said, "I want to be a writer." So if you don't want to be a writer, you find yourself [saying], "Well, this is what I'm going to do." So you learn how to do it, and you learn to do it well. And if you try hard enough—he was not fast, because the screenwriters—there was no premium in speed; you were on a weekly salary, nobody rushed you. So I was very fast because I was very uncomplicated. I never had a writer's block. If we had an assignment, I could toss out a first draft very fast and let him do whatever he wanted to. Because he finds the second draft is a breeze, because he never had to face the blank page. It just made it much faster.

CEPLAIR:

Okay. Well, I want to talk about that, but there are a few more blacklist questions I wanted to get out of the way.

LEVITT:

Fine.

CEPLAIR:

It's clear to me, listening to the last tape, that you never stopped fighting the blacklist. I mean, you may not realize that, or maybe you were even conscious of it then, but that you were—in the fifties, you were always involved in one activity or another that was fighting the blacklist.

LEVITT:

Well, you can say that until 1988. I have dedicated my life—no, I didn't—see, it wasn't a commitment where I said, "I'm going to do that." But one of the primary activities in my life every day since 1947 has been the blacklist. I've had a very funny kind of role. And I was thinking in terms of the periods of the blacklist. From '51 to '70 was the period of the blacklist where people were functioning in a lot of different ways to make a living. That's where all who were going to work, which was like 10 percent of the people who were named, ever got back their careers on any kind of level at all. So those 10 percent who stayed in Hollywood or connected with the Hollywood industry even though they were abroad, we functioned from '50 to '70. And that was the period when I was doing all this very elegant entertaining just for the blacklisted people. There were dinner parties for sixteen here once or twice every month, starting in 1963. See, '50 was just survival time. And we saw very little of each other because everyone was scattering. So I was just giving farewell parties during the fifties, starting with the one for Waldo Salt the summer of '51. And only blacklisted people were there. And I started giving parties in the fifties, and then I got this incredible housekeeper [Olivia McKinney], purely by accident, who I discovered after I had her was an incredible cook, absolutely incredible. She just felt the challenge, and so she and I just organized these incredible parties. And I just felt that—now that, as you see, our income was at that point going up and up, we could afford it. And when we had this big house [on Stansbury Avenue] in '63, I could seat sixteen people in my dining room. And the menus would just bowl you over. I mean, nobody fusses like that anymore, but Olivia really knew how. She was really competing with Zelma Wilson, who came back from Paris a great gourmet cook. Every time I came home from the Wilsons, Olivia would want to know, "What did Mrs. Wilson make?" It was really a kind of one-upmanship. But I just felt that it was—it was in the early sixties, and my feeling was, "I'm tired of having people feel sorry for us. Let's begin to live more normal lives." And

so the parties I gave were part of that. There were just a few hostesses in the group, Zelma Wilson and the Trumbos, and it was—then in '71 a new period started. People started dying. And that involves a lot of things if you feel as I did. I felt very strongly that people, our people, should end their lives in dignity. So we were there from day one when Adrian [Scott]'s lung cancer was first diagnosed, and we were there watching a ball game the night before his surgery. And it was six months that he was dying. I never saw him, but Al saw him regularly. And we were there—Al got the call when Adrian died, and I got the instructions from Joan [Scott] to take care of the remains. And we spent a week organizing the memorial. Then it wasn't long after that, I think, that Mike had his stroke. It was an embolism following cancer surgery; he had mouth cancer. The mouth-cancer surgery was successful, but the embolism had cause a stroke, and so he was physically impaired. He didn't have the use of his right arm and one leg after that. And so it was agonizing. We saw a lot of him during that period. We had seen a lot of Adrian before he took sick, and it was terrible seeing Adrian's depression, seeing him fade. And then Dalton was given one year to live, with lung cancer. He lasted five, so he was dying for five years. We didn't see much of him, but toward the end he asked to see us, and we had a visit with him. But there was this—it was around the time of the earthquake the housekeeper took sick and retired. I was just so tired then in terms of taking care of my daughter, and in '73 I finally said she had to go. [tape recorder off]

CEPLAIR:

You were saying that in '73 you were getting very tired.

LEVITT:

I was—so our daughter left. But Mike died on our fortieth anniversary in '78. And in between Adrian and Mike there was Dalton. He died before Mike. I can remember each one, you know, who the speaker was at each one. At Adrian's it was Dalton. At Dalton's it was Mike. And at Mike's, that's when Al started giving eulogies, and he's been giving them ever since. But Adrian, Dalton, and Mike had a very special position among the blacklisted people. They were kind of extraordinary men, as human beings and as talents. And having gotten as close to them as we did, which we would not have probably without the blacklist—these were people who were very socially accepted in Hollywood

until they were blacklisted, and then they were just cut out of the community. And so we made a community of our own, and so we were—we both felt very fortunate to have spent these years with those men, but the loss was just extraordinary. You just have no sense of the irreplaceability of human beings until you really start losing them. Somehow or other, when people are alive, you have the sense—you accept your own mortality, but the fact that they're not going to be there is harder to accept. So that started a sad period.

CEPLAIR:

When you were having these parties, did you ever invite nonblacklisted people to them or—?

LEVITT:

Occasionally somebody would. For some reason there would be a nonblacklisted person, toward the end. But they were blacklisted-people parties. There would be one or two who had special relationships, but not in the early years. As time went on, occasionally there would be a nonblacklisted person. But they were basically blacklisted parties. And also non-Hollywood people. There was a doctor, there were lawyers, you know, who were kind to blacklisted people.

CEPLAIR:

Well, so '53, '54 must have been terribly lonely in another way, because wasn't that when everyone started to go to France or to Mexico?

LEVITT:

Well, the Barzmans [Ben and Norma] left in '49.

CEPLAIR:

Yeah, But the Wilsons and the Jarricos [Paul and Sylvia] left in what, the mid-fifties?

LEVITT:

Mid-fifties.

CEPLAIR:

And the Trumbos?

LEVITT:

Well, we really hadn't gotten to know the Trumbos yet.

CEPLAIR:

And Adrian Scott went to England.

LEVITT:

Yeah.

CEPLAIR:

So you must have been feeling increasingly isolated from the Hollywood community, but then increasingly sort of alone among the blacklisted.

LEVITT:

Oh, as I look back, that was the toughest thing. The loneliness was simply dreadful.

CEPLAIR:

Did you ever think of emigrating? Was that ever a consideration?

LEVITT:

I never considered it. Al says that we did, but for me it never—in terms of our daughter, to take her to a place where they couldn't speak English—she was having a hard enough time understanding English. But coping with the special problems of a retarded child in a foreign country seemed like a nightmare possibility. And of course Al started working in the black market. And I had big problems about traveling, particularly about planes. Just the prospect of facing a move to Europe was—I never seriously considered it. And I didn't like the idea of fleeing. See, some people fled. They fled to avoid service of subpoenas. Some people fled. And I really felt that this—I had no impulse to flee. We were going to work it out here. And so what we did in North Hollywood was we really hid the children, we hid ourselves. The people on the street did not know who we were. We passed Al off as a photographer. By the time we moved to La Maida [Street], he was starting to collaborate and use the name Tom August. And it was there that—we moved there about '56 I guess. By '58 I was collaborating with him. Nobody knew we had any Hollywood connection.

Because of the age of the children, I was anxious to give the children a community life. Tom [Thomas A. Levitt] had been expelled from Oakwood [School] and was going to the public schools. We got what was, for us, very good professional advice to send Tom to the public schools. And he says that he was really there in the right place for a gifted child. At the age of—I don't remember the year, but he said at Colfax [Avenue Elementary] School and Walter Reed [Junior High School], I guess in North Hollywood, they were discovering the gifted child. They'd have special teachers come in with special books for him on silver platters, and he was really—he said he really got a great education there. So that worked out pretty well. But I developed a social life for Annie on the street with the children who were younger than her, which was very successful. And the way I did it—these were really very lower-class white people on the street. Al described one family—he said, "That's white trash." You see, he was explaining to me. Because if the dog bit him, the first thing they said, "You can't sue us." [laughter] Because we were Jewish we would sue them, right? We didn't hide the fact that we were Jewish. So we passed Al off as a photographer. And so that really was hiding the children. Somebody, I think a friend of somebody, found out toward the end when it wasn't quite as urgent. But we had party meetings in our house. That's when people came to see us. And toward the end of our stay there—we left there in '63 to move here—I'd started entertaining without help. I started to have dinner parties with blacklisted people, and we were making enough money to be able to afford to think about having people over.

CEPLAIR:

Sort of a normal life.

LEVITT:

Yeah, but they were all blacklisted. They were all blacklisted or close to blacklisted. There were a few people who were not blacklisted, who were "graylisted" or friends of blacklisted people. I guess La Maida somehow or other wasn't as lonely. I had improvised a lot of things. I had developed a relationship with the mothers of the retarded children at Lankershim School, where Annie went from the time she was six. And I organized the mothers so that once a week we would have lunch at a different mother's house, and the younger siblings would be included with the retarded. That was very

successful, because the mothers would sit around and talk, which was incredible therapy for those women, who really were coping with retarded children at a time when they were just beginning to come out of the closet. And it was great for the kids. And also, I organized a kind of play school with the neighborhood kids, the kids who were younger than her. That lasted for a couple of years. Once a week different mothers would take them. Just two other mothers. Each one of them had one or two kids, and each mother would do something different with them. One would take them to the park, one would bake with them, and I would have all kinds of educational toys in the big backyard. So there were beginning to be people around. It wasn't quite as isolated as it had been before, up in the hills. See, we came down from the hills so that Tom could get on a bicycle and so there could be a neighborhood life. But we were invited to dinner maybe twice a year by the Friedmans and the Marcuses. Each one had us over once for blacklist night. Nobody was ever invited who wasn't blacklisted when we were invited. But I didn't think about it that much, because at that point things were getting better. See, suddenly, in '56, we moved to La Maida. For the first time there was hope that we would just survive. And I remember for two years, when Annie was going to school for three hours a day, from nine to twelve, that was one of the happiest periods of my life. I had no help, which I'm usually—most of the time in my life I've had help. But Annie would be gone for three hours a day, and I would turn—we used to get Capitol Records [Inc.] samplers, a sample of all the new releases on a big record, with a lot of [Frank] Sinatra. And I would put on a record, and each day I would clean a different room from top to bottom. Our house has never been as clean. But I'd never done that before. And it seemed wonderful to do, because it was kind of a nice, clean house, newly painted, a nice little [San Fernando] Valley house in North Hollywood. And then at twelve o'clock I would pick up Annie at school and see all the other mothers take Annie marketing with me—she would sit in the basket—and go home and cook the dinner. And we had television by then—we got television late. It was a great two years. And then in '58 she started going until three o'clock, and that's when I started working with Al.

CEPLAIR:

You had said that you had done some work for Salt of the Earth.

LEVITT:

Yeah.

CEPLAIR:

Could you tell me about that?

LEVITT:

I don't remember exactly the year, but it must have been around '54 or '55 at the latest. Salt of the Earth was—an attempt was made to show it in town here. And they rented a theater on Hollywood Boulevard just east of Vine [Street], a little movie theater—I don't remember the name of it. It was about, I think, maybe a little past the Pantages [Theatre]. And then Mike Wilson asked me if I would work for them for a salary. So I hired a housekeeper to take care of Annie, because Annie was not in school yet. And so it was before '56, because Annie was born in '50. So it had to be '54 or '55. And there was an office above the theater. There were two other people in the office and me, and we were in charge of the exhibition of the picture in terms of promoting it. And it was a rough, tough job. Because the Hispanics weren't going to come over to Hollywood to see a movie, from the east side. And we were picketed by the American Legion. We did a lot of promotional work with the leaders of the Hispanic community, who loved the picture, but it was not a very successful operation in terms of getting many people to see that picture.

CEPLAIR:

Was there thought about trying to rent a theater in Boyle Heights or on the east side?

LEVITT:

No. It was hard enough to get that theater.

CEPLAIR:

But the film itself was an important event for blacklisted people, wasn't it?

LEVITT:

Oh, yeah, we all cared about it passionately. I mean, I've seen that—you know, I saw that picture so often. Every time we showed it for a different group, I would sit through the whole picture again and cry every time at the right time.

No, I thought it was an incredible thing they pulled off. I thought Mike had done an extraordinary job on that script.

CEPLAIR:

That almost sounds as if you didn't think that the movie itself was as good as the script.

LEVITT:

Oh, no. See, I was very close to what was going on when they were out there producing it. I knew the threats and the violence and the terror surrounding that whole operation and what they went through to pull it off. And Paul Jarrico, who produced it, is an extraordinary—I mean, he is unstoppable. If he says he's going to do it, he will do it. He's the one who I think probably had a lot to do with making it happen and just getting the money together. Of course Herbert [Biberman] probably had a lot to do about that. Well, Herbert was quite a powerhouse and quite a determined man, and I don't fault his direction at all. But I loved it and I loved working for it. But it was disappointing that we really couldn't pull it off. I know Mike Wilson and I went to the east side one night when [Edward R.] Roybal was running to meet with various people in the Hispanic community. And it ended up, you know, three o'clock in the morning addressing envelopes for Roybal at his headquarters and doing all kinds of goodwill work. But the people didn't come. I had them change the ad campaign, which I thought was too somber, to something lighter, but even that didn't do it. And it was later that I realized what the big mistake was, which nobody ever discussed at the time. And that is that the Hispanics just don't come to Hollywood just to see a movie! It's not where they feel comfortable. And it's really a long way.

CEPLAIR:

And white audiences just weren't interested?

LEVITT:

No.

CEPLAIR:

Because of the stigma attached to it?

LEVITT:

Well, whatever. I mean, all we had were little ads. We couldn't afford any kind of PR [public relations]. We got no free press notice at all. We were lucky they would take our paid ads! So—but I did give up smoking. That is one of the reasons I'm able to celebrate a fiftieth anniversary.

CEPLAIR:

You also said you worked for John Cogley during that period, to some degree.

LEVITT:

Well, yeah. That was not a job. Betty [Elizabeth Poe] Kerby was one of the two researchers on the Cogley book [*Report on Blacklisting*]. Betty Kerby was a *Life* reporter and a researcher. And she came to me and asked me if I would help her to identify the blacklisted people, go over the list. Because she's very thorough. So together we made lists, which I still have here. I have the list in which she didn't know who the people were. So I told her. We divided them into writers, producers, directors, and I told her who they were, whether they were alive, where they were. And that was really my function. I worked with her on the lists. I don't think I was more than that. But it was kind of tedious. She went through all the transcripts and made a list of everyone that was named up to that point. So I have the lists, and she still has all her research, which it's going to be very hard to separate her from because she says she promised all the people that she would never let anybody see it.

CEPLAIR:

I know Cogley burned all his, he said, because he was so afraid he was going to get subpoenaed for it. To stop himself from ever having the temptation to turn it over he just burned it all.

LEVITT:

Oh, but see Betty has it all. And she is very rigid about it. She is never going to let anybody see it.

CEPLAIR:

Well, did the Cogley report make a difference at all? It came out in 1956.

LEVITT:

I don't think so, no. I don't think so. Trumbo single-handedly, really, broke—

CEPLAIR:

Well, that was going to be my next question.

LEVITT:

Yeah, he broke the blacklist.

CEPLAIR:

Now, Michael Wilson seems to have been working with the suit [*Wilson v. Loew's*] and with other things before he left for France, fighting the blacklist. Was Trumbo consciously trying to break it? Or was he just a single screenwriter trying to break through?

LEVITT:

Oh, no, he was trying to break it for everybody. In fact, that speech that he made at the Writers Guild [of America], at the Laurel Award thing, where he said there were only victims, was an extraordinarily self-sacrificing gesture on his part. It was an effort to make it easier for other blacklisted people to work by trying to give them a feeling that we're not angry any more. So they'd be more comfortable with us. His family begged him not to say that, because they knew he would take a beating from black-listed people, as he did. But he always was thinking of the overall thing. Now, see, the [Hollywood] Ten couldn't be in our suit, because the Ten all had separate suits which they had settled beforehand. So there were no Ten people in our suit. So, actually, Trumbo was more involved in our suit than Mike, because Mike was already in Europe. Trumbo was here, and Trumbo was on the committee that was handling the public relations and the money raising for the lawsuit. So he was incredible. And when he made his Laurel Award speech, he included the reference to Bob Meltzer, who was named in the hearings. He was the only Writers Guild member, I believe, who was killed in World War II. The Laurel Award was originally the Bob Meltzer Award, and during the blacklist they changed it. And nobody will admit that—it's nobody's memory but ours. So Trumbo went to a great deal of trouble. And I helped him locate Meltzer's daughter, whom Meltzer had never seen, and invited her to be his guest at the

dinner. And he made some mention of the fact that the Laurel Award had been the Bob Meltzer Award.

CEPLAIR:

When or how did Trumbo discover that manipulating the pseudonyms was a way to begin to show up the whole absurdity of it? Did he just happen on that accidentally, or did he know that that was a lever?

LEVITT:

I don't know, I don't know. I have no knowledge of that. I just know—well, it was just great sport among other things.

CEPLAIR:

Sure.

LEVITT:

And of course they couldn't find him, you know. Why not use a different one on each one?

CEPLAIR:

And then spread rumors about who it was?

LEVITT:

Right. And he would never deny it when people would attribute other people's pictures to him. He would neither affirm it nor deny. But he was—god, what a mind. And such sweetness. He always used to ask for our daughter. And one night there was a New Year's Eve party at his house. Our son was probably a college boy by then, and Tom had brought his first girlfriend as a date for the New Year's Eve party at the Trumbos. And Trumbo took Tom and his date back to his study and really spent time with them. He gave them each an autographed copy of *Johnny* [*Got His Gun*], which was kind of typical of the kind of quiet little thoughtful things that he did.

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CEPLAIR:

Could you sum up the blacklist experience, then, its pros, its cons?

LEVITT:

I can't think of any pros! [laughter] Well, the human relations that develop in that stressful situation can be—in our case were—quite extraordinary. Because these were extraordinary people. And we developed extraordinarily close and unselfish relationships. The degree of helping each other—now, when Mike had his stroke, he felt he needed a collaborator. And everybody volunteered. Although nobody particularly wanted collaborators, he could have had anybody. And he chose Al. It was not easy for Al, because it meant commuting to Ojai, and it really sidetracked his own career. But there was just never any question about people wanting to help.

CEPLAIR:

Did you discover qualities in yourself that you didn't know you had before?

LEVITT:

No.

CEPLAIR:

You don't think it tested you in any new—

LEVITT:

No, I have no sense of that. The blacklist was just part of the difficulty of my life. Just being a writer in this community, or a writer's wife, involves always terrible economic insecurity. The blacklist just made that insecurity more insecure. And to me, that is just so awful. The fact that at this point we don't have to worry about money is such an incredible weight off me, I realize. I didn't realize the weight until it was removed. But the constant concern, no matter how well you're doing—when you finish a job you just don't know where the next money's coming from. If you went through all our returns, you'd find that even after a few good years suddenly you have some very lean years for reasons totally out of your control: luck, timing, whatever. Bum raps every writer takes. So I think it's a very tough way to make a living. This community is very difficult when you've got everything going for you. Having one hand tied behind your back—and of course I was sick all my life. I had these terrible migraines. I had a terrible—I think I thought it was a nervous stomach. I was nauseated most of my life. I discovered only a couple of years

ago that I'm allergic to milk products. So I was really half sick, and I was dragging myself around half asleep. I always needed eight hours' sleep. I never got them. My kids didn't sleep through the night for twelve years. They were the sleepless wonders of the world! So I was always tired, always harassed, always getting over or about to get a headache. When I finally started seeing a psychologist about the kids, he just asked a little bit about me and he said, "It's impossible that you have done what you have done in your life." I had no sense of doing much ever. I never felt good about myself particularly; I never felt self-satisfied or pleased with myself. I just was always focused on what I had to do. And I lacked a certain lightness and sense of fun, which I developed only recently. [tape recorder off]

CEPLAIR:

What did you think when a bunch of writers started coming around, I guess sometime in the sixties, to start interviewing you with somewhat of a friendly manner? That they were no longer thinking that you were pariahs.

LEVITT:

Oh, it was thrilling, thrilling. Well, the whole thing with the kids, you know—our son coming back with these stories about the blacklist people being treated with respect on campus. When Page Smith called him in when he won in a piaywriting contest in his freshman year at [University of California] Santa Cruz—he incorporated blacklist material about the family, and Page Smith asked him if he had had firsthand experience with the blacklist. And when he said that his parents were blacklisted, Page Smith said, "Oh, I know somebody who's blacklisted: Harold Hecht," naming a stool pigeon.

CEPLAIR:

Well, it's funny, because, you know, we talked about the fact that you weren't bitter about this. It's interesting that it's the informers who are bitter these days, whereas most of the blacklisted people seem—you know, it was something that they went through because they were political. They understood what was causing it, they survived it—preferred not to have gone through it—and their life just went on. But it seems that the informers now are feeling an extraordinary amount of bitterness and anger.

LEVITT:

What are they bitter about?

CEPLAIR:

That the tide has turned against them.

LEVITT:

Oh.

CEPLAIR:

You know, people are now not sort of saying, "You're great patriots." They're saying, "Well, you were sort of swinish about the whole thing." And they're very defensive and not eager to talk anymore.

LEVITT:

That's interesting.

CEPLAIR:

It's interesting how the tide turns, sometimes.

LEVITT:

Well, for a while we were really in fashion. I felt that I was being invited to certain places as the token blacklisted person by these young kids who were all talking about making documentaries that they never made. We were very cavalier with our time. We would spend hours with these kids, and we thought it was just great fun. But at a certain point I got tired of it. Now, after the [Victor] Navasky interview, I said, "Never again." Because that boomeranged. He did a piece for the *New York Times*—

CEPLAIR:

New York Times Magazine, yeah.

LEVITT:

I don't know if I told you this, but—I was picketing in the strike of '73. Al had to go to New York for a week for his mother's funeral, and the article came out that week. So Al calls me from New York. He says, "Everybody in New York is talking about what an ass you made of yourself in that article." And I read it, and I said—you know, Trumbo and I made the same point about talking to

stool pigeons. It was the first time people publicly said, "Yes, we talk to stool pigeons now. We're not mad at them anymore." This was Trumbo's position, which I agreed with, in terms of normalization of our lives in this community. In the period when we were really snubbing them, we were making everybody terribly uncomfortable. And Trumbo and I said the same thing, but he made it seem elegant and I made it seem tacky. But, you see, there's a skill in being interviewed, which Trumbo had developed, which I was not about to try to learn. And of course I gave Navasky his whole book [*Naming Names*]. He just got lucky in that I opened the door instead of Al. Al was back there, so he started to talk to me. And I was very vulnerable, because Adrian had just died and I was devastated. I just talked, and he found the approach to his book in that conversation. It's all there. And I didn't realize it until he autographed my book and indicated in the note that I really gave it to him. Which is fine, because I think his book is very good. It makes some interesting points. You are not so lucky in getting to talk to me, because I found it very stressful, and I still don't talk to people. I have refused television interviews. I refused to be in the [Judy] Chaikin picture [*Legacy of the Hollywood Blacklist*]. I mean, it's stressful for me. You have made it painless. And the fact that I know it's not for publication does make a difference.

CEPLAIR:

Yeah, I'm sure it does. Do you feel now that blacklisted people have been dealt with fairly by historians? I mean, do you think that a balance has been reached? Or do you think there's still more to it?

LEVITT:

Well, I don't know. You know, I read your book [*The Inquisition in Hollywood*] when it first came out. What year was it?

CEPLAIR:

'Eighty-one.

LEVITT:

'Eighty-one. And I know there were things in it that I didn't agree with, although I still think it's the best and fairest book so far. I don't know. I really

can't answer that question. I know that books have come out that I've read hastily which I haven't liked at all. I don't know. I really don't know.

CEPLAIR:

Well, do you have anything more you want to say about any of the topics we've discussed? The blacklist or your politics.

LEVITT:

Well, are we on point four, "impact of the blacklist?" Is that what we're really discussing? "Professionally, politically, personally, relationship to the community?" We really have been potshotting all those subjects. Of course I became a writer because of the blacklist. And it wasn't a bad thing for me to be Al's collaborator. That part of our life has worked quite well.

CEPLAIR:

Why don't we talk about that, talk about what it's like to collaborate and how it started. You've talked a little about how it started. But that must have been—you had never considered being a writer.

LEVITT:

No, I didn't want to be.

CEPLAIR:

And then one day he said, "Let's collaborate?"

LEVITT:

He said, "How would you like to collaborate with me?" But he insisted that we were making official what had always been a part of our relationship. It's true he always showed me his work. I always had opinions, I always made suggestions. And I had enormous respect for him as a writer as well as a person. Part of our relationship had always been based on my respect for his talent. And I had this kind of attitude toward my life, that I was perfectly happy making it possible for talented people to do their creative work. This was true in the Actors Lab. I did all the administrative work so all these marvelous actors could get up on the stage and do these marvelous things that their talent enabled them to do. Never aspiring or wanting to do that myself, but being very happy doing what I was doing. So anything that would

make it easier for Al to write seemed wonderful to me. And so I approached the collaboration in terms of making it easier for Al to do what he did and wanted to do. If turning out a first draft quickly made it less painful, particularly because of—I knew how at that point nobody went into television voluntarily. Only the screenwriters who could not make a living as a screenwriter were going into television. It was very painful. The conditions at work were dreadful for serious writers. But I didn't mind it at all. See, people used to say to me, "How do you like being a writer?" People think that writing is something wonderful. I never thought that. And I would say, perfectly honestly, "It beats scrubbing floors." That literally was what it meant in my life. Because those three years, from '56 to '58, I was scrubbing floors. I didn't mind scrubbing floors under those conditions, in that nice, clean little house. And collaborating with Al was kind of a challenge, and particularly the shows we worked on at first, "[The] Donna Reed [Show]," and "Father Knows Best," which I felt very comfortable with. I mean, the transition from the kitchen was a very short step, from my kitchen to Donna Reed's kitchen. I would go down on the set and I would see the sink really worked, and I supplied what I felt were realistic details, which I felt were missing from family situation comedies. I felt when you go into a kitchen, you don't just stand around and talk. Somebody is doing something. And I became aware of production things: you don't have them cooking up a dinner on the stove, but you can wash salad greens, you can put groceries away. And I thought in those terms. The first few years I said very little in the story conferences. I focused on my appearance. I had a friend, Jerry Fielding's wife at the time [Anne Fielding], who shopped with me? I hadn't bought clothes in seven years. I had bought no clothes in seven years. Fashions had come and gone, and I hadn't even noticed. It was the era of petticoats, and I didn't own a petticoat. [laughter] Anne Fielding really knew about clothes, so she just took me by the hand and we went off to Saks [Fifth Avenue] and [I.] Magnin's [and Company] and Bullock's Wilshire. And I probably was the best-dressed writer in town, certainly. But there were very few women writers. I also felt that the men did not like women writers. They were not used to us. And I would help them—see, I had a sense of responsibility to other women writers, because I knew about the prejudice, particularly among the comedy writers. They said, "We can't talk dirty in front of the women." They had all kinds of excuses for not having women. The fact that I came in as a married woman, with my husband, immediately made me

more acceptable. And Anne and I dressed me in a way that those men would be comfortable with, the way women in their circle dressed. That's why I went to Saks, Magnin's, and Bullock's Wilshire. And I dressed comfortably, ladylike, but good, good clothes which gave me a sense of security. So I was very careful about that and spent an obscene amount of money on my clothes, which Al never questioned because I was taking care of the books then. I took the notes at the conferences. Al always pitched the premises. I never pitched premises at the beginning, and I would really pay attention. And in the course of the conference, usually there would be a point when people were kind of stuck. But I'd really been listening to what everybody was saying, and so at some point I would contribute something really thoughtful that indicated that I really was there. That was not staged or planned, but that's the way it kind of developed at the beginning where I began to develop confidence in my ability to talk. So even by the time we got to [Walt] Disney [Productions], which probably was about '61, I was pretty cocky. I mean, I really participated in the conferences with Disney. I think Disney really liked me, because—he probably liked me more than Al, because he was kind of an old-fashioned guy who would like women more.

CEPLAIR:

But you were the Augusts at this—?

LEVITT:

Always.

CEPLAIR:

Always the Augusts.

LEVITT:

Always. I never have been anything but Helen August.

CEPLAIR:

When you were dealing with "Donna Reed" or "Father Knows Best," I assume that the key thing was just to get the script written, that putting in sort of substantive content was not high on your—

LEVITT:

Not true, not true!

CEPLAIR:

Not true?

LEVITT:

On "Donna Reed" we thought about it, and it occurred to us that we probably could get away with an interracial marriage with an Asian. See, it had never been done on situation comedy. So we came in with a suggestion, a very good story, which had both an interracial marriage with an Asian woman, but a feminist thing. Donna Reed thinks that the women are prejudiced against her because she's Asian, but it turns out the women resent the fact that she's so servile to her husband. So it would be two birds with one stone. The producer was nervous—he called the network to get an approval. And he got an approval. And they launched a television career for a Japanese actress, who later appeared in "The Courtship of Eddie's Father." I forget her name, a very good actress. So we were always trying. I mean, in "Bewitched" we did a thing about going back to the first Thanksgiving. And we have, because of his—I don't know whether you remember the show—

CEPLAIR:

I do.

LEVITT:

Because Darren is not a witch, he's totally out of sync with the other people. So he's tried as a witch. But we had a very political speech at the end, which disappeared when we saw it. It wasn't until years later that I realized, "Jesus Christ! Why was that speech cut out?" They claimed it was for length, but I really thought—Elizabeth Montgomery was Robert Montgomery's daughter! [laughter] So that we fooled nobody. The producer was her husband [William Asher]. But, no, we never stopped trying.

CEPLAIR:

I'm surprised you didn't send Donna Reed or Betty Anderson [from "Father Knows Best"] out to work at some point.

LEVITT:

No, I was not a feminist in that way at all. I liked to work and I looked down on housewives, but I was not a militant feminist. It wasn't until "The Brady Bunch," which is considerably later, that—I remember the story conference. We were sitting around with the guys, and someone suggested the old chestnut about the girl is interested in a boy and her mother is giving her advice. And she says, "Let him beat you at tennis." This comes up in a conversation, and I say, "Fellows, we can't do that anymore." I had a sense of timing that this was over. And they didn't argue. And I didn't do it hostilely. I didn't say, "You can't do that," which I think is counterproductive. Because I've used what intelligence I have, I guess, kind of carefully, with a sense of what I'm trying to accomplish—not in terms of satisfying some ego need to take a position, but in terms of getting it done. Which might be considered politically opportunistic, rather than—I'm not militant for the sake of being militant.

CEPLAIR:

So you didn't mind working on shows that had the woman simply as a housewife.

LEVITT:

Well, but in the fifties, the women were housewives! See, one of the things that I claim, which is not a popular position—because there were very important women screenwriters in the thirties and forties. And the women disappeared in the fifties because after World War II—I, who had never wanted children, I was caught up in that wave of "the boys coming home and, God, wanting to have a family. And it was just in the air. In other words, women were just rushing back into the home voluntarily! We weren't being pushed back—it was just in the air! All those petticoats and fluffy skirts and Pepsi, and it was endemic. Women were really—it was a kind of emotional reaction to the war years. I mean, a lot of the women stayed in the factories, but a lot of the women didn't. A lot of the women were delighted. I mean, toward the end of my time at the Lab, I said, "Oh, God, I don't want to work. I want a little cottage with rose-colored trellises and babies." I really wanted that for the first time in my life. Because when he went away, I said, "My God, what if he doesn't come back? I would have wanted to have his child." That was my first positive feeling about having children. I always felt that he

wanted children and I didn't. Now he says if he had it to do over again, he would not have children. I say I wouldn't have missed it for anything.

CEPLAIR:

Have you ever gone back to look at some of the old shows that you wrote for "Father Knows Best" or "Donna Reed"?

LEVITT:

Oh, God. No.

CEPLAIR:

What do you think your reaction would be to that?

LEVITT:

I don't know. [laughter] I know that when they were on the first time, I used to try to get Al not to watch them. It was always so painful. What you write and what gets on the screen, it loses so much in the translation. I mean, it always has been disappointing. Always has been disappointing.

CEPLAIR:

Is television worse than movies in terms of—? Of course, television's a weekly thing. Movies are more every month or year.

LEVITT:

I think the best experience he had was "Mrs. Mike." But, see, he was on location with the company—we were on location with "Mrs. Mike." So some of the stuff, really, got left in, and he was right there to fix it. And he was in on the conferences every night. He was writing one day ahead of the camera, they were in such trouble. So he was really involved in the process, which makes a tremendous difference. And this is what the writers are fighting for.

CEPLAIR:

So did you find writing satisfying? Or was it just another job?

LEVITT:

It's just another job, but it's not a job I dislike. I've never felt about anything that it's just another job. Every job is a challenge. I mean, the only jobs I have

really failed at have been as a saleswoman. I had a selling job when I was in college at Abraham and Strauss in Brooklyn. And I had a selling job out here, in the early years, at a Beverly Hills accessory store [Accessories Limited]. I was fired because I didn't believe in the merchandise. I cannot sell clothing. I cannot sell anything in a store. I don't believe in the merchandise. I was selling drapery fabrics in the Abraham and Strauss and hosiery in the basement, and I was a disaster. I couldn't be a waitress. I couldn't remember anything; I'm not handy enough. But almost every job I've had has been a kind of challenge. I've never disliked a job. I liked working for [John] Garfield. I liked working for the Actors Lab. I liked working for Salt of the Earth. I liked writing. I can't say I loved any of these things, because I don't have a passion to do something like some people do. But that's fine. For me it's been fine. When we start an assignment, any assignment, there's a euphoria, because you think something good is going to come out of it. Nothing ever does, but you kid yourself every time. In the end, it turns out to be a terrible disappointment, but you just don't dwell on it: you just go on to the next one.

CEPLAIR:

Do you consider yourself Al's equal, these days, as a writer?

LEVITT:

No, not as a writer. He's let me do very little writing. I'll do rough first drafts. But I've developed a technique to work with him when we've really been under pressure. When we were in the Bahamas—when he was producing a show that was in terrible trouble about a sea lion, we had this wonderful nine-week location, in '74. I really needed to get away from here, and being in the Bahamas for nine weeks on location was wonderful for me. The deal was he was co-producer and I could write as many scripts as I wanted. And here was this show in disastrous trouble, shooting already. The whole company was living in an old hotel that they had taken over and built a soundstage in. And he was working seven days a week.

CEPLAIR:

What was the name of the show?

LEVITT:

"Salty." Salty was the star. He was a sea lion. So I got there, [laughter] and ABC, which was doing the show, had taken one look at the first scripts and the first footage and said, "No way are we going to put this on the air." See, there were no Hollywood people there, so [Twentieth-Century] Fox [Film Corporation], who was involved, said, "Get some Hollywood people there." So they offered us an incredible deal, in terms of money and two suites in the hotel and a per diem for both of us. And when we got there, they told us to bring some writers, [which] we did. When I arrived, they said, "You write the pilot." I didn't even know what it was about. They had no footage, they had no scripts, because the scripts had all been thrown out. [laughter] I didn't know what it was about. So I just went around, asked questions, looked at the dailies, and I made up a pilot. And I developed a technique where it was a form where I laid everything out, some of it in teleplay, some of it in narration, every move. And on the basis of that, Al could do a teleplay in two days, what ordinarily would take two weeks.

CEPLAIR:

So you don't do dialogue. He does dialogue.

LEVITT:

I do.

CEPLAIR:

Oh, you do.

LEVITT:

I do, but he rewrites every word that I write in dialogue usually. Yeah, he really has to make it his own.

CEPLAIR:

And that's never bothered you?

LEVITT:

Not really, not really. But, you know, I kind of underestimated the importance of what I did. I've discovered that—for instance, soap operas, those are the writers that get paid the big money, who really make up the stories and lay it out in great detail. We did a pilot for Aaron Spelling where we had—it was for

a show that was going to run five days a week. It was going to be a combination of a running soap story plus an anthology. Kind of "[The] Love Boat," but not quite as funny, with a serious soap story running through about a hotel. It eventually became "Hotel," I guess. It was an incredible job. We did three five-hour pilots. And I had a whole board with little cards that I did. I laid the whole thing out, developed all the stories and the interrelationships. They needed one good strong story—I made it up. And he just sat there and just—he made it work.

CEPLAIR:

Do you write together, or do you do yours and then you—?

LEVITT:

We never work together.

CEPLAIR:

And then he takes it?

LEVITT:

I can't write together. I have to be alone, I have to be quiet. He doesn't mind interruptions, noise, but I have to—when we are at the studio, we each have a separate office, and the secretaries have a separate office. It takes three offices to occupy us. We had that setup on "[The] Bionic Woman," where we were both story editors. That was my first hyphenate job. It was tough, [laughter] because "Bionic Woman" was not my cup of tea, but I quickly learned the rules of the game. And I discovered I was very good as a story editor, in terms of story conferences, and this is what I use in my teaching.

CEPLAIR:

So you have a strong sense of structure, it seems.

LEVITT:

Oh, yeah. I'm a very good story editor, even though I have not done it much for money. But I've done a lot of it with my students. I'm sure I've told you about my teaching.

CEPLAIR:

Well, we'll get to that.

LEVITT:

Yeah.

CEPLAIR:

So if you and Al have a—if it comes down to it, do you ever have disputes over scripts?

LEVITT:

Well, yes. And we always do it his way. [laughter] One historic one I remember when he took the first hyphenate job without me on "The Ghost and Mrs. Muir." And I was to write as many scripts as I wanted. So I did a script, and this was early on, where they were really—did you ever see that show?

CEPLAIR:

Yes.

LEVITT:

I was somewhat in disagreement, very strong disagreement, with the guys who were running the show. They were really doing it—I felt they did not appreciate the potential in terms of interest from the mothers, who you want to watch with the kids. See, I felt that they would—from my own experience with Annie, there are shows which the kids watch alone, like "Gilligan's Island." Mothers are not going to sit through that. Mothers like me aren't. But there are other shows where there are certain human values that a mother will sit through, like "Donna Reed" or "That Girl," which we wrote for a few years. I felt that that love story between the ghost and Mrs. Muir was potentially a very useful part of the story, and they did not appreciate the value of that. So, in my story, which was about the dog didn't like the ghost—and the kids told me that dogs are very good judges of character. And I had a lovely, sentimental, touching scene between the boy and the mother, where the mother's feeling for the ghost kind of comes out. I did eleven versions of that outline before I gave in and accepted the fact that there was no way that that scene was going to go. [laughter] But that was unusual, because I don't—the main thing that happens with us used to happen where I was particularly helpful. There would come a point—I was very good at premises. Because I

worked very hard. Because the guys kind of liked to do—"Let's do that old thing" that they've done before. "We'll do it a little differently." But I love to do something that's never been done before. And I've come up with some marvelous premises. But I go to life. I remember when I met one of the producers of "All in the Family," he said that ours was one of the best comedy premises that he had ever, ever been exposed to. And it was mine. That was the one where Edith [Bunker] hits a car with a shopping cart and leaves a note, "I did it." And Archie [Bunker] is ready to kill her. It was based on a thing with our son. He had hit a car, and he left a note and knocked on doors to try to find the person who he had done it to, [laughter] So I became very good at premises by working very hard at it. And I found that was more fun to work on something that had never been done before than rehashing the same old tired sitcom premises. And I used to argue with him about that. But if I would come up with a good enough one—he kind of got used to letting me do a lot of premises. And I came up with some pretty good ones. Then there would come a point in most assignments where we'd come up against a little problem. We were into the screenplay, halfway through, and he'd say, "It can't be done. Let's give them back the money. We can't do it." And I would just panic, because we always needed the money desperately. We never were five thousand dollars ahead in our entire life until now. I would really believe that he meant it. So I said, "Let me try to solve it." So ten minutes later I would be back with two or three alternate solutions which would solve it. But it was like a ritual that he had to go through.

CEPLAIR:

Have you ever written a script completely your own?

LEVITT:

I have no desire to.

CEPLAIR:

You could, though. It wouldn't be—

LEVITT:

I don't know, I don't know. But I have no—I started a novel on my own of something that, you know, that had been haunting me for a long time. The

Girl from Kellyville. I had seen her during the war when I was driving across the country in a carpool of men. Strange men. And how I had the courage—and I coped with them. But this young sailor stopped at a place called Kellyville. I think it was in Kansas or Texas, one of those states that I'm not familiar with. I guess it was Texas. And this little girl whom he had dated—he had a pile of pictures this high of girls he had dated. A cute little boy who had four kids at home in Texas. And this greasy spoon little diner in the middle of nowhere—there was nothing else—and this young girl sitting at the counter. And this boy walks in who was the most glamorous thing in the world. And we gave him ten minutes. And suddenly the tragedy of these little girls, who would come spilling into California and then back they go into these dreary backgrounds—so that little girl—I never even saw her face—haunted me. And so I started a novel. And he [Al Levitt] found what I wrote very moving; I made him cry. But I really drew on a lot of things. And I went into Tom's room, which became my official study, where I don't work because it's so cluttered with files now. He was constantly barging in with minor excuses. And I can't concentrate that way. I only have a couple of hours a day that are really productive in terms of creative work. And he doesn't mind being interrupted, but I do. I can't work that way. And I realized it's very lonely work, and I didn't want to make it a source of conflict between us. I just wasn't willing to work that hard to do that at that point. It wasn't important for me to prove that I could do it, as it was for many other women. But not for me. Because I did what I had to do. And I never wanted to be a writer; I don't have to prove that I can be. When people refer to me as a writer, I really don't believe it, because I know I'm really still a writer's wife. Although I get indignant when people at the Guild treat me like a writer's wife, which they do! [laughter]

CEPLAIR:

So you just put the novel away unfinished?

LEVITT:

Yeah. I didn't get very far. And I have no feeling about that. I do hope we will get to write my screenplay on the flower child's child. Al and Tom have agreed to work on that with me. But, I mean, just as they're willing to do a screenplay on my idea, which they've both been brushing off—we've just finished one on Tom's idea, on the blacklist kids. But Al's starting to write again. He—I think it

was, I guess, when a few things conspired after the strike in '81. We had had a series of really rotten experiences, of things just turning sour on us. One of the kids who had—Universal [Pictures] was trying to screw us by giving some kid the credit for his idea that we knocked ourselves out on developing into a series. And then they said the kid was caught on embezzlement. Judging by the royal treatment that kid was getting in the black tower over it Universal—he was just a youngster from Texas—he obviously was dealing drugs. Because we thought—I put it together afterwards, in terms of enough clues. So television had gone so sour in terms of the youth. We were working for these young kids, and I remember one comes—we're walking in, and this youngster saying to Al, "Now, tell me what you've done." And I said to myself, "I'm not going to let Al be put through this anymore." So at sixty-five, when you work you have to give back some of your social security. So from sixty-five to seventy there is not a lot of drive to work for modest amounts of money. We discovered that with the social security and the pension, if Al taught one or two classes, we were quite comfortable. So there wasn't a big drive, so we told the agent that we had at that time that we would not do episodic television. So we kind of took ourselves out of that market. But Al was not writing anything else, which was fine with me. If he wanted to write, fine. If he doesn't—of course, I have no feeling about money, our needing money. We inherited a small amount of money about a year ago, so we have money in the bank. We can do anything, pretty much, that we want to, except go to expensive restaurants, which he doesn't particularly like anyway. And I don't worry about money anymore, which is to me the greatest luxury in the world. But what are we talking about? I'm usually not—I don't digress so much.

CEPLAIR:

That's fine. [tape recorder off] Let me just start off by saying it's very ironic that two blacklisted writers worked happily with one of the most reactionary men in Hollywood, Walt Disney. How did that come to pass?

LEVITT:

And that we became his favorite writers, he told our agent.

CEPLAIR:

Yeah. Did he know your real names?

LEVITT:

Oh, my God, no. We found out from one of the story editors that he didn't even know we were Jewish, or we wouldn't have been over there. Because the August name is not Jewish, [laughter] which is not the reason we took it.

CEPLAIR:

Well, how did it all begin?

LEVITT:

We got a call from our agent, Bob [Robert] Eisenbach, who had a connection there.

CEPLAIR:

And this was what year?

LEVITT:

I don't know. We'd have to look in the income tax to find it. [tape recorder off]

CEPLAIR:

So you think it was '61 or—

LEVITT:

The early sixties. We had a string of very wholesome situation-comedy credits by that time: "Donna Reed," "Father Knows Best," and "That Girl," among others. Our agent called and said, "I have an appointment arranged for you to meet Walt Disney." Al said, "No way." And the agent explained that Disney had decided to try to bring in some of these situation-comedy writers, because he liked what he was seeing on the air and he wanted to give them a try. So the agent had submitted our credits and he had picked us. And Al said we were not interested, there was no way we could work with Walt Disney. The agent said, "Well, you can't do this to me. I mean, I'm out on a limb. You have got to take the interview." So as a favor to the agent—I mean, we were so paranoid going into that studio. We went over there, and first you met the story editor and then Bill [William] Dover and then Bill [William] Anderson, who was an executive, and then his [Disney's] son-in-law, Ron [Ronald W.] Miller. You picked each one up, and then the three of them parade with you

into Disney's office. And here's this very casual guy in an old sweater, sitting behind his desk. And everything is "Walt," you know. Everybody calls him Walt, from the guy at the desk to the front door. He starts telling us some ideas, and Al says, "No, I don't think we'd be interested in that." And he'd give us another idea, and I said, "No, I really don't think that's our cup of tea." So he said, "Well, have you—?" He started mentioning some of his pictures. "Did you see [*The*] *Shaggy Dog*?" We say no." And have you seen *The Absent-Minded Professor*?" No, we had never seen a Disney movie. [laughter] So he said, "I guess you don't go to see many movies." I mean, we weren't going to bullshit him—we didn't want the job. We were polite, but we weren't interested in anything that he suggested and didn't pretend to be. And then we went home. We weren't home hardly a few minutes when the agent called and said, "I just got a call from the studio, and Walt gave the instructions that they must find something for the Augusts to do." We couldn't believe it. Meantime, we had run into a secretary there who knew us from way back, from the left. We didn't know which side she was on. So we were busy with phone books, trying to think of people who might know who could call and find out if she would blow the whistle on us. Turned out she was okay, was, I think, worried about our recognizing her! [laughter] That was typical of—the secretaries were the scariest ones in terms of recognizing us. So then we went back, and he told us that as a result of Sputnik, the government was concerned that the American young men were not sufficiently interested in science. Because the football hero was the hero on the campus, and the science student was not popular with the girls and not socially acceptable. This was bad for our national policy, in terms of catching up with the Russians. So the Defense Department had asked him to do some material glorifying the egghead. Well, since our son was an egghead who was suffering mightily from that, we thought that was really a nice idea. We loved it. And they had an idea about a character, who was their character, named Merlin Jones, a science-fiction comedy in the genre of *Shaggy Dog* and *Absent-Minded Professor*, which he ran for us. And we saw them, and we said, "Well, those are cute pictures. We liked them, and with this approach we said, "That's fine with us." First it was supposed to be television, hour television shows, which either would be incorporated into his regular show or run as a separate series. So we worked only with Walt. Walt would not allow us to meet with anyone else but

him, because he enjoyed our conferences so much. It was very unusual. All work was directly with him.

1.10. TAPE NUMBER: VI, SIDE ONE (MARCH 21, 1988)

LEVITT:

We started by doing the first hour, and we found [Walt] Disney—I think he was the best producer I ever worked for. Now, Al [Alfred Levitt] probably had a better experience with Adrian Scott, but I wasn't involved in that. But Walt's appreciation of the writer was extraordinary. The main problem, from a professional point of view, of working with him is that he did not have a good sense of structure. So he would fall in love with certain material which presented very difficult problems structurally, and he hated to give up. But I argued with him. I found that he was very open and very easy to disagree with. He had such a secure ego that he was easy to argue with, and I think probably I gained more confidence in myself working with Walt. It was interesting that he accepted it from a woman. Because I have a feeling that I participated in those conferences more than I previously had. And, you know, just as I'm telling you this, I realize that that probably was a big step forward in terms of my becoming comfortable with participation in story conferences. Because there was just a lot of give-and-take. I mean, the conferences were very creative and—but we were so tense because of the blacklist thing. We would walk out of there kind of wrung out from that kind of tension, [the tension] of "What are we doing in enemy territory?" But I just loved the graciousness of that office. I'm a sucker for that. You'd come in in the morning and you would get the best cup of coffee you have ever had in your life, served by his secretary. And about eleven o'clock you would be served tomato juice. If you were there in the late afternoon, the bar would open and they'd take your—and I just find that I'm a sucker for that kind of small, thoughtful gesture. And we did the two things.

CEPLAIR:

What were the two things?

LEVITT:

The two hour things, *The Misadventures of*—well, these two things would eventually become a movie called *The Misadventures of Merlin Jones*. But they were supposed to be hour segments for television.

CEPLAIR:

For "Wonderful World of Color"?

LEVITT:

Or a series of their own, either one. We started on the next hour—it was to be the third hour—when Walt says to us, "My distributors, Buena Vista [Distribution Company], feel that the material is too good to waste on television. They want to release it as a movie." Al screamed. He said, "You can't do that. It isn't structured as a movie; it's two separate stories. You can't just scotch-tape it together!" Al argued vehemently against it. Which must have made him seem very uncorrupt, because—we weren't even aware that this meant a big hunk of money for us if they had paid us for a television thing and it became a movie. So Walt went back to try to talk them out of it. The next time we saw him he said, "I can't talk them out of it." He said, "We're going to release it as a movie." So we were very unhappy. But then we found out all the money, and we managed to say, "Well—." The third hour we were working on became the first part of *The Monkey's Uncle*, which was about the same character. Annette Funicello was the girl, see, because Merlin Jones was going to get Annette. Well, in the fifties, the early sixties, that still was a desirable objective to high school, college boys. So when we started the third one, having it happen to us before, we structured it so there would be a better transition into the second hour. These four hours stretched over a long period. Because when Walt would be occupied with other things we'd have to wait for the next conference, because he wouldn't let anybody else take the conferences. So he would put us on a weekly salary so that we wouldn't take anything else and we would be available for him. So this became very lucrative, and this is what we bought the house on. Because it really was an incredible—because when Walt—this is why the Disney stock went up when he died. Because when Walt wanted something, they had to pay for it. And he wanted us. At a certain point in our years of working with him, we wanted out. And we didn't want to insult him, so Al says to the agent, "Just ask him for an unreasonable amount of money so they'll turn us down, and we're out of it."

They gave us the money! We did a screenplay with him, which took a long time, called *The Oddball Express*, about an army camp, comedy. And we spent a long time on that. That was a movie feature. But after it was finished, he decided that suddenly there were several service comedies going on the air, television. So he thought it was not good timing for a feature, which didn't affect our money. But then we were about to start a new movie project. We had interested him in the song "Little Boxes." Did you know that? "Little boxes made of ticky-tacky." It's the—

CEPLAIR:

Oh, right, yeah.

LEVITT:

—anti-conformity thing in the early sixties. And he loved it. So he wanted to get the rights and do a movie about conformity. And we just loved the idea. See, we found when we were dealing with issues, we could really do business with him, because he really had some of that old-time populism from his youth. When we would make fun of the army officer in the script at his suggestion, I would say, "Do you realize what you're really saying? You really want to make fun of the army officer?" He says, "Of course." And I realized, here the big guy, the authority figure, is the heavy. This came up several times, and I said, "Is this what you want to say? [laughter] Because that's what you're saying here." And I would say things like "All this flying is going to cost a lot of money." I've always been quite production conscious. "Don't worry about the money." Next time we'd come in, he'd say, "Gee, that flying, I think we've got too much. It's a little too expensive." But it was a very comfortable relationship. He went to great trouble. I'll let Al tell you the story, if you haven't heard it, about getting the autographed picture to our daughter [Annie Levitt] while he was busy entertaining [Nikita] Khrushchev. He went to such trouble to get our daughter's first name. And Al ran into him at Disneyland when he was—Al was there with our daughter. He was so sweet with our daughter. He was giving Al tickets and really talked to our daughter, to whom he was a television star. So it was a big moment for her. The picture with Mickey Mouse, signed by Walt, is still in her bedroom when she comes home. But it was while we were starting the nonconformity picture—we went to a conference with him. I was smoking—I'd gone back to smoking for a

couple of years—and he wasn't. He and I used to smoke at conferences. Al never went back after the early fifties. And he [Disney] was very cranky and he wasn't smoking. We never saw him again. Very shortly after, it was announced that he had lung cancer. So that was—I don't—I could look in the income tax to see over the years. Would you like me to look it up?

CEPLAIR:

I don't think that's important.

LEVITT:

But you have the essence of it.

CEPLAIR:

Yeah. It's just kind of the irony of it.

LEVITT:

Oh, it was surrealist, you know, that—

CEPLAIR:

One can imagine what would have happened if you at the last conference had said, "By the way, I want you to know what our real names are and who we are." That in itself is worth a movie, I think. [laughter]

LEVITT:

Well, but the thing—yeah, I have so much guilt about him. One is my first job for Terrytoons. One of my main parts of my job was to steal Disney's jokes! Whenever a new movie opened at the Radio City Music Hall, there would be a new Disney cartoon. I would go down from New Rochelle to the music hall just to see the cartoon—I wouldn't see the picture—and I would sit in the dark and make notes on all the jokes. And the number of stars would indicate how big a laugh it got. I'd go back to Terrytoons and put them in our joke files, with the information that Disney had done it and how big a laugh it got. So, as I say, my first job was stealing his jokes for Paul Terry! [laughter]

CEPLAIR:

So you've been pulling the wool over Walt's eyes all your career.

LEVITT:

Well—but, you know, I have very—we would walk out of there—we would be very tense because of knowing who he was and who we were, but the work relationship was very good. And Al can tell you about the time when he called to say that he was wrong.

CEPLAIR:

Did you ever see him socially, outside the studio?

LEVITT:

No, never saw him. The only time, Al ran into him at Disneyland. But the conferences were very relaxed and comfortable—and the fact that I talked so much. Because I don't remember that I was doing much talking yet. I assume that that was kind of the beginning. To the point where in later years I actually was allowed to pitch premises. If it was my premise and I really felt good about it, Al would suggest that I pitch the premise. Because he's a very good—Al's a very skilled raconteur. In social situations, I really don't tell stories. I don't like to tell stories or jokes; I like to talk to people. But, you know, he will be at a table, he will hold forth—and he's very skilled.

CEPLAIR:

So that was your best movie experience, then, since the blacklist, working with Disney.

LEVITT:

Yeah. Right. Those were really the only movies that I wrote. But, see, Al wrote movies without me after we had started collaborating. He sold an original to Universal [Pictures] which he wrote. And he collaborated with Mike [Michael] Wilson on several movies, some of which were made, some of which weren't. And he's had movie jobs without me in which he's collaborated with other boys or he's written alone. But my collaboration has been television. You see, this was a television job. It was just released as a movie. So we get residuals like a movie on this. It turned out to be a lucrative assignment and in many ways very painless. No, it wasn't painless. None of them are painless—they're all very hard work. Yeah, writing to the strictures of this medium is very demanding work. It's not that it's easy. But I have never been blocked. I have

always been able to do what has to be done as a television writer. I have never found an insoluble problem; there is always a solution. And I'm an incredibly good teacher of television writing, episodic television writing. We discovered that when Al was teaching at Sherwood Oaks [Experimental College], teaching screenwriting. He said, "Why don't you teach television writing?" I said, because I usually do when people suggest it, "I'll try." It was for money, and it turned out there was a big backlog of young people who wanted a course in television writing. So I invented a course. I put them through the experience, exactly as they would have it in the studio. I invented a way of teaching. And it was a very good experience. And the next—this was before the '81 strike, and a couple—it was a year later, at the '81 strike, there all my kids had become professionals. They were out on the picket line. And none—they were all amateurs [before].

CEPLAIR:

Okay, why don't we do that next session.

LEVITT:

Well, there's not much—oh, except the black writers workshop, which is—

CEPLAIR:

And I want to talk about your work in the [Writers] Guild [of America].

LEVITT:

Which has not been very extensive.

1.11. TAPE NUMBER: VII, SIDE ONE (APRIL 4, 1988)

CEPLAIR:

Why did you select the name August or why did Al [Alfred Levitt] select the name August? Did it have any particular meaning for you?

LEVITT:

I think I made it up. Yes, indeed, Tom is our son's name. Our son's name is Thomas Augustus Levitt. The Augustus is after my mother's name; my mother's name is Augusta [Greenberg]. We found that most people choose pseudonyms they have some kind of relationship to. Mike [Michael] Wilson

usually used Irish names for pseudonyms, and people have funny little inside things. But this had very special meaning to us. But it was a big mistake using our son's first name, because funny things happened in terms of—with the phones, when people would ask for Tom, and the sitter would say, "Tom's asleep," at eight o'clock at night. [laughter] You know, things like that. But those are Al's stories.

LEVITT:

Why did you use Helen August? Why didn't you take a different first name?

CEPLAIR:

It never occurred to me. Because obviously by that time, Al may have already realized that that was a mistake, that it's much better to keep your own first name. Because in most contacts people call you your first name—there's less chance of funny things happening. The funniest things in relationship to the pseudonym, those are Al's.

CEPLAIR:

Okay. Now, did the Augusts have to join the Writers Guild [of America]?

LEVITT:

Well, Al had to leave the Guild as Al Levitt. All the blacklisted writers had to leave the Guild for a variety of reasons, which I think Al should explain, because I wasn't in the Guild at the time. Al had joined the Guild as Tom August, and when I started to write I joined the Guild as Helen August. And at that time, in 1958, which is when our collaboration started—I think that he took the name in '56, at Jerry [Jerome] Davis's insistence. Jerry had been acting as his front, and it was Jerry who wanted him to go into the studio under a pseudonym. And also that you should discuss with Al. It was very important that the Guild not know that the Augusts were the Levitts. And that aspect of it really involves Al and is really Al's story. Because in terms of the collaboration and the writing, I think that you should get that primarily from Al. To me it's just a question of how I related, really, to what was more his career than mine.

CEPLAIR:

Well, did you yourself have to bodily go into the Guild and join it?

LEVITT:

No, we didn't. I never went near the Guild. No one could see us, we couldn't attend membership meetings, and the only activity for many years was the arbitration committees. The Writers Guild controls credits. So if there's a credit arbitration, they have three members read the material and then vote on it. But that's all done at home. So both of us served on arbitration panels for many years, but nobody saw us. It was as August. Nobody knew who we were.

CEPLAIR:

So, what, did you just join through the mail?

LEVITT:

Yeah, it was all done through the mail. You don't appear in person to join the Guild. When you work you have to join the Guild, so you just—the application was no problem at all. And at a certain point—it was quite late—Mike [Michael] Franklin took the initiative to say to Al, "Let's straighten it out," after everybody knew.

CEPLAIR:

Well, are you a member of the Guild now both as Helen August and Helen Levitt or just one or the other?

LEVITT:

Well, there are a lot of AKA's around. And when Al ran for the board for the first or second time, he was listed as "Al Levitt, AKA Tom August." Al has felt very strongly about going back to his own name. I didn't particularly want to. I feel from a career point of view, it wasn't particularly helpful. In fact, I think it was hurtful because we had become so well established as television writers in the August name. I think the name had commercial value. But it was very important to him to go back to his own name. I had no feeling about that, because, after all, Helen Levitt wasn't really my name any more than Helen August is. My own name got lost a long time ago, although I had used it professionally until I had children. But I'd been hanging on to the August more than him. So that when I signed a statement for a candidate running for office for the board last September, I signed it Helen August Levitt. I sometimes use

that name in the Guild, just—I don't like losing the August completely. Because that's the name under which I'm a writer. Helen Levitt—I'm somebody's wife. And it's just different. I'm treated differently, you know; I'm treated as Al Levitt's wife, particularly at the Guild. People who work there say, "Oh, I didn't know you were a writer, too," after, you know, they worked for me for a long time. Because I tend to do the kind of work that a wife might.

CEPLAIR:

So if you're on this committee, say, this first aid committee, the chairperson is Helen August or Helen Levitt or Helen August Levitt?

LEVITT:

Helen Levitt, yeah.

CEPLAIR:

Helen Levitt.

LEVITT:

When I started teaching, or leading the black writers workshop, I made a point of using the August name and letting them know what my professional name is. And I used to use my Helen August stationery and add Levitt to it, because I want them to know both names. Because if I'm useful to them, I can be useful in both names, because different people know me as different names. It's been an inconvenience in our lives, no question about it. And I think it's kind of added to the anonymity and confusion about who we are. But so be it.

CEPLAIR:

Yeah. What have been the most interesting writing projects on which you've worked? I mean that you have had a special feeling for. Or is that not something you feel you can answer?

LEVITT:

Well, there are things that I feel we did that were worthwhile, worth the effort. But, you know, so many things you start with such high hopes for that prove so disappointing. I think what we did, in terms of all our work, was the things we never did. In other words, there were certain positive values in everything we wrote, and there were certain negative values that simply

would not be in our work. We created a series for PBS [Public Broadcasting Service], which we thought was something worthwhile to do. The money was a fraction of what we were getting in prime time at the time. And we were very busy, but we took the time out because it seemed like a worthwhile project. And we thought it would be interesting work for PBS. It turned out to be a royal pain in the ass.

CEPLAIR:

What was the series?

LEVITT:

It was called "Freestyle," and actually it was—the assignment we were given was, "Sex-role stereotypes as a limiting factor in career selection for nine- to twelve-year-olds." They were preparing three pilots to decide how to do it, and they showed us the two pilots, which kind of followed a "Sesame Street" format. And we came in and did it as a kind of anthology situation comedy, with that kind of half-hour format, which of course they realized was the only way to go. So our show was the pilot. And in addition we agreed we would do one more. And not only has it been shown on PBS many times, but it was shown in the elementary schools throughout the country. I thought that was a worthwhile project at that time, and I think it was, you know, a nice little contribution to the point that girls can do anything. The pain in the ass part was that there was a committee off someplace in Washington [D.C.] of educators and psychologists who gave us such a burden of storytelling. [laughter] The second one, it had to be a geological field trip led by a full-blooded Indian woman. And the thing we had to prove was that girls don't take enough risks and boys take too many risks. It's a fascinating subject, actually, but they had such strictures in terms of everything but the kitchen sink that also had to be stuck in. [laughter] That was kind of a nice thing to have done, but it was no fun doing it. Working for educators and academic people is no more fun than working for producers. But the Disney experience in many ways was pleasant. There's nothing—I've loved research, I've loved research. God, I had more fun researching something that we never even got off the ground on. A producer who was an executive at that time at I think Lorimar[-Telepictures Corporation] said, "Let's do a series about Jimmy [James J.] Walker." And that was really fun, because I researched that in the

twenties—everything, radio, cars, Prohibition. So I really knew that period. But the more I got to know Jimmy Walker, the less I liked him. [laughter] I couldn't see how we were going to do it, so it never got off the ground. I didn't really see how it could work, so I kind of dragged my feet. But the process of doing the research was—spent months. But that was fun. But everything's a challenge. You know, the challenge part of it is stimulating and dealing with the people for a while usually is good, but then when—very few projects have happy endings. So six shows in a period of a few years turn out to be hit shows, and everybody loves each other. Like on the "Mary Tyler Moore Show," I gather, everybody got along. And "M.A.S.H." probably was a happy show. But, you know, those are one-in-a-million kind of odds that that will happen. Most of it is—you know, it's just work. And there are moments that are rewarding, and there are moments that are just a real drag. I don't know, that's life. It's very much like every aspect of life, except it's kind of heightened, kind of heightened. And so your life is a lot of emotional ups and downs. You always start a project with very high hopes, and it always ends sour when you see the damn thing on the screen because they always louse it up. I never remember seeing something where I said, "God, they really, really got it," or "They did it better than we wrote it." It hasn't been soul-satisfying, but it has never bothered me. The fact that it all turns out disappointing—I expect it, and so it isn't a big emotional low for me. But it isn't a high. I have always done it for the money. I really have looked at it very professionally. This is what I do for a living; this is not something that I dreamed of doing. I never dreamed of being a writer. I didn't particularly want to be a writer rather than other things; there was not something else that I would have preferred doing. It turned out that I'm, I think, a very good story editor, but I got into that pretty late because of our daughter [Annie Levitt] being at home. And this I had a real flair for, there's no question about it. And that's, of course, the skill that I'm using in my workshop. Because my students—they know they never have, or probably will, work with a better story editor, and in a learning experience that's very useful. So I put it to use.

CEPLAIR:

My sense from our last interview is that teaching has been much more satisfying to you than writing.

LEVITT:

Oh, yeah.

CEPLAIR:

How did you get involved in it and where did you start and how did you get into the Guild workshop for black writers?

LEVITT:

Well, I started teaching—it must have been at least ten years ago. Al was teaching—see, Al has always taught—I mean for twenty years at least. First at [California State University] Northridge and then at a place called Sherwood Oaks Experimental College. He was teaching screenwriting there, and he said to me—I guess our daughter was no longer at home—he said, "Why don't you try teaching television writing? Nobody's doing that." And I said, "Okay, I'll try." There was money involved. Not much, but it was money. So he suggested to the management that I would teach television writing. They had a backlog of applicants for a television-writing class, so they interviewed me and were delighted. Though I had, I think, the first semester, I don't know, about one or two classes. I invented a way of teaching episodic television which was very good. I just put them through the experience exactly as they would have it in the studio. I was the producer, and I let them have a turn practicing being my story editors. And these students would pitch premises exactly as they would in the studio, and I related to them as I would if I were a producer. The aim of the ten-week course was to turn out a sample script, which they then could go out and use professionally. And we studied the shows that they selected to work on, so that they would know how to do a sample script and how to study a show. I don't know whether they were an exceptionally talented group, but I got some awfully good work out of them. I taught two semesters, three classes in the course of two semesters. I don't know if the second class was the first or the second semester. Then they wanted to make the classes larger. And I said I would not accept more than twelve students, and I refused to teach under the circumstances. I felt the kids would be ripped off in terms of the amount of time that they were entitled to. A group of the students wanted me to teach them privately after that, and I said, no, I wouldn't take their money, but I would meet with them once a month to help them continue the work we had started. Because I was hoping a kind of peer group would develop. Because none of them were Hollywood kids, they didn't know

anybody, so I thought that at least they'd get kind of to know each other. And it kind of worked that way. I met with them for quite a few months, almost a year, and some of them I hired later on. And in '81, there they were, all on the picket line: they had all gotten into the Guild. So that was kind of impressive, because they were all amateurs. There were no professional writers in the group. So I was kind of impressed with the job I had done. I happened to tell this self-serving story to a black writer named Oscar Williams. It was a period in the Guild when Al was just fairly new on the board, and he always had been very conscientious about going to everything at the Guild that he's supposed to. And there were two black affairs in a row—this must have been about five or six years ago. One was a commemoration of Martin Luther King [Jr.]'s birthday, but the first one was a meeting of the black writers committee with agents. Five of the top agencies sent agents to talk to the black writers. And I'd never seen so many black writers in my life. I didn't know there were that many. The room was packed. And I was sitting listening to these—they sent these sweet, cleanshaven, golden-haired, little, articulate boys to represent these killer agencies. And they were so disingenuous: "The door is always open, just come in. We're dying to help you." And these blacks were just eating it up and believing them. I was just appalled. And one of the writers, Oscar Williams, lost his temper, and I wasn't sure who he was sore at. A real burst of rage that was very unclear. So I talked to him, and in the course of talking to him, I told him this—or else it was a few weeks later when they had this Martin Luther King thing, where nobody except a few handful of black writers and a couple of board members showed up. See, to meet agents, there were a hundred. To celebrate Martin Luther King's birthday, there were twelve people. Anyway, at one of those two affairs I spoke to Oscar Williams, and I told him about my experience at Sherwood Oaks. I don't know how it—oh, yeah, it turns out he knew [Dalton] Trumbo—that's how. And one thing led to another. And when he heard that, he said, "Would you do that for the black writers in the Guild?" I said, "I'd be happy to try." So the black writers committee organized a workshop for me to lead, and I said to them—incidentally, I assumed that there would be women in the workshop, because I had taught one class which was all men and I was not terribly comfortable. It just wasn't as good a class as the other version. Because there was something uncomfortable for me to be the authority figure in a class of all men, and I thought I would do better if there were women in it. So the response of the

men was, "There are no black women writers." So I said, "Well, if you can't find them, I won't lead the workshop. I don't think I'd be comfortable." So they found them. The first time I was petrified that I would say the wrong thing. And there were about fifteen of them, and I've been working with them about five or six years.

CEPLAIR:

The same group of people?

LEVITT:

Well, I just—really, I was interested primarily in working with people who were just starting out, who needed a sample of their work. So they've come and gone. And there was one group that I kind of solved their one problem and sent them off. If they were doing professional work they didn't belong in the workshop. If you've got a job, you shouldn't be here. You should not be writing on spec. Concentrate on your job. But I've worked with—there were at that time about a hundred blacks in the Guild, and I've worked with probably thirty or forty of them in the workshop at one time or another. It's now a group that has been meeting for the last ten sessions, about six or seven who meet here now.

CEPLAIR:

How frequently?

LEVITT:

Well, it was once a month, when Al had his board meeting. Then I helped one of the members of the workshop get elected to the board, so we have a little problem of finding a night to meet. [laughter] And they're nagging me to meet during the strike, so we're going to. I meet with them a lot individually on their projects, because all their projects are not discussed within the group. If their work is ready for the next stage and there isn't a group meeting, then I—because I don't like the whole group to be working with them, because I really treat them in a more professional way. I am the producer, they are working for me. But I'm also training story editors, and they are becoming story editors. And I have been able to get a few of them jobs, finally. People are beginning to ask me to recommend people, and I tell them, "I will send you

something they have written." And now I have one writer who I got a job as a story editor and who is probably going to become a producer.

CEPLAIR:

Now, this is only for Guild members.

LEVITT:

Only Guild members.

CEPLAIR:

Does the Guild pay you to do this?

LEVITT:

No.

CEPLAIR:

You volunteered.

LEVITT:

I wouldn't dream of taking money for teaching black writers.

CEPLAIR:

If you're teaching white writers, would you dream of taking money?

LEVITT:

I don't want to be a teacher for money. I mean, that's just not what I do.

CEPLAIR:

But you like teaching.

LEVITT:

Well, it's hard work, but this group—I just love these people. It's just an incredible experience working with them. Two of them were at our anniversary, you know—we've really become close to them—and were at our table at the awards dinner. And they're most of them in their thirties; some are still in their twenties. And most of them are women now, and most of them have backgrounds as journalists. So it seems to me that possibly the

opportunities in journalism are not too bad for black women. Because they come from good papers, like the Boston Globe and things. And they're very literate, very bright, very creative, and very interesting, thoughtful young people. It's very rewarding to me, but I don't think it necessarily would be with any group of young people. It's just that these people represent a whole new challenge. My understanding of the black experience has undergone a tremendous deepening. And after the strike is over, I really plan to dedicate myself to trying to work with them in terms of opening up job opportunities. Because it's just grotesque that they simply are not hired to write on white shows. Almost all their employment is on shows about blacks. You know, white people write most of the black shows! In the workshop, I don't let them work on black shows—their sample scripts are on white shows. The best script I ever got was a "Moonlighting," which is better than any "Moonlighting" I've seen on the air. And you couldn't get whiter than that. But that's been a challenge. It doesn't take a lot of time, but I plan to give it more time after the strike, because that's the one thing left that I want to do.

CEPLAIR:

I imagine to be black and a woman, getting a good job in Hollywood must be one of the most difficult things to do.

LEVITT:

Yeah. There is one who is now producer of "Golden Girls." [Winnifred Hervey] I never met her, [but] I followed her career with great interest. But, you know, a special circumstance. She was on "Benson" working for Susan Harris, who's one of the creators of "Golden Girls," and obviously did good work. And so she took her over to "Golden Girls" with her, and she's now the producer. But she doesn't involve herself at all with helping other blacks. See, those blacks that get ahead kind of have to protect their own positions. And I do not judge them harshly, although I used to judge women harshly who did not help other women. But I think that blacks need a lot more help than women do at the present time in this industry. Women, as such, have a lot more in terms of resources to get ahead than blacks.

CEPLAIR:

Was the 1981 strike the date when you became a very active person in the Writers Guild? Or had you been active prior to that?

LEVITT:

Well, it's very hard for me to date things. We started teaching CPR [cardiopulmonary resuscitation] in '78, which means we were attending membership meetings. We started attending membership meetings as soon as we could, and that may have been early in the seventies.

CEPLAIR:

You don't have—I mean, it's interesting. Obviously the Guild hadn't treated you very well, but yet you are about as active and strong supporters of the Guild as I've heard of these days.

LEVITT:

Well, in 1960, Warners [Warner Brothers Pictures, Inc.] sent us a message. They had found out about the August name—somebody had let it slip inadvertently. So Warners sent us a message that if we would scab in the 1960s strike, they would clear us in both our names. It just absolutely didn't tempt us a moment. And in '60, in the Guild we were—

CEPLAIR:

Persona non grata.

LEVITT:

Right! They didn't even know we were in the Guild! But it just never occurred to us to turn against the Guild in that way. It's really interesting; I've thought about it, and I'm sure that no other blacklisted people ever scabbed.

CEPLAIR:

Because it's a union of workers?

LEVITT:

Yeah, it's our union, you know.

CEPLAIR:

It's your union. For better or for worse, it's your union.

LEVITT:

Yeah, yeah, it's just—the old screenwriters have a very gut feeling about the Guild, and some of the richest writers in this town are just very strong Guild people. It's a strong tradition. And I think that they make a mistake in putting us on strike this way. Because we've had a tremendous increase in membership the last ten years, so these kids are having their first experience, a lot of them, in strike. And it's really giving them a sense of what the union is. Things which they took for granted, they're really facing and learning about. And what happens out in the picket line is a very gut thing. So I feel we may be leaving the union in good hands with these kids.

CEPLAIR:

So your activity during the strikes is to run the first aid committee?

LEVITT:

Well, we invented first aid. I don't think anyone's ever done it, but in '81—we volunteered to be trained to be CPR teachers in '78. This was right after our fortieth anniversary, when Mike Wilson had had a heart attack and died. There were two couples who knew CPR. And we felt, God, it was marvelous that the family knew that anything that could have been done was done. I said, "What if nobody had known what to do?" It took forty minutes for the paramedics to get there. So in '78 at a meeting of the Guild, Mort Lewis got up and asked if anyone would train to be teachers, because he wanted to start a CPR program. And our hands shot up, because we knew we wanted to know. Because if ever we found ourselves in such a circumstance, we would want to be the people who knew. So it was very stressful. [It was] difficult for me, because I had never moved a muscle in my life. And I didn't even know then that I have had asthma all my life and that the breathing was very difficult. The compressions were very—I really went into training, because I was determined that I was going to pass. There were eighteen of us who took the course, and only eleven passed, and I squeaked through. So we started teaching CPR, and it was a big part of our life for about eight years. We taught not only at the Guild, but we taught at the Directors Guild [of America], we taught in the community, we taught all over the place. Because CPR was kind of new. So in '81, when the strike was called, Al and I looked at each other and said, "We've got all this CPR skill in the Guild now. If anybody has a heart

attack on the picket line, boy, we better really be prepared." So Al, who was very conscientious, studied up on first aid. We consulted with doctors and we then had a big group, a large group, a dozen, of teachers—organized all the CPR teachers, in terms of being on the picket line, knowing what to do in case of an emergency. I organized the team leaders on the picket line. They had dimes—I gave them each dimes—and a whistle around their neck and a phone number to call, because there wasn't a 911 one. I organized quite an elaborate apparatus prepared for emergencies and, you know, kind of invented it. And I remember realizing, and saying at the time, that the Writers Guild picket line, '81, was probably the safest place in the world to have a heart attack, because at no point were you more than sixty seconds away from somebody who knew CPR. Not just knew it, but knew it well. Because not only did we have the teachers, but we had just completed a course of advanced training. So we had advanced students who had just graduated who had taken the eight-hour course. So I had a really good, good group. This time I don't have Alfred and there is nobody—there are no teachers left in the Guild. All the teachers dropped out for one reason or another. So it's been a very tough challenge to find the people who ever had CPR, get them together to retrain them, and to round up a team that I have. I now have twenty people, who I have found somehow or other, working under me at every picket line, about fifteen of whom know CPR. We found somebody in the Guild who once was a paramedic. And so I'm kind of like a general deploying my forces at every picket. Sometimes I say to myself, "What am I doing? I'm too old for this!" But in '81 I was running around a lot. I don't run around. I'm behind a table and there are walkie-talkies. And I have a lot of young people, a lot of my students. All my students from my black writers workshop wanted to work for me, so they're—I've got a core of very loyal young people. One is a former student from Sherwood Oaks. They do the running around, and the best-organized aspect of this whole strike is the first aid. So it's one more challenge, and it's a big job. With Al working, negotiating, and these long hours, I guess it's good that I'm involved. I had planned to stay home and write a screenplay, but maybe this is better.

CEPLAIR:

Is this your last sort of major Guild effort?

LEVITT:

Who knows. I've been asked to run for the board before. And the first time I did a kind of sassy thing: I wrote a statement in which I said that I felt the demands of the women's committee were being pushed at the expense of the blacks. I knew that I would not get nominated with that statement. The second time I declined to run, because Al was running and I didn't want to run against him. And I don't want to be on the board. I don't like committee meetings! I really don't! [laughter]

CEPLAIR:

I don't blame you.

LEVITT:

I never liked political meetings in my life! [laughter] I mean, I just—

CEPLAIR:

You like the things you can run by yourself, basically?

LEVITT:

No. Oh, no, I'm a great team player. But I like pragmatic work. I like to do something. You know, I used to produce plays. I used to work awfully hard. Well, see, today I'm really getting my act together, because now the party's over, I'm finishing with you, so I really am focusing on the strike and coping with the fact that I'm not—I've got to face the fact that I'm going to have to do business with these male chauvinist pigs who are running it, whom the women are just up in arms about. They've just got a macho group of guys who have just been treating us terribly. And everything I've done has taken five times more time than it should. And I discussed with Vida [Spears], who's my teacher's pet from my—she's a board member. And I said, "There's just no point in our wasting our time fighting their male chauvinism. We just have to get on with what we have to do, and we're not going to change them, and just manage as best we can." So with that in mind—we did have a problem with a racist remark made at a meeting that I was present at. It really put me on the spot last week. I was the only woman there. Nobody reacted. Nobody said anything. I couldn't believe it. I really had a battle with my conscience, because I realized that if you stand by and don't say anything, you become an accomplice, really. So I spoke to Al, and I told Vida about it. And I spoke to the

president of the Guild, and he spoke to a couple of people. So he talked me out of sending a letter to the board. But I couldn't believe it. You don't hear racist remarks in the boardroom of the Writers Guild.

CEPLAIR:

You shouldn't, at any rate. Have you done any overt political work since 1951?

LEVITT:

No. Not because I don't want to do anything. From that point on I just assumed that anything I cared about, I would just do it more harm than good.

CEPLAIR:

Even under the name of Helen August that didn't change?

LEVITT:

No. Al has signed a couple of things in the past few years which I have refused to sign. I won't sign anything. I really for a while said I was a retired radical. I mean, I felt I had retired. For a very long period, it simply would have been counterproductive to be associated with anything that you cared about. And I can't think of anything political I did. No, I didn't sign things. I didn't—

CEPLAIR:

Didn't march—

LEVITT:

Oh, I marched in—we marched in the thing—it was a big thing for women, women's rights, that the Writers Guild participated in. And we marched with the Writers Guild. That was kind of exciting and nostalgic, because we used to march in the May Day parades in New York when we were college kids. But we don't go to big political meetings. Somebody totally unpolitical invited us to this—Danny Sheehan, this guy who's got all kinds of information about exposing the Nicaraguans or something. Somebody totally nonpolitical invited us, and it was interesting to see him in person, because we had heard his tape. Gee, what have I been doing all these years? Running parties, until '71. What have I been doing since '71? Working for a living until '81.

CEPLAIR:

Writing.

LEVITT:

Yeah, working. And doing a lot of social work, a lot of social work among the blacklisted people. I told you the last couple of social work things I did, didn't I, about Sadie Ornitz?

CEPLAIR:

No.

LEVITT:

I guess I made a mental note to tell you, because it was just an example of—in the midst of, you know, the week before the anniversary party—I'm seeing you, I'm running this first aid, Al is up to his neck—first I get a call from Joan Scott, a message on the machine: Sadie Ornitz is in trouble. She's calling us because of my being on the blacklisted committee, and we have to do something about Sadie. And I said, "Oh, my God, I really can't handle that." I said, "Maybe Sadie has no one to take care of her." So we put off calling. I said, "I've got to call Joan and somehow or other face it and tell her we really don't have time to get involved this week." That was just before my brother [Leslie Slote] arrived. [laughter] It turned out that—I explained that the blacklist committee that I'm the chairman of just determines whether people are eligible for blacklist pensions. So I said, "What's the problem with Sadie?" It turns out Sadie does have a large support group of family, which I was delighted to hear, and she does need more help in terms of some assistance at home. And Joan was panicked that she might have to go into a nursing home. So I was able to give her some good advice and to refer her to some people who I know could be helpful. That same day I got a call from a blacklisted woman who I'm not in touch with at all. But she assumes—she calls us because she's got a problem. She doesn't want to have picket duty for the strike, but she doesn't want to tell them that she's just had a rotten biopsy and it's a recurrence of a prior cancer. She was in shock, and she just wanted to get out. So I said, "We'll take care of it." She wanted to know what to do. I said, "We'll take care of it." And Al took care of it. But that's just, you know, normal course, normal course.

CEPLAIR:

Were you on that blacklist pension committee from the beginning?

LEVITT:

Yeah. When it was organized.

CEPLAIR:

Why don't you describe how that came about.

LEVITT:

Well, Al was not on the board yet when this started. It came up in the board. There was a big issue quite a few years ago about the fact that some of the old-time screenwriters were getting very small pensions. People who had made very large sums in the thirties and were really among the pioneers in the Guild. Because of the way the pension plan worked, they were getting $10, $20 a month pension. People who had at one time been very high earners but whose careers had ended, because of their age, at too early a point to get a decent pension. So the Guild had passed a thing that raised their pensions, if they had certain qualifications, to up to $200. And after that passed, I think it was Eddie [Edward] Huebsch and Lester Cole had written to the board and said, "Hey, how about us blacklisted people? We were disadvantaged, and the Guild participated in the blacklist. Don't you think that special consideration should be given to us?" Along those lines. So the Guild's board decided, yes, that they should have the same $200 if they could prove that income had suffered because of the blacklist. And if they were getting under $200, they could be raised to $200. So they set up what they called a screening committee to screen applicants for that special pension. And Al and I were put on that original committee.

LEVITT:

Were you the only former blacklisted people on it?

LEVITT:

No, no. Frank Tarloff was on it. And Ollie [Oliver] Crawford, who was the chairman, claimed to have been blacklisted. He's questionable. He was sort of graylisted. But he was the original chairman. And when he had served his two years, he appointed me to replace him, because I was the most articulate member of the committee. I fought a tough battle, and won, to get the

pensions retroactive. I found out that the pensions for the old-timers were retroactive to the date they retired and that the pensions for blacklisted people weren't. I said, "That's not fair!" So I put up a fight and won. And it made quite a big difference to some of the blacklisted people. It was a very good committee, really did a great job. Each person was interviewed by a subcommittee of three, which would then report back to the whole committee, which would make the decision. They then forwarded to the board of directors, which—at no time did they not accept our recommendations. People are still coming in, people who we thought were dead, people we never heard of, and each one is carefully considered.

CEPLAIR:

Have you turned down a significant number?

LEVITT:

A few. Stool pigeons. People who never were blacklisted at all. But we have tended to bend over backwards in terms of the people who were not really blacklisted. Because they are people who didn't work in the fifties who like to think they were blacklisted. It was more comfortable to be blacklisted than just unemployed.

CEPLAIR:

Right.

LEVITT:

In other words, we didn't make it like a political test. It was a real solemn kind of thing and a very conscientious committee. And at first I found it—I didn't do a good job chairing because I wasn't really sure of myself. But I've gotten to be a very good chairman now, really. At the last one we had this special problem that someone had brought up, and I called a meeting and I think I handled it pretty well. But our work is just about done, you know, because very few people who are just retiring—but we had a few last year.

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CEPLAIR:

So the committee now only meets when it has something to consider?

LEVITT:

It always has met in terms of applicants. We don't sit around except to discuss applicants.

CEPLAIR:

How long have you been chairperson?

LEVITT:

I don't remember, but it's several years now.

CEPLAIR:

Will you just go on being chairperson until—?

LEVITT:

Well, nobody's questioned it, since the committee doesn't have much to do anymore and it would be awfully hard for somebody else to take over at this point. Having been in from the beginning, I really have kept track. I really know what we've done, and I've kept careful records. And I think everybody is kind of comfortable with my taking the responsibility. I'm not going to raise the question of the fact that I should not continue to be chairman because it's illegal, because you're only supposed to be a chairman for two years. A new rule in the Guild, so that people don't just get permanently attached to a job.

CEPLAIR:

Is your son a political person? Was he a radical?

LEVITT:

Not especially, not especially. I have some tape on him that Judy Chaikin gave us—she interviewed him and didn't use it—which really discusses his attitude toward the blacklist and his attitude toward us. Which if you want I'd be happy to run for you if we run out of things to talk about today.

CEPLAIR:

No, I was just curious how he was affected politically.

LEVITT:

Well, he was in the eye of the hurricane in Santa Cruz. I guess he started in '64, and so—that was the first freshman class at [University of California] Santa Cruz. So he was really in the middle of it and certainly wasn't straight. He lived the life of a hippie, a clean hippie. He really didn't like sloppiness, although he looked like a pig with that hairdo. But he was really photographing the revolution up there; he was there with a camera, taking still pictures, movie film. And he was never a crazy. I don't think he ever was in organizations, and he certainly, I think—and he's very critical of his contemporaries of that period. He looks back on it with a lot of critical—finally, God, it was so moving. Yesterday we were at his house. His wife [Janeth Levitt] cooked a vegetarian Easter dinner and—I must tell my son. When we got home, my husband said, "God, he's a wonderful young man." And he now knows what I have always known: he's an extraordinary person. Oh, he's got a first-class mind. A wonderful, wonderful human being.

CEPLAIR:

So he's inculcated your values but not your politics, in effect?

LEVITT:

I don't know. You know, he's a very—you can't label him, you can't label him. He's very thoughtful, very caring. He teaches Sunday school at the Unitarian church and I'm sure does very caring things with those kids in school. I think he's a wonderful family man. But I don't think he's active in any organizations or ever has been. I don't think there's a place for—really, there's no issue that has really grabbed him, in terms of—but he makes—he was supporting [Paul] Simon. He had certain criticisms of [Michael] Dukakis which were very thoughtful. And I don't see much of him. We're very busy, and they're very busy. And we make no demands on them at all.

CEPLAIR:

And your daughter, I assume, is in some kind of a home now?

LEVITT:

Yeah, she was here for the weekend. She just left about two hours ago. She lives in a group home in Pasadena. She's a very precocious retarded person, very sensitive, very bright in a way. She really understands—there is nothing

on television which is over her head. She watches all kinds of shows and really understands and remembers every television [show] she has ever seen in her entire life. She has a kind of total recall. And, in fact, I used to try out premises on her, and she would say, "Oh, God, not that again. They've done that on [the] 'Danny Thomas [Hour].'" And she'd list every show that they had done that same plot on. Her visit this time was very relaxed and comfortable. It used to be a tremendous emotional tear for me. Because she was at home for twenty-two years, and I could never leave her alone or out of sight. She was always at home, she was not allowed to go out by herself. She went to school always. And it was very hard for Al to let go. I knew that she had to go, that it was no longer possible to make a life for her.

CEPLAIR:

That was about seventeen years ago?

LEVITT:

Well, she was born in 1950, and she left in '63.

CEPLAIR:

So it was twenty-five years ago?

LEVITT:

No, no, '73, '73.

CEPLAIR:

So about fifteen years that she's—yeah.

LEVITT:

Yeah, fifteen years. He didn't want to let her go, but I said she had to. And she made an immediate adjustment, because she was ready to go. And going into a world with her peers, oh, God—and sending her out there—she thought she was wonderful. And, you know, when you think you're wonderful, everybody believes you. It's a simple thing that I failed with our son, who is really wonderful. No sense of his own value ever. We always thought she was just fine, because we expected nothing from her. And she developed so much more than we expected. We got some very good advice. She's reading now, reading menus by herself, which she could never do before. And we had a

lovely weekend with her. She and I really have fun together. It's very light and carefree and a lot of laughter and fun. So she comes—I was just thinking that we ought to give her an extra visit between now and Thanksgiving, that it's too long a gap. But I used to kind of dread the visits, because it was just such a wrenching—once she left to leave I had a difficult reaction, because my life was so structured around her. The medication five times a day—you know, I was always responsible for her. She now takes her own medication and I don't have to even remind her. So I had a very difficult period of adjustment, but I made it. It took a while. I never felt any guilt about her leaving. So that made it easier for her to go, because she had no feeling of ambivalence on my part, which some people have when they send a child away. But I knew it was right at the time. So she's the happiest member of the family. She's quite pleased with her life. She goes to work. She gets an allowance from me every week. While she was here she went through the Sears catalog and checked off all the clothes she wants me to order for her.

CEPLAIR:

That's great.

LEVITT:

Yeah.

CEPLAIR:

Well, I don't have any more questions. Are there any questions you think I should have asked or anything else you would like to sort of tell posterity?

LEVITT:

Not particularly, not particularly. Well, our battered copy of your book and also the other copies that you gave us, some of which are walking out of this house a little quickly.

CEPLAIR:

Okay.

1.13. APPENDIX STATEMENT OF HELEN SLOTE LEVITT

Written for her testimony before the House Committee on Un-American Activities, September 18, 1951 (She was not permitted to read it before HUAC.)

The day these hearings began my oldest child started kindergarten. As I sat in this dreary hearing room that day my thoughts wandered often to my little boy and the wonderful years of learning and discovery that lie ahead of him. Before me was enacted the sordid spectacle of a congressional committee emasculating our American heritage of freedom of conscience, and I wondered what plans it must have in store for rewriting our children's history books. Can they afford to have millions of eager youngsters memorizing such subversive combinations of words as "All men are created equal," "freedom of speech," "the right of the people peaceably to assemble"?

Do they plan to add footnotes to the history books my little boy will someday study which will say, "Of course when our forefathers spoke of all men being created equal, they did not have the advantage of the twentieth-century scientific theories of race developed in Nazi Germany"? Or perhaps they propose to rearrange the classroom schedule so the atom bomb drill will always interrupt the history class when the kids start asking embarrassing questions like "What does freedom of speech mean if my daddy is blacklisted because he said something somebody doesn't agree with?"

What am I to teach my son and daughter so that they'll benefit from the experience of their parents?

"Be careful, children, that you think no thoughts that do not conform to the pattern of what is allowed. And be even more careful that everything you say checks with what is permitted to be said. And above all, my children, be cautious about associating with any person who is not thoroughly approved."

This would be distasteful, but if it would guarantee that my children would then be safe from the threats of blacklist or jail, it might be tempting.

Unfortunately, it guarantees no such thing. The approved thoughts and speech and associations of one day might be disapproved on a later day. For my children to be really safe I must train them to think no thoughts, to speak no words, and to trust no person.

It's either that—or an America where all people can once more think and speak freely and associate with whom they please without penalty.

Faced with such a choice, any mother who feels a responsibility toward her children must take her stand for freedom of conscience and opposition to this committee.

Date: