A TEI Project

Interview of Alfred Levitt

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1. Transcript

1.1. TAPE NUMBER: I, Side One (APRIL 15, 1988)

LEVITT:

> You want to start with my name, I assume? My name is Alfred Lewis Levitt. The Lewis is my mother [Minerva Lewis Levitt]'s maiden name. I was born June 3, 1916, in an apartment house, 2055 Prospect Avenue, in the Bronx. I can tell you something I just thought of, something that happened before I was born that I—

CEPLAIR:

> That you remember? [laughter]

LEVITT:

That I remember learning about at the time that Helen [Slote Levitt] was pregnant with our son [Thomas A. Levitt]. My mother never told this to me, but she told Helen. After my mother had been married for about three months, she discovered she was pregnant, and she didn't want to be pregnant so soon. She confided that to her oldest sister [Frances Lewis Rosenthal], who, of course, was the sophisticated one. Frances said, "Get an abortion." My mother said, "I can't afford that." She knows of someone, my aunt said, who does abortions. "You make up a hard-luck story, and he'll do it for you for very little money." "Well," my mother said, "what should I use for the hard-luck story?" "Tell him you already have four or five children and you can't afford another one." My aunt took my mother to this abortionist. These were two really "sophisticated" women. My mother, who had been married three months, tells the abortionist that she already has four children and can't afford another. The doctor agreed to charge her fifteen dollars. She got on the table, and he started poking at her. Suddenly, he began to yell at her, calling her a liar. My mother couldn't understand how he could have known that she was lying. [laughter] He did what my mother assumed was the abortion, and she was permitted to leave. My aunt, her sister, was there to take her home. My mother was surprised she wasn't really as knocked out by this experience as she had expected to be. But then months passed and her periods didn't come. She was still pregnant. That was me! [laughter] My mother never told it to me, but she told Helen the story. Of course, as Helen reported it, I knew immediately that it was me, because I knew that I was born a year after my parents were married.

CEPLAIR:

Where were your parents born? Were your parents born in this country?

LEVITT:

Yes. My parents were both born in New York City, and they knew each other as very young people. Another possible prenatal influence on me was my Aunt Susan. When ray mother was pregnant with me (it must have been fairly late in the pregnancy), her sister, whom of course I only knew from pictures and from her writings—she was a poet named Susan [J.] Lewis—was murdered by a guy who wanted to marry her and she didn't want to marry him. From her pictures, I saw that she was very pretty. She worked as a schoolteacher and wrote and published poetry. Coming home one day, she found this man waiting for her. And it was one of these things: "If not me, it will be no one," and he shot her and killed her. It was something that haunted my childhood. I would see pictures of Aunt Susan, but no one wanted to tell me about her. When I was a child, there was no conversation about her in my presence. We lived in a house in the Bronx that was a couple of blocks from where my mother's parents and her still unmarried sisters lived. I spent a lot of time there. I would find things around that said "SJL." on them, and I knew that had something to do with Aunt Susan. There was a good deal of mystery about it. Oddly, Tom, when he was in Santa Cruz, looked through the New York Times in the UCSC [University of California, Santa Cruz] library. He went through the entire New York Times for that year, which was 1915, and found the front-page article about the murder and xeroxed it. It was always a thing of fascination and secrecy that nobody wanted to talk about. But, as I grew older, I learned more about it. What was interesting was that the parents of the man who committed the murder came to my grandfather [Samuel Z. Lewis]. The man had been convicted of murder. They wanted to soften the sentence. They asked my grandfather if he would sign something that would result in a more lenient sentence for the murder. I don't know what the legalisms involved were, but they felt that it would help to make the sentence a prison term and not execution. My grandfather was against capital

punishment, and he signed it. Ultimately, after serving the prison term, the man moved out of the state—in fact, out here. They changed their names. One of my aunts knew the name, and I didn't want to know it. As I grew older—I mean, I was still a kid, but growing older and learning more and more about that event—I had great affection and respect for my grandfather. He was a very marvelous man. And I attribute to him a certain degree of pacifism that I had as a child and as a young man growing up. I took the Oxford Pledge in 1936 and violated it in World War II. [laughter] But every once in a while I think about that. That comes to mind a lot in my thinking about things.

CEPLAIR:

What did your father do for a living?

LEVITT:

My father [Charles L. Levitt] was a plumbing contractor. First, he worked with his brother [Philip Levitt], who had a very successful plumbing-contracting company. My father should have been an engineer. He was really fantastic. My uncle, his oldest brother, ran the company, and my father oversaw all the work. My father was the one who really knew the mechanics and techniques of plumbing. There was always the promise that he would be made a partner. That never happened. My father ultimately left and formed his own company. That's funny. Both Helen and I had fathers whose professions are considered to be big money-making ones today, a doctor and a plumber. Each of them in his own way managed not to make a lot of money at their profession. Helen's father [Louis H. Slote] was a man I had really great respect and affection for. I'm sure Helen has told you enough about him, so I won't.

CEPLAIR:

Were your parents educated people?

LEVITT:

Yes. Well, educated as far as high school. Neither of my parents went to college, although some of my mother's younger sisters did. We lived, as I said, in an apartment house in the Bronx. That was the apartment I was born in. It was around the corner from where my mother's family, the Lewis family, lived. I used to spend a lot of time there. I was very close to my cousins in that family. There were two, both dead now, two who were really like older brothers to me [Jared Rosenthal and Alfred Rosenthal]. I never had that kind of relationship with the cousins on my father's side. One of them I'm still in touch with. Her name is Simone Israel Leeds. She lives in the East and travels out here every once in a while to visit grandchildren. We see her and like her very much. It was a fairly harmonious family, I would say, as far as that's concerned.

CEPLAIR:

Was your mother a housewife?

LEVITT:

Yeah. She worked until she got married. She worked as a secretary and was a housewife from then on. Some of my mother's sisters continued to work. One of my mother's sisters [Dorothy R. Lewis], who never married, was in love with a man who actually was her boss but who wasn't Jewish. At that time and in that place, you know, she felt that if she married him, her parents would really be heartbroken, and she never did. She became wealthy. She became a partner in this man's business. When this aunt came to be seventy-five, or when she reached her seventy-fifth birthday, with a sense of her mortality, she sent me a whole batch of things of the family history. How the Lewises came from Spain. They were Sephardic Jews. She actually lived to be ninety-three. [laughter] She was a remarkable woman. Never married. She ran that company when this man—whose name was John Hull

and was a descendant of Commodore [Isaac] Hull—had a stroke. There was a situation where she was fronting for him, not letting the various—whatever the corporate details were, it was important for them not to know that he had had [a stroke]. His mind was in good shape, but he couldn't talk. So they communicated, writing things down. I only know smatterings of that. But Aunt Dorothy was, in a way, the matriarch of the family, even though she was not the oldest of Lewis sisters.

CEPLAIR:

Was your family very Jewish in the religious sense?

LEVITT:

My grandparents were.

CEPLAIR:

The Lewises, you mean?

LEVITT:

Yeah. The Lewis grandparents [Clara and Samuel Z. Lewis] were, but none of the children—there was one son and the rest were daughters. None of them were religious, although while my grandmother and grandfather were alive, they observed the holidays—and the holidays were great fun—Jewish holidays, especially Passover. That was really great. But as soon as my grandparents were too old to be coming to dinner at our house, we stopped keeping separate dishes. My parents went to temple twice a year, on the high holidays. We had bacon at home, and there was no religious observance, although there was a sense of Jewish identity. That was important. I think with a little encouragement my mother, at least, would have become an atheist, as I was. In my childhood I was an atheist. although we went through the thing of having a bar mitzvah. I wrote my own speech, and that was right around the time that my Grandfather Lewis died. My grandmother had died before him. Although I

remember her and what she looked like, I don't remember her as a person. I don't remember the quality of her as a person. But I sure remember my grandfather very well. He died just a short time before my bar mitzvah. What I remember is that in my bar mitzvah speech, I made reference to my grandfather having just died. God, [laughter] you know, it was a mistake, obviously. I could see—I was stunned. I saw the tears, waterfalls, coming. [laughter] And I, thirteen years old, I said, "What have I done?" That family was close, really a loving family. The men who married the Lewises became part of that family. I have a couple of cousins, not many—Kenneth Wilson, the son of my Aunt Ethel [Lewis Wilson], and my mother's younger sister [Hannah Lewis Kalfus]'s daughter, Suzanne [Kalfus Ballen]. She was named for our Aunt Susan. They are religious. That's interesting. Sue married an ophthalmologist whose father was an ophthalmologist. Their daughter became an ophthalmologist who married an ophthalmologist whose father was an ophthalmologist. They [Suzanne's family] are the most religious, perhaps the only religious, ones in the family—along with my nephew David Levitt. And Sue, we really love her dearly. She's marvelous and keeps trying to convert me. [laughter] But they're really lovely people. Peter [Ballen] is a marvelous guy. And so we just try to avoid discussing religion. They are observant to the extent that there is a problem when they come to California, and they do from time to time. He talks at different conventions, ophthalmologist conventions. When they are here, we have to find a suitable place for dinner. That is, it doesn't have to be a kosher restaurant, but if it isn't, they will eat only fish and vegetables. They won't eat meat in a non-kosher restaurant. Their children are married, but none of them to anyone who's Jewish.

CEPLAIR:

Were your parents political at all?

LEVITT:

My parents were never political in a formal sense. They voted the Democratic Party for the most part. But their principles, prejudices, and beliefs all tended toward liberal politics. Sympathy for the underdog was their attitude. Their values were really very decent in everything. The other part of my family, some of the cousins whom I was very close to, were either not political or they were politically conservative. And they all became wealthy. [laughter]

CEPLAIR:

Were there socialists in your neighborhood? Weren't a lot of New York Jews, especially in the Bronx, socialists?

LEVITT:

Oh, there weren't a lot of—I mean, I knew later that there were, but I was never aware of it at the time I was growing up. I lived in that house on Prospect Avenue until I was about thirteen. Then we moved to another place still in the Bronx farther north, a better neighborhood, as it were. I mean, those were the only two places I lived until I was married. Helen and I were joking about this recently. I went over the course of our lives, in terms of addresses, and until I was married I lived in two places. After I was married, we lived in—I counted something like fifteen or sixteen addresses. [laughter] It was interesting. I was mentioning that to someone who said that her life was the reverse. But, at any rate, I never was exposed to any radicals. The first radical whom I met and got to know was in high school, a guy who later came out here. I don't know what's become of him or whether he's still alive, but he was very active in San Francisco. Named Eddie Alexander, I think. Am I remembering that name right? Edwin Alexander, yeah. I began thinking politically in high school, but it wasn't until college where I really came under the influence of a guy you probably know, who's out here now and is no longer very radical, Bert Witt. Do you know Bert?

CEPLAIR:

Sure.

LEVITT:

Bert was a student leader and the known radical of the campus. He was respected by everybody on all sides.

CEPLAIR:

This was NYU [New York University] in the Bronx?

LEVITT:

Yes. He was really terrific. I became active in things really because I felt that way about him. It was interesting. They had a camp, a freshman camp, each year. It was somewhere; I can't even remember where it was. But each year the incoming freshmen who wanted to could enroll, attend this camp, and the counselors were student leaders. I remember I was a counselor. We all were in one big dormitory. Everybody was in the same room. I remember two guys, whom I really admired, who were very religious Jews. They did the thing with the phylacteries in the morning. I admired that act of doing it. That was really—even though I was already an atheist, but that made an impression on me. But it was Bert who really got me involved in politics. One of the two religious guys we're still in touch with. He was a chemist back East until he retired. The other one—does it matter if I go out of sequence in these things? Because it really was an interesting experience. The other was a guy named Artie [Arthur] Schoen, a big, burly guy, an athlete. He quit the football team because he didn't like the language the guys used in the locker room. He was Jewish, and he looked like an Irish cop, almost a stereotype, I mean, with the red hair and the burly build. He used to play semi-pro baseball. If someone would make an anti-Semitic remark in front of him, his way of discussing it would be to grab him and say, "I'm a Jew" and slug him. You know, that was his—and we were good friends, so that in 19—we came out here in 1939, and in 1940 I got a phone call from this guy,

whose name was Artie Schoen. He said he was out here for a tryout with the—I think they were the Hollywood Angels, whatever. We didn't have a major league team here then. He said he was brought here for a baseball tryout. He asked us to meet him for dinner, and we did. In the course of the dinner, he said, "Were you guys in one of those Marxist study groups with Bert Witt?" We hadn't been. "No." He kept asking more questions. Suddenly, I began to be suspicious. I mean, he wasn't really all that clever, and it became clear that he as probing us. He said, "But you were in some kind of Marxist study group." I said I wasn't—which was the truth. He pursued it for a while, then he dropped it. "I'm sorry," he said. "I had to ask you that question, because, you see, you know they're on one side and we're on the other." I said, "Well, I never thought of it quite that way." "The reason I asked you these things," he said, "I'm not out here to play baseball—I'm with the FBI [Federal Bureau of Investigation]." I said, "You're kidding!" "No, I'm not." And he showed me his wallet with his FBI badge. This guy turned out to be a really dedicated FBI man. So the first thing that occurred to me, I said, "Artie, do you run into any anti-Semitism in the FBI?" remembering how he felt about that. "Well, I'll tell you," he said, "I found out that if you look for anything hard enough you can find it." He was making his rationalization already. If you remember that period, it was a time when the left was hugely unpopular. While he was in Los Angeles—and he was here for quite a period of time—he kept calling us to have dinner with him. He was a pain in the ass. He always referred to [J. Edgar] Hoover as "the chief" and he referred to the FBI as "the service." He would never use a service car for private use. Even though all the others did, he never would. So we had to drive down and pick him up at the hotel, which was okay, because we wanted to make sure that we ate at places where we would never run into any friends of ours! One day he said to me, "You know, every once in a while I take my turn at the complaint desk," or whatever he called it, something like that. "Someone will call

in and say they know that so-and-so is a red, or some organization is, you know, really red. We always take that down dutifully. Of course, we've got file drawers that long"—he held his hands wide apart—"on these organizations. These people all think that they've just discovered it." It was a tense period, because we didn't want to run into friends who might make assumptions about our "friend" that might get them in trouble. Every once in a while, then, he'd go back East and he'd come out again. He would always call us. And then came the war, and I went overseas. After the war ended, Helen met me in New York. When we came back, we couldn't find a place to live out here. We had stayed in New York most of that winter. I finished up a film that I was doing, *Reunion*, American version of Le Retour, a French documentary made by [Henri] Cartier-Bresson. So we stayed in New York while I finished that. Now, Helen is pregnant with Tom, and we go back. We couldn't find a place to live, so we were staying in Morris Carnovsky's rumpus room. [laughter] I was typing a letter to my family back in New York, giving them the address where we were, and there was a knock on the door. And here's Artie Schoen. I said, "How the hell did you know where we were?" He said, "I've got ways of finding out." [laughter] Something to that effect, you know! He came in and he's very friendly. We really don't want to see him, even though he said he's no longer in the FBI. He said during the war he was assigned to some job where he was reading the mail of guys who were in the army but who were suspected of having left leanings, guys who did not know that their mail was being read and censored. "What was happening that bothered me," he said, "was that I got to know these people from reading their letters. And the ones who felt most passionately about the war were kept from going overseas. They were sent to different camps in the U.S." So we never knew whether he was baiting us in one way or another or trying to—he said he was no longer working for the FBI. He was now, he said, working for Schenley [Industries, Inc.], doing cost control, some such

thing as that. He would turn up again and again, and we always had this intimidated thing. As far as we were concerned, he was the FBI. We were afraid to say, "Look, we don't want to see you." When Tom was born, one time—he had just been born and his nurse was showing Helen how to bathe him. I wasn't home; I was at the studio. And the telephone rang, and someone—Jesus Christ, we had two in-help then, I just realized. A maid answered the phone, and she came to Helen and said, "There's a man named Arthur Schoen who wants to speak to you." She said, "Tell him I can't come to the phone now and leave the baby." So she went and gave that message. She came back and said, "He said it is an emergency and he has to talk to you." So Helen got nervous, and she gave the baby to the nurse. She went to the phone and she said, "What is it? What happened?" "Nothing happened." He said, "I just wanted to get through to you." Helen lost her temper and said, "How dare you do that!" And she hung up on him. We never saw him again. It was marvelous!

CEPLAIR:

It's surprising that you were able to maintain seeing him all those years, knowing—

LEVITT:

Well, we were afraid not to.

CEPLAIR:

Yeah.

LEVITT:

If it wasn't for a burst of anger—[laughter]

CEPLAIR:

He'd probably be sitting here right now!

LEVITT:

Well, I don't think that. Not now! [laughter]

CEPLAIR:

Did you know in high school that you wanted to be a writer?

LEVITT:

Yeah. Before that. I mean, all my life I knew I wanted to be a writer.

CEPLAIR:

How did you know that? I mean, where did it come from?

LEVITT:

I used to write things. I used to enjoy writing things. I remember even writing poetry as a child, and then I wrote stories. But I was a good student, and I was being pushed by the family. They all wanted me to go to med [medical] school.

CEPLAIR:

Why? Just because that's what all good Jewish firstborn sons do?

LEVITT:

Of course. Of course, yeah. And because I was a good student. When I got to high school, I was writing for publications and things, and I really enjoyed that. In college I did a lot of writing, too. And I knew I didn't want to go to a med school. I kept cutting all my science classes for my lit [literature] courses or my language courses. I also liked languages. Not that I was really disinterested in science, but I found it interesting in a detached way. It really didn't draw me. In fact, I got a job right after college because by that time Helen and I wanted to get married. I got a job in animated cartoons as a writer, with Terrytoons. Some of this is probably going to duplicate things that Helen has told you.

CEPLAIR:

That's okay.

LEVITT:

I'm really going way out of order, I suppose. But this came to mind at our fiftieth anniversary—I mentioned this. We wanted to get married, but we couldn't get married just on what I was making. I had to get Helen a job. Helen was still in school? she was just finishing up. Paul Terry, who owned Terrytoons, was a very idiosyncratic man. I mean, he really had a whole collection of strange notions about things. He would come into my office, and he'd say, "You know, there's something funny about a baby carriage." And I'd be waiting for him to elaborate, and that was it! [laughter] But he had all these pet theories. So what I did, I wrote a letter to myself, purportedly coming from Helen, which she then put down in her handwriting, incorporating all his pet theories. I said to him one time, "Paul, I just got a letter from a woman I kind of know. I think you might be interested." And I handed it to him. He read it, and I could see his reaction. He said, "This is really a bright woman! What does she do?" I said, "Well, she's just finishing school. I think she's considering a job on the Philadelphia Inquirer, but she doesn't want to leave New York." He said, "Do you think she'd be willing to work here?" "Well, I might be able to convince her. Let's think, what would she do?" "I don't know, but I'd like to have her here. A person who thinks like this is valuable." So I said, "How about a research department?" "Terrific! Bring her in." So we made a date for Helen to come see him, and I wrote a script. I said, "Look, you say this, and he will say this." She said, "You're crazy!" I said, "Just follow it as closely as you can." When she came out of that meeting, she said, "Are you sure he hasn't seen it? He followed it as though you had told him what to say!" She was hired, and that enabled us to get married. My salary alone couldn't do it. Even our combined salary was very little, but in those days it bought a lot. Then we had a problem. Now we were both working there, and we wanted to get married. But

the thing was, is this going to look like too much of a setup and will it endanger both our jobs? So we waited a while, and then we learned that Paul Terry was going to be out of town at some convention. We figured we'd do it that weekend. That Monday he'd come in, and he'd find out. So we got married that weekend. That Monday—the other people whom we worked with knew—he came over to my desk and he said, "I hear you and Helen got married over the weekend." And, boy, I thought, "Oh, God, this may be the end!" I said, "Yes, we did." He stuck his hand out. He said, "That's what I call knitting the organization solidly together," as though we had done it for him. We breathed easier after that. We then tried to organize—

CEPLAIR:

Could we back up a bit?

LEVITT:

Sure.

CEPLAIR:

Who were your biggest influences as writers? I assume you read a lot.

LEVITT:

Yeah.

CEPLAIR:

Who—?

LEVITT:

Well, I read a lot. The earliest influence was Jack London. But the one writer who made a really deep impression on me, or the first writer who really made a deep impression on me, was Swift. I mean, his stuff really absolutely fascinated me. I would read it over and over again. And then, yeah—I'm trying to think what other writers in later years—

CEPLAIR:

What about Fitzgerald? Did he have any impact?

LEVITT:

Very little. Very little, even though that was, you know, that was—he was a little ahead of my time, but still a contemporary. I really had an affinity for things that had social meaning in them, and of course his did, but in a different way. And when Steinbeck started—plus the early thing was Hemingway. I mean, everybody in my generation was reading Hemingway and admiring him. When The Grapes of Wrath came out, I was already an adult and I was ready for—but that really seemed to me the great American novel. I mean, it had such impact that was—

CEPLAIR:

What about Sinclair Lewis? Did he—?

LEVITT:

Yeah, Lewis. Oh, yeah, all those things. Let me see. And there was another guy whose name is escaping me. One of the things that's happening is I'm having a certain amount of amnesia. [laughter]

CEPLAIR:

So am I.

LEVITT:

Guys like Dreiser, and there was a guy like Dreiser—

CEPLAIR:

Upton Sinclair.

LEVITT:

Upton Sinclair, yeah. I couldn't think of his name. But it's funny, I can think of Sinclair Lewis, and that wasn't—yeah, those works were very important in influencing my thinking.

CEPLAIR:

Well, what kind of writing did you do in high school? Did you write fiction mostly or journalism?

LEVITT:

Journalism. I sold out in college in order to—I went from—I used to write everything, all kinds of articles there. I realized that the job that would be the most lucrative for me would be to become sports editor. So I started writing sports, because then I got tickets to everything. [laughter] I became sports editor of the college newspaper, and Helen and I were going to all the games. I was offered two jobs as a result. Well, I started working for—

1.2. TAPE NUMBER: I, Side Two (APRIL 15, 1988)

LEVITT:

We were both on the newspaper.

CEPLAIR:

What was the name of it?

LEVITT:

It was called the Heights News. It was the NYU University Heights campus, which doesn't even exist anymore. That is, it exists, but it's not—I think it's some women's college, private college, that's taken over. Do you know New York?

CEPLAIR:

Yes.

LEVITT:

Are you from New York?

CEPLAIR:

No, but I worked there for three years.

LEVITT:

Well, University Heights College is the site of the Hall of Fame. The thing that was the real Hall of Fame was a colonnade along back of the campus, overlooking the river. I remember on one side of it, one end of it, there was an inscription that said, "Enter with joy that those within have lived." I can't remember what it said on the other one, but something very pithy like that. It was really a marvelous campus. It was a little, small college. There were maybe a thousand students. Living in New York, having gone to a high school that had twelve thousand students, even in 1932, it was nice to go to that college. I really liked that aspect of it. I wrote a column, a sports column for the college paper. As a result, two things happened. One was that I worked for a while for a man named Joe Val, while I was still in college, who was the sports editor of the [New York] World Telegram. Also, I was offered a job by a man named Ned Irish, who ultimately owned the Madison Square Garden. But at this time what he had done was as a sports promoter. He introduced intersectional college basketball to the Madison Square Garden. He was a really bright guy. What he had done was he made a deal where he got, after expenses, all the profits on the thing. He figured out that if he could—I think all he needed was something like a third of the house to break even, because you don't pay college players. You just have to get them expenses to get them there. He'd have these intersectional doubleheaders. It was the first time that colleges like Stanford [University] played Columbia [University] in basketball. They had done that in football, but intersectional basketball had not existed. So he very soon owned the Madison Square Garden. He liked my columns, and he wanted me to be his PR [public relations] guy. I don't know what I would have been doing, [but] I didn't want to do that.

CEPLAIR:

All this time your parents were still expecting you to go to medical school?

LEVITT:

Yeah. [laughter]

CEPLAIR:

How did you deal with that?

LEVITT:

Oh, well, by my senior year, I just made it clear that I was going to be doing something else. And my parents were—it depends on which version you hear. If you hear Helen's version, they have spoiled me. But I've never had any difficulty, that I can remember, in really persuading them of something that I wanted to do that they were against. I mean, they felt if I wanted to do this that I should do it. I knew that long before my senior year. They didn't know it until the beginning of my senior year. And they accepted it. The families, they were all very loving families. While there was a certain amount of discipline—my father was a very disciplined guy—there was nothing about "You have to do this whether you want to or not," unless it had something to do with your safety. I never ran away from home, but I did take a trip. I must have been five or something. Myself and another kid decided to go to the Bronx Zoo, which was probably four or five miles from where we lived. We walked there, and my parents didn't know we were gone. So when they looked for us, we had disappeared. When we got home after several hours to our amazement, there were crowds around, [laughter] The other kid got spanked, and I was just yelled at. But I was a kid who would—maybe that was why they didn't really hit me. I mean, I would burst into tears at being scolded with real anger. That was really pretty bad.

CEPLAIR:

Did you have brothers and sisters?

LEVITT:

I have a younger brother [Sherman Levitt].

CEPLAIR:

How much younger?

LEVITT:

Five and a half years younger.

CEPLAIR:

So you and he weren't probably very close as you grew up?

LEVITT:

No, we weren't. Things that I learned later, which seemed remarkable—when I was in high school, I was on the track team. I'm long gone from there, and I only recently found out that my brother was also on the track team, running the same event, the 440. Neither of us—well, he may have known about me, but I never realized that he did. When I went out for the track team at college, I was sixteen and I had to have my parents' consent. My mother wouldn't give it, because I weighed probably 108 pounds or something then. And all she could see was me fading away. That was a big crisis in my life.

CEPLAIR:

Did you run track at NYU?

LEVITT:

No, I didn't. I never did after that.

CEPLAIR:

You mean she wouldn't sign when you—?

LEVITT:

No, she wouldn't sign, so I couldn't do it on my own until I was eighteen. But by the time I was eighteen, I wasn't really interested anymore. Our summer camp thing had a lot to do with both Helen's life and mine. The boys camp that I went to—I mean, if you weren't an athlete, you were just out of it. As I look back now, some of it was really cruel to the kids who were not athletic. But my closest friendships were made there, in a way. There were three of us who met when we were eight years old at summer camp [Camp Balfour Lake, Minerva, New York] and remained friends even though in different parts of the country. One of them died a year ago, a year from December, and it was his widow [Phyllis Lavitt] who gave us the anniversary party. His name was Julian Lavitt. Now, there were three of us. It's interesting, he was a brilliant kid. He went to City College [College of the City of New York], and he wanted to be a math teacher. He was a great mathematician. I said, "That's really crazy." I said, "I've never met a math teacher over the age of forty who had all his marbles." He stopped to think, and he said, "Gee, neither have I!" He's always given me credit for this. Because of that, he went to Harvard Business School instead and was hugely successful. A very, very successful businessman. He came out here—must have been in the late sixties he came out here. He had gone to Harvard Business School, graduated at the top of his class, and got his first choice of the many jobs that were offered him. He stayed with that company all his life. It was called Interstate department stores [Interstate Stores, Inc.]. He came out here because they bought the White Front stores, so they came out here to run the White Front stores. It would be impossible to find two people as close as we were who are so different in every way and in all our thinking. I mean, he was an entrenched capitalist, but was a liberal guy. His values were all decent, but, I mean, he was in that business world. I had my moment to be proud of him when he decided to close the White Front stores when Martin Luther King [Jr.] was killed and kept closing them on Martin Luther King Day ever since. And

then his wife, his first wife, got cancer and died very quickly. God, it was—I guess it was merciful in a way. But between the time that they noticed something in a routine checkup and the time she died was less than six months. And he married this woman whose name is on the invitation. Interstate called him back to New York City. He felt that the White Front stores were expanding too rapidly, and he was in some kind of argument with the other officers. They called him back to New York, and he decided as a result to retire. Then the White Front stores went bankrupt and so did Interstate. They owed him a quarter of a million dollars that they couldn't pay. They said, "You have a choice. We'll pay you so much on the dollar as a result of the bankruptcy proceedings, or we'll give you a quarter of a million dollars' worth of stock in one little company that we've spun off from the White Front things." He figured, well, he'd take the chance on the stock. He took that, and that little company that spun off was called Toys "R" Us [Inc.], It became millions and millions, that quarter of a million! He once told me this story in detail as an example of, you know, business acumen, all his education at Harvard Business School and everything. And he said, "That was the flip of a coin. It was the most important decision I ever made." He and I had become close friends at eight, probably because of the alphabetic relationship of our names, Lavitt and Levitt. The little kids shared lower berths in the train that went up to this camp in the Adirondack [Mountains]. He and I shared a lower berth. This is my first time away from home. The whole excitement and everything, and I wet the bed. He never said anything. He never told anyone. He never said anything, and that cemented the relationship, you know.

CEPLAIR:

Absolutely.

LEVITT:

I made reference to this at the memorial for him when he died. It was irresistible. I said, "It proves that not only is blood thicker than water, so is urine!" [laughter] Cliff [Clifford Sager], the other one of the three who met that same year, is a very prominent psychiatrist in New York who publishes a lot. He was considered the slow-witted one of the group, a very decent guy. And he was a radical. Julian was not. Julian was liberal for where he was, voted Democrat and things like that, but Cliff was a radical. He and Tom Perry—did you know Tom Perry? Were you around when he was here?

CEPLAIR:

No.

LEVITT:

Tom Perry was one of the three blacklisted physicians at Cedars-Sinai [Medical Center]. Tom Perry left and he worked somewhere I think in British Columbia. But Cliff and Tom Perry organized the Bellevue [Hospital] interns. Whenever he comes out here—he comes out fairly frequently. He addresses conventions and things like that from time to time. And whenever we go to New York, we always see him. So we keep in touch. In fact, he was going to be at our anniversary party, but he had to speak [inaudible] before some society. When Helen became ill on our trip to New York—I'm sure she has mentioned to you—Cliff was one of the people I called. He was really very helpful and to some degree responsible for the fact that she's still alive. He and our friend Alex Shulman, who is a physician out here, a surgeon actually. Connie, do you know Connie Stone? Her husband. Anyway, that's really a ramble.

CEPLAIR:

When you went to NYU, was it in your freshman year that you met Bert Witt and became—?

LEVITT:

Yeah.

CEPLAIR:

Did he sort of recruit you into a study group, or what happened?

LEVITT:

Yeah, he recruited me into something that was, yeah, it was a study group. And then there were a lot of really ridiculous kinds of cloak-and-daggerish things that were—Bert was an imaginative guy! [laughter] I was involved in some campaign. I'm trying to remember what the hell it was. But it was some political young—I don't even remember whether it was young Democrats or young Republicans. But I was supposed to attend their meetings and report back to Bert. I can't remember what the hell Bert or I had in mind. It's all very vague in my mind, because I never quite understood what I was supposed to be doing then, and it only becomes more puzzling now. I was in the ASU [American Student Union], of course, and Bert was a terrific factor and leader in the ASU. Did we see you at that thing in Long Beach? You know about the thing [a reunion of student activists] in Long Beach? We saw some of the people from those days who were there. Among them—Helen I'm sure has told you this—Marge Wechsler.

CEPLAIR:

She mentioned that, yeah.

LEVITT:

She was with a guy whose name I can't remember, but who had been in Spain. He fought in Spain. And then in World War II he was a flier and he was shot down. I'm going to screw this story up, because I can't remember the details. But either he was—oh, in Spain he was captured and escaped. Some underground people took him, guided him through, and got him across the border into France. I think he was telling us something about he had some experience that when he was

shot down in World War II, he ran into some of those same people. That was an odd coincidence.

CEPLAIR:

Were you in the YCL [Young Communist League]?

LEVITT:

I was in the YCL with—yeah.

CEPLAIR:

When did you join that?

LEVITT:

That was in college.

CEPLAIR:

Early on?

LEVITT:

Probably—after my first year, which was '32-'33, the finance thing became tremendously great. So I took a year off and worked for an uncle. It was really a great experience, too. Bert Witt did the same thing in the same year. So we went back having jumped that year and resumed, so that we did graduate together. But I don't really remember a hell of a lot about the YCL, because probably it was either the first or second year of being there that I was recruited into that. I just remember endless discussions of things that I didn't understand very much, very well. Because Bert was an advanced Marxist, at least in the way I remember him then. So I was given various assignments all the time, and I'm not very sure, not clear, on what they were. Then when I became sports editor of the paper, it was a very—[laughter] It was undoubtedly the most liberal sports column in the country, because most of the people who were attracted to that field were hardly liberal. There were a lot of issue things in some of those columns, some of which I may even still have. I

remember fighting a battle about a football player who had been injured in a game and had been paralyzed. The university just disowned him as though they had no responsibility for it. I wrote columns about that, attacking the university for doing that. They applied a kind of mild pressure on me, but I don't remember it as being anything that was really intimidating. They made it clear that they would have preferred that I not do it. I continued to do it, and there were no repercussions, except that—his name was [Al] Lassman, I think, and he ultimately got what he was trying to get. There were issues, and most of those issues have really become very hazy in my mind. Oh, there were anti-ROTC [Reserve Officers Training Corps] things and that kind of thing. They are still the same ones I got—

CEPLAIR:

Right. Exactly. Did you read Marx and Engels?

LEVITT:

Well, I read a lot of pamphlets, some of which were Marx and Engels, but I never sat down and read Das Kapital. I think I read Engels on The Origin of the Family, [Private Property, and the State] and that kind of material. Das Kapital was pretty intimidating. I read endless other books—[Earl] Browder's and [William Z.] Foster's. I remember the great pamphlet with that really catchy title of Foster's, What Means a Strike in Steel? [laughter]

CEPLAIR:

Were you impressed with the writings of people like Foster and Browder? Did you think these were really top-notch minds or—?

LEVITT:

Well, Foster I had a lot of trouble with. I certainly confess that Browder impressed me tremendously. I mean, stylistically, he was way ahead of Foster, and all the things he said seemed

right. Oh, the other guy who was really—jeez, there was a guy who used to write in that monthly magazine.

CEPLAIR:

New Masses?

LEVITT:

No, no, no. A much more serious magazine than that.

CEPLAIR:

Modern Quarterly?

LEVITT:

No. *Political Affairs*.

CEPLAIR:

Oh, oh, the com—yeah.

LEVITT:

Political Affairs, yeah. I can't remember his name, but he was really impressive. I mean, you had to slog through every sentence, [laughter] but it was interesting. I think, you know, I came into the thing really primarily on both a cultural and instinctive fight for the underdog approach to life, or sympathy for the underdog at least. All that fed that, and that was—I really have no regrets about my involvement in the Communist Party [CP], even though—I mean, to quote Brian Walton, the executive director of the Writers Guild of America, who uses this phrase all the time in a way I don't always comprehend—but he says, "You don't have to be [Federico] Fellini to know that!" [laughter] And you don't have to be anybody to know that there were huge mistakes made by the CP. There may have been kinds of power grabs behind the scenes, and some of them not so behind the scenes, that were less than idealistic. But the things that drew and involved us were not either of those things.

CEPLAIR:

Did your parents know that you had joined the YCL?

LEVITT:

No. No. They were Democrats all their lives. They were never anti-communist. They would say every once in a while, "The communists are really right about all the issues, but their methods are terrible." That was the way they thought. They weren't political activists in any sense. They were registered Democrats and they always voted, but they never were active in anything in that sense. They were social people in the good sense. They had feelings of responsibility, but that was all.

CEPLAIR:

Did you ever have any problems with the Communist Party's extraordinarily close identification with the Soviet Union and its—?

LEVITT:

Well, those problems I had during the Nazi-Soviet Pact—I didn't have them until then because—and it didn't come automatically either. I was persuaded that the pact was right. I can still see justifications, perhaps rationalizations, for the Soviet Union making that pact with Germany to buy time and so on and so forth. What I can't find a rationalization for was the behavior of the [American] Communist Party in support of that. I mean, they didn't just support that, they went much further. And that upset me.

CEPLAIR:

At the time?

LEVITT:

Even at the time. I'm not sure it bothered Helen as much. I can't remember now, but I have a vague feeling of our having a couple of arguments about that and pushing it aside,

because we didn't want to let it get between us. I don't know what her memory is of that. But that aspect of it was always bothersome.

CEPLAIR:

Did you ever feel, as an intellectual, that the Communist Party was crimping the way you could think or write or—?

LEVITT:

I never felt personally that it was, because it never did that I can think of. Because I tended to interpret the party line in ways that I believed. So I don't remember ever saying, "I can't say this, because it's against the party line" or "I should say this because it is." I might as well tell you this: Helen and I had close friends, a couple whom we actually lived with—we shared an apartment. They are both dead now, Marjorie McGregor and Tom [Thomas] Potts. Tom Potts was an actor named Richard Fiske, and he was married to Marjorie. He was killed in World War II. The League of American Writers had a playwriting contest. Did I ever tell you about this?

CEPLAIR:

No.

LEVITT:

The deadline for submissions to this playwriting contest was July 1, 1941. On June 30, 1941, or maybe June 29, I said to Tom, "Yes, something just struck me. All the submissions in that one-act playwriting contest are going to be outdated, because the line will have changed on June 22." So we sat up. [laughter] I told him I had an idea for this one-act play. We wrote it that night and submitted it [*Herman's No Angel*]. It won first prize, because it was the only one—

CEPLAIR:

—that was politically correct. [laughter]

LEVITT:

Yeah. And we did it. It was one of those nights, sitting at the typewriter, hysterical, laughing constantly. And it was produced. The prize was a hundred dollars. At party meetings, for months afterward, they kept saying, "We've got to give them that hundred dollars. We don't have it, but we've got to give it to them. If it was somebody else, we would have given it to them, because we would have had to do it." It would go on constantly. Finally, it was something like—it must have been six months later, because it was—yeah, it was in the middle of winter that we got our hundred dollars. We went to Palm Springs [California]. You were able to do that then, a weekend in Palm Springs for fifty bucks each.

CEPLAIR:

I know that some of the older writers in the Communist Party had a writing workshop for the younger screenwriters. Did you ever submit material to them?

LEVITT:

Never. I never submitted anything I wrote to the Communist Party.

CEPLAIR:

Or to members?

LEVITT:

Well, I did to friends in the way that I still do when I want an opinion, but never in terms of if they don't approve it—never any of that. I know that on *The Boy with Green Hair*, there were some pressures on that. They weren't so much—there were some political things; I'm trying to remember what they were. I remember one was supposedly an artistic concept that they felt that we shouldn't—that we dealt too much with the racial angle in the picture—that is, the implication of the differentness of the kid—and that it would dilute the antiwar

message or some such thing as that. But, actually, nobody was able to do anything. What happened on that picture was that, as you undoubtedly know, the original producer was Adrian Scott. Adrian gave us this thing, a short story, and it was a—the supplement to the *L.A. Times* then was a publication called *This Week*. I think it was a syndicated thing, because it appeared in New York also. There was a short story, a short-short, that was on one page by Betsy Beaton. It was a very poetic, little fey thing. You couldn't know exactly what it was or what it meant. So what we used was the concept of somebody's hair turning green and the title. Adrian Scott, who was the originator of the project, was a terrific producer. I mean, he had the capacity—that rare thing: he challenged every scene. He challenged every line in every scene and every word in every line, but did it in such a way that you couldn't wait to get back to the typewriter again. He was really an extraordinary man and an extraordinary producer. When the script was finished, it was, I guess, October of 1947. Adrian was one of the [Hollywood] Ten. But they were already committed—I'm trying to remember exactly when. Joe [Joseph] Losey had been assigned to direct it. When they threw Adrian out they put on it—Jesus, I can't remember this guy's name. But the reason he was assigned to be the producer, Steve—it will come to me if I don't try [Stephen Ames]—was that Technicolor was the only color there was available, and Technicolor commitments were hard to come by. Everybody was trying to get them, and, obviously, this picture couldn't be done without color. So this guy was hired, because he was the biggest stockholder in Technicolor [Company] outside the Kalmuses [Herbert T. and Natalie D.]. So we knew we'd be able to get it. It turned out that he was really a decent man. I mean, he had the decency to say to me that he felt embarrassed being the producer, because he felt that he would never have been able to guide or in any way help the development of a script from that short-short, which he read, to the script stage. I found that endearing at least. He

was married to, oh, a silent-screen actress named Raquel Torres. Do you remember that name? You wouldn't remember it. She was still absolutely, breathtakingly beautiful. I was on the set every day. In the meantime [Howard] Hughes bought RKO [Radio Pictures, Inc.]. He threw Dore Schary out. Hughes hated the picture. He didn't want it, he didn't want to do it. Now, Ben [Barzman] was working on another project. Joe Losey and I would get together every night, and we'd take these memos that came down from Hughes, who kept wanting to make the movie a message picture for preparedness. The trick was to try to seem to be following his orders but not doing so. And, boy, that was really uncomfortable, and it was difficult. By and large, I think we succeeded in keeping what he wanted to say out of it, but it destroyed aesthetic aspects of the film to a great degree. That was painful. And Losey—it was Joe's first picture; he was really very unsure of himself. He shot everything exactly as it was written, which has never happened to me since nor has it happened by him since, I'm sure. It was an experience. Even that kid [Dean Stockwell], who is no longer a kid—

CEPLAIR:

Hardly.

LEVITT:

He was marvelous. I talked to him on the set a lot. He loved this thing, and he felt he was this kid, he said. He said he felt like it was like being a Boy Scout or something—he had some such phraseology, you know. A year or so ago, Sam Shepard was a guest at my class at AFI [American Film Institute]. During the class he ran a film of his. After the thing was over, I said the picture that he ran had Dean Stockwell in it, who also played the lead in my first picture." He said, "What was the picture?" I said that Stockwell was very young at the time and then he knew what the picture was. He was interested and kept asking a lot of questions about it.

1.3. TAPE NUMBER: II, Side One (APRIL 15, 1988)

CEPLAIR:

There were some names I would like to get from the first tape. The first names of your parents.

LEVITT:

Charles [L. Levitt] is my father's name obviously, and Minnie—Minerva [Lewis Levitt] actually—was my mother's name.

CEPLAIR:

Okay. And your brother's first name?

LEVITT:

Sherman [Levitt].

CEPLAIR:

And the name of the camp in the Adirondack [Mountains]?

LEVITT:

Camp Balfour Lake was the boy's camp, and on the other end of the lake was the girl's camp, Camp Che-Na-Wah, supposedly an Indian term.

CEPLAIR:

And the title of the play that you and Richard Fiske wrote together?

LEVITT:

Herman's No Angel. That's the title. [laughter]

CEPLAIR:

Maybe you could tell us, what was the subject of it? Do you remember?

LEVITT:

Well, I remember the subject. These were unborn children in heaven waiting to be born. And it is a conflict about not wanting to be born because of the kind of a world it was. And it was comic, I hope. [laughter] Because it certainly wasn't a documentary. I really don't remember a hell of a lot about it—of the details—except that there was a production of it that starred such people as Winnie Mann. I think Larry Parks was in it, as a matter of fact.

CEPLAIR:

This was the Actors Lab that produced it?

LEVITT:

The playwriting contest was sponsored by the League of American Writers. I'm not sure, I don't think it was officially the Actors Lab. But I think most of the same people who later were involved in the Actors Lab were involved in that. Those two are the only ones who come, the actors who—really, it was a long time ago. [laughter] And I don't have any such thing as programs and things like that to remind me. Probably Peter Virgo was in it, too; he comes to mind. He's still around.

CEPLAIR:

Was it successful, the production? Do you remember?

LEVITT:

Oh, it got tremendous reception because it was saying all the right things. [laughter] And it was funny. It had kind of a lightness about it that excused a lot of the things that it said, so it was successful in that sense. I don't remember whether I told you that we won this prize which was a hundred dollars, and then they didn't have the hundred dollars.

CEPLAIR:

Right. Yeah, you told me that.

LEVITT:

And all the meetings. When we did get the hundred dollars, we spent it on a weekend in Palm Springs, which you could do then. Not a hotel, but kind of a small hotel—I guess you would call it a motel—that had just opened. We learned about it and we made these reservations. That is, Tom [Thomas Potts] and Marge [Marjorie McGregor], his wife, and Helen [Slote Levitt] and I went to spend this weekend together. And we got there—

CEPLAIR:

You mean Richard [Fiske] and Marge?

LEVITT:

It was Tom Potts who was Dick Fiske. Tom Potts was his real name. Harry Cohn insisted that was no name for an actor, so he became Richard Fiske. That Tom is the one for whom our Tom [Thomas A. Levitt] is named. I think I mentioned that Tom Potts was an infantry officer. He was actually in a ranger battalion of the Second Division, World War II, when he was killed at Saint-Lo [France], near Saint-Lo. And so our Tom was named for him. When we got to this motel, we walked through a dining room to our rooms, and we saw place cards, names, next to all the settings. And I saw one that said Mr. and Mrs. Adrian Scott. I said, "Terrific! Adrian must have gotten married again, and we're going to surprise him." It turned out that it was not Mrs. Scott at all, and he had not remarried. He had picked that place figuring he would not run into anyone in the world, you know, who knew him. [laughter] So it was one of those great—

CEPLAIR:

Palm Springs must have been, what, a very small place then.

LEVITT:

It was like three blocks long. Yeah, Palm Springs was very different.

CEPLAIR:

I remember reading that Frank Capra and Robert Riskin used to go up there to write their scripts for their movies in the thirties.

LEVITT:

Oh, this was probably in the early forties, like 1940 or something. It would be 1941 exactly, actually. I guess when we went there, it was probably in the fall of 1941. That would have been the time that we had gotten the money, fall or early winter. It was a very different community from what it is now, and remained very different for quite a while. I guess the postwar decade was probably what made the big changes.

CEPLAIR:

You had said that Swift was your favorite writer. I neglected to ask you what there was about Swift's writing that won you.

LEVITT:

Well, the satire and the conscience impressed me at that time, in my youth. I mean, his A Modest Proposal hit me as one of the most brilliant things I'd ever read. It's the kind of thing that when you come across it for the first time without really being prepared for what it is, it's tremendously impressive.

CEPLAIR:

Did you want to be, then, a satirical writer? Was that your—?

LEVITT:

Oh, I didn't really know what I wanted to be as a writer. Elements of satire and humor were always something that I was interested in and responded to and, to some extent, when I could, projected. I came out here, we came out here, because of a job with Merrie Melodies. It was still animated cartoons that brought us out here. I lasted about six weeks. It was a really fantastic introduction to all the cliches about

Hollywood in all its monstrous aspects. At that time, animated cartoons were not scripted, which they are now. They were storyboarded. The story department almost always consisted of a group of sketch artists. I never was that. I would verbalize or put on paper a verbal description of my ideas. When I came out to Merrie Melodies, there was a guy who, upon learning that I didn't draw, he said, "Well, I'll sketch your ideas, too, as well as my own." They'd go up on a big board, and there would be these different styles of the different cartoonists. Every Friday, the guy who was a kind of studio manager, I think, would come through, and he'd look at the board and he'd say, "Nice going, Joe. Very good, John. Terrific, Jack." And when he said this to the guy who was drawing mine, I was waiting for him to explain that half of those were mine, at least half. And he didn't. After the studio manager left, I said—well, I didn't say anything. The next week, the same thing happened. This time I said, "Don't you think I should explain which of those are mine?" He made me feel really shitty and crass for even suggesting anything. He said, "You know, we are all doing this together. This is a collaboration." I accepted that, feeling embarrassed for having been so gauche. The end of the sixth week, I was called in. The studio manager, whose name I can't remember, said, "Listen, you know, we've given you six weeks. I see nothing of yours on the board." At that point, I just could not bring myself to say that this guy was taking credit for my work as well as his own, so I left. That was it. So that was our introduction to Hollywood. [laughter]

CEPLAIR:

Well, let's go back to Terrytoons. Why did you go to work for Terrytoons at all?

LEVITT:

Well, it was what seemed to me to be the most available way of earning money doing something that was not totally remote from what I wanted to do.

CEPLAIR:

Which was—?

LEVITT:

I wanted to write in some form. The way I got that job—I think I told you how Helen got the job. I'll tell you how I got it. I had an uncle who was a performer. He was in an Ed Wynn play. I was in college at this point, and I was writing funny sketches and things. And my uncle was—this play was in rehearsal, and he came to me one time, I had great affection for this uncle; he was really a marvelous guy.

CEPLAIR:

His name was—

LEVITT:

His name was Arthur Kalfus. He used the name, very imaginative pseudonym, Arthur Kay. [laughter] The play was in rehearsal, and he said, "I think they're going to drop the scene. It's my big scene, but Wynn feels it isn't really funny enough." He said, "So I thought maybe you could do something with it." And so I did. I worked on the thing. He turned it in to Wynn, and he kept the scene in. That same uncle was doing voices for Terrytoons, and when he heard they were looking to enlarge the staff, that they needed another writer, he immediately recommended me. So that is how I got that job.

CEPLAIR:

And what did you do there precisely?

LEVITT:

I worked out ideas for cartoons.

CEPLAIR:

What sort of cartoons were they?

LEVITT:

Well, each one was a story. I say "cartoon" in the sense of the one-reel little production rather than still cartoons. There they accepted my way of working, which was on paper. And there wasn't the kind of competitiveness there that I ran into in Merrie Melodies. There was a head writer who would draw my stuff with the others, a very funny old guy, John Foster. There was never any question about whose work was what. He would put my name on the things he drew that were mine,

CEPLAIR:

Did they have stock characters that you had to keep using, or was each cartoon—?

LEVITT:

No. Merrie Melodies and almost everything else had stock characters. We didn't, although I introduced a couple of characters that were repeated several times. I tended to work into it characters that my uncle did the voice for. Later on, after I left they had to get—I can't remember what it was, but I know that they had a running character. Paul Terry was one of the pioneers of animated cartoons. Farmer Alfalfa goes way back to the very early days, long before [Walt] Disney or any of these others. But he was the most backward man I've ever met in my life. His company was the last to go into sound. It was the last one to go into color. In every way he was really backward, as well as very politically reactionary. But on a personal level he was a very pleasant, sweet guy. I remember [him] telling me once that at the time that*Snow White* [*and the Seven Dwarfs*]—maybe I told you this. Disney was working on Snow White and there were things in the press that it was soon getting ready to be released. Paul Terry said, "It's too bad about Disney. He really has talent and would have had a chance, but he's going to be wiped out, because you cannot make a full-length feature in animation." With his usual clairvoyance. But he bragged about being the last to go into

sound, the last to go into color. One time he told me that in an earlier period, when I was a little child, that when radio first came out, the stores that were trying to sell this new thing would have a big horn on the outside. They'd have the radio playing and broadcast out to the street to attract purchasers. Terry told me, he said, "I always was absolutely sure that it was a con, that they had some guy in there with a phonograph playing that music. When you heard a voice, it was some guy back there. It couldn't be radio taking sounds from the air," and so on. That was characteristic of Paul Terry's advanced thinking. Later, there was something that Helen and I recall differently. She's much more generous than I am about that. We tried to organize the Terrytoon employees secretly. In fact, there was a Screen Cartoonists Guild in New York. We're in New Rochelle now; this is kind of out of New York. I don't know whether you know—

CEPLAIR:

Yeah.

LEVITT:

We had spoken to some guys who had been organizing the Fleischer [Studios, Inc.] cartoon operation. [Max] Fleischer was the guy who—you couldn't remember any of this. Out of the Inkwell had to be before your time.

CEPLAIR:

I remember that.

LEVITT:

Yeah? Fleischer came after Terry did in the animations. He was in New York. Terry was in New Rochelle when they tried and succeeded to some extent in organizing Fleischer. And Fleischer moved the whole operation to Florida. So these same guys—and I can't remember any of their names, although I have a clear picture of one of them in my mind. I don't remember how we made contact with them, but we started

talking to various people whom we felt we could trust. At one point, Paul Terry called all the employees together. He said, "I hear there has been some talk of a union among you. I just want you all to know that this company is really a hobby for me. I don't really need it anymore. And if it becomes unpleasant in any way, like a union or anything like that," he said, "I'll just disband it and retire." That really shook a lot of people, because Fleischer wasn't there anymore? this was the only place in the New York area. The nearest other places would have been Miami and Los Angeles. A lot of them really believed what Terry said. I guess he probably could have carried that threat through if he felt like doing so, because he was clearly very rich. Anyway, they all fell away. Where Helen and I differ is that Helen—we were then fired.

CEPLAIR:

He knew that you were the instigators.

LEVITT:

Well, Helen feels we were fired because there was a general retrenchment. But my recollection is that all those who were fired in the retrenchment were all people who responded to our unionizing attempts. It was absolutely certain to me that we were fired because of our attempting to unionize the place. But in any case, what was clear was that we were definitely fired.

CEPLAIR:

You didn't think of going to the National Labor Relations Board [NLRB] to file a complaint?

LEVITT:

It never occurred to me. Never. I mean, we were really pretty uninformed to be union organizers, [laughter] I mean, we knew there were unions, and it was a good thing. We knew there was such a thing as NLRB and so on, but we had no experience with them at all.

CEPLAIR:

So you were doing this on your own. I mean, like the CIO [Congress of Industrial Organizations] wasn't helping or—?

LEVITT:

Right, no. But there was a Screen Cartoonists Guild that had headquarters in New York.

CEPLAIR:

Was it affiliated to—?

LEVITT:

I can't remember. I just remember there was one man there who was advising us and, you know, relating to us. But once we were fired, I never saw that guy again.

CEPLAIR:

Had you liked your work for Terrytoons?

LEVITT:

Well, it was—I liked our life at that time. I don't think we've ever lived as well since. We've made a lot more money, but never lived as well. We had a little apartment in New Rochelle that we furnished ourselves. We had a marvelous life there. We were very political, and we were involved in the community. There was a rather large Italian population that was a kind of a sub-population of New Rochelle. New Rochelle essentially was a very wealthy community. They had an election there that led to what was known as "the ten days that shook New Rochelle." It was a very Republican community, and the mayoralty election—I can't remember the term that describes their electoral setup. But, at any rate, there were three candidates running: a Republican, a Democrat, and then the ALP—American Labor Party—guy. As far as the people in New Rochelle were concerned, anything other than a Republican, you know, was the equivalent of a

communist. So there was never any question about the Republican being elected. But ten days before the actual election, the Republican candidate died. There was a communist candidate, too, who had very few votes, but there was hardly any difference to the people of New Rochelle between the Democrat and the communist. I mean, anything left of the Republican was red! The communist candidate was a man named Tony Lombardo, who was the son of the local shoemaker. The stories about him were that whenever anybody was looking for him as the leader of the Communist Party, he was usually in the basement of the house with his violin. So they had on the ticket now, within ten days of the election, a Democrat and a communist, and they were the same. Within those ten days, they rammed through an amendment to the city charter for the first time permitting write-in ballots, write-in candidates. When the election day came, you filled out your ballot with a pencil and you placed crosses in the proper squares. The pencils in the polling booth said, "Vote for the Republican candidate," who won on a write-in by a landslide. But during those ten days, the Communist Party in New York was so excited about it that they sent planes with those streamers, "Vote for Tony Lombardo." [laughter] That happened before we got there, but we heard about it. We got to know Tony Lombardo, some of the others there, and some people who became fairly well known on a national scale. A lot of things in our life were really—I can't think of the word to describe it, but our life was very full in all kinds of things in the very political arena. We were active in a Communist Party unit of some sort. We also were persuaded to join the temple, and we organized current events groups and all that kind of thing. There was a group of young Italian people who were very gifted and talented musically and theatrically. There were a number of events of that sort, cultural theatrical events that were very exciting and very stimulating. They did a production of [Irwin Shaw's] Bury the Dead that was absolutely sensational. After leaving there—you know, those ten months

were very intense ten months—for a while we would get some letters from some of the people telling us how much they missed us, and we would correspond for a while. Then it all petered out, as things tend to. During that ten months in New Rochelle—of our other set, the group of friends which centered around the camp, we were the first in the group to get married. The others all got married later. But they'd all come up, and on weekends there would be several couples sleeping on our living room floor, because we only had a small apartment. It was a nice period, but it was also a tense period. At the end of those ten months, when we got fired—we never told our parents that we were fired. I don't know why, but we both had this kind of protective thing about our parents, like feeling we could handle it, but they couldn't.

CEPLAIR:

This was the summer of 1939?

LEVITT:

Well, we were fired in—I think we were fired in the winter. I think we got a Christmas bonus or something, and we were fired. And then there was a period of a month or two when we were trying to get other things and didn't. I wrote to [Walt] Disney [Productions]. I wrote to Merrie Melodies. Disney sent me in a cartoon comic problem to work out, but you had to do it in sketches, and I didn't do that. But I can't remember what I wrote to Merrie Melodies that got them to say, "You're hired." I remember that telegram coming and the great excitement. We had never been out of New York, really—I mean, not out of New York State. New Jersey, maybe. And it was a big deal. We were moving west. Some friends who were living in New Rochelle, friends that we made in New Rochelle—one woman was the sister-in-law of Harry Kurnitz, who was a very successful writer out here. He wrote things like the Thin Man [series]. I can't remember what, but he wrote a series of these things. The woman who was his sister-in-law was the expert

on Hollywood. She'd never been here, but she knew all about it. One of the things she said was, "Nobody has furniture. Everybody lives in furnished apartments." She advised us to sell our furniture. So we sold this furniture which was ten months old—most of which she bought. [laughter] It never occurred to us at the time. Of course, we drove across the country. I think we had our first anniversary on the road somewhere. Helen remembers the exact place. We talked about it fairly recently, but I can't remember where it was.

CEPLAIR:

So that's April, about—?

LEVITT:

April 2 was our anniversary, yeah. We came out here. We knew no one out here. But there was a counselor at the camp at Balfour Lake, who was a counselor when I was a kid, named Mickey [Michael] Uris. I had heard he married a woman from the girl's camp, who was an actress named Dorothy Tree. They were the first Balfour Lake couple who got married. We were the second. There was quite a gap between us; they were considerably older. On the May Day previous to our departure, almost a year earlier, we had run into Mickey Uris's brother, George Uris, who was a radical. We had maintained some contact with him. When we were leaving, we called him. He said, "Look Mickey up." He gave us his address and phone number. The woman who bought our furniture said—no, no. Harry Kurnitz was in New York, and so she gave us his number to call him for any advice we'd want. Well, I couldn't think of any advice, except to ask him to suggest an inexpensive, centrally located hotel that we could head for when we got out here. He suggested the Hollywood Roosevelt [Hotel]. We drove across the country with various adventures that Helen probably remembers better than I do. We arrived here at the Hollywood Roosevelt. It looked very impressive to us. I think I had asked him to recommend a centrally located, moderately

priced hotel. We had not had much experience with hotels—you know, across the country with these little motels—and so I remember this very vividly. I pulled up to the hotel and took our bags in. We went up to the desk and I said, "I want a room and bath for two." A snotty desk clerk said, "All our rooms have baths." Instead of accepting that, I said, "Well, what I really meant was my wife takes showers and I take baths, and what I wanted was a room that had both a bath and a shower." He said, "All our rooms have baths and showers." I was really humiliated. And I felt absolutely defeated. The bellhop came and took our bags. Took us to our room and opened the door, and there was this beautiful living room. He put our bags down, I tipped him, and he left. We looked around, "Where the hell is the bed?" Helen said, "The couch must open." So I tried to open the couch, couldn't find a way of opening it. She said, "Well, call up and ask them." I said, "I can't do that! There has to be a bed here." She said, "Call them up." So, finally, in defeat, I called and I said, "I can't find the bed." They said they'd send someone up. The bellhop comes up again. There's some tapestry on the wall, and they part the thing and there's a wall bed! Well, my only—I had never seen a wall bed except in the movies, and they were always in the slums. So that really startled me and took us both by surprise. As a parenthesis to this, probably at least ten years later, maybe more, we went to Las Vegas at El Rancho [Hotel], which I think has burned down since. It must have been more than ten years, because it was already in the blacklist period. I had been working for the King brothers, and Frank King had recommended this place to us, El Rancho. He said, "Ask for a cottage," and we did. The bellhop takes us to this cottage and puts our bags down. I tip him, he leaves, I look around. It's furnished like a living room, with a table, a long table. I said, "Where's the bed?" And Helen said, "Just change your clothes, so we can get down there and start losing money. When we come back, the bed will be made." But I felt along the walls, you know, to locate a bed. I couldn't feel

anything. I tried to take the couch apart, and I couldn't do it. She said, "Come on! Let's go!" So we both undressed. There's a knock at the door, and I throw something on. Helen hides in the closet, and I go to the door. It's the bellhop, and he said, "I'm new here. I took you to a conference room. There's no bed here!" [laughter]

CEPLAIR:

The sophisticated travelers.

LEVITT:

You're right! Yeah. That was really—

CEPLAIR:

Let me go back and ask you a few questions. Were you a movie buff? I mean, did you want to work in movies? Were movies something that attracted you?

LEVITT:

Movies hadn't attracted me until I got the job at Terrytoons. Then I became very interested in the moving image. We used to talk at Terrytoons about that far-off, distant future when there would be such things as television. The word was used for a long time before the actuality on any large scale. It seemed like something that would be terrific to be prepared for, to get in on at the bottom and so on. At least that's the way it was talked about. So I was interested in that. I became a movie buff while we were at New Rochelle, at Terrytoons. Previous to that when thinking about writing, I had never thought about writing movies; I thought about writing novels. And so we became very interested, both of us became interested in movies then.

CEPLAIR:

Helen said she'd gone to the theater a lot. Had she always—?

LEVITT:

Oh, yeah, Helen had a big theater orientation, much more than I had. But when we started going together, we started going to the theater a lot together. We enjoyed that. Again, in a peculiar way—theater, I never associated theater with movies. I mean, it was such a different medium. I'm expressing it wrong. It was not only that it was a different medium, it just seemed to be on a totally—operating on a different planet. Or, to put it: more accurately, that films were on a different planet, that they were remote. I never thought about films at all. And even animation was different from films. But I did become interested in that image. In a way, seeing it through animation, I mean, there are so many marvelous things that can be done. The only limitation was your imagination. There were marvelously gifted people in that outfit. There was a man named [Carlo] Vinceguerra. I knew later that he had come out here, but I never saw him out here. I can't believe he's still alive, although he may be. It seemed to me that he was very much older than me. But I realize now from a number of things I recognized recently, when you're young, even someone who is three or four years older than you seems like he's really in another generation. So he may not have been much older than we were, as our impression was. I did meet a guy whose name I can't remember. I met him out here. He was at Terrytoons, and he was an animator. I met him on the Disney strike picket line in—it must have been 1939 or '40, something like that.

CEPLAIR:

'Forty-one, I think.

LEVITT:

'Forty-one? Yeah. And that was the only holdover contact from Terrytoons. I can't remember his name, although I remember his face. When we did come out here, when we arrived at the Hollywood Roosevelt, one of the things after—I guess the next day after we were—we must have collapsed probably upon

arrival. The next day I called Mickey Uris. I didn't want to explain that I had been at this camp when I was a child and he was a young man. So I just said, "We ran into your brother George, and he said to call you." I told him our names, and he said, "Where are you?" I told him, and we made a date for lunch. He said we'd meet at the lobby of the hotel. So he called from the house phone, and I said we'd come right down. We came down, and I recognized him immediately. I walked over to him. He seemed a little surprised, but didn't say anything. I guess he assumed that—I don't know what he assumed. We started to walk to the Gotham [restaurant], which was right near there at that time, for lunch. He said, "You know, I keep thinking there's something familiar about your name, about you. Have we ever met before?" I said, "Yes, we did, a long time ago." "Where?" "Camp Balfour Lake." And he said, "Al Levitt!" "Yeah!" [laughter] He was a counselor when I was a child. He was very excited about that. He insisted on bringing us home to meet his wife, Dorothy. She was an actress, Dorothy Tree. He brought us in, very excited, telling her the whole thing, and her reaction was, "Wait a minute! You telling me he was a kid when you were a camp counselor. Now he comes in here, a married man with a wife." She said, "How old do you think that makes me feel?" [laughter] She's still around; she lives in New York, was a very acerbic woman, but a very good, decent woman They were both very political.

1.4. TAPE NUMBER: II, Side Two (APRIL 15, 1988)

LEVITT:

Early on when we got here, through the Urises, we met a lot of really interesting, marvelous people. Dorothy had a fairly good role in a picture called Confessions of a Nazi Spy, which was, you know, very well received by the left. It was really a—made a splash. She invited us to the premiere—big excitement. We went to that. We met Don [Donald Ogden] Stewart, Ella

Winters, and a lot of people like that. Some of the people are still around. We met the Endores [Guy and Harriet]. Now they're not still around, are they?

CEPLAIR:

She is, I think.

LEVITT:

Is she still? I haven't—we were sent to a Marxist study group.

CEPLAIR:

Who sent you? Do you remember how that happened?

LEVITT:

I don't remember who exactly it was, but through the Urises, through Mickey, we made that connection.

CEPLAIR:

Even though you had been, say, a communist in New York, you couldn't go directly—

LEVITT:

No. Security was very important. So we went through some kind of procedure of a study group, and it was like being tested [laughter] and checked. And then we were assigned to a party branch. I can't remember those early branches, what we were doing, what our connection was. But it was during that period, after I was fired, when I started writing screen treatments, you know, originals, to try to sell. I got a lot of encouragement, but I never sold anything. Helen, meanwhile, was working for the Motion Picture Democratic Committee first.

CEPLAIR:

So you weren't working for a salary for a period of time?

LEVITT:

Yeah, when I was working at Merrie Melodies, I was working, and Helen was working at the Motion Picture Democratic Committee.

CEPLAIR:

But when you were fired from Merrie Melodies?

LEVITT:

Then I had no work. Finally, I found out about readers and reading, found out that I could get outside reading assignments, which would be kind of preliminary. If they liked what you did, you might be able to get a job. So I started doing that. You make very small amounts of money; by the piece, you do this thing. But I did get to know whoever was in charge of the reading department or the story department, as it was called, at RKO [Radio Pictures, Inc.], at Paramount [Pictures, Inc.]. And then I got this terrific job working as a reader for David [0.] Selznick. David Selznick's story editor was Val Lewton. I don't know if you know who he is. Most remarkable man I've ever met in my life. He was really an extraordinary person. I was the only reader. He said, "It's ridiculous for you to be a reader. I'm going to make you the assistant story editor. Same pay," he said, "but you can tell people you're an assistant story editor." But I was the reader. He was an interesting man in many ways. His mother ['s sister] was, I think, [Alia] Nazimova.

CEPLAIR:

Ballet dancer?

LEVITT:

Yeah? Either that or a Russian actress was his mother, I can't remember which one was. But he was educated in Russia. I think he was probably the most literate human being I've ever encountered in my life. He had a lot of languages as well as Russian. His English was impeccable. The one thing that was interesting was that he didn't know, he never learned, the

sequence of the English alphabet. So here this very learned man every once in a while would come up to my office. He'd have a big volume in his hand. He'd say, "What comes first, e or m?" Whenever he had to look up something that was alphabetized, he always had problems. You'd think he'd just sit down and memorize it for that, but he never did. Funny how everything ties in. David Selznick at that time had some kind of project I think he referred to as—it may have had a different title, but it was always referred to as the Lobero Theater project. Lobero Theater was a theater in Santa Barbara, legitimate theater. Playwrights would submit their plays. He turned those over to me to read. One of the plays submitted was by a man named Martin Berkeley. It was terrible! He found out that I was the reader, and he called me. He said, "Hey, did you get my play? Did you read it yet?" I said, "Martin, I'm really not allowed to discuss it." "Come on, never mind that bullshit. You can tell me." I said, "I can't tell you." And, of course, his play was not among those selected, and I don't think he ever forgave me. [laughter]

CEPLAIR:

That's obvious! What exactly is the job of a reader?

LEVITT:

Well, in the studio in which I then became a reader, at Paramount Studios, there's a great deal of material that is submitted to be made into motion pictures. It can come in the form of a novel, a play, a screenplay, or a treatment, which is a screen story in straight narrative form that the writer wants to sell to the studio. Because at that time the major studios were running the town, and each studio was turning out an enormous—altogether, they were turning out something like a few hundred feature films a year. So the amount of material was very great. No producer then or since is ready to sit down and read any long piece of work himself. In fact, they won't even read a short piece of work. Because the routine, the

procedure, is to send the stuff—no matter who it's handed to, it's sent down to the story department, where it's logged in and each piece is assigned to a reader, who reads the material, does a synopsis of it. The synopsis may be as short as three pages if the material requires that or over twenty pages, depending, again, on the material. It's a retelling of the story in shorter form. Along with the synopsis, there is a kind of one-page summary—or was at the time—and in addition a one-paragraph summary. So depending on how much of a hurry the producer was in, he didn't have to go through the whole thing. And you also wrote your comment about it. If you thought it was good and would make a good film, you would tell why you thought it was good, what casting things seemed to be favorable for it and so on. If you didn't, you said that. There were very few writers above the age of forty who weren't readers before they became writers.

CEPLAIR:

Was it good practice?

LEVITT:

It was really an education. It was very good. You were able to think objectively because it wasn't your work that you were thinking about. You saw a whole range of kinds of mistakes that could be made in developing a story. And you saw the things that were good that really were like beacons. Contrary to what some people used to say and think and maybe still do, that readers were all just trying to bury everything, you didn't. Because coming across something that was good, I mean, suddenly you were handed dessert after this long meal, and you really enjoyed it. There were a couple of experiences—it was always difficult when it was a friend or someone you knew. There were about three instances where I was covering material written by somebody I knew. I can't remember whether it was a full screenplay or a detailed treatment, written, a collaboration of Dalton Trumbo and Ring Lardner

[Jr.]. It was marvelous. I even remember the title, The Fisherman of Boudrais. I don't know whether I would think it was marvelous today, but at that time I saw it was so right about the war. It was so charming. It really was a lovely thing. And I was really enthusiastic about that. But it didn't sell, as I remember. On the other hand, there was something that was handed in, a treatment, a very detailed treatment that I read that was written by Bess Taffel, Sol Barzman, and Ben Barzman. It was a three-way collaboration. I didn't know them then. I may have met Ben in passing somewhere. I'm sure I didn't know Bess, and I might have met Sol. But they certainly were not friends, I thought it was an absolutely marvelous idea and marvelously developed. I was really delighted to be legitimately enthusiastic about it. Bill [William] Dozier was my boss. He was the head of the story department; he was the story editor. His title was story editor, and the head of the reading department was Meta Reis Rosenberg. So it was a good cast. One of my fellow readers at Paramount was Bernie [Bernard] Gordon. Do you know him?

CEPLAIR:

Uh-huh.

LEVITT:

One was an innocent victim of the blacklist who I get letters from still, Jerry Gruskin. You don't know that name?

CEPLAIR:

I don't know him.

LEVITT:

Some other time, I'll tell you about that. Oh, Alice Hunter was a reader there. She wasn't Alice Hunter then; she was Alice Goldberg. Ian Hunter's wife, Tim Hunter's mother.

CEPLAIR:

Was that just happenstance?

LEVITT:

Oh, yeah.

CEPLAIR:

I mean, you always hear talks, you know, when people write about Hollywood from sort of the right, that the party was sort of getting people all these jobs and infiltrating. I mean, does—?

LEVITT:

I'll tell you what happened. And I think it's probably true of almost any business, but maybe more true of this one, this business. Anybody who gets somebody a job and doesn't think that that person can handle the job is out of his mind. It's absolute insanity. You wouldn't. You're not doing the person who's getting the job a favor, because you know they're going to be in trouble. And you're certainly not doing yourself a favor. So nobody that I know of would do that. What you would do sometimes is when you've found someone who you did like because of his politics and liked his work, of course you would, like anything else, you would push it. That wasn't the case here, because I really didn't know those people. I think the agent was Harold Hecht.

CEPLAIR:

This is for the Taffel-Barzman script?

LEVITT:

Yeah. It was called True to Life. Bill Dozier called me, and he said, "I've got their agent in my office now. He's asking for a lot of money. And you're the only one in the studio who's read it. All we've read is your synopsis. It looks and sounds very good on the basis of the synopsis, but I've got to ask you a lot of questions. Do you think this will lend itself to a screenplay readily?" and so on. I said, "The thing is written. All you have to do is put scene headings on it, virtually, you know, and

character names over the dialogue. It's almost a screenplay as it is." He said, "All right." It was after that, they bought it. It was made. I think it was made with Bing Crosby and Franchot Tone, not a musical, a straight comedy. The picture never lived up to what the script was, but I still think it was a great idea! [laughter] I think what is probably true that the right has said is that you as an individual reflect your own attitudes. So material that was right wing you would honestly say you didn't like, and you didn't. I remember somebody before the war had submitted a thing—I don't remember the title, but if I were to put a title on that, it would be "The Yellow Peril." It was really very anti-Japanese from a racial point of view and all the shitty things, you know, that—and this was before Pearl Harbor. I was really offended by it, and I attacked it. But I never heard any repercussions, because I think anybody else there who looked at it would have said the same thing.

CEPLAIR:

There are other readers, though, of other political persuasions, so you hardly—

LEVITT:

Oh, oh, of course! I mean, there were a variety of readers. At that time, there were at least a half a dozen at every major studio, and sometimes more.

CEPLAIR:

Were you aware of who were communists and who were not?

LEVITT:

Not automatically I wasn't. I'm sure there must have been scenes played in which people were very careful to protect themselves. And then they'd hear something, and two people start to recruit one another, because that kind of thing—I'm sure that happened. It didn't happen to me. The tendency, though, is when you say "politics" it seems to narrow things. At least the connotation of the word is narrow. But if you talk

about it from a philosophical viewpoint about life and justice and all those nice words, your tendency is that you will respond to that kind of material no matter who writes it. On the other side of that, of course, is that your friendships are also influenced by your outlook and the outlook of people you know. There are many people I met in the party whom I could not stand and many out of it whom I felt great affinity for. Which is not to say that I didn't have a lot of communist friends whom I have a great feeling for. But it was never merely because they were communists.

CEPLAIR:

Were you writing while you were being a reader?

LEVITT:

Yeah, I was always—I was writing. As a matter of fact, Bill Dozier, who was our boss—our immediate boss was Meta Reis Rosenberg, and above her was Bill Dozier, who I think is still alive. He used to be—maybe still is—teaching at Loyola Marymount [University]. But he must be a very old man now. He was a terrific guy. I mean, he was a great guy to work for. He encouraged people. I wrote a little thing, and he tried to sell it. He tried to get a producer interested in it. He didn't succeed, but he encouraged me. I was about to get my first movie assignment at Paramount when I got drafted. [laughter]

CEPLAIR:

This would have been '42 or '43?

LEVITT:

'Forty-two.

CEPLAIR:

So you were a reader, then, for almost maybe three years, I guess.

LEVITT:

About two years.

CEPLAIR:

What interests me as I listen to you and reflect on your career is you always seem to have written for salary. I mean, you never seem to have written novels or short stories or plays.

LEVITT:

That's true.

CEPLAIR:

Did that just happen that way?

LEVITT:

It just happened that way, yeah. I do have a novel project, which I have got several hundred pages on. I go back to it, you know, every once in a while. But I guess starting with Terrytoons, I began to think in those terms. Most of my life I've stayed with that. So then, yeah, I got drafted.

CEPLAIR:

Before we get to the draft, were you an active member of the Communist Party during those years?

LEVITT:

Yeah.

CEPLAIR:

Do you remember what sorts of—? I mean, obviously, from '39 to '41 it was to stay out of the war.

LEVITT:

Right.

CEPLAIR:

Were you an active part of that?

LEVITT:

Yeah.

CEPLAIR:

Because I know you didn't approve of that line particularly.

LEVITT:

Well, what I didn't approve of was that after the Nazi-Soviet Pact, some in the party felt that they not only had to justify the Soviet Union's position, but they really had to embrace the Nazi "ally." And it was really a schizophrenic kind of thing. Where were we? I'm trying to figure out the time patterns on this thing.

CEPLAIR:

Well, I think it's in September 1939, when the word comes down that this is an imperialist war.

LEVITT:

Right. Right. Yeah. There were a lot of heated battles on that subject.

CEPLAIR:

Well, the united front falls apart, in effect, at that point, right?

LEVITT:

Right. Yeah. I was reminded of it as recently as a week or so ago. I've been running into Phil [Philip] Dunne on the picket line. Phil has no idea who I am, but he remembers me from around the [Writers] Guild [of America]. He greets me as a friend, and we walk along the picket line. He tells me stories that he would be embarrassed to tell me if he really knew me. There's no point in embarrassing him, so I just let it go on. I think I told you about a long time ago—well, you would be able to date this time. It was on the eve of a guild strike. Oh, it was '81, that's right. It was the '81 strike, I guess. Yes, the '81 strike. I was on the strike planning committee. One of the things that they were doing for a particular guild meeting was

they were going to invite Phil Dunne to come and talk to the membership about the whole history of the guild and strikes and so on. But he was ill at the time. He was not very well, and he said he would just give his speech and leave. He couldn't see terribly well either; he had some problem. Someone would have to be in the lobby who could recognize him and then lead him to his seat, so that he could then leave again. I volunteered, because I was sure I would recognize him. I may have told you this before, personally. So I did that; I met him. I introduced myself. He had no recollection of my name. I didn't expect him to. I didn't ask—I led him to his seat. I sat next to him, waiting for—oh, one of the things was the way you get to talk at a guild meeting. There are the microphones, you line up behind the microphones. He couldn't be expected to stand in line, waiting for that. So when the time came, I was going to get on line for him. When his turn came, he would come to the microphone. But there was a lot of time before that, and I'm sitting next to him. He's telling me about his book [*Take Two: A Life in Movies and Politics*]. His book had just come out, and so had yours [*The Inquisition in Hollywood: Politics in the Film Community, 1930-1940*]. He was telling me how he would go on this circuit and follow those two young guys. They'd state the party line, and he said, "I would turn it upside down." And, you know, jeez, God, like that! [laughter] It was one of these things where you feel awkward. You feel like you're eavesdropping on something. Because I feel if he knew me, he wouldn't be talking to me that way. And that still persists till today. Now he knows me by name, but he has no idea of anything about my past. We walk along the picket line. I walk with him often, because I'm afraid he's going to collapse or something, he's so old. But he's really in pretty good shape, although he's almost blind.

CEPLAIR:

He doesn't remember Helen either, I assume, although she worked for the Motion Picture Democratic Committee.

LEVITT:

No, he doesn't remember her. He says things to me that I have to restrain myself [laughter] to keep from arguing. But he's an interesting character.

CEPLAIR:

He's really a gentleman from the old school.

LEVITT:

Oh, such a courteous, gentlemanly man, it's incredible. I'm sure he must be in much pain at the language that is current these days. [laughter]

CEPLAIR:

Well, back to the period between '39 and '42 and your political activity.

LEVITT:

I remember the Urises taking us to the beach. That September of '39 was very hot, so we went to the beach often. There's a particular part of the beach where all the liberals and left went. Sorrento, that was where everybody was. And there I met the Traubs. You know them? Shep [Shepard] Traub?

CEPLAIR:

I know the name.

LEVITT:

I met the Endores. I met Groucho Marx. I remember one time down there. We were sitting in the sand. Groucho walked to the edge of the water and turned around, spread his arms out like this. He said, "The Jews' last stand." [laughter] The conversation, everybody was deeply involved in politics, and I mean the gubernatorial politics, mayoralty election, and so on. All that kind of thing. The Traubs were certainly not party members. Shep Traub was a director from New York who had

been brought out here. He had been in theater, directed very successfully in the theater. He never made it out here. Somehow, he never adapted to that change. The Urises went back East after 1951, and Mickey really never, never recovered from that. He was a very sweet man, very political. It was very hard to convince him of anything that did not correspond exactly to the party line. But he believed it. It wasn't like it was a duty. He really believed and was a very decent man, as I say. He never really, after the whole [William Z.] Foster-[Earl] Browder thing—he kind of never recovered from that. Anyway, he died a long time ago. Dorothy, his widow, is still alive, living in New York.

CEPLAIR:

Did you march on picket lines protesting the war?

LEVITT:

Oh, sure. Sure.

CEPLAIR:

I know there were a lot of strikes in this area. Especially there was one at the [Los Angeles] Vultee Aircraft [Inc.] company I think in '41. How were communists involved in picketing at those strikes or doing anything?

LEVITT:

I don't remember that. I don't recall. I remember picketing Disney's, and I remember—

CEPLAIR:

For the Cartoonists Guild.

LEVITT:

Yeah. I remember picketing Warner Brothers [Pictures, Inc.]. That was [laughter] the thing I'm sure Helen has told you about. It was right after the war. It was like 1946. And I think that was the—

CEPLAIR:

That would have been the CSU [Conference of Studio Unions] strike.

LEVITT:

CSU, right. What was the name of that guy?

CEPLAIR:

Herb [Herbert K.] Sorrell.

LEVITT:

Herb Sorrell, right. And I was working. My first assignment as a writer was in 1946 at Columbia [Pictures Industries, Inc.]. This was really coincidence. A producer named Jules Schirmer whom I knew in the army—I left out—or did we talk about the army?

CEPLAIR:

No, I want to do that.

LEVITT:

Shall we go back to that now?

CEPLAIR:

Yeah, let's go back to that. Well, let me, before we do that, how would you class—? What sort of communist were you? I mean, would you classify yourself as a—?

LEVITT:

Tell me what the various categories are.

CEPLAIR:

Well, were you an ideologue?

LEVITT:

No.

CEPLAIR:

A dogmatic?

LEVITT:

No.

CEPLAIR:

Would you consider yourself a critical communist?

LEVITT:

I suppose I was critical, but I wasn't as critical as I should have been. In the times when I was critical of the party, the problem I faced was that I always found myself even more critical of the critics. There always was—and this never changed, and it went through to the hearings. There was always an element of self-servingness in—not always. There was frequently an element of self-servingness in the—can't be the right word, but I'll use it for now anyway—in many of the critics of the party who perhaps were on their way out if they were in or those who were criticizing it from the outside or who had been in or maybe even [those] who never had. When I detected that, I found that was a turn off and that I could not discuss something really coolly and with any degree of objectivity. Many of the criticisms, many of which have faded into oblivion for me now—throughout the party, I always weighed that wrong with what the alternatives were. For a long time, they weren't heavy enough to outweigh the other side of it. And that didn't come about until quite a bit later.

CEPLAIR:

So you thought that in terms of accomplishing the sorts of things you wanted to accomplish, the party was the best vehicle, with all its faults.

LEVITT:

Yeah. I didn't think there was any other place to go. Not only as a vehicle, but also even when the party shed obfuscation on things, [laughter] it sometimes enabled you to see things, [laughter] you know, in peculiar ways. Their wrongness made you able to see the right a little more clearly. I think I may have told you—did I tell you about Marc Blitzstein?

CEPLAIR:

No.

LEVITT:

It really jumps ahead, so I'll wait, because that's during the war.

CEPLAIR:

So in '42 you're on the verge of being hired as a screenwriter, and you get drafted.

LEVITT:

Right.

CEPLAIR:

What happens then?

LEVITT:

My draft board was the only one in Los Angeles that sent people out of Los Angeles for the physical. They put me in a bus, sent me to Fresno [California] with a group of others from that draft board for my physical, and then back. I mean, it was really insane. And then when I went into the army, they sent me to Monterey [California] for my reception center. From Monterey they sent me to Atlantic City, New Jersey, for my basic training. And from Atlantic City, New Jersey, they sent me to Culver City [California].

CEPLAIR:

To be stationed?

LEVITT:

I was stationed at Culver City at what was familiarly known as Fort Roach for a year and a half. You know about Fort Roach, I assume.

CEPLAIR:

Hal Roach Studios.

LEVITT:

It was the Hal Roach Studios that were taken over by the government for the First Motion Picture Unit. It was called FMPU, First Motion Picture Unit, but more popularly referred to as Fort Roach. There, every day for a year and a half I would see Ronald Reagan, then called "Ree-gan," who arrived at the post—he arrived there before I did. But he arrived from a cavalry outfit, wearing jodhpurs and a campaign hat. Nobody could take him seriously from then on. He was the laughingstock. But I do remember a day—and I may have told you this before, what I perceive in retrospect as being his departure from being a liberal. There was a strike in one of the public utilities. I don't know whether it was water and power or telephone or what it was. Anyway, he came in that morning in absolute fury. And he said, "I'm a good union man and all that, but this is inconvenient." And his choice of the word "inconvenient" stayed with me forever. I mean, I was so stunned. I was waiting for him to say, "This is a pain in the ass," at least, or "This is—." whatever it was. But "inconvenient" just seemed like such a strange choice of words for something that was going to change his political orientation. It has stayed with me.

CEPLAIR:

What was your job at the FMPU?

LEVITT:

It's funny. On your record, your army record, as your last employment it says, "Last employer: Paramount Pictures. Department: Story." Well, they don't know that the story department is where the readers work, and they assume that's what the writers do. So they sent me to write training films at Roach. And I did. It was an interesting group of writers there at that time. There was Irving Wallace, Walter Doniger, Sam Locke, Guy Trosper, Joel Malone, Mai [Malvin] Wald, myself, and several others.

CEPLAIR:

Did you enjoy writing training films?

LEVITT:

Well, I did. I did. It was hard sometimes. It was really because you wanted to—you had technical information to impart, and you wanted to make it entertaining as well, because you didn't want your audience to fall asleep on you. I think it was a real good experience for somebody to become a screenwriter. But I was still young then and foolish. I felt I really should be going overseas instead of—you know, you lived at home.

CEPLAIR:

And you of course were out of the party during this time.

LEVITT:

Oh, yeah.

CEPLAIR:

No political stuff at all.

LEVITT:

Right. No. I lived at home. You drove to the post each morning. Usually, you'd get on the mess line and have breakfast there, because you had to be there so damn early. And you'd have lunch there. During the time, you'd have a certain amount of—you know, your formation, you'd line up.

And then you'd go back and work on your script for training films. At a certain point, I heard about the combat camera units they were sending overseas. But they never had a place in their TO [table of organization] for writers. I thought it would be a good idea for a writer to go on. The first unit that liked that idea indicated they were interested in people who wanted to volunteer to go as a writer. Three of us applied: a guy named Sam Locke, who's still around, a guy named Guy Trosper, and me. And Guy Trosper was by far the most experienced. I mean, he really was an experienced screenwriter and a good one. And so he went overseas with the first outfit, and they traded him to another outfit for a 35 mm enlarger! [laughter]

1.5. TAPE NUMBER: III, Side One (APRIL 25, 1988)

CEPLAIR:

Okay, I want to go back and cover some of the writing elements of 1940-45. Did you have any mentors in Hollywood? I mean, people who helped you as a screenwriter or as a—?

LEVITT:

I took a class that was given by the League of American Writers, and the class was given by Mary McCall. The class primarily consisted of her telling anecdotes about her experiences. The only useful thing to me about that class was that I remembered it when I started teaching and knew not to do that! [laughter] Yeah, there were always people who—I tell you, the two guys who really were of most help to me were John Bright and Bob [Robert] Tasker. I wish I could be as patient as they were. I would write things, and they would read them. They would read them carefully and discuss it in great detail. They were very helpful to me. I got a sense of how to construct a screen story from them. Did I mention those two guys in the—? Well, at a certain point, they lived about two blocks from where Helen [Slote Levitt] and I were living. We were living on Lexington [Avenue]. They were living

on one of the cross streets right near us. John was then married to Josephine [Josefina] Fierro, and Bob Tasker was married to or living with a woman who was also Mexican named Raquel, and I don't know her last name. Both were beautiful women. They were both, incidentally, fluent in Spanish; that is, I'm talking about Bob and John. Obviously, the women were, too. Bob had been in. prison for car theft or some prosaic crime. In prison he wrote a novel called Grimhaven, which I have; I still have a copy of that novel. His own social conscience developed as a result of the response that that novel elicited from the public. He said women who didn't know him wrote in with proposals of marriage and things like that. And he was saying, "I'm in prison, you know. I'm a thief"—and whatever else he was—"and these women wanted to marry me!" I remember him telling me that it made him rethink his whole life. I don't know by what steps he and John Bright got together, but of course Bob's background certainly fit in with John's experiences in Chicago. They were two really very kind and generous men. This was before they knew that I was or I knew that they were in the party. At least, I think it was.

CEPLAIR:

Were they called "Tisker and Tasker"?

LEVITT:

No, I never heard that.

CEPLAIR:

I read somewhere there were two people who were called that, and I just wondered if that was—

LEVITT:

Both of them were very handsome men. When you see John today, it's impossible to realize that this man looked like a college sophomore into his fifties, and then suddenly it all fell apart. How he lasted that long with the amount of booze that

he consumed and the kind of life he lived generally—Tasker was killed in a street fight in Mexico City. But I found them really—

CEPLAIR:

They were very successful as screenwriters?

LEVITT:

Oh, yeah. They were a team. They became very successful. By the time I got to know them, they had gotten in trouble at Paramount [Pictures, Inc.] with—unintentionally, they wrote a story about an older man who was in love with a younger woman, and it was a story that, without realizing it, was patterned after B.P. [Benjamin P.] Schulberg and Sylvia Sidney. When they turned it in to Schulberg, he felt it was someone trying to parody him, and they were fired. They found it very difficult to get a job after that, and it was long before the blacklist. That was the period that was early on, before I became a reader. When I did become a reader at Paramount, there were a couple of experiences that were significant for me, because I remember them. I was called in once to—this was fairly early on. There was a plagiarism case. Paramount made a film called either Touchdown or Quarterback, something like that, obviously about football [The Quarterback]. It was about twin brothers or at least brothers who looked very much alike. One was a great athlete and the other was a great student. So the one was playing football in the other one's name and in the other one's academic record. Since they were both played by an actor named Wayne Morris, who was the quintessential lug—. [laughter] I mean, his efforts to play an intellectual anything were hilarious. They were sued. Paramount was sued by a laundry man who delivered the laundry and picked up the laundry of a woman who was a secretary in the story department. He had given her that story. This woman was no longer working there, but he sued. At the time of the suit, they

looked through the desk of the person who succeeded her, and they found the story! It indeed was based on twin brothers, one of whom was playing football in the other one's name. And once you take that premise, there are certain similarities, what you do, you know, in the romantic confusion and so on. So they asked me to look at the picture, read the script, read the laundry man's thing, and write a report on what the similarities were for the legal department. I'm not proud of what I'm about to tell you. Because what I did was I got interested in the thing, and there was something, some note, that was sounding in my head as I was reading both these things that finally led me—I went to the library—and started looking through old newspapers. I found what was troubling me. I remember having read about [it]. There was a thing at UCLA where there were two cousins with the same name, and one of them played football on the other one's grades. I reported that, and the case was—the laundry man admitted that that was where he got it. The writer of that screenplay, who was in Europe at the time this case was going on, later became a friend, Bob Pirosh, Robert Pirosh, who wrote Battleground and several other things. I was rewarded for that by being sent into Henry Ginsberg's office. Henry Ginsberg was the top executive of Paramount. Y. Frank Freeman was the next guy, although Y. Frank Freeman—of whom Ben Barzman always used to say, "It's a fair question"—had his job because he was the biggest stockholder in Coca-Cola [Company] or something and they were financing some of the stuff at Paramount. That was my reward: to go in. Henry Ginsberg said, "Come in, come in," very warmly. I walked in, I started to sit down. He said, "Thank you." And then he turned to work at his desk, and I walked out again, [laughter] you know, feeling kind of foolish. I thought I was going to get a bonus or something!

CEPLAIR:

Yeah, at least.

LEVITT:

One time at Paramount—

CEPLAIR:

So it turned out the story idea—

LEVITT:

The case was thrown out of court, because it was public domain. Both were working from the same source. So there were obviously certain similarities in that. Meta Reis [Rosenberg] was the head of what was called the story department, which was the reading department, and above her was Bill [William] Dozier, who was head of the entire story department, I guess you'd call this—no, it had another name. But he was in charge of writers and everything, and so on. Meta called me in one time to cover a piece of material. She said, "This has been submitted by someone who works here. Be kind of nice to it." She said, "I'm sure it's not going to be anything we can make, but be nice to it." The name on it didn't mean anything to me; I had no idea who this guy was. I read the thing, and I was really astounded by it. I said, "This guy hasn't the foggiest notion of how to tell a story, but this thing bristles with talent. I mean, everything jumps off the page at you. He's dealing with a singer and a band. And I don't know anything about singers and bands, but I know this is authentic." And it was Frank Loesser. I wrote this thing and I didn't know who Frank Loesser was. The next thing was I got a phone call from a guy who says, "Al Levitt?" I said, "Yeah." He said, "You got a date for lunch today." "I do?" "Yeah." "Who's this?" "Frank Loesser." We became very good friends after that. He was then married to his first wife, Lynn [G. Loesser], who was referred to as "the evil of two Loessers." [laughter] We used to see them often. We didn't have kids then, and we were much more social than we've been since. He was over at our house one Saturday night, and he said, with great embarrassment, "Do you mind if I turn the radio on? I think my song is going to be number one on 'The Hit Parade.'" And it

was. The war was years on its way. The song was "I Don't Want to Walk without You, Baby." He was then writing lyrics, and then he started writing the music as well. I remember sitting in Oblath's [restaurant] one time. "I've got the song," he said, "that's really going to be the great war song. But I'm waiting. All the other things will be done. Every songwriter is going to write a war song, and it will all get lost." He said, "I'm waiting for the right moment." I said, "What's your song like?" He said, "You know 'Ballad for Americans'?" I said, "Yeah." "It's something like that, but none of that 'what kind of hat is a three-cornered hat' shit." [laughter] That's the way he talked* I mean, he was such a Broadway guy. He was really incredible. And the song that he wrote that he felt was going to be the big hit, it never meant a damn thing, "The Moon is Down." He used it as a—it was a title of a Steinbeck book that also didn't do anything. But later he wrote "Praise the Lord and Pass the Ammunition." And that, of course, was tremendously successful. He had a great job in the army. He was drafted, and he was assigned to write songs for the army. He made a deal that the army could use his songs, but he would own the copyright. He was stationed at the Essex House in New York. There would be a camp somewhere, some branch of the service would want a song for their outfit, and they'd send him. He'd go and he'd live with the guys for a while and pick up whatever the lingo was. And then he'd go back and he'd do it. During that time he wrote things like "What Do They Do in the Infantry?" that were commercially successful, too. He owned the copyright on all of these. Once he went to an airfield in Texas, where the bombardiers in training were stationed. He lived with them. He found that whenever a bombardier missed a target, he'd always blame it on the pilot. The expression they'd always use was "The pilot had his head up his ass." So Frank wrote this song, and the refrain was "The pilot had his head up, his head up, his head up, the pilot had his head up his ass." And they loved it. He went back to the Essex House, and then he got a call. The commanding general

of the base wanted him to come there to conduct a hundred-man chorus singing this song! [laughter] Which he did. When the war was over, I remember visiting Frank at Paramount. He was back there writing songs for Paramount. There were these little signs outside your office that had your name on it, and his said, "Frank Loesser." The two s's in his name had vertical lines through them. So that he had two dollar signs in the middle of his name, because of all those songs he owned the copyright to. He was the first songwriter to recognize the value of owning the copyright of your own songs. I don't know why I got into that, but that was a very vivid memory of mine. There was a big jump. During the blacklist I was a photographer, and I was assigned to shoot the rehearsals of a production of Guys and Dolls, written, as you know, by Abe Burrows—the book. He wasn't there, I was relieved to know. Abe was one of the most obnoxious informers. Sam Levene was in the cast and was there, and Frank was. It was really a nice reunion. I talked to Sam about how did he—Sam was never in the party or anything like that, but considered himself a big liberal. And I said, "How do you get along with Abe?" Sam was angry with me for having even said that, you know. He never answered the question. There was something else that dates back to that period that I wanted to mention. It also has to do with my screenwriting beginnings, in a way. A man named—he was married to Helen Fischer. Maurice Clark. Very much older than me or my contemporaries. He died within the last few years. He must have been in his nineties. He wrote a script that I covered, and I made a big thing about it. All I remember of it was the title, "A Tank Called John." It was, you know, a very pro-war kind of thing. I wrote a glowing thing about it, and Bill Dozier called me in and he said, "I read your synopsis and your report on it. Then I read the story. I like what you wrote about it better than the story itself." He said, "Would you like a crack at it?" I said, "Certainly, I would." Then I felt that I might have been cutting Maurice out in some way. So I called him and told him and asked him how he felt about that. He

said, "Fine. At least it means it's selling, and I'll get paid for it," which he was. I worked on that, and I was drafted while I was in the midst of it. When I think back on it now, I'm glad I never finished it. Because, God, you know, my thinking on that thing was so dominated by the gung ho thing about the war at that time that it really would have been an embarrassment. Not that I don't have plenty of embarrassments floating around as it is! But it was a good experience for to me.

CEPLAIR:

Did you work on it by yourself without Clark?

LEVITT:

Yeah. Bill Dozier was always very nice to me and encouraging me. There was a play that was running in Los Angeles. I was sent to cover it. The play was called Cry Havoc, and it dealt with some war stuff. It was really a terrible play. I wrote a report that reflected that feeling. The next thing I knew, I got a little note from Bill Dozier. Attached to it was a little news item that MGM [Metro-Goldwyn-Mayer, Inc.] had bought this play. It was a rebuke, but it was a good-natured rebuke, you know. I kept that. And then when they made the film, it got panned everywhere. I sent him his note rebuking me and the clippings of the unanimously bad reviews. [laughter] We really did have a—he was a good guy. This is a big parenthesis again. When Adrian [Scott] was in prison—Joan [Scott] may have told you this story. Well, she probably wouldn't have known about it, because Adrian didn't go with Joan until a much later date. But when Adrian was in prison, he was writing letters to this son, the orphan whom he and Anne Shirley had adopted, the British war orphan. He wrote the letters as little stories. He was called in by the warden or whatever, some executive of the prison; I don't know what their various titles are. The only one I can think of is warden. But whatever he was, he said that Adrian's letters were read, and they felt they were—this man was concerned that Adrian

didn't have the right attitude that would help him rejoin society when he got out. He said Adrian seemed very pessimistic about certain things and so on. Adrian said, "I've got a right to be pessimistic. I'll never be able to work in the film industry." And the warden, if he was that, said, "No, you're wrong about that. We've had other people here who went back and resumed careers in your industry." He said, "A man named William Dozier, who was in prison for I think it was something like car theft or something." [laughter]

CEPLAIR:

That's true?

LEVITT:

Yeah!

CEPLAIR:

I'll be darned.

LEVITT:

So that was kind of an odd thing. Mel [Melvin] Frank and Norman Panama were very helpful to me, very friendly toward me during that period at Paramount. It was kind of a good time, even though it was somewhat frustrating. There was an organization formed as the war went on called the Hollywood Writers Mobilization. The Screen Writers Guild and the [Screen] Readers Guild were united with that, and I think the—I don't know whether the Dramatists Guild was even in existence then, but I think they were. There was some organization of playwrights that also was part of this thing. You may have seen this, but there was some big event at UCLA over a period of time.

CEPLAIR:

They published a book of all the—

LEVITT:

Yeah. I remember writing a speech for Henry Fonda that was designed to—he was speaking to writers to get them to help and write material that would encourage morale, all kinds of things like this. Anyway, I wrote that speech. The reason I'm telling you this is that I sat in the audience watching Henry Fonda deliver that speech, and it was an experience that I've never had before or since. He made that speech so much his own without ever changing a comma. You had the feeling here was a guy talking and saying things as they came to his mind, and it was tremendously effective. And, as a writer, I feel it's been downhill ever since in relation to what happens to the things you write. [laughter] But that session, that thing out at UCLA, I remember [Darryl F.] Zanuck making a speech about Wilson, which I guess was in production then, or maybe just about to be released. He said he had great hopes for that picture. And he said if it didn't work, if it didn't get a good box office response, he'd never make another picture that said anything. And it was a disaster. I never checked to see whether he kept his word on that.*The Grapes of Wrath* must have come after that.

CEPLAIR:

No, Grapes of Wrath was 1940.

LEVITT:

Oh, it was before. Right. Of course, yeah, right.

CEPLAIR:

I think it was Betty Grable movies came after that.

LEVITT:

[laughter] Right. That may have been the phrase he used, "I may never make another picture without Betty Grable."

CEPLAIR:

Or Alice Faye.

LEVITT:

Betty Grable was, you know, particularly, she became almost a symbol. You could not go into any army installation without seeing that thing of her looking back at her legs or something. Also, I wanted to tell you that when I was drafted, [John "Julie"] Garfield gave me a going-away party—Helen was working for him then—and invited all my friends. It was really very sweet. It was a nice party. Somehow, a crap game developed with Garfield and my friends, and he kept cleaning them out! It was really a funny incident, because I saw he was trying to lose. He was making outrageous bets and trying to lose, but he kept winning all the time. Finally, what he did was—he had this big pile of money; he pushed it in the center. He said, "I've got to take care of something else." And he said, "You guys divide it up." And he left, so nobody was embarrassed, because he wasn't there. That was one of the nicest things he has ever done. I was touched by that. Also, I'm reminded that two guys who were doing a book on Garfield—Bernie [Bernard] Wolfe and who was the other guy? Anyway, they came to interview Helen and me. Both Helen and I ghosted for Garfield in a number of things. I wrote an article in his name for the Theatre Arts magazine, and Helen was constantly doing things in his name. But he was kind of, you know, he was—he was no great intellect, but I kind of liked him. I think, on certain levels, he was really a spoiled kid—by his success. But he was amiable insofar as I knew him, and he certainly was kind of nice to us. I told you that before I was drafted, I was sent to Fresno [California] for my physical. Then I was sent to Monterey [California] for reception center and Atlantic City [New Jersey] for basic training. While I was in Atlantic City, which was surreal, because we were billeted in hotels—there was the movie top sergeant, who got us all together and said, "You're living in a hotel, but you're not on a honeymoon!" That was the first thing. But the hotel I was in was the worst of them all. It was an old wooden firetrap. When you were on guard duty in the corridors at night, in the wee

hours, you'd watch the mice running back and forth. The hard part of it, though, was marching in the sand. Jesus, I was—you know, with packs. It was really terrible, because you had no footing. And this was in the winter. Boy, those cold winds that came up off that ocean were murderous. There was a group of us from California. Within a short time we were all in the infirmary. [laughter] But I did get to see some of my New York friends. They came out to visit me on days off, and that was good. Then, as I told you, I was sent back to Culver City [California], where I was stationed. And there were a couple of things I'd like to tell you about that, if I haven't already. I'm going to start to do this so I'll know what I've told you [laughter] and what I haven't.

CEPLAIR:

What was the highest rank you achieved?

LEVITT:

Sergeant. Buck sergeant. I'm skipping for a moment. I had this problem that I may have told you. This unit I was in overseas, there were cameramen. Ted McCord was a captain, and it always embarrassed the "real" military brass when they'd see me telling him what to shoot. And it wasn't right. It got to a point where at one point they said, "If you take a test and it shows that you know something about photography, which is really ridiculous—." But I did know something about photography then. At any rate, it was ridiculous because the table of organization only provided for cameramen and editors. It didn't have any place for a writer. So I was down as a cameraman, and I did learn to use a camera. They said, "We'll give you a field commission. And then even if you're of a lesser rank than some of the other officers, at least you'll be an officer if you're—." So I said, "Fine. I'll take the test." They gave me some forms. And then I found out that getting the commission I was committing myself to go to Japan after the war in Europe ended, if the war in Japan had not yet ended. All

I could see was that that might go on forever, and I said no, I wouldn't do it. There were some heated arguments. They did everything but command me to do it. Obviously, they couldn't command me to do it, because I could fail the test. There was no—but back at what was called Fort Roach, where there were a number of writers who were not very well known then, like Irving Wallace, a pain in the ass named Walter Doniger—

CEPLAIR:

You went through them in the last sessions.

LEVITT:

I did go through it? Okay. Thank you for—and I told you about the applications for going overseas?

CEPLAIR:

You'd started to do that. I think you'd said that Sam Locke had gone first and been traded for a camera.

LEVITT:

No, that was Guy Trosper.

CEPLAIR:

Guy Trosper.

LEVITT:

Yeah. The three of us who kept applying were—it was Guy Trosper, Sam Locke, and me. And Sam Locke had written musicals. Guy Trosper was taken and was traded for a 35 mm enlarger.

CEPLAIR:

Was Helen upset that you wanted to go overseas?

LEVITT:

She was upset, but she also was—she said things like, "I don't think that you have to think that you have to go." [laughter]

But I really did feel I had to go in the sense that it was embarrassing living at home, going to that thing, you know. What was embarrassing was the attitude of some of the other people at that post. I did not want to identify myself with some of them. I mean, this was a place where, as you walk onto the post, guys would come up, not to me but to others—they'd come and they'd feel your sleeve and they'd say, "Who did your costume?" And a lot of their guys had their uniforms made; they wouldn't wear GI stuff. They referred to uniforms as "costumes." Eventually, a new commanding officer, a West Point [United States Military Academy] guy, came in there. After he was there a while, there was a notice on the bulletin board that said, "The clothes you wear are uniforms, and they're not to be referred to as 'costumes.' These premises are an army post. They're not to be referred to as 'the lot' or 'the studio.'" A whole series of things like that, that were ridiculous. Every once in a while there would be visiting brass from Washington. And everybody would suddenly get very GI in preparation for that. There was a costume designer who was drafted into the army, and he still had a clientele for whom he made clothes. We'd be lined up in formation, you'd look up—there's a window, and there's this woman taking her clothes off and this guy's draping her to make a gown for her! [laughter] It was surreal in many ways. In fact, I think I also mentioned that Helen and I did a treatment for a movie called *Fort Hollywood* fairly recently, also.

CEPLAIR:

Based on your experience.

LEVITT:

Yeah. Really an exaggeration of the experience. It was much worse than the real thing, which was bad enough.

CEPLAIR:

When was it that you applied to go overseas? What was the date?

LEVITT:

It was early in '44. Let's see, I got to—'41, '42, '43. It must have been the end of '43. I didn't get chosen until some time in '44, and I was chosen by Van Heflin. He had a unit going overseas, and he had heard that I wanted to go. He said, "You want to come with me? This unit is mine." And I said yes. And then we went. We had one preparatory session. There was another part of the post, also in Culver City, that they used to refer to as "the hill." It was where they trained people for combat camera units, and they had draftees. Particularly if they had experience with cameras of any kind, they trained them for that. So toward the end Heflin, me, and others were in that thing. There was a marvelous time when Clark Gable had gone to Europe, and I think he flew as a gunner in whatever plane it was. I can't be sure that he piloted. He may have taken a gunnery position in a plane and shot photographs. Because I know later that when we converted bombers for our camera unit, the guns were removed, but they were perfect placements for cameras. At any rate, the only reason this is worth telling is that he spoke to the whole group of people being trained for these units, and I guess I asked a dumb question and then got a dumb answer. I said something to the effect that people who are involved in a war that's fought with guns and bullets and things, how do they feel about people coming around with cameras? Gable said, "Oh, you've got nothing to worry about on that score." He said, "I got tremendous cooperation everywhere I went." I realized that he really meant it. He was really telling us that we didn't have to worry, because he got full cooperation everywhere he went! [laughter] In a way it was endearing, you know, because he—unless he was a better actor than I thought he was.

CEPLAIR:

Was this unit you were with to film combat or to make—?

LEVITT:

It was the Fourth Combat Camera [Unit]. First I went over in the 162d [Combat] Camera Unit. We were attached to the air force. There were eight of us and two officers, and what we did was—there were technicians who were in charge of the gun-site-aiming-point cameras, which were referred to as GSAP cameras, that were attached to the planes. So we were linked to the gun, so whenever the button was pressed that fired, these cameras would automatically operate. In addition, we were to shoot whatever we could that we thought would have some meaning. There were no restrictions. We really were our own commanding officers in a sense.

1.6. TAPE NUMBER: III, Side Two (APRIL 25, 1988)

CEPLAIR:

You were on the airplanes during bombing runs?

LEVITT:

Well, during bombing runs, and this was the Ninth Air Force that we were attached to. They had B-25s and fighter planes. Our outfit put these GSAP cameras in place. I volunteered to operate a camera from a gun position on a mission. I went on one, and then Van Heflin wouldn't let me go on another, because he didn't want to go.

CEPLAIR:

So you were stationed in England?

LEVITT:

We were stationed first in England and then we moved to France. The most interesting experience, though, was in France. When we were in England, the film would go to a film lab. Even after we were in France for a while, it would go to a film lab in North Acton, which is a kind of a suburb of—not a

suburb. It's an industrial portion of London. Now, once we got to France, we'd go with a particular outfit, infantry or whatever, in order to—our primary mission was to show how the air force supported ground missions. So we shot from there, from the ground, and shot the operations, and you got the sense of it. I don't know whether I told you about my experience in Normandy. First of all, in the landing craft I think it was—it is LC, and there is always another initial. This was, I think, was LCI, which was "landing craft infantry." You stay in the English Channel there. You don't know when you're going to leave. Sometimes you're there for a couple of days, and then suddenly you would go. One night there were a couple of French officers aboard who were going with these troops. I got to talking to a French officer, with whom I wanted to practice my French. And he was talking to me because he wanted to practice his English. There was a kind of amusing conversation. But when I got back to my bunk, I discovered that my wallet was gone. And that was a disaster because—I mean, the money wasn't—but all my ID, my papers, it was going to represent endless paperwork to get these things. I realized that what had happened was that leaning against the rail and talking—I kept my wallet in my back pocket—it worked its way out and was gone. The next day when I saw this French officer again, I said to him in English and slowly—because I wanted him to understand—that that French lesson was very expensive for me, because while we were talking, my wallet fell out of my pocket into the Channel, and with it were all my papers and identification and everything else. He said, "Oh, bien, bien, bien!" I thought later on about how many times did I pretend to understand him at times when I really didn't, [laughter] You realize what terrible kinds of embarrassments occur in those things!

CEPLAIR:

Well, how did you get from the air force to the infantry?

LEVITT:

Well, we were attached to the air force, but we didn't have a plane. There was no plane assigned to us, so we were foot soldiers.

CEPLAIR:

So you just filmed whatever—

LEVITT:

Whatever we could, whatever we—and sometimes we were asked to film specific things.

CEPLAIR:

So you didn't do any writing when you were overseas.

LEVITT:

Yes, I did. I wrote these scripts. Sometimes they were scripts, and sometimes it was just a matter of telling someone, "Cover this and get that and get that." And I also did some shooting as well. I did learn to operate a camera. This unit was a 16 mm unit, and it was an experimental unit. We had with us our own processing equipment, so we could shoot, process the stuff, look at it. This was before we had, as I said, a lab; that's a little later. That was a different unit. In Normandy, when we first landed, this unit consisted of Van Heflin, another officer, and either six or eight enlisted men. I think the guys also appointed me as the only one who could speak any French and maybe the only one who was literate in English, as a matter of fact—that's an exaggeration—to see if I could make some deals to buy some real food, rather than canned rations, from the peasants. So I walked across a field looking for a farmhouse. I saw a guy sitting in front of some contraption; I didn't know what it was. I greeted him and asked him what he was doing. He told me he was making something, and he used a word I had never heard. I asked him what that was, and his description made it sound to me like it was apple cider. It turned out to be calvados. So I said, "I'd like to buy a bottle from you." He said, "I don't want to sell you a bottle. Your

money doesn't mean anything to me anyway." "Well, how can I get a bottle from you?" "If you give me your shirt." So I gave him my shirt. I took the bottle. I forgot about getting the food. It was getting late, so I decided to head back to my outfit. But I decided to try it, and you know, the first taste of it—I wasn't prepared for calvados. It's very strong, and, gee, I almost choked on it. But it had a good taste, and I decided to taste a little more. I guess I tasted a little more and a little more, because the next thing I knew, I woke up at the side of the road with a half-empty bottle of calvados beside me. It was pitch dark, and I didn't know where my outfit was. I really panicked. I was really scared. I was also very cold. Every once in a while, one of the Red Ball [Express] trucks would come by, I don't know if you know about the Red Ball. What they did was they had—everything was blacked out, so their headlights were blacked out with a little narrow crescent on each one that was clear. That threw a little bit of light down at the road. They kept passing. They didn't see me. I kept trying to flag them down. And one of them finally saw me and stopped, and I told them what happened. I got in with them, and they ultimately found my outfit. The guys said, "Where the hell were you?" I said, "I was there trying to get you guys food. Where the hell were you?" They said, "When you didn't come back, we thought you were killed. We just went on." The next place I remember that we stopped at for any length of time, the town we came through, was Sainte-Mere Eglise [France], and we eventually got to Chartres. In fact, we stayed in Chartres for a while. We set up a thing, a kind of headquarters. And we shot a fantastic thing that we stumbled across. Jewish holidays were approaching, and there were five Jewish families in Chartres who had been farmed out, Anne Frank style, among the other families. The Jewish families had gotten together for the breaking of the Yom Kippur fast, and they invited the French families who had sheltered them to this feast. We photographed it. Also, there was no temple. I don't know whether they ever had a synagogue before, but if they

did, it wasn't there now. So we got German prisoners to build a small thing to serve as their temple, with an altar and everything in it. We shot this. We shot the whole thing and the breaking of the fast with all the—and it was—I haven't the foggiest notion where any of that film is. I would really give a lot to get hold of that and see what it looks like now. It was really an interesting experience. We kept going on. We went actually from air base—we went from there to an air base and then from air base to air base.

CEPLAIR:

Following the troops into Germany?

LEVITT:

Right. But when we got to Rheims, we were quartered in what had been a school of some sort. I had this little experience that comes to mind. You live in a barracks situation, and you find yourself in a peculiarly torn way. You can listen to just so much of the barracks talk, and it really gets very boring and irritating. At the same time, you feel kind of guilty, because you feel you're being snobbish about, you know, the GIs who were not necessarily intellectually oriented. One night I was really filled with it, and it really was so irritating, I just got up and left. Went into some cafe looking for a place where I could just sit down alone. Every place was jammed, and there was a little table that was perfect—it seated only one. I wanted it because you couldn't have more. It was like this [measures with his hands] wide. I sat there, and I'm ordering some wine, a bottle of red wine, whatever it was. One of the things that happens when you're in that town is you get tired of champagne. It's the heart of the champagne country, and it's like water. There were a bunch of paratroopers in this cafe. The paratroopers were always very young, very tough kids who, I think, probably killed as many of our people as they did the enemy. One of them got up, left the table—I guess he was going to the men's room or something—and he was

staggering. He had just taken a couple of steps, and he bumped into my table. It knocked the wine over. The wine spilled on my sleeve, and it leaked through. I jumped up to take my jacket off, and so these two guys grabbed me by each arm, saying, "Take it easy! He's drunk. He didn't know what he was doing." I couldn't believe it; they thought I was going to start a fight! I have to say, with embarrassment, it was irresistible. I played it for that, and they asked me to join them. I joined them, getting the same stuff that I was avoiding. I was trying to escape back in the barracks, and here I was with these kids! It was really dumb. You do so many things that you feel are really out of character, but you do them somehow. A new aircraft was introduced into the theater. I think it was an A-24. A-25 had been the—no, I can't remember the designation, but it was a new attack bomber. This one had arrived, and no others were there. Orders came to do a film to orient the pilots to this new aircraft. One of the problems was that all pilots, I guess all crew members, whatever plane they're flying, they get to feel that's the best damn plane there is. It's very hard to get them to adjust to a new plane. That was part of the purpose of this thing, not only to show how the thing operated, but to show what a great plane this was, to make them fall in love with it. Every time I'd start work with my cameramen on shooting this thing, some colonel would come along and say, "Excuse me, I just want to take this up and try it." And he'd take the plane away from me. Finally, I told the commanding officer that it was going so slowly because these officers were taking the plane. So he wrote out a thing placing the plane under my command, and I figured that would stop the thing. What would happen, a colonel would come along, and I'd say, "Colonel, I'm sorry." I'd show him the thing. He'd pat me on the head and say, "That's all right. I'll bring it right back." So it was a terrible nuisance. On one such occasion, I got in the plane with the officer, feeling I could hurry him back. I was sitting in the gun position toward the rear of the plane, and he was naturally in the pilot

spot. As we were coming to land, the light that's supposed to go on when the wheels are down and are firmly in place didn't go on. He said, "From your position, you can see the wheels. What I'm going to do is I'm going to come in very gently and touch the wheels down. I want you to watch and see if they buckle or whether they remained rigid. I've got to do it very lightly so that nothing happens." I said, "Gee, I don't know whether I can do this. I mean, I've never looked at that part of a plane. I don't know. I can't do it!" He said, "Well, there's nobody else; you've got to do it!" It was very tense, and when I told him I thought it remained rigid, he said, "Thought isn't enough. Was it?" I said, "Yes!" And then I hoped it was right, and it was right. But after that I really fought and did not let officers, no matter what their rank was, take it. Somehow that gave me a feeling of strength about this. So I finally finished that film. There were interesting guys. There was a crew out from Los Angeles—I think they were from Douglas Aircraft [Company]—who were the experts. They were civilians who came out and who knew the plane, who were training, orienting the crews on the thing. There was a guy whose name I can't remember, but [whom] I admired, one of these guys with great ingenuity. The plane had a flat tire and the crew couldn't—the crew was trying to change the tire, and they couldn't get the tube out of the tire. This guy sent for a bucket of water and soap. No, I think they couldn't get the tube into the tire; that was the thing. Because they had to inflate it first and get it into the tire. He got the soapsuds, put the inflated tube in, and slid it right into the tire, you know! [laughter] Those guys, I always admired them. They had a kind of marvelous ingenuity.

CEPLAIR:

How long were you in Europe?

LEVITT:

A year and a half.

CEPLAIR:

Until what? Till spring '45?

LEVITT:

No, I went to Europe in the spring of '44 and came back in the winter of '45.

CEPLAIR:

Well after the war was over?

LEVITT:

Yeah, because when the war was over—now, somewhere along the way, I was transferred to the Fourth Combat Camera Unit. And that's when I was going out in the field with ground troops shooting stuff to show the effect of air support on the ground action. When the war ended, they then sent me back to my 16 mm outfit. By that time, Van Heflin had himself transferred home, because he couldn't handle it. And then from there, I was sent to Paris to do an American version of this film with [Henri] Cartier-Bresson.

CEPLAIR:

The American version of what film?

LEVITT:

I thought I told you about that. It was a film about the repatriation of prisoners of war and concentration camp inmates. The French version was called Le Retour and the American version was called *Reunion*. They were quite different for a number of reasons. One is that the audiences had such different relations to the matters that were covered that that made for a big difference in approach. That was a really marvelous part of my life in the war, because Cartier-Bresson was an incredible man. He was a fascinating guy. Do you know his work?

CEPLAIR:

Not offhand.

LEVITT:

Well, he was one of the world-famous still photographers. He almost single-handedly elevated photography to an art form. The first one-man exhibit of photography at the Museum of Modern Art was an exhibit of his work. Next time I see you, I'll bring you a book of photographs of his. He's published a number of books of photographs and commentary. The Decisive Moment is one of the best known of them. People who are photography buffs know his name.

CEPLAIR:

Had you known who he was before you went overseas?

LEVITT:

No. No, I did not.

CEPLAIR:

Well, how did you happen to get together with him?

LEVITT:

I was assigned. And he, apparently, wanted someone to write the American version.

CEPLAIR:

He had been responsible for shooting a French version.

LEVITT:

Right. And he had shot it. He had the footage, and they wanted—it was a Franco-American project. America was putting up most of the money, so there had to be—probably all the money—an American version, and it had to be very different from his. Because his film, which was written by Claude Roy, was written for an audience every one of whom either had a relative or a friend who had the experience or himself or herself had the experience. Being with Cartier-

Bresson was one of the great experiences of my life. First of all, he knew everybody. Every figure in French culture knew him and admired him. He had shot the scenes in the Paris railroad station—do you have a VCR?

CEPLAIR:

No.

LEVITT:

I was going to say I would bring you a cassette of the American version.

CEPLAIR:

You mean of the people coming home from the camps?

LEVITT:

People coming home. Their relatives would gather. They never knew when anyone would come. They'd just come to the Paris railroad station every day, and every once in a while somebody would find someone. I mean, the emotion of some of those things was incredible. Anyway, that was the film. God, I met such people through Cartier-Bresson, including La Pasionaria [Dolores Ibarruri]. That was a thrill. The whole French literary world and theatrical world, they were all there. I was stationed during this period in the Hotel d'Astor, eating in the hotel dining room, which had embassy rations and French chefs. It was incredible. During that time a woman named Hilda Wayne, whom I didn't know, but whom Helen met after I had left to go overseas—and, oh, Helen had hired her to take her place with Julie Garfield. What Helen had done was [she] made a decision: it had to be either Garfield or the Actors Lab. She chose the Lab, and she hired Hilda to work for Garfield. There were a couple of people who were hired to do the things that Helen had done alone. Hilda's family had a farm in San Diego or in the San Diego area, and she took—stop me if Helen has told you this. Hilda took Garfield's young daughter—I don't know, six or eight years old, something like

that—with her on this visit. The kid got ill, seemed to have developed a sore throat and began to run a very high fever. Hilda got her in the car and drove her back home. She arrived home. Very shortly after she arrived home, the child died. So, I mean, Hilda was—you know, it was a really terrible experience for Hilda as well. It was really very—so Helen advised her to do something, join the Red Cross or something like that, that would take her away, which she did. She didn't know where she would end up, but she ended up in Paris. She didn't know me and I didn't know her. She just knew that Helen's husband—she knew my name, and she knew that I was in Paris, but she didn't know she was going to be there. What she did was she stopped every GI she saw in the street and said, "Do you know Al Levitt?" And one of them she stopped was Paddy Chayefsky, and he said, "Yes." [laughter] It's really incredible when you think of the thousands, you know. And she said, "Do you know where he is?" And Paddy did, because he used to hang out at that hotel. She was going with some French baron she met. I remember I invited them to dinner. I could have guests for dinner by paying what was the equivalent of ninety cents each for this dinner. They were overwhelmed—especially this Frenchman was overwhelmed—by this meal. Apparently, he was a wealthy guy. To reciprocate, he took me out to a black market restaurant, and it must have cost him [laughter] several hundred dollars. It was absurd!

CEPLAIR:

Did you begin to think you were never going to get out of Europe?

LEVITT:

Well, I really—yes, I did. I finally did get out of Europe in I think it was December of 19—oh, yes, one of the ways I got out was I wrote the American version while I was in Paris, with Cartier's blessings, then I left. I got back to the States,

because it was going to be done in New York. Meanwhile, Helen had gone to New York to meet me months and months before I actually got there. I remember finally getting into that plane, you know—finally, I got on the plane, or was about to get on the plane, and some general came over. "I'm sorry," he said, "but I'm going to bump you." And that meant he was going to take the place that was there for me. There was a woman there, very short. I didn't know who she was. And she started yelling and screaming at that general, "How dare you, taking this soldier's chance to get home away from him?" You know, "Pulling rank that way!" The general really shrunk and—well, the woman was Ella Logan, the singer-actress, whom I didn't recognize or know. I was very grateful to her, I must say. I didn't even mind the forty bucks she won from me at gin rummy. [laughter]

CEPLAIR:

On the plane back?

LEVITT:

Yeah. But it was worthwhile. Then, somewhere along the way, where we had to get very high—the plane wasn't pressurized, and I had a cold. Suddenly the thing went to my ears. I spent the rest of the flight writhing around on the floor of the plane in absolutely ghastly pain. God, it was awful! But when I arrived, my father [Charles L. Levitt] and mother [Minerva Lewis Levitt] were there, and Helen. It was a great moment, with my father saying, "Where's your hat? Where's your hat?" I had my cap in my pocket. He said, "Why don't you put your hat on?" Out of his nervousness, [laughter] not knowing what to do. It was really a marvelous scene.

CEPLAIR:

You still had to stay in the army to finish the film?

LEVITT:

Yeah. I finished the film. Actually, when I met them there, I then had to go—no, I didn't stay in the army. Then, I had to go, they sent me, to Camp Kilmer [New Jersey]—I think it was Camp Kilmer—where I got my discharge. No, it was Fort Dix, New Jersey. And then I finished the film as a civilian. I think I actually—they paid me something, you know, not much, but something. Two things: I was wrong about the Camp Kilmer, because before I went overseas, my port of embarkation was Camp Kilmer. The reason I remember that is that I had a cousin who was the PX officer at Camp Kilmer. He was a first cousin. Apparently, there's some resemblance. I knew he was there, and I went to the first PX I could find and I said, "Do you know where I can find Captain [Alfred] Randall?" They said, "Well, no, he just does the circuit of the PXs, and you may run into him anytime." I asked that of a couple of PXs, so he got a report from a couple of sources that his "brother" was here in the army. He knew his brother was not in the army, and he figured it must be me. He checked and found what my outfit was, and he came to the billet and so on. He asked permission of Van Heflin to take me off the base to have dinner with him and his family at home. And got it. I got there, and my mother and father were there. What he had done was he had called my mother and father. He couldn't tell them why. He said, "I want you to come to dinner on Thursday night." And they said, "Well, this is New Brunswick [New Jersey]." They live in the Bronx, and that's, you know, quite some distance. My mother apparently said, "Couldn't you make it on the weekend?" He said, "No, you must come on this night." She said, "But, you know, what's—?" He said, "Please don't argue with me. Just come." I don't know whether my parents began to get the sense of that or whether they thought there was some crisis in his family. But, in any case, they came. We had that dinner, and it was really very lovely. That was the last time I saw them before coming back. Now, jumping back to the war's end, even though I'm still in the army, I can live anywhere. I'm on per diem and I live

wherever I want. Helen had joined me. There was an officer, a lieutenant back in Paris, who was a film editor. He wasn't a professional film editor, so far as I knew. But apparently he wanted to be a film editor, and he had worked in New York. What he did was he wanted to get back there, too; he wanted to be involved in the editing. So what he did was instead of my carrying the negatives of the film with me to New York, I left it behind so that he would be able to use that as a way of his getting back. He did get back within a week or so after I did. But when he found out that he was not going to be the editor, he sabotaged the thing. The film he delivered was two reels of negative, and then the rest was all soundtrack that wasn't used. It was a really shitty thing to do, because the guy who did edit it—I can't say whether or not he really is a good editor because it was not a fair test. He had to fill in with Signal Corps stuff. Every time I see it, it's painful because you recognize the Signal Corps stuff immediately. It's not what Cartier shot. It had a different quality. I'm telling you this at some length because there is an interesting aspect to it. We stayed in New York that winter. I finished working on the film. I stayed through to the recording of the narration. The narration was spoken by Danny [Daniel] Mann, who in a kind of fit of ethnicity decided to go back to his real name, which was Clugarman. Of course, since he got back here he went back to Danny Mann. I left, as I said, before I saw the whole film put together—this was the recording and the narration—and ordered a 16 mm print for myself. Now, Helen is pregnant with Tom [Thomas A. Levitt]. Her father [Louis H. Slote], who was a doctor, would not let her travel during her first three months. That was his first grandson, grandchild; he wouldn't let her travel. So we stayed. We left, I guess, after the three months and we came back.

CEPLAIR:

This was spring of '46 that you returned?

LEVITT:

Yeah.

CEPLAIR:

Was the film released into regular theaters?

LEVITT:

No. In France and in Europe it was, but this is part of the story. I'd come back and I had my print, and I got a letter from the guy who was the editor, the film editor, on this thing in New York. He said he was leaving government employ, wanted to get work in the private sector, and would I lend him my print to run to show his editing? I figured, well, okay. And I started to pack a box, and I ran into Irving Lerner. Did you know Irving? And Irving said, "Have you heard what's happened to your film?" I said, "What do you mean?" He said, "The State Department—." Which had taken over the OWI [Office of War Information] at this point and which was producing the film. The State Department had decided that the impact of the film was too strongly for peace. It had too much of a peace impact, and they were destroying all copies of it. It had been translated into something like forty languages but they were destroying all copies of it. So I told him about what this guy had asked for, and Irving said, "I wouldn't sent it if I were you." So I wrote him a letter and said, "I feel a little reluctant to send it through the mails; it might get lost or something, sending it there and you sending it back. I really would rather not." He wrote back to me and he said, "Look, send it to me and I'll have a dupe made and send yours back by return mail, so you won't—." you know. So I wrote to him and I said, "Well, I'll have the dupe made here and bill you and send the dupe on to you." And I never heard from him again. It wasn't until 1984, shortly before we were going to Europe, Malvin Wald sent me a thing that he saw in a catalog from the [United States] National Archives [and Records Service], and here it had both *Le Retour* and *Reunion* for sale either in 16 mm motion picture or video cassette. It has quotes from that

guy who used to be the Russian expert, American film guy. Can't think of his name. But, anyway, he said it was one of the greatest documents to come out of World War II. I sent for it immediately and got it. It's now available. My 16 mm print I had used to get my first jobs here in Hollywood.

CEPLAIR:

Was the VCR—? Had they changed it or is it the exact same?

LEVITT:

No, it's back the way it was.

1.7. TAPE NUMBER: IV, Side One (APRIL 25, 1988)

CEPLAIR:

You mentioned last time that you'd done a bit of detective work on a football film, and you'd said you weren't very proud of it, I couldn't figure out why you weren't proud of it.

LEVITT:

Oh, what I meant by that was that after I had done it, I began to feel sympathy for the poor laundry man, who might have had a decent lawsuit or at least would have gotten some money in a settlement on the thing, because clearly he had that idea. It was the fact that both his idea and the screenwriter's idea came from the same source that gave him no case.

CEPLAIR:

So the fact that you had sided with management instead of the working class.

LEVITT:

Yeah, right. [laughter] That's what I felt guilty about. You get caught up in the thing. It was kind of an interesting puzzle, but I forgot the consequences.

CEPLAIR:

Okay. You wanted to say something?

LEVITT:

Yeah. I wanted to, I think—because I'm sure you've read Bill [William] Goldman's book.

CEPLAIR:

On screenwriting [*Adventures in the Screen Trade*].

LEVITT:

Yeah, in which he says nobody knows anything. He's wrong, because there are technicians who know a hell of a lot. What is true, though, is nobody in the film industry is sure of anything. This experience came to mind. When I was a reader, at one point—I don't know if I've already told you this—in a big efficiency move, the readers were given quotas. You had to have covered a certain amount of stuff per day. Bernie [Bernard] Gordon and I, who were and still are close friends, were readers at Paramount [Pictures, Inc.]. We did all our quota in the morning, and we had [laughter] the afternoon free. We would go out on the set and watch things like that. One day, we went out on a set, because we were anxious to see in operation this great French director, Rene Clair, who was directing a film at Paramount called I Married a Witch. I think that was the one that introduced that great "actress" Veronica Lake. We got there. We kept working our way closer and closer to the camera and where Rene Clair was standing, until I was standing right by him. Bernie was next to me. On the other side of Rene Clair was some man whom he seemed to be discussing things with a lot. They shot a scene. Then I heard them talking, and they decided to shoot the scene a different way. They re-shot the same scene a different way, and then they were talking and discussing the thing. I kept leaning closer and closer to hear what they were saying. Suddenly, Clair turned to me and he said, "What do you think?" Almost as a reflex, I said, "I like the first way better."

He turned to the other guy and said, "I think he's right. Let's—." [laughter] You know, it stunned me and shocked me afterward. But that's the thing, because we're not dealing with mathematics or physics. There's no one right answer. There are a lot of right answers, so people are legitimately uncertain about things. Anyway, I wanted to mention that because I feel—

CEPLAIR:

That leads into something I wanted to ask you. Were there any movies or directors who especially influenced you in these years? I mean, whose work made an impact.

LEVITT:

There probably were, and I can't think of who they were now. I mean, I was a sucker for all those sentimental [Frank] Capra pictures. I mean, what could have been better than Mr. Smith Goes to Washington? That was so right in every way. I was really vulnerable to that. But there even were people whose politics I couldn't stand who I really admired. John Ford, of course, is one of them.

CEPLAIR:

Because weren't there aesthetic discussions in the [Communist] Party about what constituted good filmmaking?

LEVITT:

Oh, sure. Yeah. And I always found those things so unrelated to the real world that they had almost—yeah, you struggled to understand what they were saying. Yeah, you understand it, but that isn't the way anything works. I do remember, although I can't be specific about it, the people who really tried to apply those things and applied them so mechanically that their work was absolutely lifeless, you know. It had no meaning. Well, I do know one guy who used to do that. I don't even like to mention his name. He's not around—he was a sweet, nice man—I mean, he died a long time ago. But he was

the original party liner if I ever knew one. Listen, we all were, too, at different times and in varying degrees.

CEPLAIR:

Just one last question on that. I think this may have been a postwar rather than a prewar debate, but wasn't—? Paul Jarrico once mentioned that there was a very strong debate about base/superstructure, you know, that—were you ever involved in those debates, or did you think that was just nonsense?

LEVITT:

I'm trying to remember. I never really got my heart into those debates. I listened to them. There was always the problem that anything that deals with any form of literature, any form of writing—when you apply hard-and-fast rules, it tends to mechanize what you do. That keeps coming up even in my recent teaching at AFI [American Film Institute]. The kids gobble up books by Sid [Sidney] Field, who is a very nice man, whose big credit is that he was story editor for Cinemobile. I've never seen anything other than his book that he's written. I don't know of anything he's ever actually written for the screen. Again, everybody's always looking for the formula. And there just isn't one. When the kids keep badgering me for that kind of thing, what I tell them is that the closest that I would ever come to anything that could be described as a formula would be for a film or any dramatic medium—you have characters in conflict, and the conflict intensifies to a point where a decision has to be made that resolves the conflict. And that's about as much formulization as I believe you can give anyone. That can be moved around in a lot of places. It isn't even a formula, really; it states certain principles of drama. So the period being a reader was perhaps one of the most educational things for me. Because you read and you saw that this worked, and you read something else and said this didn't. You kept trying to understand why one did and one

didn't. It's always easier to understand why one doesn't work than it is why one does work. Bernie Gordon was the other reader with me there. Bernie's experience, by the way, is something you might be interested in, because of what he did. He left the country in the blacklist period. His blacklisting was very peculiar, because someone described him and didn't know his name—I think he remembered the first name. But the description was quite accurate. At any rate, Bernie left. He went to Spain and he worked. He spent a lot of years there and turned out a lot of films. He was deeply involved in writing them and then producing them for that whole outfit—[Samuel] Bronston, Phil Yordan, and that whole group there. That's another ramble. One of the other things I wanted to tell you about, which goes back to this same period when I was a reader, before I became involved in World War II—there's a friend from New York named Steve Fisher. I did mention him to you, didn't I?

CEPLAIR:

I think maybe a few tapes ago.

LEVITT:

Did I tell you he was at our house staying over? He was a journalist on the San Francisco Chronicle, and he was Paul [C.] Smith's—Paul Smith was the editor and publisher then. He was really his favorite, and he was a Nieman Fellow. Every once in a while he'd come to Los Angeles, and he'd stay at our house over the weekend. One weekend, a Sunday morning, we were having breakfast and we all heard the news of Pearl Harbor together. One of the reasons I mention Steve is that when you talk about war and war heroes, he's my idea of what would describe as a war hero. Because he was single and had no ties, he felt obliged to enlist. At that time, all the recruitment, a lot of it, was concentrated on the air force. We hadn't really had much of an air force. So he applied and went into training in Santa Ana [California]. There was a base at Santa Ana. At that

time that he went in, first of all, to get in, he had to phony up his weight. I mean, he did it in collusion with the guys as he was being admitted. He is a long, skinny guy. He was underweight for his height and so on. They all got the same training at that point. The ones who finished with the highest score were made pilots. The next highest score were made bombardiers and the third navigators. After the training period was over, they posted these names with a "p," or an "n," or a "b" next to each name. The young men wept, you know, when they didn't have a "p" next to their name. Steve, after they were posted, got in to see the commandant to ask that his rating be changed. The commandant said, "Look, everybody wants to be a pilot, and navigators and bombardiers are just as important. We can't do it." Steve said, "No, you don't understand. My rating was pilot; I don't want to be a pilot." "What do you want to be, a bombardier?" "No. I don't want a job in a plane that has anything to do with firing bullets or dropping bombs. I want a desk job. I want to be a navigator." This is a guy who's scared of flying. Every time he got into the plane, he had to fight himself. Of course the commandant immediately agreed. He was in the first squadron of I think it was B-24s that went into the Solomon Islands. His squadron had 140 percent casualties. And when he finished his tour of duty, they brought him to San Francisco. They then fly you to your home; his was New York. They gave him tickets on an airline. He said, "Man wasn't made to fly." And he went home by train. I think of Steve often because he—later—this is jumping in time—he got his job back on the San Francisco Chronicle. When the [Henry A.] Wallace campaign came up, he was asked to be Wallace's press secretary. Paul Smith said, "If you do that, you'll never work on another newspaper." So Steve, of course, felt then [laughter] more obliged than ever. And he was the press secretary on that campaign. He never got to work on a newspaper again. He got a job—well, it was pathetic, because he was such an able guy. After a while his whole personality changed. He was really down. But he worked

for a long time on Scientific American until Jerry [Gerard] Piel put his son or his nephew in the spot that Steve had.

CEPLAIR:

Was he a friend from New York?

LEVITT:

Yeah.

CEPLAIR:

Had you gone to college with him?

LEVITT:

Yeah. He was a year behind me.

CEPLAIR:

Was he Camp Balfour Lake [New York] also?

LEVITT:

No. He's still around, living in New York, having a very hard time.

CEPLAIR:

Let me ask you about the writers community. I know we've often talked about this off tape, but could you tell us a little bit about what constituted the writers community in Hollywood?

LEVITT:

Well, for one thing, the writers, when you worked, you worked at the studio. Different from now—everybody works at home. At every studio there was a commissary, and at every commissary there was a writers table. So there was that kind of community of writers. Our social life was all writers, not all left, but all writers. You know, our social life was certainly heavily left. We had a number of friends—many of whom to this day are friends—who during the blacklist period disappeared. I'll have to tell you this story. It's way out of

sequence, but I'll tell it to you anyway. Let's say you worry about the sequence. [laughter] During the blacklist, I became a photographer. I got this assignment to shoot the opening of a hotel in Las Vegas. I went up there before the hotel opened, and I shot a lot of just physical stuff. And then there was a show that was rehearsing. They thought I should cover it. Rehearsal shots are always interesting. The girls, instead of being all uniform, they're all dressed differently, and it's really interesting shooting. The most amazing thing that I remember that period—workmen moved some slot machines into the area where they were rehearsing and then went out. The choreographer called a break, and girls started going over to the slot machine and stuff, putting coins in. One of the workmen came in and said, "Hey, don't do that!" He said, "There's no money in those." So the girls said, "Okay." They went back to their rehearsal and the guy left. There was another break in the rehearsal. One of the girls looked at the—I watched her. She looked at the slot machine. Knowing there was no money in that machine, she shrugged and started throwing coins in it anyway. Knowing that she couldn't win! [laughter] I mean, it was so marvelously Las Vegas, it seemed to me. The night of the opening of the hotel, the PR [public relations] guy gave me the seating plan in the big room that indicated various important personalities whom he wanted me to shoot. This friend of mine [Jerome L. Davis] who was always in my office at MGM [Metro-Goldwyn-Mayer]—we had adjoining offices. He was always in my office with his story problem. He and his wife and Helen [Slote Levitt] and I would have dinner together every Saturday night. We were close friends. He was nice, an amusing guy, and really a decent guy. But when my subpoena became known—this was before I testified—I took an ad in Variety. Did I tell you about that?

CEPLAIR:

I knew about it.

LEVITT:

Anyway, he called me up and asked me. He said Nancy [Davis], his wife, was—I think her friend was Rosemary Clooney or somebody like that who was going to be there with a guy from the Hollywood Reporter who was a notorious red-baiter. He said, "So I don't think you ought to come." I said, "Okay." A few hours later, he called me. "Listen," he said, "you know, I mentioned that phone conversation you and I had, and some people think I was being shitty about that. Look, you can come if you want. You're welcome." I said, "I don't think so." There was this big gap in time where we just never saw them. And then on this night, the opening of this hotel—meanwhile, he and his wife broke up, and he married an actress named Marilyn Maxwell. I looked at the seating plans. It said "Marilyn Maxwell and husband." It was irresistible, right? So I was going through the tables, flashgun and camera in hand. I approached that table, with Marilyn, who didn't know me, facing me, and his back was to me. I walked over to the table and I said, "Miss Maxwell?" She looked up at me and gave me the starlet smile. I just waited a moment. He turned, his mouth dropped. I hit the flash button. [laughter] He said, "What are you doing?" I said, "Taking pictures." He said, "No, I mean, where are you?" "Here in the hotel." "Do you have a room here?" "Yeah." "What room?" I told him. He said, "I want to talk to you." The next morning he was in my room. He said, "I've got this assignment at Paramount [Pictures, Inc.] and here's the story problem." [laughter] It was right like, you know, nothing had happened. But what that did was ultimately he turned up at a little studio that I had on Highland [Avenue], which doesn't exist anymore. They've got tall office buildings now—near Franklin [Avenue]. He came and he said, "Look, I've been thinking about it. Where could you find a better front than me? And where could I find a better behind than you?" We started. He started fronting, and I was, boy, turning out everything in sight, every television thing. I said, "Take them all, whatever you can get." One time I was at the typewriter,

and he said to me, "God, if I could only think of a way of chaining you to that damn machine, we? d make a fortune."

CEPLAIR:

Had he been a friend of yours from the very beginning?

LEVITT:

From the time I started working at Metro[-Goldwyn-Mayer, Inc.], we became friendly, yeah. And we've resumed that friendship since, and even today, you know, he calls. I mean, this guy was made not to be a writer but to be a producer. He's a very personable guy. He's bright. He has no discipline at all. He has had how many wives now? Only three, but he's really a playboy. He's fun to be with. You know, he really is. He is a decent man. He would never intentionally hurt anyone. I'm sure of that. He is the Jerry Davis whose first wife was Nancy, making her Nancy Davis. And that Nancy Davis was a student at the Actors Lab, which is what got the name "Nancy Davis" on the list. So that when the actress Nancy Davis, before she was Nancy Davis Reagan, was no longer under contract at Metro and tried to freelance, she couldn't get a job. Her agent finally told her she was on the list. And it was because of that.

CEPLAIR:

And she went to [Ronald W.] Reagan to get her off the list.

LEVITT:

Right.

CEPLAIR:

Oh!

LEVITT:

So I frequently tell Jerry it's his fault. He's responsible for Reagan's political career. If Jerry hadn't married Nancy May—making her Nancy Davis—the other Nancy Davis might never

have met Ronald Reagan, who might then not have had the political career he subsequently did have. [laughter]

CEPLAIR:

That's right. Did the writers think that they were a breed apart from other Hollywood people?

LEVITT:

Well, I never thought of it in those terms, but certainly there was a much different community of writers than there was of actors or even directors, to the extent that I've witnessed it. The writers always felt put upon. You always felt because we were the ones who faced the blank page, once that blank page is filled, everybody considers himself able to make the changes. They can't fill the blank page themselves, but they all think they know what's right and wrong. So there was always that. Because it's interesting that the writers table at Metro, it was probably the biggest writers table of any of the studios. Metro then was turning out—all the studios were turning out a hell of a lot more than they do now, but Metro especially. One of the things I think about often is that there were many more women writers then with those paragons of feminism like Louis B. Mayer [laughter] or Harry Cohn—those guys. They were hiring women at a much greater proportion, you know. I think of that table. The names of women who were working there come to mind: Mary McCall, Sally Benson, Maggie [Marguerite] Roberts, and several other women were working there at that time. Irmgard von Cube and another European woman, whose name I can't remember. Jean Bartlett, Peggy Fitts, Dorothy Cooper, Dorothy Kingsley. All at that one time.

CEPLAIR:

Certainly the writers were the best educated of the Hollywood people and the most literate.

LEVITT:

Yes, there's no question about that. Always the writers table was great fun. Others, a producer or director, would like to slip in there from time to time, and sometimes would be tolerated if there was plenty of room. But, yeah, it was always interesting.

CEPLAIR:

It wasn't [Robert] Benchley, I guess. Wasn't he at MGM when you were there?

LEVITT:

No, he was—

CEPLAIR:

Gone by then.

LEVITT:

Yeah.

CEPLAIR:

Well, let's go back and be a little more chronological just for a minute. You were in the army and perhaps even overseas when [Earl] Browder altered the party to the [Communist] Political Association. What was your reaction to that?

LEVITT:

[laughter] That's interesting. Do you know who Marc Blitzstein was?

CEPLAIR:

Yeah.

LEVITT:

Well, you remember I had the—I don't know if I told you about it. I had the flat in London. Did I tell you about that?

CEPLAIR:

No.

LEVITT:

Well, Guy Trosper, whom I'm sure I must have mentioned, was working on a project, an Anglo-American project, in which Garson Kanin represented the American end of it. And, oh, I can't think of his name—a great English director, whose name will come to me some other time, was doing the English end. Guy was working with Gar Kanin, and Guy had a flat in London. I would come back there with film and bring it to the lab. And Guy persuaded me to move into his flat instead of a GI billet and pay half the rent, because [laughter] he spent a lot of money on liquor, among other things, and acquired lots of debts. But it was very luxurious for me. God, it was right in the middle of Mayfair [district]. It was on Clarges Street, just off Piccadilly. And I met Gar Kanin through him. What was the question that started this?

CEPLAIR:

The political association.

LEVITT:

Yeah.

CEPLAIR:

Marc Blitzstein.

LEVITT:

Marc Blitzstein. I met Marc Blitzstein through him. And there was a place called Le Petit Club Frangais. It was a sort of restaurant and sort of a hangout for a number of the Americans in London. And Marc was there a lot. At the time of the Browder thing, Marc said to me, "That's wrong. It's really wrong." He really disagreed. Then, if you remember, it was toward the end of the war when [William Z.] Foster came up and Browder was out. I ran into Marc in New York, and I said,

"Well, Marc, you were right." And he said, "No, I think they're wrong now." [laughter] It never quite got straightened out.

CEPLAIR:

Well, how did you feel about it?

LEVITT:

I was confused. I kind of felt that it certainly was much more comfortable to take the Browder approach. I mean, you didn't have to—You felt less isolated. But I ultimately accepted—sort of accepted—the Foster approach. And, you know, there were a lot of us—it's really interesting. If the [House] Committee [on Un-American Activities] hadn't raised its head in '47, and certainly if it hadn't returned in '51, a lot of us would have been out of the party. The sense of it being under attack made many of us feel that we had that right, and we were not going to yield that right to them. So a lot of people stayed in longer than they would have. After most of the hearings were over, at least our round or a couple of rounds of hearings were over—Helen particularly. Helen was really in the forefront. She kept arguing that the party should dissolve itself, and she was right. It didn't, and we left. Ultimately, it, you know, kind of fell apart. But that was—I'm sure that we are not alone. I've never discussed this with other people, but I think a lot of people didn't like the idea of defending the party, except for its right to exist, not the party itself. We didn't like defending our having been members of the party, again, except our right to be members of it. And that's certainly not unique. I'm sure that almost everybody I know felt—

CEPLAIR:

What had changed in the postwar period that made you less—?

LEVITT:

Well, first of all, you suddenly got such a different perspective on the things, on a lot of other things, that had troubled you before, that you kind of swallowed and tolerated. But now

there was a whole different world. Certainly it seemed time—if they wouldn't get straightened out, there was no place for it. And yet, what's interesting is, for a few individuals who seemed to have no life without the party, when that did happen, people were to a great extent liberated, except for the inhibitions that were placed on you—not inhibitions, but there were certain constraints that were placed on you by having been blacklisted—that is, that you would contaminate certain organizations and so on. But people felt free to express opinions without measuring them against a party line of any kind. You know, there's a whole book that could be written about how you rationalize away misgivings that you have about something. It doesn't seem quite right, but all the people you respect seem to think that way. But you don't know that they have misgivings, too! [laughter]

CEPLAIR:

But didn't the world seem every bit as dangerous a place after 1945 as it did in the thirties?

LEVITT:

Well, of course. I mean, more so. I mean, the cold war was almost immediate, and that was really—of course, the big thing came in terms of the disillusionment with the exposure of Stalin's role.

CEPLAIR:

But that comes a bit later.

LEVITT:

That came later, yeah. But right after the war—I mean, I think the cold war began when [Harry S.] Truman decided to drop the atom bomb in order to keep the Russians out of Japan. That was—

CEPLAIR:

Were you critical of—? I guess what I'm trying to get at, and probably not doing a very good job, is that I guess in the thirties it must have seemed that there were an incredible number of domestic problems to solve, and yes, there were foreign problems as well. But in the postwar period, does the international scene dominate? There don't seem to be as many domestic problems, and, therefore, the party isn't really an appropriate vehicle anymore.

LEVITT:

Well, I never thought of it in those terms. Certainly for a while, right after the war, domestic problems didn't seem so great, but the foreign ones did. That began with the whole thing about Iran and the Soviet Union in the UN [United Nations]. And in a way, we—I was going to say "all," but I can't say that. But certainly a tremendous percentage of us had such an idealized view of what that post-World War II world would be like that nothing could have measured up, you know. But if you think about it, everybody's life is like that. As a kid in the Depression, you felt if that depression were over, everything would be right. Well, the Depression did get over, and suddenly there's war. You figure once the war is over, everything will be okay. The war is over, and then McCarthyism and the cold war turns up. And you have to figure, well, when that's over—and it never ends! [laughter] I mean, it's a—

CEPLAIR:

Did party leaders seem—? You know I've talked to Dorothy Healey. In her looking back, party leaders seem much more ruthless about, say, liberals or political coalitions.

LEVITT:

Much narrower, yeah.

CEPLAIR:

I wonder, did that register at that time and have an effect? Because you know the Cominform [Communist Informational Bureau] formed in '47. Yugoslavia is read out of the Cominform, You know, you have the whole two-camp theory coming into play.

LEVITT:

Yeah, and that always was bothersome, because [Josip] Tito was a very attractive figure. It was very disheartening to see him read out, as it were. And before that, there was always great inner conflict that everybody had with [Franklin D.] Roosevelt. I mean, we all really idealized Roosevelt. I was in Luxembourg the day the news of his death came, and I remember being wakened by a woman. (A couple of us were billeted in this house.) Someone was shaking me. I hear a woman saying, "Le president Roosevelt est mort." It was like a dream, you know, and when I heard It repeated and it finally soaked in, I didn't believe it. I figured it must be some kind of rumor. But I got out, got in the field, and it was all over the place. It was really a fantastic thing to see. I mean, GIs were weeping all over the place. It was a very moving thing, because no president in my lifetime captured the imagination and really had that inspiring, inspirational quality that he did. That was a big thing. There was a guy named Eugene List, who was a pianist. He and Paul Robeson and someone else were traveling through Europe, playing before camps. He told me that he got called one time, sent to Berlin to play for some big shots. The officer told him to go get a haircut. He went. There was an enlisted men's barber shop. It was so crowded he couldn't get in. He went back. He said the line was two blocks long, so this guy gave him a thing that would let him get into the officers' barbershop. He went there and the line was big there. He went back. He [the officer] said, "Well, we have a field grade officers' barbershop," and he gave him this thing. He [List] went there, and that line was too bad. He came back. He said, "I'm sorry, I'm just going to have to go

this way." This colonel said, "No, I'm going to send you to the general officers' barbershop." He began to think, "Jesus, who the hell am I playing for?" He was playing for Stalin, Churchill, and Truman. But he didn't know that until he got there.

1.8. TAPE NUMBER: IV, Side Two (APRIL 25, 1988)

LEVITT:

Gene hadn't know whom he was to play for until he arrived at this place in Potsdam, He described being introduced to them. Stalin, he said, had two interpreters: one who translated everything Stalin said and another who translated everything that was said to him. He said the illusion was as though you were speaking directly to him. It was so efficient and worked so well. He hadn't known where he was going to be, you know, whom he was going to be playing for. Among the music that he had with him, he had some Georgian folk songs, Russian Georgian folk songs, so he was a great hit with those songs. Then he was sent out. The three guys and their interpreters were going to be having a kind of an informal discussion. They were out on a veranda or something. The piano was inside by a window. They told him to just play the piano, noodle whatever he wanted. It was kind of a background thing. He would hear snatches of conversation, he said. One of the things he heard was Churchill saying something about—"We're running out of palaces," he said, "and what's a conference like this without a palace?" And he heard Stalin's interpreter say, "They have palaces in Japan." He said he had all he could do to keep from hitting a chord, you know! He was sure that comment meant that the Russians were going to move into Japan with the Americans, and I guess that's what the atom bomb prevented.

CEPLAIR:

It seems so. It's hard otherwise to explain the two bombs, one right after the other.

LEVITT:

Right.

CEPLAIR:

Do you suppose that part of the psychology of people like you who had been overseas and were coming back was a sense that you just wanted to get on with your careers, just sort of put your life back in social order? And that politics didn't seem quite as important as it once had in that kind of a framework?

LEVITT:

Well, there were contradictory things that were running. There was some of that; you wanted to get your life in order. But, also, you felt you had been through an experience that was, in its way, profoundly political. And you were less willing to accept things that you didn't understand and that didn't seem to make sense to you. So I think that there were more—no longer could they send a ukase down and be accepted unquestioningly.

CEPLAIR:

So you were politically sophisticated in a lot of ways.

LEVITT:

In certain ways. Also, it wasn't just political; it was a life thing that changed. I mean, I don't think any of us could have helped but be changed by such an experience.

CEPLAIR:

Well, were you in Europe when that controversy broke out over Albert Maltz's article ["What Shall We Ask of Writers"]? Did you pick up any reverberations of that?

LEVITT:

Yeah, yeah.. I'm trying to remember it now. That, too, I think I had a conversation with Blitzstein about. The first one, I was

in Europe then. But by the second one, I mean when he recanted, I think I was in New York by then. I can't remember the dates exactly; I just remember discussions of the first one in Europe and discussions of the second one in New York.

CEPLAIR:

I think the first one was the spring of '45 and the recanting was late autumn, like November or something like that.

LEVITT:

Well, I didn't get back until December, but I guess I had more—by late autumn, or at least by winter, I was with a different group of people whom I would not have been discussing these things with until I got to New York. Yeah. Oh, I had this thing. Jeez, when the war ended, I did the thing with [Henri] Cartier-Bresson. Then—I'm trying to remember the order, or maybe before I was assigned to that—I went back to my original outfit that I went overseas with, and they were stationed somewhere in Germany. I arrived, and Van Heflin had long since come back to the States. There was this young guy, Joe Moscaret, and he said, "Listen, we're in big trouble here." This is my first day back. I said, "What's the trouble?" He said, "Well, I guess I need to explain something to you." There were PX rations. The outfits got ration slips or cards, so that when you went to the PX, most things which were in short supply, you would show that. They'd punch a hole or whatever, make some kind of mark and so on, until the card was used up or the time period expired. Then you'd be issued a new ration card. When I arrived back at this outfit, the commanding officer told me that the whole unit was in trouble. Somebody got hold of a pack of blank ration cards, and they used them. All they had to do was not get their last week of the second ration card, and then only one would be on file. But these guys went, and they each had two. And they were handed in. Then the PX people looked at them and said, "Hey, wait a minute!" So there were two ration cards for Charley

[Charles E.] Long, two ration cards for Leo Bloom, two for Danny [Levinson], and two for me. And I wasn't even there! So I started to figure things out. And then I realized that what had happened was that one of the guys was smart enough to use me because I wasn't there, but someone else also did it. I realized that the commanding officer was the other one. So he dumped the whole thing on my lap. I realized that if the commanding officer was going to be involved too, these guys didn't have a chance. They needed a commanding officer who would testify, and have credibility, that these were decent guys, this was one lapse, and so on. So I met with the guys and I said, "Look, somebody's going to have to take the rap for an additional one—mine." They were court-martialed. And I attended the court-martial and testified as a character witness for them. The commanding officer testified, too, so they got a very light thing. It was interesting, this sample of military justice. As I'm sitting there watching this trial go on, I suddenly realize that the guy who was testifying, the PX officer, didn't know any of these guys by sight and really didn't have any proof, unless they admitted it, that they had done it. So there was a recess. I went to the officer who was assigned to defend them. I mentioned that there was no evidence unless the GIs confessed. I said, "Can you change a plea from guilty to innocent? Then you can get these guys off altogether." So he said, "You a friend of theirs?" I said, "Yes." "Well," he said, "if you're a friend of theirs, don't bring that subject up. The plea could be changed. But if you do make that change, will probably throw the book at them. We made a deal before the thing that they'd be fined a certain number of months' pay, they'd have to restore the rations, and so on. But if you violate the deal, they'll serve prison sentences." Then I sat there and watched the rest of this charade go on. And it was really, you know—with the flag there, and it was really—. [laughter] What the hell is the word I'm trying to think of? Anyway, it made you very—a cynical, farcical experience. These guys who were so—they were really a nice bunch of

guys. You know, some of them were not very bright, but they were fundamentally decent guys. One of them, the guy I liked best in the group, this guy named Charley Long, Chuck Long, from Lima, Ohio. Helen and I went back to France in 1984 and visited some of the people who had befriended me. I thought of him when we got back. I figured there can't be too many Charles Longs in Lima, Ohio. So I called information and found out that there was a Charles E. Long and a Charles A. Long. I had some hunch that it was E. I called, and a woman answered. I said, "Is this the Charles Long residence?" She said, "Yeah." "The Charles Long who was in Europe during World War II with a motion picture unit?" "Yes." I said, "Terrific." She said, "Who is this?" I told her my name, and she said, "Oh, yes, I know your name because he's spoken of you." "Well, good! I'd like to talk to him." "He's dead." You know, that! Really, now, I have to tell you, this guy never smoked, didn't drink. He was a premature physical fitness guy. He used to work out. He was just the picture of health, and I said, "What did he die of?" She said, "Lung cancer." I said, "But he never smoked!" "I know," she said. "He went to Vietnam to teach, to train Vietnamese to teach special education." And she told me he was in the—what the hell's that phrase they use? The Agent Orange area. He came back, and a couple of years later that was it. I did see Van Heflin. I saw him a couple of times after that. Heflin died in a swimming pool. He was drunk and drowned.

CEPLAIR:

We could start talking about the Maltz situation and what you knew of it.

LEVITT:

Oh, yeah. I'm trying to remember it. I kind of liked what he said the first time, and I was thrown by the second one. [pause] Albert and I had some disagreements. He was an Incredible man. He was extraordinary in many ways. But that

whole battle that he had with [Dalton] Trumbo made me very unhappy. He just clung to that. While Trumbo was dying, you know, he was doing it.

CEPLAIR:

I guess I'm wondering, did that have some effect on your attitude when you came back, the fact that the party had forced a writer to change?

LEVITT:

Oh, absolutely. Absolutely. That was really very uncomfortable.

CEPLAIR:

Did that split the writers' ranks? Because I know there were some pretty heavy debates over that.

LEVITT:

Well, yeah. I would say that everybody was bothered by it. I don't think anyone really clasped it to their bosom, you know. But you always felt that you weighed taking an overt stand on that against what you felt the potential for good that the party represented—until it really—that was part of, you know, a whole process of it falling apart.

CEPLAIR:

I want to go into your returning to Hollywood and becoming a screenwriter. But before I do, is there anything from before the war years or—?

LEVITT:

Yeah, I wanted to tell you—. [pause] Yeah, there were two men who were really very interesting to me. One was Gar Kanin, and the other was a man named Norman Krasna. I don't know if you know who he is.

CEPLAIR:

I know both of them.

LEVITT:

They both had in common agile wits. I mean, they were really very amusing people to be around. Krasna was really—Gar was a mensch and Krasna was not. Krasna was the—in terms of the nature of his work and the success of his work, he was kind of the Neil Simon of his day. He wrote marvelous comedy things. When he and a couple of guys came out late in the war to make a film, they picked me up because I had been there. I am in a weapons carrier going across Germany, and I've never spoken to Krasna now. We were introduced, and I hadn't probably said ten words to him and he said, "Did you ever read a book called What Makes Sammy Run?" I said, "Yes." He said, "A lot of people think I'm Sammy Glick, but I've got a letter from Budd Schulberg that proves I'm not." [laughter] I was really stunned by it.

CEPLAIR:

I thought everybody thought Jerry [Jerome I.] Wald was Sammy Glick.

LEVITT:

Well, Jerry Wald probably was. Because Krasna was different from Wald. Krasna was talented. Wald wasn't. But the two men, you know, were very close friends.

CEPLAIR:

I didn't know that!

LEVITT:

In fact, after the war was over and I—he left. While I'm traveling with Krasna and a great cameraman named Ted McCord—did I mention him, yeah?—Krasna noticed what I was doing. I was collecting issues of Stars and Stripes from D day, and I wanted to keep doing that through the end of the war. He said, "What are you doing?" And I told him. "Gee," he said,

"collect copies for me, too. When we're back home, I'll have them both bound. And you'll have a bound copy." "Terrific! Okay." It was a lot of trouble to go back and get the back issues that I didn't have, but I eventually got them. Colonel Owen Crump, who commanded the unit, had had a town in Germany evacuated. They then napalmed the town in order to be able to have visually exciting pictures. So when I heard that they had done, I said, "That's insane! What are you going to do with that film when somebody asks you what town that was? And if you don't answer, I mean, you have a record now of that town, and somebody will—." You know. They said, "Yeah, that's right." And they gave me the reel of film. Colonel Owen Crump said, "Burn it." I mean, this is in Paris now. I said, "Where the hell am I going to burn it?" And this Owen Crump, who was a colonel—I was a sergeant—said, "You find a place." I said, "Look, this is classified material, right?" He said, "Yes." I said, "An enlisted man is not allowed to destroy classified material unless he's accompanied by an officer." So he said okay. A guy named Bill [William] Graf, whom I still see at the Academy [of Motion Picture Arts and Sciences], who was a captain, he was assigned to do it. He said, "Okay, let's do it together." I said, "Where?" He said, "Well, I don't know." "Well, I sure as hell don't know where I'm going to be able to burn a couple of reels of film"—I think there were three reels of film—"and not attract attention." So I said, "The least dangerous thing I can think of—I can't guarantee this, but I think if we go across one of the bridges on the Seine [River], if you got them in just cores and you don't have them in reels, we can just flip them over and go on. That will ruin the film, and that will be it." He said, "Okay, let's do that." First he wanted me to do it alone. I said, "No, I won't do it alone." [laughter] So we get on the bridge on the Seine and take the—there were three reels, with just a little core. We take the first one and we toss it over the bridge. What we didn't realize was—in the air it unspun into this whole big fluttering thing. Pretty soon, there's a whole crowd around us, and they're

applauding! We're hurrying up to do the second one. When we throw it out and it unfurls, they're saying, "Oh, look, it looks great. It looks marvelous!" and so on. [laughter] We finished and then got the hell out of there. But Owen Crump was furious with me for that and didn't take me home with the rest of the group as he had promised.

CEPLAIR:

He was angry because you had pointed out the problem.

LEVITT:

Right. But it was to my advantage in the long run. Because if I had gone home with them, I would not have gotten to work with Cartier-Bresson and so on. But it was an odd thing. When the blacklist came out, there was another thing that I'll tell you later. But there were a lot of long discussions in Paris about political matters and things, and they're all kind of a blur now. There was a guy who lives out here named Bob [Robert] Weinstein. He was not part of the project. But he was working for a branch of the army that was putting out some of these—I think he was the art director on some of these—"Why We Fight" pamphlets and that kind of thing. He was stationed in Paris. He used to come to this hotel and join us, became friendly with Cartier and myself and others. I had told him about my experiences with my friends in Chartres. Cartier said, "Hey, I haven't seen the cathedral for a long time. Let's go some Sunday or some weekend." So I called my friends there, and I told them we would come out for a visit. They were very excited about it, and they treated us regally. They invited them all to dinner, and it was really a banquet. We had gotten rooms at the hotel there, but they wouldn't let me—you know, they made me stay over there. In 1984 when we went back to Chartres—this kid who was seventeen at the time I had seen him previously, and it was now forty years later, he said, "Do you remember the time you brought Cartier-Bresson to Chartres?" I said, "Yes, I do." "Do you know that he's

famous all over France?" I said, "He's famous all over the world!" [laughter] He'd remembered every minute of it. A few years ago, there was a thing in Long Beach. Do you know about that, this reunion of the student activists of the thirties and the student activists of the sixties?

CEPLAIR:

I'm vaguely aware of it.

LEVITT:

And we went. We were somewhat involved in some of the plans for it. There's a guy we knew who started it [Leo Rifkin]. He teaches at Long Beach State College [now California State University, Long Beach] or whatever. That was an incredible experience. What was marvelous was the women student leaders of the thirties who were there. They were so full of vitality and were so radiant. You knew that their activism had really kept them young during all those years. It was a great weekend. It was much more than either of us ever expected. There I ran into this guy Bob Weinstein. He said, "Do you remember Chartres?" I said, "Sure I do." He started telling me an experience that I had, that I had told him, and he was telling it to me as though it had happened to him! It was really weird! That isn't the word. And one time he used the wrong name, and I instinctively corrected him. He said, "Oh, was it him?" And then he went on with his story. [laughter]

CEPLAIR:

How bizarre!

LEVITT:

It was wild.

CEPLAIR:

I guess you couldn't really tell him that, I guess.

LEVITT:

No, I couldn't. I couldn't bring myself to do that. But Helen of course knew, and she—it was really stunning.

CEPLAIR:

Was your French fluent by the time you left?

LEVITT:

Well, I had had three years of French in high school and three years in college. When I got out of college, I could read and write French almost as well as English. But I could never speak it, because they didn't teach languages that way at that time. When I got to France, I spoke it a lot, and it kept coming back to me—I mean, not coming back to me. First of all, it was closer to my college years than now. I began to have a sense of the conversational. I got to realize that it really didn't matter very much if you didn't pronounce every damned thing exactly the way they did, and I felt a little freer. I discovered that if I had a couple of drinks, I was very fluent. So I did get along very well. With the Guerin family in Chartres, none of them spoke any English, so I had to. When I went back in 1984, it was different, because there was a bigger gap.

CEPLAIR:

Much bigger.

LEVITT:

Of course, it was very—it was a struggle. But by the time I left, I was getting pretty good, in better shape than—

CEPLAIR:

You said he [Cartier-Bresson] introduced you to many people in the French cultural community.

LEVITT:

Yeah.

CEPLAIR:

Did you ever come into contact with [Albert] Camus or [Jean-Paul] Sartre or [Maurice] Merleau-Ponty?

LEVITT:

No, not them. But I did meet Paul Eluard and Georges Sadoul. There were a number of people I met whose names didn't mean anything to me then, which I've forgotten. Some of them may be among them. [laughter] There was a—I'm going to jump again in time, because this was a great experience. The war was over, and I had not yet been assigned to do this film with Cartier-Bresson. But I ran into Gar Kanin while I was looking for a GI billet. I had I think two weeks in Paris. So he said, "Look, I've got a room at the [Hotel] Scribe and there are twin beds. You're welcome to take one of the beds. It has to be better than a GI billet." I said, "Sure does." I stayed in that room. The first morning I was there, there was a knock at the door. Gar went to the door, and there was a waiter there with a tray and cup of coffee. He said that he had had an arrangement with someone next door to bring him a cup of coffee each morning. "And he seems to be gone. He's not going to be here anymore," he said, "and I thought maybe you would like it." So Gar says, "Terrific! Listen, could you bring two cups tomorrow morning?" The guy said, "Sure." I said, "I don't drink coffee, Gar." He said, "What do you drink? Tea?" I said, "Yeah, I drink tea." He said, "Can you bring a cup of tea and a cup of coffee?" The guy said, "Yeah." He gave him fifty francs for the cup of coffee. A franc was then two cents. Next day the waiter brings a cup of coffee and a cup of tea, and Gar gave him a hundred francs. Then the next day the guy brought tea, coffee, and toast, and Gar gave him two hundred francs. I said, "Gar, you don't have to be a mathematician to figure out that if you keep doing that, it's going to be ridiculous." "You don't understand," he said. "This is a competition. This is a contest between that waiter's ingenuity and my money to see which one runs out first." We were getting eggs and bacon. He's trying—. [laughter] It went on and on until at some point

it stopped; I can't remember where. But he was that kind of guy. He also showed me a play that he had written. Asked me to read it and tell him what I thought of it. I read it, and I said, "I love it. But you've got this scene where two people sit on the stage and play gin rummy together. The whole action of the play stops; I don't understand that." He said, "Well, it's supposed to be funny." I said, "Well, I don't see anything funny about it." He said, "Well, believe me. I visualize it the way I would stage it"—this was Born Yesterday, of course—"and my only defense is that—." What he showed me was kind of a director's script written like his notes to himself and had not yet—in a recent interview with Gar Kanin that was in the Dramatists Guild publication, he said he had the idea for Born Yesterday when he was still in France, but he didn't put it together until he got to New York. I was embarrassed, because I saw it when it opened in New York, rolling on the floor with laughter. But he was a stunning character. Where Krasna was, you know, really from—incidentally, Gar Kanin was the only man, maybe in the whole world, who predicted—he said to me before the election of 1945, whatever it was, that there would be a Labour [Party] victory.

CEPLAIR:

You mean in England?

LEVITT:

In England, yeah. It stunned everybody. But I reminded him of that, that he did. One day I was walking along the street and I saw a guy, a young man my age, who had a hat on—a strange uniform. It was not consistent, but it had a thing with a red star and a hammer and sickle on the thing. I was curious. He was talking to another guy, and they were talking in French. I joined them. I was curious as to what it was, to find out what it was. The Russian had been taken prisoner by the Germans. He had escaped and fought with the Maquis, had won a Croix de Guerre from the French government, and he had the papers

for it. This was Sunday, and the next morning very early he was leaving to go back to the Soviet Union. The other kid was just a French guy who had also been in the French Maquis. So I said, "Well, wait a minute. Maybe I can help." So I called the hotel. I told Gar the situation, and he said, "Bring him over here. Get a bottle of cognac and bring Henri." I said, "Can you get him a Croix de Guerre?" He said, "I don't know, but I'll think of something." So I brought these two guys, and I said, "We might be able to help you." Brought them to the hotel room. By the time I got there, Gar was ready. "Okay," he said, "we're getting in the car. We're going to the apartment of a French actor." Who was very well known—Claude Dauphin. Claude Dauphin's apartment. We went down, the three of us and Gar. There's a big party going on with a lot of people, actresses as well as actors. And these are not guys who are just going to give him the medal. (Because Dauphin's brother had won the Croix de Guerre, he said he would give him the medal. He would get another one later, because he had the papers.) They weren't just about to give [it] to him; they were going to award it to him. They do a whole ceremony that's really very funny, and Gar is taking pictures of all of this. And the Russian keeps wanting to stage it in all kinds of corny ways, like the three of us holding hands like this, not realizing who Gar Kanin was. Oh, the French kid recognized Dauphin's brother as his commander in the Maquis. All those kinds of things happened. When it was over and we left, the Russian wanted my address, and I gave him whatever address I had at that time. I said, "Give me yours." He gave it to me, and I didn't even look at it until he was gone. He'd given it to me in Russian, this Cyrillic script. [laughter] I never did figure his name. I never heard from him, either.

CEPLAIR:

Well, of course, you know, Russians who had been captured in the West did not have a—

LEVITT:

That's right, yeah.

CEPLAIR:

—a very long life when they got back to the Soviet Union.

LEVITT:

Yeah. It was a marvelous day. I'm really—I'm doing this for me, you understand, not for you.

CEPLAIR:

I understand. It's your history, not mine.

LEVITT:

Did I tell you about Ted McCord?

CEPLAIR:

You've mentioned him a few times, nothing much in detail.

LEVITT:

Did I tell you about the prisoner of war cage? Well, Ted McCord is really a great cameraman, a very talented guy, but absolute nutty. [laughter]

CEPLAIR:

He worked in Hollywood before the war?

LEVITT:

Oh, yeah. He got an Academy Award for [The] Treasure of the Sierra Madre. Did a lot of absolutely beautiful things. I mean, he and Jimmy [James Wong] Howe are, I think, probably the best cameramen. And the other guy, too, runs a third, the guy who did Citizen Kane, whose name—

CEPLAIR:

Gregg something.

LEVITT:

Yeah. Toland. But he [McCord] was crazy, you know. He carried this big B-4 bag. I must have told you this. On one side, he had stenciled "Kill 'em with Fil-um." And on the other side it said, "Don't Get Sore." [laughter] We're going into combat zones, and he's carrying this damned bag! He was always frightened of the wrong things. He saw a forward command post—we were in a jeep, and he saw it and he said, "Stop the jeep!" I said, "Why?" He said, "It's a forward command post! I'm not—." I said, "Look, it's a division forward command post. It's when you get to a company forward command post that it's time to start being nervous." On the other hand, when he was looking through his finder and he saw something, he would walk right into the cannon's mouth! So he was weird. Helen and I wrote to each other every day during the war. I was an enlisted man, so I'd always have to have an officer sign it, sign on the outside of my letter that it was okay, you know—it was not giving away any military secrets. So I said to Ted, "Would you sign this thing?" He said, "What for?" I said, "I need an officer to sign it to indicate I haven't given away any war secrets." He said, "But I haven't read it." I said, "You want to read my mail?" "Well, I'm supposed to, right?" "Do I read yours?" "No." I said, "Okay." And he signed it. From then on he signed it. He would show me some of his letters. This guy is ordinary. He couldn't really express himself when he was talking about other things, but when he would describe a scene, it was really poetic and vivid—he really made it come to life. The only thing was, I said, "Ted, do you want to be court-martialed? You can't describe these fortifications and these—." And in Holland he had descriptions of the ships in the harbor, and though he was describing scenery, he was also giving military information that could have gotten him in trouble. He didn't know! He just got carried away by beautiful pictures. But that's enough about the war, isn't it?

CEPLAIR:

It sounds as if you had a, you know—it's. a dumb expression—but a decent war. I mean that you hadn't—

LEVITT:

Well, what I had was an incredible experience.

CEPLAIR:

You learned a new skill.

LEVITT:

[laughter] Yes! But it was really a marvelous experience in many ways in terms of people and in terms of others that I met.

CEPLAIR:

Did you come back a noticeably different individual than when you had left, do you think?

LEVITT:

Well, you felt many ways older than the time period that had passed. Even though I don't know whether I can be specific about this, I know I felt certain values had changed. I mean values in the sense of what's important and what isn't. I knew that I didn't want to go back to being a reader, even though I could have. That was one of the big things backing you. Your job is waiting for you. That's how I started. I used—I think I told you—my print of *Reunion* to get my first job.

CEPLAIR:

I think we'll hold that for the next tape. Did the United States seem a different place to you when you returned?

LEVITT:

Well, I returned to New York and spent the winter in New York. I hadn't been to New York in so long that that certainly seemed a different place. But, yeah, it did seem—it was a different place because you could not help reacting to coming

from Europe, where you couldn't go a quarter of a mile in one direction without seeing some war damage. And [here] you see everything intact and nothing damaged. When Cartier sent me a thing—there were a lot of shortages in Europe right after the war, but among them was women's shoes. And he wanted me to get shoes for his sister and for his wife. I mean, the sizes—you know, there's a whole different system of sizes here. So what he had done was he had traced the outline of each, and he wrote this little note: "The foot of a Javanese dancer." That was his wife. And "the foot of a female poet"—his sister had won the Paul Valery prize for poetry that year, and she was about eighteen. We also sent food packages and things to our friends in Chartres and clothing.

1.9. TAPE NUMBER: V, Side One (MAY 17, 1988)

CEPLAIR:

The first thing I want to ask is, was Hollywood different to you than it had been when you left, or did the industry seem different? Did the town seem different?

LEVITT:

I don't have any recollection of the town seeming different. I felt that I was different. Of course, in terms of real estate there was a huge difference because suddenly—I think I may have mentioned to you earlier that we had rented this house for three couples for $75 month. That was a marvelous house. After spending the winter in New York after I came back from Europe, we then took the train out here, because Helen [Slote Levitt]'s father [Louis H. Slote] wouldn't let her fly. She was then pregnant with his first grandson [Thomas A. Levitt]. Helen's father was a physician. The first place we looked for was that $75-a-month house, and it was for sale. This was the house that had been offered to us. I think I must have mentioned this, that while I was away, Helen wrote to me and said, "The landlady needs money. She'll sell the house with furniture and everything for $12,500." I wrote back, "How can

you talk about buying a house now? I don't know when I'll come back or if I'll come back." And then she wrote again and their price was reduced. I think the last price that was offered was either $8,500 or $9,500. And, again, I was absolutely outraged that she would even think of that. Well, now, the war's over and it's only a year or so later, a year and a half later, and we headed for that house. It was for sale for $40,000. [laughter] You can imagine what it is now, one of those big old Spanish houses with walls that thick, just terrific. So that changed. We had to scurry around to find a place to live. We got an apartment on Riverside Drive in North Hollywood, Riverside Drive near Cahuenga [Boulevard]. Oddly enough, there was another apartment house next to it which was owned by George Stevens. I think one of his ex-wives lived in it. This apartment house had four apartments in it. We lived downstairs in one apartment. And upstairs at that angle [laughter]—I'm sure the tape will record that angle that I described with my hands—lived Dick [Richard] and Betty [Elizabeth] Wilson. We were really very close friends. They had a little child. Tom was born while we were living there. I don't remember how long we lived there, but he was toddling around by the time we left. Chris [Christopher] Wilson, who was older than Tom, maybe a year or two older, was there in the same place. I ran an intercom between our two apartments. Sometimes if one of us was going out and the other couple was going to stay in, we'd sit for each other via intercom. We did a lot of kind of mutual entertaining; we had a lot of mutual friends. My first attempt at getting work, my—Johnny [John] Weber, a very political guy, had become an agent for William Morris [Agency], and he became my agent. The first assignment I was able to get was to write a screenplay called *Double Crossroads*. That was some kind of a spy thing. The producer, whom I knew from the army at [Fort] Roach, wanted to hire me, but he really was uncertain. I had no feature-film credits, so he assigned someone to work with me, to collaborate with me on this. And the one he assigned

was Ben Barzman. I had known Ben before, so the whole thing was very fortuitous. Ben and I were really quite friendly. Shortly after we were back, I ran into Ben and I said—you know, big greetings—I said, "How's Norma [Barzman]? I hear that either she just had her baby or she's just about to have her baby." He said, "She just had a baby and she's about to have a baby!" [laughter]

CEPLAIR:

What studio was this?

LEVITT:

This was Columbia [Pictures Industries, Inc.].

CEPLAIR:

He was already a screenwriter, right?

LEVITT:

Ben had already been established as a screenwriter. We had a terrible time with the producer, but we got along. We worked well together, enough—the thing was never made. Ben went on to other projects, and I went on to something. I got an assignment at RKO [Radio Pictures, Inc.].

CEPLAIR:

So at Columbia you were just signed for a one-picture deal. Is that how it went?

LEVITT:

Yeah.

CEPLAIR:

And when it didn't come through, they didn't pick up your option?

LEVITT:

You were on weekly salary, and you worked at the studio. It's funny—I just did a piece for the [Writers Guild of America] newsletter, because I'm on the editorial board. And I was telling guys that—this is a big parenthesis; I don't know that it should even be on here. I'll come to it later then. Anyway, you worked at the studio, and you were either under contract, that is, term contract, or you made a deal by coming in and selling a story either verbally or having written the story—the thing they used to call an "original," what you'd bring in and sell. Part of the deal would be to write the screenplay, and you'd have a sum plus eight weeks, let's say, to do the screenplay at so much a week and so on. A number of variations of that governed your employment. Or sometimes you just had an idea—or a studio or a producer had an idea and brought a writer in. That's what happened in the first case. It was this guy Jules Schirmer who had an idea. We tried to develop it, and it never worked. Then I had an idea, and my agent sold it to—did my agent or I? I can't remember. There was a producer named Ralph Steiner who had never produced anything in the studio before. He had made a documentary film in New York that won prizes or something. And I think working with him in some kind of assistant capacity was Phil [Philip] Brown. You know Phil Brown? Well, Phil Brown was one of the founders of the Actors Lab. He was primarily an actor, or director, and I remember some involvement of his there. I can't remember exactly what it was. I had a terrible time with Ralph Steiner. I mean, he and I did not see eye to eye on anything. The thing that got me both of these things was the film, *Reunion*.

CEPLAIR:

You literally carted it with you and showed it to people?

LEVITT:

Well, I give it to my agent. He would show it to people, and that got them interested.

CEPLAIR:

So Steiner's at RKO?

LEVITT:

Steiner's at RKO, and I had an idea—oh, I had an idea, that's right, that I interested them in. And every time I kept running into great difficulties with Steiner. We really didn't see eye to eye on anything in relation to that story, how that story should be told.

CEPLAIR:

What was the idea?

LEVITT:

It was about a boy, a young boy in a family where he had—I think he didn't have a father or didn't have a mother, I can't remember which. It's a long time ago. He was being brought up by an aunt who loved him but was very stern in the way she handled him, and there were other relatives in the family. They lived out in the [San Fernando] Valley, and at that time Columbia had its—what do they call it?—back lot or ranch. It was the Columbia Ranch. There were sets and things where they would shoot things that they couldn't shoot on a soundstage. But the idea of this story was that this kid found an opening in the fence or something and managed to wriggle through, and he'd wander around seeing these marvelous sets. He would walk in front of a set, and then his imagination would take over. He would play a role in relation to that set. What he did was he solved, or he dealt with, problems that he had with his family through these scenes that he would imagine. One day in the RKO commissary, you know, having a terrible time with Steiner, I was sitting at a table alone. Adrian Scott, whom I knew, came over and joined me. He started asking questions about what I was doing. I told him about that story, and he said, "Gee, that's a marvelous story. That's a terrific story." I said, "Yeah, but I can't get anywhere with this guy." And I

didn't. Ultimately, the thing blew up. Adrian then hired me for *The Boy with Green Hair*, really, on the basis of that. He said, "How would you feel about working with Ben Barzman?" [laughter] I said, "Fine!" I said, "You know, we've worked [together] before." So we worked together on The Boy with Green Hair. And that was interesting.

CEPLAIR:

How did you work together? What was the form that your collaboration took?

LEVITT:

First, we had to work out the entire outline.

CEPLAIR:

As you said on one of the other tapes, all you had was the title to begin with—right?—for this.

LEVITT:

No, there was what was called a short-short story that appeared on one page of a magazine supplement of the L. A. Times then called This Week. It was a syndicated supplement, because the [New York] Herald Tribune had that too. It was this lovely, poetic thing, but there was no story about it, about this boy. So they bought the rights to it in order to use the title. The cold war had already begun, so we wanted to do a piece, something that would talk about peace. The way we worked, Ben and I—I'm trying to remember whether we had adjoining offices or whether it was one big office. I think we had separate offices. We'd go back and forth. What I do remember—Ben was never young. Ben was like an old man then in certain ways. He had a row of bottles of pills and medications on his desk. But always a very—I mean, I have a great affection for Ben. He's got some terribly irritating [laughter] things that he does—never to me. I remember one time we had given the secretary pages to type. We were talking about something, and we could hear the secretary's

typewriter go, and suddenly it stopped.. Ben and I were in the middle of something, and Ben turns around and said, "What's the matter? You make a mistake?" I said, "Jesus, Ben! you can't—!" [laughter] But this is part of his whole nervous system. He was really good to work with. There was never any throwing weight around, because he had more experience than I did. He had credits. I hadn't, at that point, had any credits. Adrian was the greatest producer who ever lived. I mean, he spoiled me for everyone else. Adrian would challenge every scene, challenge every line in every speech, every word in every line, and managed to do it in such a way you couldn't wait to get back to the typewriter to do it again. I mean, he was absolutely marvelous. He was a lovely man, just as a person. He was a gentle man, capable of being very tough if he had to be, but never for very long. And very acute. He was a great producer. I was spoiled. You know, I thought all producers were going to be like him! I found I was wrong. We finished the script. Dore Schary was then head of production at RKO, and Dore liked it very much. In fact, he came in after we were almost finished with it. He used to say—Adrian would get a call when we were waiting to have a conference with him. He said, "Okay, you can bring your communist writers up now." And we'd go up. I remember there was one scene in the picture where the kid has his—it's toward the end of the picture. It's a big emotional scene. The kid's hair is being cut off by the barber. We wrote into the thing [that] his hair is cut off, and it's kind of a quiet scene. Everybody's kind of wondering what they have done. They look at the kid, now shorn, and the kid gets up out of the chair. Pat O'Brien hands the barber money, and you follow the kid and you hear—we wrote in just hearing the cash register sound, because it was so quiet that we wrote that in. We had this meeting with Schary. "Listen, guys," he said, "that's great, but you can't do that." We said, "Why?" He said, "Because, you know, everybody will figure it out." And we said, "Figure what out?" He said, "The cash register bell is capitalism." [laughter] It was

so remote from anything—we just thought of it as an effect, you know, a sound effect that would be an accent in a kind of tense scene. And he was reading political things into it. I'm sure he was making those readings because of who we were, not because it was—if somebody else had been writing that, I don't think that would have occurred to him.

CEPLAIR:

I admit to having the same thought before you said that.

LEVITT:

Really?

CEPLAIR:

Yeah! [laughter]

LEVITT:

Well, I mean, maybe on some level of consciousness that we weren't aware of, but we were stunned by that comment. But it stayed in anyway. We assured him that was not our purpose. [laughter] Sometimes the best things you do are unconscious.

CEPLAIR:

Your [inaudible] runs so deep. Yeah.

LEVITT:

Before the picture was made, just before it was ready to start and Joe [Joseph] Losey was set to direct it—Adrian brought Joe in to direct it. Joe had never directed any film before. And Howard Hughes bought RKO, and Schary was out. Howard Hughes took over the studio. He bought the studio, and he hated hated the script. Now, when it finished, Ben went on to another assignment. He had a thing—I remember, it was The Wreck of the Hesperus. I don't think it was ever made, but there was that. And Joe, this was Joe's first picture. Joe would get these notes from Hughes in which he would try to change

each scene where he felt the message was peace. He would try to change it to preparedness. That was his view. So I would—let me back up a little bit in terms of time. Now that the [Hollywood] Ten happens and Adrian is out, a man named Stephen Ames becomes the producer. Maybe I've told you this.

CEPLAIR:

Yeah.

LEVITT:

I did. Okay. Anyway, Stephen Ames, because he was so conscious of his lack of qualification for being the producer, it was a help to us. Also, the fact that he was not—I stayed on. I was off salary. I wasn't being paid, but I was there every day with Joe on the set. At night we would take the memos that Hughes sent that day and try to seem to do what Hughes wanted, but not to have the effect that he wanted. And we did that pretty successfully, because Hughes hated the film. [laughter]

CEPLAIR:

Did you ever meet with Hughes?

LEVITT:

Joe may have, but I never met with him, no.

CEPLAIR:

Did he know you were doing the rewriting?

LEVITT:

No. I'm sure he didn't.

CEPLAIR:

So you were just doing it to preserve the script.

LEVITT:

Right. And it was interesting. We had Pat O'Brien, who was not our first choice. The guy whom we wanted to play that role was an actor named Albert Sharp, who had just made a big hit in Finian's Rainbow playing a kind of elfin Irishman. But he really was Irish, and he really did speak with a brogue and didn't have to, you know, fake it. So they hired Pat O'Brien, who also was a right-wing guy, but was very pleasant and genial to work with. What he was most interested in was getting the Irish dialogue right, the use of English in that way. And he kept saying, "God, you guys must have read a lot of Sean O'Casey." I said, "Yeah, we did." I was surprised that he had read any Sean O'Casey! [laughter] So I was on the set all through the thing. And the kid, who was absolutely marvelous—this was before he ever learned to act, as frequently happens with kids. Although I saw him in something within the last few years, I can't remember what it was. But he was pretty good. It was something that Sam Shepard wrote. It may have been Paris, Texas. Was he in that?

CEPLAIR:

Yeah.

LEVITT:

I thought he was kind of good in that. At any rate—

CEPLAIR:

Just for the record, we're talking about Dean Stockwell.

LEVITT:

Yeah. At any rate, I had some conversations with Dean, the child, and he told me in his own kind of way how he felt about playing it. "I feel," he said, "this picture is like," he said, "it's like being a Boy Scout." And he said, "You're doing something really good." And I didn't question it any further. But I was pleased with that, and I think his performance was really an outstanding child performance. He was really good. His family was Italian, which somehow surprised me. And his mother said

she was about to open a restaurant with the money Dean made. I think Guy [Stockwell], who is older than Dean, became an actor afterward.

CEPLAIR:

Were you pleased with the final product?

LEVITT:

There were some things where we made these compromises to seem to do what Hughes wanted us to do, but not really do it. What suffered was not the content, because we were able to take care of that, but the aesthetics suffered in a number of things that were really awkward. Joe is very tense and nervous about a lot of things in there. It was his first picture, and it was something to be tense about, with Hughes having moved in there. We wrote our screenplay, detailed every bit of action that any of the actors did. It was amusing in a way. I think in retrospect, although after the fact, Joe resented that. He had frequently made disparaging comments about it, because he shot the script as is, to the extent that he was able to. Although I remember in the reviews he got credit for touches that we had written. In the very opening of the thing, or early on, there is a scene with the kid and Pat O'Brien walking along and various people reacting. He says, "This is my grandson," or whatever the hell he referred—or nephew. I don't remember how he characterized him. And there was a whole thing we had written in with—I can't even describe it now. They were, in some of the reviews, described as director's touches. But that was my first experience, and I learned to get used to that after a while. [laughter] There were things that I think Joe did in performance that were really nice. I mean, I was much more worried about Pat O'Brien beforehand than I was afterward. It was a serviceable performance. One of the things that's interesting about collaboration generally, if it's a good collaboration, if the collaboration is really good, you don't remember who contributed what. Once I had Ben, many years

later—when I was teaching at [California State University] Northridge, I guess we ran the film, and Ben was there. We were both talking about it. And someone asked about a particular thing, a line that worked very well, and said, "Whose idea was that?" And Ben and I said almost simultaneously, "His." And we each really thought it was. Neither of us really could remember whose idea was whose. It was nice. I mean, that was really good.

CEPLAIR:

Was it a successful movie?

LEVITT:

It's hard to say. It was a respected film, but Hughes really hated it. So I don't think it got the kind of release it might have gotten, and there were some people who attacked the content and so on. Like anything else, or perhaps even more than anything else, I would like to do a rewrite of it. I ran it about a year ago, because one of my students had heard or had found that in my credits or something. As I ran it, I found myself saying, "Gee, the thing seems so slow and so ponderous." Of course, that's true not only of that, but of all the films that were made before television came in. Most of them, I would say, unless they were actually action-adventure films in themselves, were slow—a better word or a nicer word would be "reflective"—as compared with today. Parenthetically, the many years I have been on the foreign language awards committee of the Academy [of Motion Picture Arts and Sciences], we'd see, in a period of six or eight weeks, you know, thirty or forty foreign films, which is really punishment. But you could look at the film and almost tell from that film what the level of penetration of American television is in that country. When they start hurrying up right from the beginning, you know American television has been there. When they do a slow, thoughtful kind of thing, you know it hasn't had its effect yet.

CEPLAIR:

I wanted to ask you, when you came back from the war and back to screenwriting, had your experience with documentary filmmaking changed your attitude toward movies? Or did you think that movies could now be better than they had been?

LEVITT:

That's an interesting question. I had an obsession with the real, and I became aware of it. And that thing that I wrote for RKO that never went was an expression of my consciousness that I was too involved in the real and literal. So I consciously tried to develop a story that would break out of that. I once tried to buy that back from RKO. They could never find it. They didn't have any record of it. I probably could have stolen it if I hadn't mentioned it. I could have just stolen it. They couldn't find it, and they couldn't set a price on it because they didn't know how much money they had invested in it. It was one of those dumb things. The Boy with Green Hair certainly wasn't a really successful picture, but it made a splash in a sense. It's—I guess I should put quotations around it—"differentness" got attention, and people even now remember the title, even though they don't remember the picture.

CEPLAIR:

I was five years old when it came out. I can remember the title vividly.

LEVITT:

Yeah. Yeah.

CEPLAIR:

Now, what's interesting is that while Adrian, I guess, was producing or starting to produce *The Boy with Green Hair*, he also was just probably finishing *Crossfire*. Right?

LEVITT:

He had finished *Crossfire*.

CEPLAIR:

He had finished *Crossfire*.

LEVITT:

In fact, while we were working with Adrian, there was a screening at the studio of *Crossfire*, and that's when we saw it for the first time. It had not yet been released. Well, you know what the origins of *Crossfire* were. The Brick Foxhole [by Richard Brooks].

CEPLAIR:

Right. About a homosexual.

LEVITT:

Yeah. A couple of years ago at some dinner party I was saying—Richard Brooks was there, and I was saying I thought a number of times that if that picture were made today, it would be made the way it was written, rather than making the guy Jewish. And Brooks, you know, agreed that was true. Well, Dore Schary was a liberal guy when his liberalism didn't put him at risk in any way. So his notions—now, we were way advanced on—wait a minute, wait a minute now. No, it was *Crossfire* that he put his name on, that he had nothing to do with. Yeah.

CEPLAIR:

Right.

LEVITT:

Now, he was really involved in our thing.

CEPLAIR:

So was there a sense, then, at RKO that this was a studio in which sort of important movies could be made? I mean movies with social content.

LEVITT:

I think there was a—I'm not sure that it had that reputation, because the guy who was running the studio before Hughes, whose name I cannot remember, was just a corporate guy, not a moviemaker as most of the other studio film heads were. The guy was married to Jacqueline Cochran, who was a famous aviatrix, the word was then, and he was a very wealthy guy. [Floyd Odium] At any rate, I never thought of RKO as—but, you know, others may have had that perception without my being aware of it. Certainly after a while—the picture was in production. Or just before it went into production—the script was finished. And the subpoenas for the [Hollywood] Nineteen—or there were more than nineteen, weren't there, originally?

CEPLAIR:

It was nineteen.

LEVITT:

Nineteen. And Adrian and—I'm blocking his name out—

CEPLAIR:

[Edward] Dmytryk.

LEVITT:

Eddie Dmytryk got their subpoenas. I remember I was with Adrian when Eddie Dmytryk came into Adrian's office and said—this was his reaction to getting the subpoena. He said, "They can't prove anything on me." That was his total reaction at that time. Even after Adrian was fired, Adrian continued to make contributions to the film. Joe and I had a couple of meetings with Adrian. He was really an extraordinary man.

CEPLAIR:

Well, when they received their subpoenas, did you tremble a little?

LEVITT:

No, I never thought to—I thought that was just for the big shots. [laughter] You know, I never thought that it would ever filter down. At that time, there was no thought that it was going to go beyond those people.

CEPLAIR:

Did Hughes use that as an excuse to clean house at RKO, to get rid of people he thought were—?

LEVITT:

Well, you know, I can't remember any other people at RKO who would have been suspect to Hughes. What I'm sure of is that anybody at RKO from that point on, and at other studios as well, was more careful about the material they bought or the material that was being written, [tape recorder off] Something else just occurred to me. There was a scene early on in which the kid is describing his, I think he referred to him as his grandfather, which he wasn't, of course, as having performed before a king. And then there's a scene showing this kind of fantasy thing of a king. It was played by an Irish actor whose name I can't remember, an older man, but I guess a contemporary of Pat O'Brien's. O'Brien insisted that we get this guy to play it, because O'Brien had loaned him money, and this was his way to make sure he was getting paid back. That clearly made a deep impression on me, because I was shocked by that. [laughter]

CEPLAIR:

That venality existed. Well, so when the movie was over, there was no question that you were going to be rehired at RKO, I guess.

LEVITT:

There was no question that I wouldn't be hired, yeah. But when the movie was over, I got offers. I think the next thing I

worked on was at Universal [Pictures], a picture called *Shakedown*. There was a period there where everybody was doing one-word titles. I think the original title was something very different, and then they wanted to make—

CEPLAIR:

What about *Mrs. Mike*?

LEVITT:

That came later.

CEPLAIR:

But wasn't *Shakedown* released after *Mrs. Mike*?

LEVITT:

I don't think so.

CEPLAIR:

Oh. I must have got the—okay.

LEVITT:

I worked on that [*Shakedown*]. They had had a previous script, and I worked—I didn't know about a previous script. They can't do that now, but that used to happen a lot. The [Writers] Guild [of America] now requires the hiring company to inform each writer hired of any previous writers who worked on the project. Anyway, I did the script, and the guy who was going to direct it was a first-time director named Joe [Joseph] Pevney. He was an actor who had played in Home of the Brave in New York. He was married to Mitzi Green, if you remember who she was. Well, you were too young to know. She was a child actress and child star. Joe Pevney was a very talented actor. In fact, he used to drive me crazy. Because we would have conversations about the script, about characters, about different things in the script, and he would say something to me and I would respond to what he said, but he was acting. That was to be a line of dialogue he was suggesting. [laughter]

I could never tell when he was creating by speaking a line of dialogue that he thought should be in there, or whether he was having a conversation with me around the script. I could never distinguish those apart. I mean, that doesn't sound like it's a compliment to his acting, but he is a very good actor, very talented. After that—

CEPLAIR:

Did you collaborate on *Shakedown*?

LEVITT:

No, I worked alone on that.

CEPLAIR:

Was that about criminals?

LEVITT:

No. What it was, it was about a photographer, a news photographer, and I got very interested in the whole thing. I was still—

CEPLAIR:

Yeah, right.

LEVITT:

There was an original story that was sold to the studio by a famous news photographer. A news photographer not on the level of a Bob [Robert] Capa, but a kind of tabloid guy. The original title of it was something like—it was some variation of the phrase "velvet carpet" or "red carpet" that used something photographic in the title that connoted that by virtue of his camera he was able to get in various places he had a lot of—and then around that there was some kind of melodramatic story, but I can't even remember what the hell it was.

1.10. TAPE NUMBER: V, Side Two (MAY 17, 1988)

LEVITT:

While I was there working at Universal, I found myself sitting at a table with other writers, most of whom I didn't know. Especially one I didn't know named Borden Chase, whose name I assume you are familiar with. And the director—I've forgotten already. What's his name?

CEPLAIR:

Pevney?

LEVITT:

Yeah, Joe. Joe Pevney never told me anything about Borden Chase. I didn't know anything about Borden Chase, except that he wrote westerns, until I began some of the conversations. Pevney used to do his little things. If I was carrying a Variety or a book, Pevney would draw a hammer and sickle on it. The idea was to get Chase to see that. Chase was—I found him—apart from his politics, a rather unpleasant man. He was writing westerns there. And he was very anti-Screen Writers Guild. I remember getting into arguments with him about that, and he said, "Aw, come on, I'm for real unions, you know." He had been a sandhog. He had worked I think on the Holland Tunnel [New York-New Jersey]. And he said, "Guys who do that kind of work, they're the guys in the union," and so on. If I can jump ahead a little bit, just about Borden Chase—jump ahead a lot, because the blacklist was well under way, and I was living in North Hollywood and driving to a place that I had where I was doing photography. I used to take a particular path that went by a Catholic church that's on Moorpark [Street] near Lankershim [Boulevard] or Vineland [Avenue], one of those. The day or the day after—it must have been the day after. The day following the issue of the newspaper that reported Joe [Joseph P.] McCarthy's death, I drove by, and I saw a lot of people going into that Catholic church. And I saw Borden Chase walk up the stairs.

CEPLAIR:

What kind of political activity were you involved in during this period?

LEVITT:

I was just involved in guild activity and my guild activity was very slight. I was attending meetings, and there was whatever remained of—I can't remember the organizations that were still in existence then. I guess the Anti-Nazi League must have been over by then. Helen was—oh, Helen was no longer with the Actors Lab. That's right. When she went back East to meet me after the war, she left the Actors Lab.

CEPLAIR:

I guess the Hollywood Independent Citizens Committee [of the Arts, Sciences, and Professions] was probably the—

LEVITT:

Right. That's right. That was one of the organizations.

CEPLAIR:

And of course there was the Hollywood Ten defense.

LEVITT:

Right. That was the big thing. Oh, yeah. When the Hollywood Ten defense—I've got to jump ahead. Let me try to keep this in chronological order; otherwise, I'll be repeating things so damned much. My activity was not, you know—I was one in a crowd. And after the Universal thing, I worked at Columbia on *The Barefoot Mailman*. That was a novel. The guy I worked directly with was Sylvan [S.] Simon, who was kind of head of the production there. Jeez, I've got some funny letters from Harry Cohn somewhere in my file. The name I used was my full name, Alfred Lewis Levitt. Something about that seemed to irritate Cohn, because he'd write me notes—he'd say, "Listen, Alfred Lewis Levitt—." And every time he'd mention my name, he'd always say "Alfred Lewis Levitt." [laughter] Bobby [Robert] Cohn was the producer who was directly on it. Sylvan

Simon was in charge of production, and he was an impossible man. And I left. I finished that, and then I left to work on—

CEPLAIR:

My Outlaw Brother?

LEVITT:

Oh, yeah, I just worked on that really briefly, *My Outlaw Brother*. Where the hell was I? I remember getting a phone call at a studio. They asked me to come back. They wanted more changes on *The Barefoot Mailman.* When I heard what the changes were that they wanted, I refused to do it. So they hired someone else to make the changes, and I think they hired a couple more writers after that. There was a credit arbitration, and I think the credit was me and someone else, whose name I can't remember. But I read the final—or maybe they ran the film for me. I can't remember which. Bobby Cohn called me, and he said, "I'm having trouble with this other guy. He's making a big stink about whose name goes first and says he feels you shouldn't have a credit at all. And now you're going to tell me, I'm sure, that you don't think he should have a credit at all." I said, "I've got a surprise for you, Bobby." I said, "Give the whole thing to him. I don't want my name on it." Of course, I didn't know anything about residuals then or anything like that. So that was released without my name. My name shouldn't have been on there, because the basic concept I had was really so different, even though they used some scenes of mine. The whole thrust of the story was different. Then I worked on *My Outlaw Brother*, and I worked on that for—that was really a weird one. Ben Bogeaus, Benedict [E.] Bogeaus was the producer. I'm trying to remember the name of the man who was supposed to direct it. He was a well-known Broadway director, a very successful guy, who was one of the co-writers on *The Male Animal*. What the hell was his name? I cannot think of it. [Elliot Nugent] Anyway, I was working on that, and I'd turn in pages. My secretary said,

"Don't tell anybody I told you this, but all the pages that you turn in, they're being rewritten by the director." I said, "Let me see some of the pages." I saw what he was doing. I mean, there was some kind of insanity about it, so I just finished a week on that script. I did the whole thing in a week, ground it out. The reason I stayed a week was you worked on weekly salary at that time. It might have been two weeks; I can't remember. But I know it was a very short time. I didn't want to take this assignment in the first place, but they raised my weekly salary. So you want to establish that. It means that the next time someone hires you, it won't be for less than the weekly salary you've established. So I finished the whole thing in two weeks, now knowing that everything I was doing was being changed by the director. Anyway, Bogeaus was so grateful for my having done it so quickly that what he did later, I only learned after the picture was released, he gave me additional dialogue credit. It's the only credit I have that says "Additional Dialogue: Al Levitt." A form of my name which I have never used for film credit. And after that—

CEPLAIR:

How were you feeling about the screenwriting? I mean, you've had some checkered experience.

LEVITT:

Oh, I was feeling really lousy about it. I was thinking of what I could do to make a living other than this. I kept thinking about leaving the film industry. That went through my mind a lot. When I got an assignment, and this was—our agent, who was with the William Morris office, Sam Weisbord, was the lieutenant to—ultimately became the head of it, but he was Abe Lastfogel's right-hand guy. And he operated like—but he was a great agent when he was working for you. He called me and he said, "I want you and Ben to get together again and do something. Because I made a big thing with somebody at Metro[-Goldwyn-Mayer, Inc.] about *The Boy with Green Hair*,

and they have a project that they want you and Ben to work on." So we met at the William Morris office and met Sam Weisbord for the first time, and he took us to Metro. But he didn't take us to the producer whom he said he was trying to sell us to. Instead, he takes us to another producer. This is my first look at these things. He says to this producer, "Look, Carey Wilson is eager to get these guys, but I think that he is wrong. You're the one that they should be working for." I was standing there aghast. He's selling, doing this number. The guy was clearly interested and asked us a lot of questions about things, and he said, "You're going to hear from me." And we said, "What the hell was that for?" He said, "Well, don't worry about it." We go upstairs now to Carey Wilson, and he says, "Listen, you've got to act fast because this guy is trying to get these—I." Well, they had a book called *The Wild Country*, by a very popular novelist named Louis—I'm really suffering an attack of amnesia. I'll get that name for you later [Louis Bromfield]. And the book was interesting. It was a period thing. It was a book about a young kid and his relationship to his grandfather, but very different from the one in *The Boy with Green Hair*. But there's something typically Hollywood about that. "These guys wrote a thing about a kid and his grandfather." So this one, which has nothing to do with that except that there's a grandfather and a kid involved, we were hired to work on that together. Now, Carey Wilson was one of the really old-time producers. He had been a writer. He was always talking about Jean [Harlow] and Irving [Thalberg] and Norma [Shearer]. He did the first *Mutiny on the Bounty*. He was famous for being long-winded. Ben and I would sometimes have meetings with him that would go from ten to one; we'd break for lunch, come back at two; and resume from two to six. During which we would get in maybe two minutes. All the rest of the time we were listening to him. He's telling stories about the old days, and he's redoing scenes from *Mutiny on the Bounty* for us. He'll say, "Let's see, now, you're Clark Gable, and you're the camera." He'll say to me,

"The camera pulls back." He said, "Go ahead, pull back!" I'd take a few steps back. I mean, it was surreal!

CEPLAIR:

[laughter] Great efficiency!

LEVITT:

It was endless. One time at the writers table at Metro after one of these sessions, I said to some of the guys, "I've heard a story that may not be true, but it really characterizes him. Somebody told me that a guy who was trying to get into an army motion picture unit asked Carey Wilson to write a letter of recommendation. So Wilson wrote a twenty-eight-page letter. The first twenty-seven pages said, 'So-and-so has asked me for a recommendation, and in order that my recommendation may be meaningful, you should know something about me.' And he went on about himself. And the last page said, 'And therefore I recommend this guy.' When I told this story, I said, "I'm sure it's not true, but it fits his character nevertheless." And a guy, Dick [Richard] Goldstone, at the table said, "Don't worry about it being true. Some of the words and phraseology are wrong, but I was the one in that letter!" [laughter] We'd have conferences with Schary—oh, Dore Schary moved into this, into the picture, in an odd way. He had been fired from RKO. Now, Ben and I are working at Metro, and Louis B. Mayer is head of production at Metro. Ben at the writers table one time, for a lark, said, "Don't spread it, fellows, but I've got information that Dore Schary is going to come here next and is going to be head of production here at Metro." After lunch, I said, "Where the hell did you hear that?" He said, "I just made it up, you know, just to start a rumor." A week or so later, it's announced that Dore Schary has become head of production at Metro, and everybody looked at us like we were his favorite writers.

CEPLAIR:

Of course, you had lost a great deal of your respect for him because of his—

LEVITT:

Dore.

CEPLAIR:

Dore.

LEVITT:

Yeah, what we—but now we're dealing with this guy Carey Wilson. This thing advanced by inches, slowly. Dore once asked Wilson and us to come up and have a meeting and tell him where we're at. We're nowhere. I mean, Ben and I, we have an idea of where we want to go, what we want to do with it, but we've never gotten it on paper past Carey Wilson. We go up to this meeting. Wilson goes on endlessly about the fact that Dore came from New Jersey. Wilson was brought up in the cranberry bogs of New Jersey, and he says that the studio made a fortune on him, on Carey Wilson's childhood, because the Andy Hardy pictures which he produced were based on Wilson's childhood. This went on endlessly, and the story was not discussed. When we left, Ben and I were really tense and angry, because we were concerned what the hell Dore was going to think. We never got a word in. We had been doing work on it. Wilson said, "Look, guys, I sense that you were a little upset by the fact that we didn't get any further in that conference." I said, "Yeah, we were upset." He said, "Don't worry about it. I want you to relax. One of the ways you can relax is I'm going to play a game with you." (He said he used to play this with Irving and Norma all the time.) He said, "I'm going to give you—I used to spin this out for days. I'm going to start giving you clues, and you've got to tell me who it JLS." And I think, "The guy's lost his marbles." He said, "I was born in a log cabin, and my mother was a schoolteacher." I said, "Charles Lindbergh." But I barked it at him. It was like a way

of getting back at him. So then he said—this is a surreal scene! He said, "Do you know the second verse of 'Drink to Me Only With Thine Eyes'?" Ben rattled it off! This was our way of getting back at him. And he kept flinching each time. He said, "What's the real title of 'Drink to Me Only With Thine Eyes'?" And I said, "'To Celia." I mean, it was really an absolutely absurd scene. When Ben and I got back to our office, we got hysterical! [laughter] We were so tense it didn't seem funny to us at the time. The next meeting we had with him, we came to his office. He had a fantastic—I mean, the little anteroom was about the size of this apartment. A huge office of his own. When we came in, he was sitting in a big, comfortable chair and he was reading a book. He put it down—open that way—and we began another one of these conferences, trying to break through to talk about the story. In the midst of it, he got a call. He finished the call, and he said, "I'll be right back. Excuse me for a minute." And he walked out. I got up and I paced around. I walked by the book. I was curious to see the book, and the title of the book was High School Subjects Made Easy. He was boning up for more quizzes! Well, that went on, and at the end of seven months of this—

CEPLAIR:

Was this 1950?

LEVITT:

No, this must have been '49 and spilled over. Yeah, it was '49, because at the end of seven months of this, Ben left with his family and they went to Europe. Something I read recently said something about Ben left to escape the blacklist, but he wasn't even blacklisted then. He left actually because Adrian and Eddie Dmytryk were going to do Christ in Concrete in England and Ben wanted to do that, so he went over there and wrote the screenplay. I stayed for another three or four months on a weekly salary. And a guy who was the production manager on *The Boy with Green Hair*, a terrific guy named

Ruby Rosenberg—I neglected to mention that Ruby, on *The Boy with Green Hair*, was of tremendous—I mean, he was an education for me. Because while it was being shot, he would come over to me with the script—he was the production [manager]—and he would say, "If you did this scene in this way and you move this here, we could save a whole day's shooting." I'd look at it, and it was better. It made the pace better. I learned a lot of things. He was doing that a lot, and he showed me a lot of things of that sort that I had no inkling of. So, now, eleven months into this thing with Carey Wilson—

CEPLAIR:

You must have been beside yourself.

LEVITT:

Oh, it was—

CEPLAIR:

It sounds agonizing.

LEVITT:

It really was agonizing. Oh, he ran a film for us. Earlier on he ran a film that he—in our first meeting with him, I should tell you, he said, "I don't like to involve writers in matters of budget and schedule, things like that. But I would like this picture to be written in such a way that it would have a shorter shooting schedule than my last picture." I said, "What was the schedule?" He said, "A hundred and eighty days." I said, "I think we can manage that." [laughter] A hundred and eighty days! So he ran this picture for us, and the picture was Green Dolphin Street. We sat in the projection room, just Ben and I, as this thing was unfolding. It was endless. I mean, it went on forever. You couldn't keep track of the characters, and at one point the lights went on and the projectionist apologized. He said, "I just transposed two reels." He said, "I'm sorry. I'll redo them." We hadn't noticed it! We said, "Never mind, just go on with what you have." [laughter] Anyway—oh, it was really

painful. So when Ruby Rosenberg came and dropped into my office at Metro, he said, "There's a picture that's starting, that's being made. They went into the first week of shooting and discovered they didn't have a script. And they want a writer who will write it as it goes along." I said, "Forget it. I've just had eleven months on weekly salary, and I'm not going to put my head in that kind of a meat grinder." "Well," he said, "I think you ought to consider it, because it might do you—." I said, "Who's involved?" "The producer is Sam [Samuel] Bischoff." I said, "Well, jeez, everything I've heard of him is terrible." He said, "Yeah, but the guy who really runs it, who is a partner of Bischoff's in this, is also the star. And that's Dick Powell." (I just realized that Ruby Rosenberg was the production manager on Adrian's Murder, My Sweet, which changed Dick Powell's career.) He said, "I recommended you, and it won't hurt you to talk to him." "Jeez, I don't want to. I've had this eleven months of sheer torture, and I don't want to kill myself on this." "All right. Just do me a favor and talk to them. Tell them you don't want to do it." So the first guy I met with—there were two producers on it, Sam Bischoff and Ed [Edward] Gross. Gross had owned the rights to the book*Mrs. Mike*? that's why he was the producer. Bischoff I had never met, but I had heard that he was a monster. And I said no. We're still living in this apartment on Riverside Drive in North Hollywood, and one day Dick Powell comes to see me. I mean, he was a big star. I'd never met him. "Look," he said, "you really can write your own ticket. We're in terrible trouble. Every day that passes, not shooting costs us an enormous amount of money. I know what you were getting. We're going to double that." So I was tempted a little. I said, "But there are a couple of conditions." He said, "Okay, what are they?" "One is that I never have to talk to Sam Bischoff. I'll talk to you or anybody you want me to, but I won't talk to Sam Bischoff." He hesitated for a moment. He said, "Okay, I'll protect you." Well, they were in production, they had stopped, and they wanted to resume again. I had to do the thing in

sequence. I picked up where they were, which was nowhere, because it was only a week. And I'd write the scene. This was before the days of Xerox. My secretary would type it up. It was with like nine carbons. I would take these copies and I'd go down to the set. I'd distribute them. I suddenly realized what I had to face—there was a protocol here. I had to figure out who gets the first one and so on, down the line. I'd give them the material, and they'd read it. And it's like I'm waiting for the jury. They'd nod. They'd go on and shoot it. I'd go to the next scene, do it the same way. I'd come back as the director says, "Cut!" Now, my agent during this is Johnny Weber, who is still at William Morris. Sam Weisbord didn't have anything to do with this. At the end of a week, they gave me an unsolicited raise of another hundred dollars. So I called Johnny and I said, "Look, I'm in this really absurd position where I'm a hero and—." I forgot how I worded it, but I meant to tell him that they offered me another hundred-dollar raise, but he thought I was asking him to get me a hundred-dollar raise. He said, "Look, Al, you can't ask me to do that. I'll fall on my face. They've already raised your salary." I said, "Are you suggesting that I turn it down?" "What do you mean, turn it down?" "They offered it to me." He said, "Oh! Well, of course!" And so I got this raise. Then, after several weeks, I got into a fight with Sam Bischoff, because Dick Powell said, "Sam is on my back all the time." He said, "Please, just meet with him once to take the pressure off me." And I made that mistake. He is really a monstrous human being. I never heard him refer to a woman as an actress who was an actress or a secretary who was a secretary. Always by the slang female organ—that was the only term he ever used. I've frequently said this, "He was really the only pure man I've ever met." I mean, he's never had an idea, a thought, or uttered a word that wasn't crass, vulgar, wrong, shitty in every way. I mean, he was just—and we're immediately into a yelling, screaming argument about what he wants me to do. I said, "I won't do it." He said, "You'd better think about it." I said, "I've thought

about it." I said, "I'll go up and clear my desk." So I went up to my office and started clearing my desk. The phone rings, and it's Sam Bischoff. He said, "Well, have you thought about it? Will you do it my way?" I said, "No, Sam, I'm not going to do it." "Okay," he said, "I've hired another writer. I didn't want to do anything behind your back." So I took my things and I moved off the lot. And then I would read in the trades that production has stopped on Mrs. Mike while they're trying to get ahead with the script. About a week or ten days passed, and I get a call from Sam Bischoff. In his characteristic way, he says, "Listen, the guy we hired to take your place makes twice as much as you do, which means he's twice as good a writer as you are." I said, "Sam, is that what you called me up to tell me?" "No, no, no." He said, "I called you up to tell you that it just didn't work out that way for us, so I want you to come back." "Sam," I said, "I'm not going to write the sequence that we argued about, that you want." He said, "It's okay. It's already written; you don't have to write it." I said, "I don't want to do it." So he apparently then called my agent and said, "What's this bullshit?" So my agent calls up and he said, "Look, we can get another raise on this." So I decided to try to do it. Now, what I liked about the experience, what was really enjoyable, was Dick Powell and Evelyn Keyes, who were the leads in the thing. They were marvelous to me. Oh, oh, the other thing—the temptation about it was that they were going to go on location at Big Bear [Lake, California]. So I said, "You've got to get a house for me and my wife and my small son on the lake, and you've got to provide a sitter every night." He started screaming, and I said, "It's okay." I mean, it's so marvelous when you really don't want something. And you can't bluff it; you know, you really have to be willing to walk away from it. He said, "Wait a minute, wait a minute, wait a minute." And he gave me them all. So we had this big house on Big Bear, right on the lake. Dick Powell and June Allyson were up there and had this little room in a hotel—that is, one little room. And our house was the only production

office we had. We had to have these production meetings every night to play the next day's shooting. So Powell was involved, the production manager and the director and me. June Allyson and Evelyn Keyes and Dick Powell would come over to the house. Every time she went in, Allyson would look around. You could see the smoke coming out of her ears. "What's a writer doing with this house?" And then Evelyn, June, and Helen would go bowling in the village, and we'd work on planning the next day's shooting. For me, while it was painful and difficult, it was a marvelous experience. It was tremendously educational. It was a terrific thing. I realized that I would have been crazy to have missed that. We shot the thing, finished the thing, and we went back and started putting the film together. It was good. It went along, and then there was this one big lump, and then it went again. I never said anything about that scene. Finally, Powell said, "Sam, we cannot have that scene in there." And Sam said, "Sure, that schmuck director screwed it up." He said to cut it, and they took the scene out. We finished the picture, and there was a screening. Bischoff said to me, "Everything's good except the very last scene." He said, "What the hell kind of line is that, 'I love you'?" In this scene there is something in which Evelyn says something, something, something, and she says, "Mike, I love you so," whatever. I said, "Well, it really is a love story, and it's the only time in the whole picture anyone says, 'I love you.' What's wrong with it?" He said, "I'll tell you what's wrong with it. That line's twenty years old." [laughter] So I said, "What do you think it should be?" He said, "Well, I want it should be that he says to her, 'Wherever you go, I'll go, because that's home for me.'" I said, "Sam, that's a shitty line. It doesn't do what's necessary to finish this thing." He said, "What makes you think that you're a better writer than the guy who wrote the Bible?" That was what he was trying to get at, apparently. [laughter] So I said, "I don't know about the guys who wrote the Bible. All I know is I'm a better writer than Sam Bischoff. That I'll stake my claim on." We had a big fight

about it, and he insisted that it stay in. It was all over this time. Powell got me aside, and he said, "Don't worry. We'll take care of it." Ultimately, I got my scene in. Now, the picture ends and I've just seen a rough assembly. I haven't seen anything else, and it's not really completely finished. There is some narration that has to be recorded. I went into the hospital to have a hemorrhoidectomy. It seems that all writers ultimately do. When I came out of the hospital, I went back to find out what the status of the picture was. Bischoff says, "You were in the hospital?" I said, "Yeah." "What was it?" I told him. He said, "Was it bad?" I said, "Well, the only part that was bad was that the damned doctor didn't prepare me. He asked me if I wanted to go home or if I wanted to stay in the hospital. He didn't tell me what it would be like if I—so I said I wanted to go home. He didn't warn me about those first bowel movements after that. And the other thing is—." I told him the incident about when they were going to catheterize me if I didn't pee, and I'm doing everything to avoid it with the warm baths in the hospital. The nurse came in and said, "Sorry, we can't wait any more. You're going to be catheterized." And as she said that, I started to pee. He said, "What's so terrible about being catheterized?" I said, "Well, I don't like that sensation, [laughter] I've never had it, but I know I won't like it." "Listen," he said, "I've got a condition. I go to the doctor every week. He has these probes with hooks on the end of them. One is bigger than the other. Each time I go there, he shoves it up and he pulls it out. And out comes blood and pus." And he goes on about this ghastly story, you know! He says, "You know something? After a while, it got so I liked it." [laughter]

CEPLAIR:

What happened to the Carey Wilson project in the meantime? It just disappeared?

LEVITT:

Nothing. Nothing ever happened with it. It just—

CEPLAIR:

Did you like working alone? Or did you prefer—?

LEVITT:

Yeah, I liked working alone.

CEPLAIR:

After all this, were you on contract with MGM [Metro-Goldwyn-Mayer, Inc.]? Did they offer you a long-term contract?

LEVITT:

No, it wasn't a contract; I was on week to week.

CEPLAIR:

But after *Mrs. Mike*, were they—?

LEVITT:

Oh, after *Mrs. Mike*, I started getting a—well, there are a couple of things more I want to tell you about *Mrs. Mike* that become a little more pertinent to this thing. Because the director was on another film, there was some narration that had to be done, and Bischoff asked me if I would handle the narration. Dick Powell was going to be delivering it, and he wanted someone to function as the director would have. But Dick was on another movie at MGM. He had made arrangements, and at the end of a day's shooting they would record the narration right there at MGM. So I went out there, and the picture they were shooting was a picture that [Norman] Panama and [Melvin] Frank had written. One of them was producing; the other was directing at that time. They were a team, and they would alternate. They were still shooting, and I'm standing there next to some guy, short guy. At one point, Mel Frank came over and greeted me and said, "You two know each other?" I said, "No." He said, "This is Abe Lastfogel." He said, "This is Al Levitt." And he made a big thing

about me as the young, hot writer. A little later, Norman Panama comes over and does the same thing. After he left, Lastfogel said—

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LEVITT:

Well, just to end that story, after the second guy made this introduction and the comment, [Abe] Lastfogel turned to me and he said, "Who's your agent?" I said, "You are." He said, "Oh?" Then Dick Powell came over and started the same thing again. And Lastfogel said—when he [Powell] said, "Do you know each other?" he said, "Are you kidding? I represent him." And then six weeks later, we were going to a premier of a movie with Larry Parks and Betty Garrett. They were not in the movie, but they were going. So they asked us if we'd like to go with them, and that made it much easier. As cars pulled up near the theater, there was a big jam, and they were moving at a snail's pace. Abe Lastfogel was walking among the cars. Like an agent would work the tables, he was working the cars, you know, stopping and talking to people because the cars were going so slowly. He came to this car, and he greeted Larry and Betty. They said, "Oh, Abe, this is Helen [Slote Levitt] and Al Levitt," and so on. He says, "Nice to meet you," like we had—he had forgotten completely that we had met. I wanted to record that story, because it is a classic agent thing.

CEPLAIR:

Was *Mrs. Mike* a successful movie?

LEVITT:

Yeah, it got good reviews. I assume it made money; I don't know. I think I like it probably better than any movie I've written, although I haven't seen it in a long time. I'd like to see it before saying that aloud. Then Dick Powell asked me—oh, the previews. There was a preview, and one of the credits was "a Regal Films production." Dick Powell turned to Sam

[Samuel] Bischoff and said, "Look, Regal Films—." It was a company that the two of them had. He said, "You and I are never going to work together again, so there will never be another Regal Films production. So you might as well eliminate that credit." Bischoff said, "Okay." At the next preview, instead, it said "a Sam Bischoff production." He put it in there in its place! [laughter] Then after that was over, Dick asked me to do a rewrite on a film he planned to do. You know, Dick Powell was one of the great businessmen of this community. He was a multi-multi-millionaire then. What he would do, he would buy a script for whatever price it was, and then he would get involved in—he'd set up a company or he'd sell the script to the company. Then, he would star in it. He'd sell it at a hugely larger price, that would be a capital gain. He did a lot of things like that that were very money wise, I guess is—but he was very nice in all his personal relationships. Now, the [Hollywood] Ten has been going, and the amicus curiae brief is being circulated, Dick Powell is an ardent Republican, but I decided to take a chance, I said, "Dick, I've got something I'd like you to sign." He said, "What is it?" I said, "You won't take my word for it and just sign it?" He said, "Do you want me to?" I said, "No. You read it and then sign it." So he read the thing. He looked up at me and smiled. He said, "Give me your pen." And he signed it. He said, "I'll tell you something. If there were a gentleman in the White House, these guys wouldn't be in this trouble." [laughter] That was his—but he really was an extraordinary man in these ways. He was really a right-wing conservative, but he was a very decent man in terms of all his values. He really believed in fairness and things, and he was marvelous to work with. Then after that—

CEPLAIR:

This would be around the summer of 1950 at this point?

LEVITT:

Yeah, yeah. I then worked on an idea that was about—somebody had given me the idea. This was a guy who used to live in the Hollywood Hills, those hills off Beachwood [Drive] where the Hollywoodland sign is. He used to take his dog for a walk, and there was a woman who used to take her dog for a walk. He got to know her, and they talked to each other. She was an opera singer. She was trained to be an opera singer. I don't think she ever made it, but part of her training was that she became fluent in Italian. She told this guy that when Howard Hughes was having an affair with Gina Lollobrigida, who didn't speak any English at the time, he hired this woman. She was telling this with outrage. She would be in the bedroom while these two people were screwing, and when Gina would say something, he'd say, "What did she say?" And she'd have to translate it into English, or if he wanted to say something to her. It was the most humiliating experience she had ever had, she said, but it was a lot of money involved. Anyway, that became the basis for an idea that I wrote about a guy who was in the import-export business, or something, returning from a trip. He had taken a trip to the Middle East that was involved in business. On his return, he was offended by American women being—the aggressiveness, the way they—and he said to his partner one time, "You know, in that little village there, there is this woman, girl, who has been brought up to cater to a man's every whim. She would be the perfect—and she's beautiful, and she would be the perfect wife, a dream wife." He wants to send for her to bring her here. But he can't speak the language. So he tries to get some professor who is an expert in Middle East languages. The professor is either elsewhere or whatever it is, but his daughter—it happens to be Deborah Kerr—she also can speak the language. She's opposed to Grant and to this whole project in every way. This is Deborah Kerr and Cary Grant [in *Dream Wife*]. It really was a marvelous vehicle for a lot of feminist values, and that was the thing. The producer on this was

Sidney Sheldon, and that picture was—when I finished the first draft of it, I did a treatment. I sold that—

CEPLAIR:

To MGM [Metro-Goldwyn-Mayer, Inc.]?

LEVITT:

—to MGM. The deal was they gave me so much money for the treatment, and it guaranteed me twelve weeks' guaranteed salary to do the screenplay. So I finished this first draft somewhere around the eight-week period. Sidney read it and said he loved it—it was terrific. He sent it to Dore Schary. This was on a Friday or Thursday. Friday morning when I came in, Sidney was all elated and he said, "Dore read the script and said, 'Don't change a word. I'm sending it to Cary Grant in the morning." So Sidney said, "Look, it may take who knows how long for Grant to make up his mind or even to get around to reading it. Why don't you take some time off, take a little vacation. But look around for books or anything that you like that you think will make a movie, and the studio will buy it for you. We're a team, and we're going to be making pictures." I said, "Great!" and took some time off. We went away for a weekend. I started looking around for things. I didn't hear anything. I called, and I said, "How are we doing about, you know, Cary Grant?" He said, "Well, Grant feels that his part isn't big enough." I said, "You're kidding! The whole thing is about him. I mean, how can his part not be big enough?" "Well, it wasn't really a matter of size. He just felt that his part didn't really motivate the story." "Sidney, I don't know what the hell you're talking about, but I'll come in and we'll talk about it and make whatever changes we need to, because I owe the studio four weeks, anyway." He said, "Well, you know how they feel. They feel the first writer has written himself out, and they want to put another coin in the slot." I remember that phraseology. I said, "But that was a first draft." He said, "Don't worry about it. If there are any changes that

have to be made, I'll make them. And I'll protect your credit, because I don't need it." I was really thrown by that, but I didn't—I was not suspicious. By this time, the [House Committee on Un-American Activities] hearings, the '51 spring hearings, are beginning in Washington. Oh, no, they began before, because I was at the studio when they were happening. That was when that whole thing with Waldo Salt happened. So those hearings were over. I think this is in June, because when I got my subpoena, it was dated before that phone call from Sheldon. So the studio apparently knew before I did. By now a group of us with subpoenas are meeting, and one of the attorneys said, "It would be good if someone would announce his subpoena, because then we could start building rallies around it and do something to try to raise money for defense and other things, as well as educate the public." In the meantime, I had gone out to try to get work. My agent was then Henry Lewis. Henry was very—he said, "You're really hot, and I'm getting calls from everybody." So he sent me on different meetings about different projects, and I kept running into strange things. These were people who were anxious to see me. And then when I got there, they seemed—something about their attitude I wasn't able to identify. And then I remembered this meeting with Jerry [Jerome I.] Wald, who during the meeting was eating his lunch and was on the phones, not paying any attention to me. I knew that they must have the thing—so at one of the meetings of the subpoenees, I said, "Look, I might as well announce it, because I know they know anyway. It's clear from the reception that I'm getting at the studios that they know." I called the Hollywood Reporter and Variety to give them a statement. Both of them took it, but neither of them ran it. So then I called both of them to place an ad. The Reporter wouldn't even accept the ad. In fact, the guy at the Reporter said, "Listen, are you married?" I said, "Yeah." He said, "You got any kids?" I said, "Yeah." He said, "Why don't you wise up?" The guy who took the ad at Variety, he accepted it, and he said, "I really feel that you shouldn't

have to be spending the money to buy an ad." He said, "We should have run it in our news pages." It was kind of one of those little decent things that you remember. Anyway, this is the ad.

1.12. TAPE NUMBER: VII, Side One (OCTOBER 18, 1988)

CEPLAIR:

I wanted to ask you a few questions before we get back to where we left off last time. You had said on *The Boy with Green Hair* that you had gone down on the set in case of rewrites. I was wondering, isn't that unusual for a director to ask a writer, especially an unsalaried writer, to come and help with revisions?

LEVITT:

It's highly unusual. The factors that came into play in that situation were the memos that were coming down from Howard Hughes, who wanted to blunt the antiwar aspect of the picture. We were trying to make it seem as though we were complying, without really doing so. Also, it was Joe [Joseph Losey]'s first picture, and he was very nervous. Since I saw you last I think—I'm sure it was since I saw you last—I noticed that a videocassette was on sale at one of those video stores. I bought it and ran it. One of the things you realize is there just is no place anymore for a picture like that. By that I don't mean its content. I mean just its style. It's slow. It's pre-television, so everything is slow and reflective, and it seems endless. Also, I was shocked at some of the line readings. Simple line readings seemed to me to be terrible. I think, you know, if Joe had had more time and there was less pressure, it would have been a far better picture.

CEPLAIR:

I also wonder, when you collaborated, did you have a special skill that you'd bring especially to collaboration that you did,

where the other person did something else? Or did you just both do everything?

LEVITT:

Well, the way we collaborated was we would talk endlessly, and then we would divide a section in half. I would do one half of that section; Ben [Barzman] would do the other. Then we'd hand each other's piece to the other one, and we'd each go over the thing, making our comments and changes that we thought should be made. Then we discussed them and resolved them. We never had any real problems of, you know, differences of opinion on the thing. It was really an unusual thing, because it was all by chance, that collaboration. I don't know that I mentioned this then—I mean at our last session—but Ben spoke at a class that I was teaching several years ago. This was at [California State University] Northridge. We were talking about the—oh, I think we ran the picture. There was a line, a wild line in the picture, while kids were all talking about there's something wrong with green hair and that whole thing. There was one line, "How would you like your sister to marry someone with green hair?" These are all wild lines. And every review picked that up. Ben and I each, to this day, have credited the line to the other one. Neither of us—the only reason I mention that is that there is something good about a collaboration in which neither of the partners remembers who did what. It really was a joint thing. That was kind of—

CEPLAIR:

Did you think you had a particular strength as a screenwriter? I mean, say, dialogue or construction or plot. Or did you—?

LEVITT:

I never think of it in those terms. I think most writers whom I know and respect think of all the elements and devote themselves to all the elements. But I've never felt one or the other.

CEPLAIR:

Why did you like screenwriting? I mean, what was there about that craft that appealed to you so much?

LEVITT:

Well, in a way, I guess, to some extent it's true of all writing, but it seems to be more concentrated in screenwriting or any dramatic form. Essentially, you set up a problem and you have to solve it. It's problem solving, not only in the overall sense, but each scene. It's constant problem solving, and it's interesting. It keeps—I've rarely been bored by work. I didn't say "never"; I said "rarely," you understand! [laughter] It was that project with Carey Wilson that really did put me away. But it is interesting, particularly as you try almost always to become involved in the material—that what you're doing is something that you really have strong feelings about. So that there are always contradictory forces at play. On one level, you have strong feelings one way or another, but you also have to—it can't be one-sided, so you have to build up an opponent to those elements. That is part of the problem solving that is always involved in screenwriting. It is one thing I learned from—and I just heard her say it once—Maggie [Marguerite] Roberts which is interesting in relation to screenwriting: "Compress, compress, compress." It's always too long, yes. The fundamental principle is for me—for others as well—that anything in your script that doesn't advance the conflict or enhance character should be out, unless it has some other quality like humor or something else that is so great as to overwhelm that other big need of advancing the conflict. And that's always a creative decision which all of us frequently make incorrectly. [laughter] But there's a dynamic involved in films that I find very exciting and interesting.

CEPLAIR:

Okay. One other thing that surfaced on the last tape, although it's a little premature now—but I noticed that Betty [Elizabeth]

Wilson did not name you or Helen [Slote Levitt], but yet you knew her very well. Why do you suppose—? Was that just out of sort of friendship?

LEVITT:

Did I tell you anything about that?

CEPLAIR:

Well, you told me, I think, you had lived in the same building with her and her husband [Richard Wilson] and you were very good friends. They'd babysit for you.

LEVITT:

Oh, it's really an interesting story, and there are very few places I ever tell this story. We were very close friends. After we had already gotten our subpoenas and before they were ever made public, I got a call from Dick Wilson, her husband. He asked me to meet him for a drink. I didn't tell you this?

CEPLAIR:

I don't think so.

LEVITT:

I immediately was apprehensive, but I agreed to meet him. He told me—to short-circuit this—he said that Betty had gotten a subpoena. I said, "What is she going to do?" He said, "Well, she hasn't made up her mind yet." I said, "Has she seen—?" What the hell is that guy's name? Bill—one of the [House] Committee [on Un-American Activities (HUAC)]'s advance men would go and talk to these—I forget his name.

CEPLAIR:

I do, too. [William Wheeler]

LEVITT:

And Dick said, "How did you know about that?" He was really taken aback by my mentioning that name. I said, "Well, that's

part of the process. I know it." He said, "Well, yes, she has. And they're putting a lot of pressure on her to name you and Helen. But I called you because I wanted you to know, and Betty wanted you and Helen to know, that she is putting up a big fight against naming you two." And I said, "I think Betty should know that our attitude toward her is not based on whom she names, but whether or not she's willing to cooperate with the committee." He said, "I was afraid you'd say that." We left. When she testified, she was on television—sometime after we testified they started televising it. Helen and I watched. She named a lot of people. She did not name us. Some time later, [Donald L.] Jackson, who was a member of the committee, was running for reelection. Some young, liberal attorney was running against him. And some genius got the idea of putting out a piece of literature and having all the blacklisted people sign it in his behalf! [laughter] Which they did. Jackson took that circular. Next to each name, he said, "Named by so-and-so before the House Un-American Activities Committee on such and such date." With every name. When it came to our names, it was "named by Martin Berkeley on such and such a date," and "named by Elizabeth Wilson in executive session on such and such a date," a date which preceded my meeting with Dick. To this day, she doesn't know that we know that she named us. When Mel [Melville] Shavelson was president of the [Writers] Guild [of America], there were a lot of guild social things at his home, and they were always invited. They are apparently close friends. They'd sit at his table. Betty goes to great pains to be friendly in those situations. We respond in a polite way. She still thinks we don't know that she named us. It reached a kind of a peak recently in the meetings, the Writers Guild meetings, at the [Hollywood] Palladium around the strike, when she gave me her proxy to vote for her. [laughter] I mean, it's a—but, you know, she has that gift of selective memory also, because in one conversation at Mel Shavelson's she said, "You know, I was married before I was married to Dick." I said, "Betty, we

knew Lew." She said, "You did?" "When we met you, it was before you ever met Dick." And she didn't—she has blocked out certain things that really—of course, Lew [Lewis] Amster was her first husband—was also named. In fact, in [Victor] Navasky's book [Naming Names], he clearly had a mix-up in relation—because he referred to Helen's first husband as no longer in the industry at the time, but having been named. And that fitted Lew, so Navasky got Betty and Helen mixed up in there. We told him about it, and he said he would change it in the next edition, if there ever was one. I am still Helen's first husband.

CEPLAIR:

She's one of the three or four witnesses who named, you know, something like in excess of sixty or seventy names.

LEVITT:

Oh, I don't think so. I don't think she named that many. Well, unless the bulk of the names were in executive session. On this thing, it only indicated Helen and me as having been named by her in executive—but I'm sure there were a lot—I'm not sure, but there might have A been a lot of others. But the big—besides Berkeley, the people who named a lot of others were—

CEPLAIR:

Pauline Townsend.

LEVITT:

Yeah, the Townsends, both Townsends. Incidentally, Leo Townsend applied for a thing that the guild has of supplemental pension for blacklisted writers. He claimed he was blacklisted, as did others.

CEPLAIR:

Okay, we'll go back to the chronology now of the subpoena, but I'm going to stop and ask you something first. [tape

recorder off] Okay, you're now going to read the ad that you placed in Variety shortly after you received your subpoena. [Betty Wilson named forty-five names in a public testimony, the sixth largest number of anyone.—Ed.]

LEVITT:

Right. This is the issue of Variety of Thursday, August 30, 1951. The ad says: Like most of you, I have been opposed to the Un-American Activities Committee for a long time. To change this attitude now that it has been officially challenged by the committee's subpoena would be dishonest. To cooperate by sacrificing others' careers for one's own would be degrading. To repudiate past ideas and associations which dissent from the committee's standards of orthodoxy, branding oneself a dupe, would be humiliating. The course of dishonesty, degradation, and humiliation feeds the committee's insatiable hunger for publicity and aids in the ruin of the motion picture industry. The committee has demonstrated that it thrives on submissiveness and hysteria. I am with all who are for resistance and reason. And I signed my name.

CEPLAIR:

Okay. Now, you appeared on September 18, and you brought a statement with you to read, which, as I recollect, you were not allowed to read.

LEVITT:

Right.

CEPLAIR:

So if you would read that into the record. Now, this would be dated September 18.

LEVITT:

September 18, 1951, right. If you modify freedom of expression and conscience and association according to the

current popularity of the words expressed and the beliefs held and the people associated with, you have destroyed those freedoms. They are destroyed not only for an unpopular minority, but for everyone. For everyone must then consider his words and his beliefs and his associations with caution, lest they be interpreted in an unpopular way. Every man has the right to be unpopular or even to be wrong in these areas without suffering the consequence of official censure, blacklist, or jail. Most peace-loving people will find themselves unpopular with this committee. A citizen may be held accountable only for his acts. This principle has been written into our Constitution and has been spelled out for this committee often and eloquently. The committee's continued intimidation of all people under the pretext of attacking a few is its fundamental purpose. I do not, therefore, intend to enter my beliefs or my associations in a popularity contest in which the members of this committee are the judges. I shall offer no cooperation to the evil purpose of these hearings, except that which the force of law compels. I shall resist the committee in every way that the Constitution provides.

CEPLAIR:

Okay. I think what we should do is then—shortly after this or sometime after this, you wrote a speech for an actor who had been blacklisted, whom you call Fred Smith. If you could tell us the occasion for writing it and then read the speech for us.

LEVITT:

There were a number of meetings that were held in various public auditoriums and some in large homes that were fund-raisers for the legal expenses, primarily, of the blacklist. In relation to those things, a number of the blacklisted actors would be assigned to different writers. I drew Fred and also Howard Da Silva. I may have mentioned this to you. Howard gave me a great compliment. I always enjoyed that compliment, because he said, "You write words that fit my

face." [laughter] It was kind of funny, because I think he was—I guess it didn't take much to be perceptive that the style in which I wrote speeches for him was totally different from any way that I would ever talk, because Howard was a somewhat florid man and a marvelous actor. It was really great to hear him say those things. Those sessions were very successful in the audience response, because most of the people who came to them were already disposed that way, and they raised a certain amount of money. I don't have a recollection of what the figures were. But by the time the hearings began, most of us were broke in terms of lawyers' fees and—not that the lawyers were charging fees, but the expenses, legal expenses. You want me to read it?

CEPLAIR:

Yeah, why don't you read this.

LEVITT:

Well, Fred was a young actor who, after the blacklist, became a furniture salesman. Never worked again. I have no idea what has happened to him since or where he is, which is why I'm reluctant to use his full name. This is the speech: For the past twelve years I have tried to become a good actor. I have studied and worked with little theater groups, stock companies, the Actors Lab here in Hollywood, and in a very small way in motion pictures. In a personal sense, I feel that I have achieved some success. I believe that I have developed what talent I have, so that I'm a better actor now than I was twelve years ago. But an actor's opinion of himself is not the index of his success. If it were, maybe there would be no unsuccessful actors. I've won no awards. I've received no recognition from the public. Except in the somewhat prejudiced eyes of my wife and my small daughter, I've had no success. But one morning, one Monday morning, I was ordered a subpoena by the Un-American Activities Committee of the House of Representatives, and suddenly I found recognition

thrust upon me. Before that Monday morning, very few movie producers knew my name. I've worked in films an aggregate of only eight weeks in the last few years. Since that Monday morning, every producer in Hollywood knows my name, even though many of you here turned to the person on either side of you when my name was announced and asked, "Who's he?" Overnight, I found a prominence that my talent as an actor had not earned. I was cast in a nonpaying role alongside the creative artists whose work I most respect. I had very complex reactions to receiving that subpoena. I know that I was a little frightened at first, but I also was a little proud. I was proud and flattered at the company I was placed in. But when I tried to trace back my activities through the years to find the things that had won me the right to this recognition, I became ashamed. I never spoke up boldly against injustice suffered by minority groups in this country, although I deplored that evil. I never gave more than lip service to the struggle to win economic and civil rights for the American people. Except for signing a petition to outlaw the atom bomb, I never took any concrete action to help insure a peaceful life for my child and yours. I never had a position of leadership or even responsibility in any of the many organizations that have struggled for these things in which I believe. Then why was I subpoenaed? The reason that another Hollywood investigation was undertaken is made clear in an article by Frank Rogers, the Washington correspondent of the [Los Angeles] Daily News. Mr. Rogers's report, dated March 6, deals with the fact that some members of HUAC were considering an investigation of charges that communist agents are crossing the Mexican border with Mexican agricultural workers who are entering this country illegally. The article goes on to say—and then he then quotes the article, which makes the point that the committee is drawn to the film industry because it generates greater publicity than any of its other investigations. Then his speech resumes. That explains why Hollywood. But why me, Fred Smith, unknown? I did a lot of thinking about this. Almost

hopefully, I wondered if maybe the part I had in Union Station was weightier than I realized. It was certainly the biggest part I've ever had in pictures, and it actually gave me a chance to act. Maybe I was really getting to be important—or a little bit important. Or at least—but no, this wishful thinking lasted about ten seconds, and I faced the fact that I was still Fred Smith, unknown. But I hadn't answered the question of why a group of men in Washington who make a profession out of sniping at their betters should bother with small fry like me. I tried to figure out where these investigations fitted into the whole pattern of today. A witness is asked if he is a member of the Communist Party. If he is a communist and answers the question, he is blacklisted from his job. If he is not a communist and answers the question, he may face a perjury charge if he has a progressive record. There are long lists of organizations that have been arbitrarily declared to be communist or communist-front enterprises. Membership in any of these is the same as membership in the Communist Party in the eyes of the Un-American Activities Committee. So as a non-communist progressive, answering the question may present you with a perjury trial as well as the blacklist. The Hollywood Ten, you may remember, were blacklisted when they were charged with contempt of Congress, long before they were convicted in the lower courts. Communist or non-communist, answer or not, if you're a progressive, you're threatened with the blacklist. If an Academy Award-winning actor is blacklisted or if a brilliant and successful screenwriter is blacklisted, it might not ring any warning bells in you who go about your anonymous jobs, unmolested as yet. But if the finger is pointed at Fred Smith, unknown, then all other unknowns had better watch out: The goal is conformity for the entire population. The minimum penalty for nonconformity is loss of livelihood. It has already spread far beyond the entertainment fields, into education and science. And screening has become a practice in some trade unions. The word "communist" has been stretched to include all

progressives. The word "progressive" will be stretched to include any kind of nonconformist thinking. You can lay low and hope that it's not moving toward you, or you can resist while you still can. If you don't resist now, there may come a time when you can't resist. To those of you who turned to your neighbors when I was introduced and asked, "Who is he?" my answer is, "Who are you? "

CEPLAIR:

Did those three statements basically constitute your written response to the committee?

LEVITT:

To a large extent, I think the committee asked me the question that they were fond of asking then, that went like this: "Mr. Levitt, if you're so passionately against war, how would you—?" Wait a minute, how the hell was it? "How did you feel about the war of the Spanish Loyalists? Were you in support of that?" "Yes, I supported that. I felt that was just." He said, "Well, suppose—." I can't remember the question that triggered the exact thing, but—oh, I know. He said, "If this country were at war with the Soviet Union, would you participate in that war?" That was a question, by the way, that was asked of almost everybody. And I said that that question had been asked often, and I think the question is really a kind of a nasty trick question. If you answer no, that you would not want to participate in such a war, you're placed in the light of being disloyal to your own country. If you answer yes, you jump on the bandwagon with the rest of you people who are creating a really warlike atmosphere, using the Soviets as the big bugaboo and so on. Something to that effect. Also, I got into a long, really ridiculous thing where when I was asked about various organizations other than the Communist Party, I took the Fifth [Amendment] on them because it is named in the—someone said, "Why? That's not the Communist Party." I said, "No, but it is named in the attorney general's book as a

subversive organization." So that little funny guy whose name I can't remember—he was a Democrat on the committee. He was talking about his son who was killed in World War II. And he said, "Where did you see that particular organization listed in the book?" I said, "I don't know whether—I know that it's listed there, but I can't tell you what page it was on." He said, "Well, here's the book. Find it there." And I was very nervous, and I'm having trouble turning pages. Either Bob [Robert W. Kenny] or Ben [Margolis] leaned over to help me, and suddenly he said, "What's the matter? Can't you find something in there without the help of your attorney?" And for a moment, I really lost my temper and I said something about, "Did you people travel three thousand miles to come here to see whether I could use a directory that's alphabetically arranged?" Or something like that. He assured me that [laughter] was not their purpose. Ultimately I found it. But, you know, I'm not a performer, and I don't—for many of us who don't have that, it was very hard to perform. It was always fighting the tension.

CEPLAIR:

Did you want to make a public statement during your testimony, your oral testimony, about how much you disliked them and what they were doing?

LEVITT:

Oh, sure.

CEPLAIR:

Were you able to?

LEVITT:

Well, I got some of it. I got—I think I got some of this—I mean, not this, but my statement—into the thing. There was some opportunity when someone asked me something—I don't know what it was, but it enabled me to get some of the other stuff in.

CEPLAIR:

How did you answer the question, by the way, about would you fight if the United States and the Soviet Union were at war?

LEVITT:

Well, that's why I said that it was a question that was designed to place me either in the guise of someone who was not loyal to this country or to be placed on the bandwagon for war. And I went on that I felt war was qualitatively different from anything in previous history since the advent of the atom bomb and so on and so forth. That was the essence of that.

CEPLAIR:

How long were you on the stand? Do you remember?

LEVITT:

It seemed like hours! [laughter] I really don't know how to guess. Maybe twenty minutes, maybe thirty. I really have no way of—

CEPLAIR:

When you finished, were you relieved?

LEVITT:

Oh, yeah. I mean, it was an ordeal for me. It would be less of an ordeal for me today than it was then. I mean, I never spoke at a guild meeting until—I think there was a meeting some time in the seventies. It was the first time I ever spoke at a guild meeting. All that kind of thing is alien to me. It was very difficult. Then, much more so. It was an ordeal for reasons that had nothing to do with the things that were really at stake. You know, the worst part of the ordeal was just that kind of public thing. I mean, some of our guys, not just the actors, were great, who had a great facility for handling that

kind of thing. Mike [Michael Wilson] was marvelous, and, oh, a lot were. [tape recorder off]

CEPLAIR:

Had you begun to plan your new life before you testified? Or was it after your testimony that you began to try and establish a new profession or a new way of living?

LEVITT:

It was only afterward that I did that. As a matter of fact, before I testified, before we all testified in our group of the fall of 1951—one of the reasons that I took that ad was because we wanted to announce that there was another round in the hope of being able to raise some money. But they didn't want anyone to expose themself who was still able to get work. And I had found, I may have told you—did I tell you the thing about [Sidney] Sheldon and MGM [Metro-Goldwyn-Mayer, Inc.]? So, that was my first suspicion that something was wrong. But after that, I hadn't told my agent. My agent was setting up meetings, and I would have a meeting and it would go very well. My agent would call me immediately after the meeting and say, "They're really hot for you, and you've got this thing in the bag." And then we expected to hear in a couple days and didn't hear. Suddenly, the agent called and said, "I can't get them on the phone." Or he'd say, "The thing, you know, seems to—they changed their mind or something." Now, the agent was totally innocent. He had no idea. He kept setting up other things. After about three that went like that, where they were very responsive and looked like that—after the third one, I then told the agent. I leveled with him, because I realized nothing was going to happen. So when they wanted somebody to make a statement that there is another round of blacklisting about to go on, none of the other guys wanted to do it, because they were still getting work. So I volunteered, because I was convinced by that time that I wasn't going to get any more work. That's how that came

about. And then there were two things that happened shortly afterward. I think I may have mentioned them. Did I tell you about this guy Ed Gross? He had a movie for me. He was the co-producer on a picture that I had done called *Mrs. Mike*. He called me after my blacklisting was made public. I can't remember whether I had actually testified or whether this ad had just appeared. He said, "Would you be willing to write something in another name?" I said, "Yes." And he said, "I want to come see you. I have a project." At that time we lived on top of a hill. What happened in instances like this—anybody, sometimes not just producers, but people not involved themselves who wanted to express their support for us would call, make a date, come up and see and say hello—they would always come up out of breath. I realized they were parking their cars down at the bottom of the hill, because they didn't want their car parked in front of our house. [laughter] It took me a few times before that dawned. Anyway, Ed Gross came in, and he said, "Listen, I've got a project in mind, and you would be perfect for it." I said, "Boy, I'm really interested. Tell me what it is." He said, "The Larry Parks story." I said, "What?" "The Larry Parks story. He's this guy: he's made some mistakes, he tries to go straight, everybody kicks him in the ass." He said, "Who could write that better than you?" [laughter] I couldn't believe it, you know. This guy had such an absolute lack of understanding of what was going on that he really thought I was going to do that! He was kind of shocked when I told him I wouldn't. And then there was another one, maybe a couple of months later, a producer, whose name I really can't remember. The other guy was Ed Gross. This producer I had met because we were among the founders of the Oakwood School. I think we've had that conversation before.

CEPLAIR:

Yeah.

LEVITT:

I was very active in the parents' group there. This guy called me and asked me to meet him somewhere, some remote place. He again asked, first thing, "Are you willing to write something under a pseudonym?" I said, "Absolutely." So we met at this place, and he starts to outline this picture. And it's a really gung ho, pro-Korean War story. I'm listening and I can't believe—finally, I stopped him. "Look," I said, "what the hell makes you think I'd be willing to write that? If I was willing to write that, I wouldn't be blacklisted!" He said, "What the hell's the fuss? Nobody's going to know. You're going to use a different name!" [laughter] There was no way of communicating to him. I left. And that was—

CEPLAIR:

Had there been discussion among the people in '51 about the possibilities of pseudonymous screenwriting or of organizing to do it or anything of that nature?

LEVITT:

I don't remember any discussion of that specifically, but ultimately, you know, we all did one thing or another in one way or another.

CEPLAIR:

Were you aware that some of the [Hollywood] Ten had done some—?

LEVITT:

Oh, sure, yeah.

CEPLAIR:

So you knew it was a possibility.

LEVITT:

Yeah. Right. The difficulty of the thing was you couldn't go out and advertise.

CEPLAIR:

Take out an ad in Variety. [laughter]

LEVITT:

Right. You sort of had to wait for someone to come to you. Unless you had some reason to believe that somebody would be sympathetic to doing that, and then you would try to get someone else, preferably an agent, to sound them out. But if you went to somebody and said, "Look, I've got this idea which I think would make a good movie, and I'd be willing to do it under a pseudonym," and he said, "Well, let's hear the idea." Then if he liked the idea and didn't want to hire me, he had the idea, and we could never go to court over anything. That was one of the things that happened. We all felt that we could not defend ourselves legally on any small matter other than our principle thing. So we were taken advantage of a lot in many instances.

1.13. TAPE NUMBER: VII, Side Two (OCTOBER 18, 1988)

LEVITT:

This is still very early on, that is, relatively soon after appearing before the committee. I got a call from a writer named Isobel Lennart. Do you know who she is?

CEPLAIR:

Yeah.

LEVITT:

Isobel asked me to meet her at a drive-in somewhere. Isobel had gotten a subpoena while I was at Metro[-Goldwyn-Mayer, Inc.] and she was there. She was pregnant, and she got a doctor to excuse her from testifying. She thought she had beaten her rap, but she was being very careful. We met at this drive-in. Gosh, this is really interesting. This is the second

person who did this. She said, "I'm doing very well. I want to put you on a weekly salary." I was really stunned by it, and in her case, you know—I was very appreciative. I said, "Don't do it." I did have reservations about her. As I say, she had gotten out of one subpoena by virtue of being pregnant, but she couldn't stay pregnant all the time. When they did get her, she folded immediately. So I never did that. I started to work on a television show. First, I did something—it's hard for me to keep the exact chronology straight. I never tell this story and mention the name of this guy, because—. [tape recorder off] I was approached by somebody who asked me the question that always was asked when someone approached you at that time, "Are you willing to work under a pseudonym?" I said yes. He said he was shooting a film that his family was financing. They shot a lot of footage and realized that they didn't really have a script. It was in terrible shape. So the job they were offering would be I would have to look at the film that was shot—work over a Moviola for quite a period of time—and write a script that would be able to use stuff they had already shot, so that they then would only have to shoot a little bit more. It was his family money that was financing this. I didn't want to do it. It just seemed like too impossible a thing, and the amount of money involved was a total of $5,000. I saw it taking, well, a long time. But I finally agreed, and I said, "What I want, I want the contract drawn up in Helen's name." Helen was not then a writer; she was not a member of the Writers Guild. And that's what we did. I worked my ass off on this thing, really trying to salvage it, and having some success with it. They were very pleased with it, and then one day—the contract called for $1,000 when I did this, then I think I had a lump sum of $3,000 at some point. The last payment was on completion, was the last $1,000. I was working on completion when I got a call from him saying, "I've got great news!" I thought, "Jeez, maybe somebody's bought the picture already." I said, "What happened? What is it?" He said, "The leading lady has had a nervous breakdown and is confined to

an institution." I said, "Is this a joke?" He said, "No. Don't you realize what that means? Our insurance covers everything. I can dump the whole project, and we're out of it!" "Well, okay, but you owe me $1,000." "What do you mean?" "The last payment is $1,000." He said, "Yeah, but I looked at the contract. It said 'on delivering the completed script." "Okay, I'll deliver you the completed script." "I don't want it." I said, "You don't have a choice. There are no options on it. That just breaks down the time of payments." He said, "No, you're wrong. I don't have to pay you anything. I'm out of the thing." I was really furious. I was about to accept that, because what could I do? I'm in the bank one day. I run into a woman whom I knew because she was an attorney who once worked for Ed [Edward] Mosk. She was now working for some other attorney, and it was his attorney. She said, "Listen, I overheard something that I wasn't supposed to hear. And I don't know whether I'm doing the right thing telling you this, but I just feel that I have to. I heard your name mentioned. This guy was saying to his attorney—his attorney said, 'Yes, you do owe him that money. He said, 'But I don't have to pay him, because he's blacklisted and he wouldn't dare sue.'" Well, when I heard that, I want to tell you, boy, my hair stood on end. I called Aubrey Finn and I said, "I don't care what happens. I don't care if we never get the money, but I want to sue him for that $1,000." The suit was instituted, and it got to a point of—what the hell do you call it? Deposition has to be taken in his attorney's office. So Helen is the one who has to go, because it was in her name. I'm not there, but Aubrey Finn is there with Helen. The attorney asks some questions, and then he said, "Isn't it true that you didn't really write this, but it was written by your husband, who is blacklisted?" Aubrey said, "Helen, you don't have to answer that question. It's not a proper question for this thing." So Helen didn't answer it, and that ended the deposition. The attorney said to Aubrey privately, "I'm sorry about that." He said, "My client insisted that I do it." It ended up that he had to pay us the $1,000

dollars anyway. But it was more than $1,000 for him, because he had to pay the attorney. It was less than $1,000 for us because we had to pay the attorney. It was such a—. [laughter] And because of who he is and his whole record, you know, we—I have since forgiven him. I don't care anymore. But he has such guilt that he always avoids me when he sees me.

CEPLAIR:

Incredible.

LEVITT:

But it is incredible, you know, the things that—the blacklist provided temptation for certain people that they would not ordinarily ever have [had]. Of course, it was a temptation because he was under that pressure. Then it gets worse. There was a guy who I knew from Oakwood School. Each of us had a kid there. Actually, I knew him from before then, too. We were in the army together before I went overseas. He was a special material writer. He used to write special material for acts in Las Vegas and comics, and he did some radio writing, that kind of thing. He kept coming to me with projects that he wanted me to write, but it was his project. His name would be on it, and presumably I would be paid if it ever sold. But I hated everything. It was all really lousy stuff; none of it ever sold. I said to him, "Look, get a job. Try to get a job somewhere where you get paid. And I'll write the thing, and we'll split the money." So he got a job writing "Colgate Comedy Hour," I think it was. They had alternate stars. There was a [Dean] Martin and [Jerry] Lewis one. There were three. I don't remember the other one. The one that he got to do—Jesus Christ, you know, I can't remember the name of the star who we were doing it for. Oh, Donald O'Connor! There was a lot of the stuff that was just music. But there were sketches, and I would write the sketches. He would give me half the money. And then, as the show became successful, the more successful

it became, the more he resented me. He kept cutting my share lower and lower on the premise that, as he said, "You know, you sit in front of a typewriter all day. I've got to go to those goddamned conferences. They ask me something, I don't know what the hell the answer is. It's very tense," he said, "and so you're getting—." He had me down to where I was getting a third or something like that, or a quarter. One night, I was in bed at eleven, eleven thirty, or something, and the phone rings. I pick it up, and it's him. He said, "Get your ass over here." I said, "What's up?" He said, "Just get your ass over here." I thought, "God, something awful has happened." And I got up, got dressed, drove over to his house, came in, and he was sitting there. He said, "You want a drink?" I said, "No. What happened?" He said, "Nothing happened." "What do you mean? What am I here for?" "I just felt like I wanted someone to talk to. I couldn't sleep." "That's it," I said. "Good-bye." That was the end of that. I never saw him again, except every strike I'd run into him on the picket line. Then there were a couple of other little things. Oh, then there was a period, someone we met—the guy was a musician. I don't know what his wife did, but they both wanted to be writers. They worked for some correspondence school of writing, one of these things, you know, the great authors or one of them. Their ads are in various writers' magazines. So he got a job correcting these things and commenting on them. It was so boring he turned it over to his wife, and it was so boring to her she turned it over to me. The pay was on the big story things. You'd write your comment, you'd get seventy-five cents. They ranged down to thirty-five and twenty-five cents. It was a lot of work for very little money, and it was really terrible. It ended when there was one poor guy who was so illiterate and had no concept of anything—there was some biographical thing that he wrote. It was clear that this guy didn't have very much money. And it was really costing him. I wrote my comment as kindly as I could, "I think you really are wasting your money; you shouldn't do this." And the guy who was

fronting for me, he got fired I [laughter] But he was relieved. He didn't care. But that was one of the worst periods of our life. On that same note—I thought I was going to write an article about this particular thing. During this really terrible period, we had moved to a place where we rented a place above the landlady, and the landlady was a trainer and breeder of Hungarian sheepdogs. A terrible human being. The dogs were noisy as hell. It really was a terrible period. I had just quit this thing, and one night [phone rings] the phone rang! [laughter]

CEPLAIR:

Of course.

LEVITT:

I picked up the phone and said, "Hello." A voice that sounded like it was out of Damon Runyon said, "Your name Levitt?" I said, "Yes." He said, "First name Al?" "Yes." "Oh boy," he said, "you're the guy." "What guy?" "Woody from Chicago told me to call you about a job." I said, "About a job for me?" He said, "No, about a job for me." "What are you talking about? What kind of a job?" "Driving out of Arcadia [California]." "Look, I think you've got the wrong person." "Your name Levitt?" "Yes." "First name Al?" "Yes, but, uh, I don't know anything about it." "Look, I know you've got to be careful, all that," he says, "but I've got this letter from Woody." I said, "You've got the wrong person," and I hung up. Ten minutes later the phone rings again and it's this guy, and he said, "I just called Woody in Chicago, and he said you're the guy." I said, "Look, I need a job myself. What the hell kind of a job do you think I can give you?" He mentioned—I think that's probably where he mentioned the thing about driving out of Arcadia. He said, "I really need the job. I just got out of the hospital. I was in for two years with a broken ankle, if you know what I mean." I began to know what he meant! Finally, I convinced him I was the wrong guy, and I hung up. I said to Helen, "There's

another Al Levitt in this town, and someday somebody's going to think he's me, and he's going to be in trouble." [laughter] There was a shooting in some restaurant. I think it was the thing where somebody tried to kill Mickey Cohen, but they got somebody else. There was a newspaper article about the funeral, and one of the pallbearers was Al Levitt. That was kind of weird. [laughter] I had had an office in a little building on—as you go east toward Hollywood from Ventura Boulevard, it becomes Cahuenga [Boulevard]. At the corner of Barham [Boulevard] and Cahuenga there's a little building, and I had a little office there. A guy and his wife moved in, and he was a photographer. I got to meet them, and we became, and still are, very friendly. I had been interested in photography since my experiences with [Henri] Cartier-Bresson. I started gradually working. He would take me with him on shoots, and I'd get a percentage. And he'd turn some work over to me. I stopped doing any writing at all. I became a photographer. It was kind of funny, because in certain ways we were doing high fashion—Jimmy [James] Galanos, Rudi Gernreich. This guy had a great eye and he understood fashion. I never did. I had no inkling of it. But I did have a good eye for photography, a sense of a picture, and, boy, I really enjoyed that. The problem was that—I set up my own thing, too, some things, and he would turn things over to me that he didn't want to do. Unfortunately, what would happen was as I became more and more successful, the demands on me were greater, and I'd have to make investments in more and more equipment. This guy whom I wrote the "Colgate Comedy Hour" for, came back into my life. Oh, yeah, the way he came back was this.

CEPLAIR:

This was the guy who kept cutting your percentage.

LEVITT:

Right. I ran into him somewhere. I think our kids were at one of those things where they have these little merry-go-rounds

on Ventura Boulevard. I told him what I was doing and had some conversation. So he called me. He said, "How would you like to shoot the opening of a new hotel in Las Vegas?" I said, "Terrific." He had some kind of a connection with putting on the show in that hotel. So I went up before it opened, and I shot various rooms and so on to get certain things that they needed. And then I came up for the opening. One thing that has nothing to do with this subject, but I have to tell you this. There was a room which the show was going to be using during the day. The dance director was rehearsing the dancers, and they were all in different outfits. That was great to shoot, because they all had different kinds of outfits in the rehearsal thing, and I would just shoot them. A couple of workmen came in, and they moved a slot machine in there. I'm shooting these pictures, and the dance director tells them to take a break. A couple of the girls come down to the slot machine, and they start putting coins in it. One of the workmen comes in and says, "Hey, don't do that. There's no money in those machines." The girls stop, the workman goes out. One of the girls is looking at the thing, and I see her go—she shrugs and starts putting coins in anyway, knowing there's no money! [laughter] But it was an interesting thing to see. When it came to opening night, the PR [public relations] guy gave me the seating plan with the names of the various celebrities. He wanted me to go in to shoot pictures of them. I looked at the seating plan and it had—I guess I can use the names in this case, for the record. I may have told you this before. It said "Marilyn Maxwell and husband." Did I tell you this?

CEPLAIR:

I think so. But you might as well finish it.

LEVITT:

We had been very close friends with a writer named Jerry [Jerome L.] Davis and his wife, whose name then was Nancy

[Davis]. Jerry and I had adjoining offices at Metro, and he was in my office most of the time with his story problem. Then I appeared before the committee, and I never heard from him again. I mean, we used to have dinner every weekend together, he and his wife. But later I learned that he and his wife had broken up, and then he had married Marilyn Maxwell. The temptation was irresistible. I worked my way through the place taking pictures. I approached so that I faced her and Jerry's back was to me, because Marilyn didn't know me. I was coming with camera and flashgun, and I said, "Miss Maxwell?" She looked up and gave me the big starlet smile. He turned around, his jaw dropped, and I hit the flash button. I got this great picture [laughter] of him with his mouth wide open. He said, "What are you doing?" I said, "I'm taking pictures." He said, "But where are you staying?" "At the hotel." "What room?" I told him. He said, "I want to see you in the morning." The next morning there was a knock on my door and he comes in. He said, "I've got this assignment at Paramount [Pictures, Inc.], and here's the problem." He told me the story, and suddenly it was like no time had passed. He was in my office again, and I was working on his thing. That was amusing, but that was that. I finished my work there. I went back to town. One day he turned up at my studio. And he said, "Look, I've been thinking about it. Where could you find a better front than me, and where could I find a better behind than you?" So he said, "Let's." So we started working in his name.

CEPLAIR:

Prior to that, had you thought that this was your career now, that you were a photographer, no longer a writer?

LEVITT:

Oh, yeah.

CEPLAIR:

You'd just given up the thought that you were ever going to get back into screenwriting.

LEVITT:

Yeah.

CEPLAIR:

Were you glad to have the opportunity to get back in when he—?

LEVITT:

I was glad to have the money because—I only thought of it in terms of money, because I needed it. I was never really able to get sufficiently ahead in photography. I was starting too late in life to do that. So, yeah, I was glad to have it. I said, "Take any assignment you can get. Take it." He said, "Well, I—." He then moved into the same little building. He had an office above mine. We had extensions of each other's phone, and I ran an old buzzer system. When he would get a phone call and he thought that I should be listening to it, he'd just buzz me, and I'd pick it up and listen in on the conversation. One day he buzzed me—first of all, we're doing these things, and because my name isn't on it, it was a great freedom. [laughter] I said, "Who cares what kind of shit it is? Just do it, as long as it doesn't violate any principles." Mostly what we were doing were sitcoms, and the worst you could say about them was they were just silly and dumb.

CEPLAIR:

This was what? About '55 now?

LEVITT:

Yeah.

CEPLAIR:

And they're television shows.

LEVITT:

Television, right. Actually, before that, I had done, Adrian [Scott] and I did a thing which I always enjoy. It was a rewrite of a script that Eddie [Edward] Anhalt wrote. And I enjoy rewriting Eddie Anhalt! [laughter]

CEPLAIR:

Was that made?

LEVITT:

I don't think it was made, no. It was very expensive. Jeez, it would have cost a fortune to make, and it wasn't that good of a basic idea. And yes, that was a period when I was writing also—I'm trying to remember the timing now. No, I guess later that came. I'm now writing the television stuff with Jerry's name on it. One day Jerry said to me, "Look, my psyche can't handle this situation with my name on your work. You've got to take a pseudonym and we'll work as a team openly, but in a different name." I said, "Well, if I did that, I'd have to appear at conferences and so on. They can't do anything to me. They can give me an oak-leaf cluster for my blacklisting, but you'll get in trouble." "Nah," he said, "you're paranoid about that. Nobody gives a damn anymore." He just insisted, and I took the name Tom August. Actually, I'd taken the name Tom August before, because I had written in his name a thing for a show, CBS show, an hour show called "Climax." I had the idea for this thing; it was based on a song. I wrote the lyric of the song—this is kind of funny—and the song played an important part in the story. I went to Andre Previn and I handed him the typed lyric. Andre puts it on the piano. He looks at it for like thirty seconds. He pulls out a little notebook with the music paper in it, and he writes in it. He hands it to me. That's the song. So I go back to Jerry to give it to Jerry. Then a day or so passed—I get a call from Andre. Andre said, "Metro won't release me to write for television, so you're going to have to front for me." [laughter] So it was "words and music by Tom

August." And I was fronting for Andre on this thing. It was classic, because what happened was the arranger on the show—"Who the hell's Tom August?" He took a plaintive ballad and forced an up-tempo into it, which he wouldn't have dared do [laughter] if it were Andre's name on it. So I get the dub, and I took it to Andre's house. He put it on the turntable and stood there this way, listening, and I'm looking at him. This is Johnny Desmond singing this thing. I'm looking at Andre, and his face is absolutely impassive. The thing ends, and he takes the record off the turntable and hands it back to me. I said, "What do you think, Andre?" He said, "I think you could take them to court and win." But it got me into ASCAP [American Society of Composers, Authors, and Publishers], and actually that song made more money than anything Andre had ever written up to that time. [laughter]

CEPLAIR:

Did you share in any of the money?

LEVITT:

Yeah, we split it. His music and my lyric. Of course I would.

CEPLAIR:

Oh! How nice!

LEVITT:

After [all], he wrote the music for Christ's sake! So when Jerry said, "Come do this. Take a name and let's—." I took the name Tom August, which I had already used for the song. Let's see, the first thing we got called in on was "Bachelor Father," right? I think you've got this in your book. I think I've told you this. Where I'm very nervous the first time I'm walking into a studio, and as we go through the entrance into the open, I suddenly stop and grab Jerry's arm. He says, "What's the matter?" I said, "I just saw Tiger Fafara." And he said, "What's a Tiger Fafara?" I said, "He's a kid who's in the Woodcraft Rangers group that I lead, and he knows me as Levitt." Jerry

said, "Jesus Christ, I've heard of people being afraid of the FBI [Federal Bureau of Investigation], but the Woodcraft Rangers?" That was interesting, because that show was "Bachelor Father" and the producer was—can't think of his first name. His name is—oh, yeah, Everett Freeman, whom I had known at Metro. I had never been close to him or anything. I felt that the risk was worth taking, because even though he was a conservative guy, I didn't think he would remember my name, although he might remember me. That's exactly what happened. He said, "Oh, Tom, of course," he said, "I remember you from Metro." So we worked on that show for quite a while. The next thing that happened while we were still working on that, Jerry got a phone call. He said, "I just got a call from Bill [William] Roberts. Do you know Bill?" I said, "Yeah. We were readers together." He said, "Well, he must know you're Tom August." "How the hell could he know that? I've just done that one thing." "Well, I know he doesn't like me, and he wants us to come in to work on a new show that he's doing." I said, "There's no way he can know, no likelihood that he really knows who Tom August is. But I think he'll be okay, that he won't do anything bad." So we went to [Columbia Pictures Industries, Inc.] Screen Gems, and there was always that tension. That fear lasted for quite a while, the tension of running into somebody you know. As we walked into the office, the secretary looked up and said, "Aren't you Al Levitt?" Jerry said, "Yes, he is," and ran out of the room. So she said, "What's the matter with him?" I said, "He's not feeling well. I'll have to make another appointment." I go down, and he's sitting in the car in the parking lot. I said, "What happened?" He said, "I panicked." Before I left, I said to the secretary, "Incidentally, I no longer use the name Levitt. I use the name Tom August." She said, "Okay." So we came back another time. We had made the date for another time. We're sitting there waiting, because he has somebody else in there. The somebody else leaves. Then Bill Roberts, the producer, comes out. He said, "Al Levitt, what are you doing

here?" I said, "Let's go in and I'll explain it to you." So we go inside, and Jerry's telling all the wrong kinds of jokes. I'm trying to make Bill feel secure, feel that it's safe, that nobody's going to blow the whistle, and Jerry's telling the wrong kinds of jokes. But Bill said, "Let me think about it and I'll call you." He called us back, and we worked on that show for a long—like four years (doing other things, too). In the meantime, the producer left and Tony Owen, who is—this was "The Donna Reed Show"—Donna Reed's husband, offered me the producership of it. I was afraid to take the chance, because it would seem to be putting too much of a spotlight on me, and I might be—it might endanger him and other things. So I said, "No, I don't feel comfortable doing that." Jerry was made a producer at Warner Brothers [Pictures, Inc.]. And then Helen and I started working together. So "The Donna Reed Show" was really very good to us. Every year they'd have a little Donna's frolic or something for everybody connected with the show, with their kids. It was at Sportsman's Lodge. You know, we have a braindamaged daughter [Annie Levitt], and her speech is not very clear. We understood her, but other people didn't. And our worry was whether she would inadvertently indicate that our name was Levitt and not August. Of course, that never happened. Donna was terrific. I later learned that before Bill Roberts hired us, he went to Tony Owen, who was Donna's husband, told about me, and got his okay. He said, "But I don't want to know about it." That happened; that kind of thing happened a lot. [tape recorder off]

CEPLAIR:

So you worked on "Donna Reed" through the fifties, then, to the end of the fifties?

LEVITT:

Well, not to the end of the fifties. It's the middle of the fifties, maybe like '57. Well, beyond that. I think '57 is when Helen started working with me, and we must have done it for

another two years after that, and other shows as well. It was really interesting, because Helen collaborating with me was really only a formalization of what we had always done anyway. Because anything I did I would always discuss with her, and she'd have input on it and so on. I would coach her before—she was terrified of the meetings, conferences. Not terrified in terms of blacklist, but just of that situation itself. I would coach her about the producer and tell her what to say about things and so on. Every time—it seemed to me every time but I'm sure it wasn't, but it happened a lot—that we'd come in and we'd have a conference with the producer—a producer would have a problem with something that we did, and we'd argue about it and try to find solutions, Helen would say one little sentence, and the producer would say, "Of course, that's it!" It would solve this thing. [laughter] I had set her up so unnecessarily, you know. I mean, she handled herself very well immediately. As I say, it really was only a formalization of what was the truth anyway. Our marriage was such that, you know, that was the way we operated.

CEPLAIR:

Was television—? Obviously it's different than movies. Was it different-good? Different-bad? Different—

LEVITT:

Different-horrible.

CEPLAIR:

[laughter] I see!

LEVITT:

It's the worst thing that has ever been invented, from a writer's point of view. I mean, it grinds you down. It has nothing to offer you but money. And even that is—you know, you have to work really fast to come out ahead on it. There were certain things we just would not do. I mean, we would not do any of the violence shows or any of the other things

with crappy values. We did do some decent things on television, even though they didn't always come out as we would have liked. I remember one time we had this idea on "The Donna Reed Show." The producer was then Phil Sharp, who considered himself a liberal. I said, "We have an idea for doing an antidiscrimination thing." In "The Donna Reed Show" her husband is a doctor, a pediatrician. An old friend of his, a doctor, who has been abroad, comes In with a Japanese wife. It was that actress who played in that Marlon Brando picture [Sayonara].

CEPLAIR:

Miyoshi Umeki?

LEVITT:

Yes. She played it. She really has got such a lovely quality. It was really terrific. And all our troubles with that—

1.14. TAPE NUMBER: VIII, Side One (OCTOBER 27, 1988)

CEPLAIR:

We left off last time where you had been saying that television was much worse than writing for movies. And then you began to talk about a particular kind of show you'd been able to do on "[The] Donna Reed [Show]." But before we get back to that, I was wondering—in general, did you find politically or socially you were much more constrained as a television writer than you had been as a movie writer?

LEVITT:

There's no doubt about that. You were much more constrained in television than in film, partly because the control of the medium was more remote from you when you were writing in television than it was when you were writing film. In film, you had a producer and there was a studio head, and you could make contact. In television, you have a producer and you have

a studio head, but you have advertising agencies and sponsors and so on. The time that I was speaking of, when I was working for "The Donna Reed Show," it was the time of the single sponsor. One sponsor would sponsor the entire show, and that gave them more control. Actually, when multiple sponsors came in, you had a little more edge—not a lot, but it was a little more. Of course, in addition to sponsors, there were the advertising agencies that were actually handling things for them. So it was really the advertising agency for the most part. In the case of "The Donna Reed Show," the sponsor was Campbell's Soup [Company] and stuff like that, and they had several shows. So they were very directly involved. They bought that idea. They felt that a certain amount of—there are certain elements of do-goodism that some people feel, even though they don't have anything any deeper than that, but it seemed like a good thing. Of course, before giving Campbell's Soup too much credit for anything, any company that has a product that is marketed in the way food products are—I mean, they want to get Japanese to buy their product, too. But, really, the point of what I was saying was that people tend to censor themselves. Phil Sharp was not opposed to any of these things. In fact, I'm sure he considered himself a very progressive guy. But he was immediately worried. He started worrying about the sponsor in the first place, and it would have just ended with him. I don't want to make too much of a thing of this, because this was a little half-hour sitcom, and it was no great, revolutionary thing, except in the context of what was being done in that medium at that time, in that place. I may have mentioned this before. Donna eventually became a very progressive woman and was very active in that organization another Mother for Peace.

CEPLAIR:

But that was long past the show's end.

LEVITT:

Well, yeah, it was past the show, I guess. We were gone then. I don't remember exactly. The show went on for a very long time.

CEPLAIR:

Did you have any ideas, or many ideas, turned down? Or were you so very careful as to what you would set up in the first place?

LEVITT:

You do—there's an enormous amount of self-censorship that you do, particularly at the beginning of a relationship. After a while, if you get a sense both of the person and that person's attitude toward you, you start to probe and try to push it a little more. I may have mentioned this. Did I tell you about Donna and John Foster Dulles?

CEPLAIR:

No.

LEVITT:

When I was first working for that show—actually the producer, Bill [William] Roberts, after that—we finally did meet. He said, "What are you doing here?" We had the meeting, Jerry [Jerome L. Davis] and I, with Jerry making all the wrong jokes. We went back. We didn't know whether we were going to get an assignment or anything. It just ended with a meeting, and we talked generally. Then we left. I think it was the same day—it may have been the next day—Jerry buzzed me from his phone to pick up the phone. It was Bill Roberts calling him. Bill Roberts said to him, "Aren't you afraid someone might blow the whistle on Al?" Jerry, knowing that I was on the other end of the line, was being very careful. Now, he was saying the right things in the sense of saying, "You know, everybody knows, except that it's not, you know—." And all that kind of thing. I never knew whether anyone else other than Bill Roberts on that show knew that I was blacklisted. By the time

Phil Sharp came in, he knew, but at this time I didn't know—the first inkling I had was when Tony Owen—who was the executive producer of the show, but it was really just a title, because he never did anything. He was Donna's husband, and he was an agent, a former agent. One day I walked in, and he said, "Donna is making a speech at a banquet for John Foster Dulles." He said, "Do you think it would be good casting for you to write her speech?" [laughter] And that he said with a big grin, of course. That was the first inkling I had that he knew. Later, I learned that Bill Roberts, right from the start, never—he was not taking any chance in hiring me. He went to Tony Owen, and he said, "This is who Tom August." Owen said, "Do you think he can write the show?" He said, "Yeah, I think he can." Owen said, "As far as I'm concerned, he's Tom August. I don't know anything else about him. Hire him."

CEPLAIR:

Does that mean that the blacklist was starting to waver then or just that this individual—?

LEVITT:

That was an individual.

CEPLAIR:

Just individual.

LEVITT:

Because later than that—I think I've already told you this. Did I tell you about the thing at Warner Brothers [Pictures, Inc.]? I was still working with Jerry then, and we got a call—oh, God, this is—got a call from Roy Huggins—I had never met Roy Huggins; I didn't know him, which made me very happy that I didn't know him—to come in and talk to him about a pilot. As we entered Warner Brothers, suddenly somebody taps me on the back and he says, "Sergeant Levitt! What the hell are you doing here?" And it's a guy who was a clerk at [Fort] Roach, the air force [First] Motion Picture Unit, who was the clerk who

would record the assignments to the writers there. Bill [William] Orr, who was then running the Warner Brothers television operation—and who had been a high-ranking officer at the place—had hired this guy. It was very cynical, because he knew nothing, and he made him a producer. So he stopped me, and, you know, we exchanged greetings. He said, "Will you work for my show?" I said, "Sure." (I don't even remember what his show was.) "Let me have a script. I'd like to read it and see what this show is like." He said, "Terrific." I said, "Incidentally, I no longer use the name Levitt. I use the name Tom August." He said, "Fine." We went and had our meeting with Huggins, who had an idea for a pilot that he wanted us to write. I hated the idea. We left. A day or so later, my partner gets a call from an executive at Warner's saying, "We know that Tom August is Al Levitt, and we will not do business with Al Levitt." So, in a panic, he ran down and said this: "How the hell do you think they found out?" I said, "I don't know, but—." He said, "I want to find out. I want to call and find out or ask this guy," Bert, whatever the hell his name was. "Maybe he told." I said, "Don't ask anybody. So I'm blacklisted at Warner Brothers, but there are still other studios. I don't think that Bert would intentionally—obviously, he wouldn't intentionally say anything to expose me, since he wanted me to work on his show. So just drop it." But he didn't. Apparently, as he says, he ran into Bert—and maybe he did—and he [Davis] says, "Uh, did you tell someone at Warner Brothers that Tom August was Al Levitt?" He said, "Sure." He said, "Why the hell did you do that?" He said, "Why not?" He said, "For Christ's sake, didn't you know that Al was blacklisted?" He said, "Al was blacklisted? No, I didn't know that!" He said, "Why do you think he was using another name?" He said, "I thought he didn't want anyone to know he was working at Warner Brothers and taking short money." That was Warner Brothers' reputation in the television operation headed by Bill Orr.

CEPLAIR:

What does "short money" mean? You work for less?

LEVITT:

You're getting paid less, yeah. The minimums. He was paying strict minimums where you usually would get more than that, depending on what your credits were and how much they wanted you. So I couldn't work at Warner Brothers. This was like—It's got to be 1959. In 1960 there's a strike, an even longer strike than the one we had. Oh, no, I think we beat them by one day.

CEPLAIR:

By one day, I think so.

LEVITT:

And somewhere along the way into the strike, a Warner Brothers executive calls and says, "We're willing to let bygones be bygones, and you can work for us under any name you want—during the strike."

CEPLAIR:

Oh! How generous!

LEVITT:

[laughter] There is something so—you know, you think that you've heard it all, but there's something—I was really shocked, because there was something so absolutely amoral about it: even their own principles they wouldn't stand up for. It was really kind of incredible.

CEPLAIR:

Did you miss being politically involved during this period? Because I know by the sixties, sort of with [John F.] Kennedy running for president, it seemed—at least it seemed to me—that an exciting political era was beginning. Did you feel—?

LEVITT:

Well, there was a process that was going on. I think for most of us, at least most of the people I was close to—I think most of the people who were blacklisted—again, I'm saying my friends—would have been out of the [Communist] Party before the hearings ever took place. Because there was a gradual—if I say disillusionment, that's a little too strong—disappointment, a feeling that it wasn't working. Things, you know, weren't—and it was just a hindrance rather than anything else by that time. It was the fact that when the party came under attack, everybody kind of stiffened to resist that attack. Even if you felt you no longer wanted to be a member of the Communist Party, you believed that the Communist Party had a right to exist, and those people who did want to be a member should have that right and so on. There were those peculiarly conflicting threads that went through that period. Certainly your organized political activity diminished in a certain sense. But we were all—well, for a while, many of us, maybe most of us, left the [Writers] Guild [of America]. But while you were in the guild, you—we—were active. But our effectiveness, of course, became—I mean, they did such a good smear job that the mere fact that—ultimately it became a situation where if it was known that we supported it, it was doomed to defeat. That attitude gradually began to change.

CEPLAIR:

One more thing. When was the last party meeting you attended in Hollywood? Did you continue to attend branch meetings after the blacklist?

LEVITT:

After '51, but not for long after '51. Long enough to make it clear that we were not turning against the party. As a matter of fact, what we did before we left, both Helen [Slote Levitt] and I—I must admit Helen led this. She was trying to get the party to disband. She felt that it had so discredited itself that it just had to fold and go away and something newer might have

a chance to work a little better. That occurred—gee, it's hard for me to place the dates on some of these things. I know I associate that time with a dinner that we had—did I mention this?—with Dr. [W. E. B.] Du Bois and Shirley Graham. There's a man named Carlton Moss. He is different from the one who's M-O-R-S-E whose first name is Carlton. Carlton Moss is a black man who's a terrific guy. He's still around. I mean, we thought it was really a great honor that he—Dr. Du Bois and Shirley Graham were visiting him, and he invited one couple: he invited us. It was an extraordinary evening. Both those people were fantastic. We talked, and by that time I think—the reason I mention that is I think we discussed some of this then, and I think by that time our thoughts about trying to dissolve the party had crystallized. But I can't place that in time, because I don't remember. There were some things I can't remember whether I ever told you about, but I want to ask you whether—did I ever tell you about Artie [Arthur] Schoen?

CEPLAIR:

You've talked about him. He was a friend from New York, wasn't he?

LEVITT:

Yeah.

CEPLAIR:

A boyhood friend?

LEVITT:

A college friend.

CEPLAIR:

College friend. I don't remember. Helen mentioned him, but I don't remember if you mentioned him.

LEVITT:

Oh. Well, I'll just do this briefly. This is in 1940, I think. I got a call from him. He said he was out here for a tryout with the Hollywood Angels or the Hollywood—it was a professional, triple-A team, whatever.

CEPLAIR:

There were the Hollywood Stars and the Los Angeles Angels.

LEVITT:

There were the Los Angeles Angels then? Well, it was one of those teams. That made sense, because I remember he was a terrific athlete. He quit the football team, because he didn't like the language the guys used in the locker-room. He was Jewish and was very sensitive to anti-Semitism. During the summers he would play semi-pro ball. The way he would deal with anti-Semitism, someone would say something—he looked like an Irish cop, as they say. The way he would deal with it—when someone said something anti-Semitic, he said, "I'm Jewish"—bang! You know, that was his way of doing it. He did the phylacteries in the morning, really a very religious guy. As I say, he was a stereotype of an Irish cop, with the red hair and burly—so when he said he was coming out here for a tryout with this team, it seemed to make sense, and we asked—I was delighted to hear from him. I had always liked him. He asked if we could meet him for dinner downtown near the hotel where he was staying. He was out here for some company, he said, doing time-study things or something like that—I can't remember what it was. So we met and had dinner, and we started just talking generally. And he said suddenly—I mean, it seemed suddenly to me, although it seemed to be worked into the conversation. He said, "You remember Bert Witt?" He was a college friend, too. I said, "Sure." He said, "You guys were in that Marxist study group with Bert, weren't you?" I said, "No, I was never in any such thing with Bert Witt." He turned to Helen and said, "Weren't you in some kind of Marxist group?" By the second question,

we were both alerted and said no. He pursued it for maybe twenty, thirty seconds more, and then he stopped. "I'm really sorry," he said. "I had to ask you that. I'm not out here to sell anything"—whatever it was that was his excuse. He said, "I'm in the FBI [Federal Bureau of Investigation]." My first reaction was, "You're kidding!" And he said, "No, I'm not kidding." He pulled out this badge that says FBI. Well, Helen and I avoided looking at each other, [laughter] you know, and we talked about—and then as the evening dinner went on, I began to get curious. I said, "Hey, Artie, do you run into any anti-Semitism in the FBI?" "Well, I'll tell you," he said, "I've learned if you look for anything hard enough, you'll find it." It was marvelous to see how rationalizations were starting. He was a dedicated FBI man. He never referred to [J. Edgar] Hoover by name until I asked; he always referred to him as "the chief." The first time he did it, I said, "Who do you mean?" He said, "J. Edgar Hoover, of course." He referred to the FBI as "the service." Now, we had to go all the way downtown. Every time he came into town then, he would come and he'd always call us. One time we had to go all the way down, and I said, "Don't you get a car in the FBI so you can meet us somewhere halfway?" He said, "Oh, yes, I've got a car, but I'd never use the car for personal business." I said, "You mean to tell me that all the guys whom you work with never use the cars?" "No, they all do," he said, "but I would never do that. Well, he became a—in 1940, when the "phony war" was on, we were always terrified of running into friends of ours with him, you know. It was a great strain. He had changed, not only on the question of anti-Semitism, but in many ways. This guy whom I'd always liked as a sensitive, decent guy, in restaurants he was nasty to the waitresses and waiters, and it was really embarrassing to be with him. This went on—one time I remember driving in a car, and he said, "It's really funny, when you're on the desk where you get the phone calls, people come in and tell you about this or that subversive group that's, you know—we listen to them, let them tell their whole stories—." I figured he was going. to

say, "But we know it's nonsense, and we don't pay any attention to it." But he said, "But we already have files that long on the same group that they're calling in on." Then when the war came, we didn't see him [inaudible]. The next time we saw him was 1946 or—let's see, Tom [Thomas A. Levitt] was born, yeah, November '46. So it must have been still 1946, because he was an infant. We had a nurse who was showing Helen how to bathe the baby, and this was a very tense thing for Helen. We also had a maid. Now, I was not home. I was working at one of the studios. The phone rang, and the maid answered it and said, "Artie Schoen is on the phone." She said, "Tell him I can't speak to him now." So she apparently told him that, then came back and said, "He said it's very urgent. It's very important." Helen got nervous, gave the baby back to the nurse, went to the phone, and said, "What is it?" "Nothing," he said. "I always do that when I want to get someone on the phone." She was furious. She said, "You son of a bitch, I don't want—." And she hung up on him, and that ended it. We didn't hear from him again. Before that ended, though, the first time we saw him after the war, when we came back here—after spending the winter of '45 and early part of '46 in New York, we came back here. Helen pregnant now with Tom. We couldn't find any place to live. It was really impossible, very difficult at least. The Carnovskys invited us to live in their rumpus room until we found a place. It had a separate entrance. It had a bar and we put up a little bed, a cot, in there. I was sitting there typing a letter to my parents [Charles L. and Minerva Lewis Levitt], telling them what our address now was. There was a knock on the door. I go there, and it's Artie Schoen. I said, "How the hell did you find out this address? My parents don' t even know it." "I know how to do that." He said, "I'm not in the FBI anymore." I said, "You're not?" "No. I left, because during the war they stationed me at a camp where I read and reported on the letters of the soldiers stationed at the camp. And this was a camp that had—they tried to keep radicals from going overseas, and they put them

in this camp. There were a lot of them in this camp. I read those letters," he said, "and the men who understood the war best and felt most strongly about it were not allowed to go overseas. So I decided that I didn't want any more of the FBI. I left." I said, "What are you doing now?" He said, "I work for Schenley [Industries, Inc.]." And he said, "I've got something—." I can't remember exactly how he described his job, but it had something to do with—anyway, it was something that sounded like someone who went to business school would do, you know, quality control, something or other. But as far as we were concerned, he was still in the FBI, and we always treated him that way. Actually, after the incident that I told you about with Helen and the baby—she yelled and screamed at him and said, "We don't want to see you again" and hung up, and that was marvelous. So we never did hear from him again. He has since died. I'm really jumping around here. Was there something else you wanted me—?

CEPLAIR:

So you think you probably had stopped attending Communist Party meetings by the middle of the fifties for sure, would you think?

LEVITT:

Oh, yeah.

CEPLAIR:

Before the [Nikita S.] Khrushchev speech, you were—?

LEVITT:

Yeah. Yeah.

CEPLAIR:

You didn't formally resign, did you? You just sort of stopped attending meetings?

LEVITT:

You just stopped attending. And there were several of us who—I think most of us on the Hollywood Review had done that. You didn't know what others did. That is, you didn't ask, but you got a sense that others were doing—it was kind of interesting, because it was done spontaneously.

CEPLAIR:

A lot of your close friends had been steadily leaving Hollywood. I mean, the Barzmans [Ben and Norma] went in the late forties and didn't come back.

LEVITT:

Yeah.

CEPLAIR:

And then the Wilsons [Michael and Zelma Gussin] went, the Jarricos [Paul and Sylvia Gussin] went, the Trumbos [Dalton and Cleo Beth]—I mean, weren't you increasingly feeling alone here?

LEVITT:

Well, we were in a way. So far as I can remember, we were the only blacklisted writers who never left the community during that period. Bobby [Robert] Lees went to Phoenix. Freddy [Fred] Rinaldo, I don't remember what he did. But we never left. Helen was really running a USO [United Service Organizations] for the blacklisted people. Because whenever they'd come to town, they'd call us and we'd have some kind of a get-together. And it was kind of nice. Recently I was going through my files for something else, and I came across letters from Mike [Wilson] and from Carl Foreman, each of them saying—in Mike's case, "You know, you really ought to come to Paris," he said. "I think you can get work here." And Carl said, "Come to London, because there's work there." Helen and I were tempted, but we just felt we couldn't take the chance because of our daughter [Annie Levitt]. She was still too young to—so I just wanted to make the point why we didn't: We

weren't remaining here as a matter of principle. [laughter] It just worked out that way. So that we did run that, Helen did. A little earlier, before everybody left. Did I ever tell you about the Richardses, Bob [Robert] Richards and Ann Richards? Bob was blacklisted, a blacklisted writer, and Ann, who was named Ann Roth Morgan—she may have been blacklisted, too—she was not a writer. She worked for the Screen Writers Guild and worked for various things that she—anyway, they had a little house in, I think, Sherman Oaks [California]. When they were blacklisted, their biggest financial problem was the hundred bucks or more per week that they spent on booze. So Bob decided to find out how to make it himself. I don't know whether you've ever—you're too young to ever have seen these old-fashioned milk cans that were about this high, metal things with the big lid that comes off. He got hold of one of those, and he had it chromium plated. He had put the mash in there when he would—then he had a hole drilled and a copper pipe, you know, coil, coming out of it. So he distilled it. He would cook it on the stove in his kitchen. It was kind of a narrow kitchen and the sink was there. He'd have the tube come curled down there, and he'd make this white lightning. And, I mean, it was really powerful. He learned more and more, as time went on, how to do it better. And then he began to add coloring to it, so it wasn't just white lightning. Everybody was coming in to get some of the booze. He would run out of bottles, so he would tell people, "If you want some, you have got to bring your own bottle." Every Sunday there was a kind of afternoon at their house with blacklisted people and their kids, and there was the booze. When you got within a quarter of a mile of the house, you could smell it! I was really worried because I thought he was going to—I could not see how he could escape being caught and in trouble, but he never was caught. You'd come and bring bottles to take them home. When we were about to move from the house we were living in on Adina Drive to a cheaper place, we invited the Hubleys over for dinner. It was going to be a dinner where we

were just going to use everything that was hanging around, what we wanted to use up before moving. I found a bottle of wine that had been opened. It was corked, but it had been opened. I brought that to the table. This was John Hubley's first wife, whose name I can't think of at the moment [Claudia], but I poured the wine and she took a sip of it. She said, "Wow. This is really strong wine, but it's very good." Later, I took a sip and almost choked on it, because it was that booze that I had put in that wine bottle. That's when I first knew that she had a drinking problem. Boy, did she have a drinking problem! Those Sunday afternoons at the Richardses were really very nice. People came who didn't drink at all, because it was just nice. The booze was kind of an excuse for doing it. Both of them are dead. He became a carpenter. He had written some John Wayne westerns before being blacklisted. And he went to Mexico. She died first, I think, and then he died.

CEPLAIR:

Why and when did you leave "The Donna Reed Show"?

LEVITT:

I guess I left because I was getting other things that I wanted. I mean, we did something like thirty shows for them. It was enough. I think I told you about this show. It was an hour show at CBS. The first thing I put Tom August's name on was a song. I told you the thing with Andre Previn.

CEPLAIR:

Right.

LEVITT:

That was when I first used Tom August, and this other writer put his—I did the script too and put his name on. I may also have told you—did I tell you about the [Dalton] Trumbo thing in "Studio One"? After there was the big thing about The Brave One and people knew Trumbo had written it—and Trumbo,

every time these people would ask him, he would say he has made it a matter of principle neither to confirm nor deny whether or not he's written anything, and so on. Well, now he was beginning to get movie assignments, and the head of CBS out here called him and said, "Would you do a comedy for "Studio One" around the Robert Rich [pseudonym of Trumbo for The Brave One] thing?" Because he was getting movie assignments, he said he didn't think he had time to do it, but he recommended me. Now, the guy who was head of this—I guess it doesn't matter to mention his name now; he's very old—who was head of that operation then was Bill [William] Dozier. He had been my boss when I was working at Paramount [Pictures, Inc.] as a reader. He had, in fact, given me a crack at writing while I was a reader, but I went into the army too soon after that for that to be completed. So I met with him. I told him I would use the name Tom August. I told him an approach to the story, and he liked it. "But," he said, "I'm a little worried. If you get this assignment, nobody knows who Tom August is. Why did I hire you?" and so on. "Do you know someone who is not blacklisted, whose name you could use with yours as a collaborator? That would help." "Yes, I know someone who I think would do that." I said, "Jerry Davis." He said, "Terrific. He just wrote a show for us that was very successful." It was the one I wrote [laughter] which Jerry had put his name on. That one.

1.15. TAPE NUMBER: VIII, Side Two (OCTOBER 27, 1988)

LEVITT:

The show that was based on the Robert Rich situation—Jerry actually had a job up in Las Vegas then working for Jerry Lewis. But he would come down every once in a while, come to these meetings. "Studio One" was done like theater. You rehearse it live before a live audience. And then it goes on live. The guy who was directing it would—oh, after we had done

this whole thing, we had to change it. CBS wouldn't let them go on the air. The guy could be blacklisted, but not for political reasons; but he was blacklisted because he had slugged a producer! You know, it was kind of dumb. So this director took me aside one time and he said, "I don't think you really know what you've written here. This isn't about a guy who slugs a producer. This is really about a guy who was blacklisted politically and we're just using that. Now, I know a lot about the blacklist," he said, "because I know all those guys back East." He would take me aside, and he would explain the blacklist to me! And it was pretty eerie.

CEPLAIR:

I imagine!

LEVITT:

You had that temptation: Should I tell him? Ultimately you decide not to, because you realize it will compromise him, so you don't tell him. And then, also, at that time I had been doing photography. In the live audience during one of the rehearsals, a model whom I had shot comes over and greets me as Al Levitt. I said, "I'm using a different name." I never told her why. She probably thought I didn't want it to interfere with my photography career. But that kind of thing was going on.

CEPLAIR:

When did you get your first movie work as a blacklisted—?

LEVITT:

Well, it was the King brothers [Frank, Maury, and Herman] of course, and that was through Trumbo. Trumbo recommended me to the King brothers. I mean, the King brothers were [pause] ridiculous. These three guys—at that time they had a mother around. They were extraordinary men. I mean, they were really vulgar, in every way, and unprincipled. If people were being blacklisted for being child murderers and therefore

they couldn't work in their own name, they'd come and hire them, because they could get them for less. So there was no principle involved with them. I did, Jesus, a lot of things for them, none of which was ever made. One of which I bought back from them—it was such a good idea. Oh, they were very conscientious and patriotic in relation to their Jewishness. They wanted to do—this started with a story they had called "Ten Men and a Prayer." It was a World War II story in which a guy, a Jewish soldier, is killed, and they wanted to have a Jewish service for him. They didn't have a tenth Jew for the minyan. They went into a bombed-out church, and there was a statue of Christ that would be the tenth Jew. Well, [laughter] there was no way in the world that I was going to write that, but it made me think about something else. I thought of the guys whom I knew in the army in the outfit that I worked with. I had an idea. Toward the waning days of World War II, there's an outfit into which a new man has just been transferred, because he slugged a noncom [noncommissioned officer] in his other outfit and they moved him. They were going on patrol, and the guys were worried about going out on patrol. But what they're worried about is they know the war is winding down, and to get it just in the last days of the war would be really shitty. The new man is subtly excluded from the group. Not intentionally, but because the other guys all have long, close relationships and he's new. But it turns out that he's more experienced soldier and a better soldier than them in terms of knowing what to do at a given time. What happens is that this patrol goes out and they follow the officers, because the officer's word carries against the advice of the new man. They walk into a trap, and several of them are killed. About five or six of them are taken prisoner, and they are taken in a German truck. They start to go behind the lines, back rather to the headquarters, where the Germans want to see what information they can get. On the way the vehicle they're traveling in is strafed by an American plane. The driver is killed, their guards are killed, and a couple of them are killed.

But there are five or six of them left, including this Jewish guy. They see that there they are, alone, in Germany. The question is should they give themselves up. The Jewish guy says, "They'll kill us. They can't be bothered taking prisoners now. They don't have enough to feed their own guys. They are taking us back to interrogate us, and after they interrogate us, they'll kill us." He's for trying to make their way back to their lines. And that's what they—I won't go into all the details, but only two of them survive, this guy and another guy. And so that was what I sold them, instead of what they were going to do.

CEPLAIR:

On a percentage basis, what did the Kings pay as compared to, say, what a studio would have paid?

LEVITT:

I'd say half. Less than half, probably, less than half, probably 35 percent.

CEPLAIR:

Did you write as well for the Kings as you would have written for a studio, do you think?

LEVITT:

I think so. You know, it—

CEPLAIR:

You write for yourself, basically, right?

LEVITT:

That's right. You just do the best you can in whatever you're doing.

CEPLAIR:

When did you get your first studio work once you were blacklisted?

LEVITT:

I never got. screen studio work after I was blacklisted or while I was blacklisted where it was open and known. The kind of work I got was when I'd get a rewrite of something where my name was never going to be used. During that blacklist period, I never got an actual studio job. It was just independent producers who had ties with studios. It was never directly, except in television.

CEPLAIR:

So the producers were pretty faithful, then, about the blacklist.

LEVITT:

It wasn't that they were faithful; it was that they were scared.

CEPLAIR:

But whatever the cause was, the effect was they didn't—

LEVITT:

No, there were individual producers who were willing to take a chance, take a very careful chance. But I'm dying to know—during the recent negotiations—jeez, I forget his name—one of the members of the management's negotiating committee was representing the studio there. What was the name of the executive at Columbia [Pictures Industries, Inc.] who was really monitoring the blacklist?

CEPLAIR:

I don't remember.

LEVITT:

He was administering, I should say, the blacklist for Columbia. I think it was Ben Kahane. This guy has that same name. It's hard for me to figure out, because he's white-haired, but he still could have been the son of this guy. Because the guy I

know was considerably older than me. I was trying to bring myself to ask him if he—but it was too fraught; I didn't.

CEPLAIR:

Was there ever a point in time when you could say the blacklist, if not over, is ending and Tom August or Al Levitt is now a much more employable person?

LEVITT:

Yeah, it was that time at [Twentieth Century-]Fox [Film Corporation] for me.

CEPLAIR:

What time at Fox was that?

LEVITT:

Well, I think I told you, when I wrote this original screenplay and told the agent to submit it under my own name. Did I tell you that?

CEPLAIR:

We are talking now about the sixties?

LEVITT:

Yeah.

CEPLAIR:

No, you didn't.

LEVITT:

Well, it's interesting. I was hired to be story editor. Actually, Helen and I were offered the story editorship of a show called "The Ghost and Mrs. Muir." That required going to the studio every day. Our daughter was then living at home, and Helen said, "There's no way I can do that; you have to take that yourself. See if I can do a script from time to time." So I asked the agent, "Who's the producer?" He said, "Stanley Rubin." I

said, "You better tell him that Tom August is Al Levitt." Stanley Rubin was a guy I've known for a lot of years. He was, I think, briefly in the party, and he was an informer. I figured I wouldn't have to make a decision. As soon as he was told who I was, I was sure Stan would say, "Thanks, but no thanks." Instead, he said he wanted to meet with me anyway. So I figured, "What the hell. What do I have to lose?"

CEPLAIR:

What year is this? Do you remember?

LEVITT:

'Sixty-seven, around there. I went to see Stan, and he said the question that always gets asked in anything that approaches this kind of situation. He said, "Aren't you afraid someone will blow the whistle on you?" I said, "No. Nobody cares anymore." And I figured that I was not going to get the job. Because if I were he, I wouldn't want me there every day reminding him. But he did, he did hire me. I was hired as Tom August. And I've got to tell you, he was the best producer I've worked for since Adrian Scott. He creates a really good atmosphere around in terms of the things necessary to get the work done. The only time there was ever any mention that gave any indication about the secret between us on both sides was—I'm trying to think of how he phrased that. He had done something. He had made a decision about something that related to the show, and afterwards he said, "God, I shouldn't have done that." This was a totally nonpolitical thing; it was purely. an aesthetic decision. He was annoyed, and he kept saying, "I shouldn't have done it." I said, "There's no point in torturing yourself about it. You did it, and we'll be able to live with it." "Yeah," he said, "God knows I've lived with enough guilt without this, so I guess you're right." That was the only reference he ever made. It was a good, creative team experience. It was the days when there was only one story editor on a show, so we worked very closely together. It was a

good show—I don't know whether you ever saw it—the first year, at any rate, because I left after the end of the first year, and then the show changed quite a bit. But the first year was a good show, one of the few television things I don't squirm at when I see. Anyway, it was while I was working on that show that I told the agent to market my screenplay under my own name. Then when the screenplay was sold and a trade paper appeared, it said, "Tom August, story editor at Twentieth Century-Fox, sold a screenplay to Universal [Pictures] which he wrote under the name Alfred Lewis Levitt." And then right after that, I worked for Bob [Robert] Wise at Universal, but he knew. By that time, I think I was using the Levitt name. Universal was the first one who knew. I told you about that check, didn't I, the residuals check? Well, the Writers Guild publication used to print every once in a while a list: "We have residuals for the following people. If you know them or any members of their family, please call the guild and we'll send them their money." One day, as I'm Tom August, I see Alfred Lewis Levitt on that list. So I called the guild, and I said, "I'd like you to send it to my attorney." I didn't want them to have my address. I didn't want them to link Tom August with me. They said, "You'll have to send us a letter authorizing us to send it to your attorney." So I wrote such a letter and gave them Aubrey Finn's name and address. I called Aubrey and told him, and he said, "Fine." When the thing came to him, he saw an envelope, "Writers Guild," addressed to me, care of him. It said "residual" on the envelope. He just put it in another envelope and mailed it back to me. I got it, and there was a check made out to Alfred Lewis Levitt. On the check stub it said, "AKA Tom August." So I had gone through all this to avoid—Universal was apparently the first one to know, because they were the first company to computerize. I always used my own Social Security number. I lost enough on the things where I used fronts, where I got no contribution to my pension plan and none to my Social Security. So when I was doing it myself, I wanted—I didn't dream that anybody would

check that. But what happened, then, was that Mike [Michael H.] Franklin, who was then the executive director of the Writers Guild, called Aubrey Finn and said—I guess somebody must have called it to his attention—"What do we do about the Tom August-Al Levitt situation?" Aubrey said, "Let me think about that." [laughter] He called me and told me about it. I said, "Well, maybe it's time for me to go back to using Levitt and then use August as a registered pen name." So Aubrey said that to Mike, and Mike said, "That was what I was going to suggest." So they changed my membership from August to Levitt. And there was some confusion for a while among some people. I had stayed away from the guild, but that's when I became active in the guild again. The only activity I maintained during that period was arbitration. I would do credit arbitrations. Because when you served on a credit arbitration, you didn't have to appear at the guild. You read the material at home and mailed your decision to the guild. Apparently, there was a lot of work. One of the old, former employees of the guild who worked in the screen credits department years ago—she was able to work there when they need extra help. She doesn't work full-time. The credits administrator had called me and said, "Mary Dorfman wanted me to. tell you that she knew your father." I said, "What do you mean?" "She said you're a 'Jr.' Aren't you?" I said, "Tell Mary Dorfman that she knew me, not my father." But so much time had passed that she assumed that Alfred Levitt had to be the father of the one she knew.

CEPLAIR:

When you went back to using Alfred Lewis Levitt, did that in any way alter the flow of assignments you were getting?

LEVITT:

Well, I didn't go back to using it in television. We had so many credits as Tom and Helen August that it would have been against our interests to do that.

CEPLAIR:

Right.

LEVITT:

So I continued. To this day, I use the Levitt name for film and screen and August for television. By '67 or '-8, when I was working at Fox, in that studio commissary—it was the first time that I was working in the studio, other than coming in and dropping something off that I had written and then leaving. I was flabbergasted by the way people were talking in the commissary, at lunches and meetings. They weren't careful or worried about somebody overhearing them. I mean, I was catching up with the sixties finally! And you know, the strong antiwar sentiment, it was really like a rebirth of a sort, [laughter] It was very interesting.

CEPLAIR:

Is it ever fair to say that the blacklist ended for anyone, or did the effect still—? I mean, obviously you missed a lot. I mean, there was a big period of your professional life that was hurt. But did you still feel the effects in some way or another?

LEVITT:

Well, there are two things. It's frequently asked by people who are less knowledgeable than you, "When did the blacklist end?" As though somebody rang a bell and said, "Okay, it's over now." Of course, as you know, it ended at different times for different people. But even then it was never a clear-cut thing. There were still people after that who just were uncomfortable with blacklisted writers. There was a man—did I tell you about Owen Crump? Owen Crump was the colonel in charge of production at the First Motion Picture Unit at [Fort] Roach. At a time when we were doing very well in television—it was well into the sixties already and may have been close to the end of the decade. It was at least '67. Our agent called and said, "There's a producer who read the script you wrote for some

other show, and he has a pilot that he wants to do. It's in the same genre. He loved that script, and he wants to meet with you." I said, "What's his name?" He said, "Owen Crump." I said, "Well, I'm not too sure about that." I said, "I'll let you know." Owen Crump knew who I was, but didn't know that Tom August was me. So I discussed it with Helen, and Helen said, "Come on, who cares any more? Don't be paranoid. Let's just do it." In the meantime, I was uncomfortable and I kept stalling. The agent keeps calling, and he said, "Listen, this guy's calling me every day. He wants you, and he wants to get it in motion as soon as possible." So finally I said okay. Helen tried convince me as we were driving. "He has to know it's you. It's no secret anymore; everybody knows." Owen Crump is one of the slickest gentlemen you've ever seen in your life. I mean, an old southern gentleman, a very, very smooth guy. We came to the office. The secretary announced us, and she said, "It will be just a minute." And this wait gave me more time to be nervous. Finally, the secretary's phone buzzed and she said, "You can go on in now." We walked in, and I saw a little start, just enough of, like a flicker of the eye, to realize he didn't know that Tom August would turn out to be me. He was warm. "How nice to see you again," and it's marvelous and warm. He says, "Tell me about yourself. Tell me what you've been doing over the years." I said, "Well, as you may or may not know, I was blacklisted in 1951, and I've been working under this name. In almost every instance, people know what my real name is. Even people whom I didn't know before know that I have another name and they know why. Nobody seems to care about it anymore." He said, "Oh, that's really nice to hear; I'm really delighted. I read your script and loved it. It's exactly in the vein, the kind of thing that I want to do. I'm going to send some material over to you, and I'll get back to you." So we left. I mean, it was in the bag, and I called the agent and told him. He said, "Good. I'll call him, and we'll make the deal." The next day he called me back and he said, "I haven't been able to reach him." I said, "Well, let's see

if we really have a deal or not." I began to think we were not going to have a deal. Helen scolded me for my negativism. And the agent said, "I don't understand it. He was in this huge hurry, and now I can't reach him on the phone." He never did reach Crump; he hired somebody else. So that was the only flash of it that went that late in time that I encountered, that I know about. You know, there may be individual things. There are things where I'm sure that people who were involved, people like Dick [Richard] Collins, would—I don't know whether Dick Collins would hire us or not. That's a bad example, because I remember now being at Universal [Pictures] on something else and Dick Collins fawning all over me. You know, it was disgusting! What's the name—? The woman who used to be an agent. Meta [Reis] Rosenberg. She would never hire me.

CEPLAIR:

What about the reverse, especially in the guild? Do younger writers who know that you've been blacklisted look upon you with veneration?

LEVITT:

Some of them do, yeah. There tends to be some of that.

CEPLAIR:

Sort of an old soldier who's been through the war kind of thing. [laughter]

LEVITT:

Yeah. The younger ones particularly, because they want to know what it was like, and they can't believe—I mean, the kids particularly who lived through the sixties can't believe that. Last spring—was it last spring? It must have been last spring. Yeah, it was during the strike. Before the strike began, somebody approached us and wanted us to speak at Claremont [California] on the blacklist. They'd send a car for us. I picked a date that I was sure of, a date in June. I was

sure the strike would be over by then. [laughter] And of course it wasn't, so I had to take that day off from negotiations. They picked us up, and it's Chaffey. College in [Alta Loma, California]. We were looking at the map, and we saw that we would be going through Cucamonga [California]. Cucamonga was always a joke name. But we knew one person who actually grew up in Cucamonga, and that was Mary Salt when she was Mary Davenport. While we were talking about this, the phone rings, and it's Mary calling from New York. We said, "This is weird beyond belief!" She said, "What is?" I said, "We're looking at a map because we're going to speak at a college, and we're going through Cucamonga." She said, "What college?" And I said, "Chaffey Junior College." She said, "I was a student there! I went there before I went to the University of Washington." [laughter] So we used that as an introduction to telling them then who Waldo Salt was. And it was—god, this remote place. I mean, it seemed remote to me. I practically never—neither of us has ever spoken to an audience that was as interested, responsive. They asked intelligent questions. It was really a great experience. [tape recorder off]

CEPLAIR:

I guess the natural culmination to the blacklist story would be that blacklist committee that the guild formed for the pensions, so why don't you just tell how that got started and what that accomplished.

LEVITT:

Okay. The way it came about, actually, it was the product of something else. The guild had a pension plan. The way the pension plan was constructed, it placed the older writers at a great disadvantage. The writers most of whose credits were before 1948 got very small pensions, so that you had a distinguished writer and former president of the guild like Sheridan Gibney who was getting a pension of something like

$14 a month. There were similar things with prominent people like that. At every guild meeting, someone got up and said, "It's outrageous" and so on. But pension plans, as you know, are very tightly controlled by law. To make a change in the pension plan is a major operation. So the pressure became so great that the guild board that was in being at that time decided—after this protest came up at every guild meeting, they decided that they would work out a formula that would compensate the writers who were disadvantaged by virtue of having been in the guild longer. They would give them a supplement that would come out of the guild treasury. Therefore, they didn't have to deal with the laws that governed pension plans. They calculated it on a very specific formula that had to do with years of work and so on. When that was announced, two people wrote letters to the guild, which appeared in the guild publication [the Writers Guild of America, West, Newsletter], both of which said in different words, "What about writers who were blacklisted, who were disadvantaged by virtue of being blacklisted?" Those two writers were Lester Cole and Eddie [Edward] Huebsch. Each independently of the other. So the Writers Guild board decided that it was a legitimate question and that we should set up a committee to try to apply the same formula and the same criteria for people who were blacklisted. Well, the first step was in setting up the committee. The actual name was the Blacklisted Writers Screening Committee. And on that committee were Helen and myself, Frank Tarloff, who only recently, since it has become more or less chic to be blacklisted, has become a very open blacklistee, and several other nonblacklisted writers, some young ones and some older ones. The committee met and began to develop criteria. Of course, it could never have happened without us or others like us, who knew enough about that experience to know that you could not transfer the criteria for the older writers to the blacklisted writers, because there isn't a percentage thing that dropped and changed and so on. So it had to be much more subjective in a certain sense,

and we let some of the others really take the lead. We only took the lead in these early times in the areas where nobody else really had the information. We found ourselves in a couple of instances in the ridiculous situation of—some of these other people were proposing formulas that were much richer than anything we had dared. So we shut up! [laughter] As I said, they couldn't translate the formula used for the other writers. So what they arrived at was a percentage thing. Both supplemental plans had a limit; that is, you could only supplement the pension to the point that brought it up to $200 a month. You could not bring it over that. There was no floor, though. I mean, you didn't have to raise it up, but you couldn't go over the set maximum. One of the other members of the committee [Nate Monaster] was a guy whom I really like and one of the first guys, really, of the nonblacklisted people to invite us to his home. A guy whom I'm in total disagreement with now in guild politics. He was on this committee, and he said—his idea was very simple, "If we find that someone was totally blacklisted, and they got some action in the black market to indicate they were employable and would have had work, then we give then 100 percent of the difference between what they're getting and $200 a month. If we find that only half, in terms of the period of time that they were blacklisted or how much work they had had beforehand, then you give them 50 percent. So it was 100 percent, 50 percent, or a quarter. We never had any trouble. In fact, Helen and I quickly learned to let them do most of the talking. What we did was we were able to verify people having been blacklisted. Your book [The Inquisition in Hollywood: Politics in the Film Community] was one of the official documents that was used. There were a few instances, which don't occur to me at the moment, where people were graylisted or were blacklisted, whatever you want to call it, for a short period of time, and they would get [a supplement] depending on that period of time. But there were also other interesting things. One guy came, and he was blacklisted for several years. He said, "I was

working all the time; suddenly, I didn't get any work. I didn't know what the hell it was." As he pointed out—interestingly, because a lot of the blacklisted people felt this—you begin to wonder about it yourself, whether you don't have some mental problem. Maybe you've lost whatever it was you had; they don't want you anyway. And then he'd have other moods, and he was really bothered by it. Finally, his agent told him, "Look, I'm not supposed to tell you this." You remember the phraseology: "If you repeat this, you know, I'll deny it. But you're on the list." He said, "What list?" He said, "You're on the blacklist for being a communist." He said, "That's impossible. I never was." This guy lived up in the hills somewhere. He had converted his garage into a study, so he worked there. As a consequence, he'd park his car on the street. What he didn't know was that his neighbor was a functionary of the Communist Party downtown, and the FBI kept finding his car parked there. Well, we gave him a full blacklist supplement, because he, indeed, was a victim of the blacklist.

1.16. TAPE NUMBER: IX, Side One (OCTOBER 27, 1988)

CEPLAIR:

Okay. We're talking about—

LEVITT:

Supplemental pension.

CEPLAIR:

Supplemental pension and this man who has been blacklisted inadvertently.

LEVITT:

Yeah. Because he was parking his car in front of the house that was owned by a Communist Party functionary.

CEPLAIR:

How many blacklist pensions were actually voted along in the course of this?

LEVITT:

I would say two dozen. People were dying off, you know, as it was—and some people were able to get it for a short time.

CEPLAIR:

Yeah, how many did you turn down, and what were the various reasons for turning down people?

LEVITT:

Oh, Stephen Longstreet came and said he felt he should have a blacklist pension. We said, "What makes you think you were blacklisted? And why would you be blacklisted?" He said, "I was seen having lunch in public with Albert Maltz." [laughter] He was turned down. There were some people—there was a guy named Jerry Gruskin. He's still around. I don't know whether Stephen Longstreet is around anymore. Jerry Gruskin's name was confused with somebody else who had a very similar name, who was known to be a communist, so we gave him a fractional supplement. There were a couple of people like that. Oh, there was one interesting one. A woman whom I knew in the studios [Louella MacFarland]. I knew her as a kind of nice, liberal lady who became—her husband became very rich; he founded Fedco [Inc.]. And then they broke up. She later had a stroke, and she was really in pretty bad shape. But she had suddenly found she couldn't get any work, and her agent told her she was blacklisted. She said, "It can't be." And someone told her about—what's the name of the guy, the [House] Committee [on Un-American Activities] investigator?

CEPLAIR:

[William] Wheeler?

LEVITT:

Wheeler. Yeah, Bill Wheeler. She went to Wheeler and said, "I've never been a communist." He said, "You think a while and you think back. Maybe you were in for a very short time and you forgot about it." She said, "Never. Nobody has ever asked me. I never have been. I've never—." So he said, "Well, I'll tell you what. There's a party that I'm going to, and the man who named you is going to be there. Would you like an opportunity to confront him?" She said, "Yes." She went to this party. She's introduced to Dick [Richard] Collins, and Dick Collins said, with surprise, "You're Louella MacFarland?" He had confused her with someone else. And she got a partial pension for that period of time for what she lost. There were a couple of others like that, not many more, but a few more. people. Or people who were active politically in some cases were anti-communist, but were blacklisted for a period of time. Most interesting are two applicants for blacklist pensions: Mel [Melvin] Levy and Leo Townsend. Now, the way the blacklist committee operated was this: Applications would come in to the [Writers] Guild [of America] staff person who was connected with the thing. We would meet and look these over. What we would do, we would break up, and a subcommittee of three persons would interview the applicant and then make the recommendations to the full committee. The full committee would vote on, first, granting a pension, and then what the pension should be. Helen and I quickly decided that whenever someone like one of those guys, Mel Levy or Leo Townsend, applied, we would not be on the subcommittee that would confront them. But when Leo Townsend applied, and they gave the report, they said, "This guy showed how he had been blacklisted for years and years. Never cooperated with the committee." I brought in transcripts. I read portions, especially in Leo Townsend's case, when Leo actually said in his testimony that Warner Brothers [Pictures, Inc.] assured him that his job was safe. But the hard thing was with Mel Levy. There was a young woman on the committee, who probably wasn't born at the time of the blacklist, who said, making the

report, "This poor, old, sick man," she said. "It was really heartbreaking when he told how he had been a member of the Communist Party. He had been recruited by Earl Browder. You know, he fought for the things he believed in. And he's sick and dying and broke." I said, "He's not telling the truth about being blacklisted. He was an informer." She said, "No, no. He fought the committee tooth and nail. He told us!" I said, "It's not true." She looked at me like I was some kind of monster, because she had this picture of this poor old man. So I brought the transcript in. Fortunately, I had those two transcripts. Those were the only two instances where I had to bring transcripts in. And so they didn't get pension supplements.

CEPLAIR:

Leo Townsend is amazing, because he has screen credits all the way through the fifties. I mean, you know—

LEVITT:

Of course! That was one of the things I read. I read the list of Beach Blanket Bingo and similar credits, you know.

CEPLAIR:

Fascinating.

LEVITT:

But do you think that that they convinced themselves that they were blacklisted or that it was a case of outright lying?

CEPLAIR:

I don't know. The human mind is such an amazing contraption for parallel thinking, you know, on certain—

LEVITT:

See, I could conceive of Mel Levy really convincing himself that he was blacklisted, because he just didn't work. I don't see how Leo Townsend could have justified it [laughter] in any way, even to his own twisted mind. But, you know—of course

it was really a godsend for people like John Bright. He's still hanging in there.

CEPLAIR:

Yeah. Did you feel when you were on it that you were almost reliving an era?

LEVITT:

Oh, boy, it was—Yes. There were things that happened in those sessions that there was no way for the younger committee members really to understand. You know, it was—. [pause] But we got pensions for Bernie [Bernard] Gordon. We must have gotten—I think there were between twenty and thirty people who got pensions. Of course, a number of them have already died. The supplemental pensions cease when they die, although the widow or widower in the regular guild pension gets some kind of payment—I don't know how it works. But it didn't in this arrangement, because it was coming out of the treasury, as I said. It's an expense that keeps diminishing as the years go by, because there aren't any more people turning up for it. Recipients are dying. Both Helen and I feel that that particular. experience on that committee makes a lot of our other activity worth—I mean, that's what makes it worthwhile, really.

CEPLAIR:

No other guild has done that, has it?

LEVITT:

Not to my knowledge.

CEPLAIR:

Well, I don't have any more questions. Do you have anything else you'd like to say or comment on?

LEVITT:

I wrote down a list of things, but I don't remember whether I've mentioned it or not. Newton Meltzer, did I—? I think I must have told you about that. This was very early. About the thing at UCLA, the search program, called "The Search," kind of a documentary thing?

CEPLAIR:

I don't recall.

LEVITT:

The guy came out from CBS. He didn't know I was blacklisted, and I didn't tell him when I realized he didn't know. They had a Saturday morning program called "The Search." It was a documentary about research programs that were going on at different universities. It was a very interesting program. Gee, after I started watching it, I felt it was a great program. What they wanted to do was a show on the acoustical research going on at UCLA. I told this guy—I think his name was Newton Meltzer. He had seen a documentary that I had done at the end of World War II with [Henri] Cartier-Bresson that I told you about. So he wanted. to know if I'd be interested in doing a segment for his show, and I said yes. I said, "Do you mind if I use a different name? Because I've never done—." At that time I had not done any television. He said, "No, suit yourself." So I used "Alfred Lewis." One of the first things that happened—this is all in the physics department at UCLA—was I run into a guy named Dr. [Isadore] Rudnick. I'd never met him before. I just took one look at him and knew that he was the brother of Sam Rudnick, because he looked just like him. Lovely guy. I wanted to tell him that, but I felt I shouldn't. I couldn't. It was a whole fascinating thing where they put me in a live—they have a live room there, where every sound you make just reverberates almost endlessly. And they have a dead room, where the moment the sound is made, it seems to disappear. They put me in a booth. These rooms are suspended. In some way, there's something that insulates

them from the ground. Then there was a booth, a small booth like a telephone booth, you go into. They said, "Why don't you go in there and see how long you can stay in?" You go in. In five seconds, you start hearing your pulse beating in your temple, your heart, and suddenly you hear some sound, a scraping sound. You don't know what it is, and you realize it's the sound of your eyelids scraping on your eyeballs as you blink! [laughter] I mean, you can't stay in there very long. It's really weird. Then I met the head of the physics department [Vern 0. Knudsen], whose specialty was acoustics. He was really a nut. I think one of the things that endeared me to the guys back East—I have the feeling that I told you this. In one of my reports, I was telling about Knudsen, who was really a freak about noise. I said, "I think he's against war because it's noisy." That really summed up his attitude. They loved that; they wanted to use it. I said, "No, you can't use it." And then guy, the producer came but, or the director came out here, to shoot the script. He says, "There's one segment that you haven't written yet, and you don't even have to write it, because it's kind of a standard thing. But we always use the writer on this, because it gives you a chance to pick up some extra money." I said, "Great. What's that?" He said, "You do a small interview—in this case, it would be with Knudsen—on camera." I said, "I don't want to do that." He said, "Why? You write the thing yourself. There's no problem. You can type out your questions and read it from the paper and ask them." I said, "I don't want to do it." He said, "You know, you're going to get extra money for it." They thought I was some kind of a nut, because I didn't want to appear there. That was the only thing in which I used that name Alfred Lewis. I hadn't even thought of a pseudonym by then, and that seemed a convenient way to do it. Then one of the things that happened was—this was before, of course, banks were computerized. I had an account with the bank. The account was Levitt, Alfred Lewis. And this was some time after this particular thing. One day I get my bank statement. It was a time when we were

really broke. Our money had run out, and nothing loomed on the horizon. I see deposits each week for four weeks of something like $350 each time—$1,400 in there that wasn't ours. And I had just gotten an assignment. I'd tried to see if I could get some money in advance, and I couldn't get it. So I said to Helen—we had bills that had to be paid. I said, "We'll pay these bills. It will take them some time to catch up with us, and we'll just pray that our money comes in on this other thing in time." And that's exactly what happened. We kept things from being turned off and being dispossessed. By the end of the month, some guy was yelling, "Where the hell is my $1,400?" [laughter] By that time the money came in and I was able to replace it. It almost makes you believe in God, right!

CEPLAIR:

That's right.

LEVITT:

That's it. The thing, of course, that is very hard to accept—I recognize that it's going on, but it's really hard to assimilate, really. Nobody ever dreamed that one day people would say, "Hey, jeez, isn't that marvelous? You were blacklisted, huh?" That's really [laughter] incredible, even though we've said—and I'm sure Helen must have told you about when Tom [Thomas A. Levitt], as a baby, heard her on radio. Did she tell you that incident?

CEPLAIR:

I don't remember.

LEVITT:

It was the day we testified, and we were home. I guess on the evening news they played some of her testimony. Tom suddenly looked up and said, "Why is Mommy talking on the radio?" Helen got very dramatic, and she said, "You're too young to understand, but someday when you're old enough, you will understand, and then you'll be proud of what your

mother and father did." He looked up at her with big eyes and said, "I'm proud of you right now!" It's interesting that there are people who weren't blacklisted who are now claiming to have been blacklisted. You know, that's the phenomenon that is really wild. And in a peculiar, petty way, I find myself resenting it, you know. [laughter]

CEPLAIR:

I don't blame you.

LEVITT:

[pause] I think I have covered it. Is there anything you can think of that I didn't say? My God, I can't imagine.

CEPLAIR:

I don't think so. Okay. We'll stop then.

Date: 2011-10-07