

RUTGERS, THE STATE UNIVERSITY OF NEW JERSEY

NEW BRUNSWICK

AN INTERVIEW WITH LOWELL A. BLANKFORT

FOR THE

RUTGERS ORAL HISTORY ARCHIVES OF WORLD WAR II

INTERVIEW CONDUCTED BY

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TRANSCRIPT BY

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Sandra Holyoak: This begins an interview, on May 11, 1996, with Lowell Blankfort, at the Hyatt Hotel in New Brunswick, New Jersey, for the Rutgers World War II Archives Project. Thank you, Mr. Blankfort, for joining me today.

Lowell Blankfort: It's a pleasure to be here. [laughter.]

SH: I'd like you to tell me a little bit about yourself. I understand you were born in New York City?

LB: That's correct.

SH: Can you tell me about your family, your father?

LB: Well, my parents were divorced when I was nine years old. From the time I was five, I lived with my mother's family. I went with my mother to Reno, because in those days, about the only place you could get a divorce, in fact, the only place, was in the State of Nevada, because of the political situation in New York. The Catholics were a very strong influence in the political picture ..., and so, as in most states ... divorce was against the law, except on the grounds of adultery. There were all kinds of fake ways. Anyway, when I was nine years old, I went to Reno with my mother. And, I wore short pants while all the [other] kids wore long pants. And so, I grew up with my mother and an uncle, who went away to war, and my grandparents. I came from a fairly affluent family, affluent Jewish family. We lived on Central Park West, the sort of Golden Ghetto of New York City, and, that was my upbringing.

When I was six years old, or five years old, really, I was a case unique in medical history, at the time. I had an intestinal obstruction. My abdomen was left open for six months while I was fed intravenously. And, after that, I was regularly paraded in front of medical conventions, where I was asked to drop my pants so the doctors could look at my scar. This became rather embarrassing when I got older. And, I remember being called for the week of my final exams, by the doctor who was parading me. He didn't operate [on me], he ... just recommended the doctor who did. But, he basked in the reflected glory. He said, "Lowell, I would like for you to come to a convention." And, I said, "I have final exams." The doctor said, "I saved your life." And, I said, "What have you done for me lately?" And, after that, he didn't call me.

Anyway ... because of the stomach thing, I was 4-F in the World War II military draft. And, you had asked me earlier, before this tape went on, was I harassed at college because of that? And, the answer was no. For one thing, ... I didn't turn eighteen until ... let's see ... until ... nineteen forty-four. I was quite young when I entered Rutgers. I had done high school in three years of a special school in New York that the city established for bright kids. We were part of the University system. It was an experimental ... well, it wasn't experimental, it had existed for a number of years. We were taught by university professors rather than by the ordinary high school system. And, it did four years work in three. And so, I went to high [school] ... and then, before that, I had skipped several grades in elementary school. And I did college in three years. So, I was quite young. And, therefore ... it was[not] until the, toward the end of my career at

Rutgers, I wasn't actually nineteen, I guess, I was called. But, I wasn't harassed. I looked a lot younger for my age even than I [was].

SH: To back up just a little bit: What armed forces did your father and uncle serve in?

LB: My father lied about his age, he bragged, to get into World War I. He was seventeen. And he became a lieutenant. He fought in the Battle of Verdun, and he was gassed there. As a result, or perhaps as a result, twelve years later, in the early thirties, he developed tuberculosis. This was the time my mother and he split up. They split up while he was recovering, actually. The family battle. My maternal grandfather said that he, he was tired of supporting him. The doctors said he was fine, he should go to work. ... And, his [my father's] mother said that he shouldn't go to work. He's too precious. In any event, they split up. He died at eighty. And his father (my grandfather) died at ninety-five. I attended the funeral of my great-grandfather, his grandfather, [who was] a hundred and one. We're a very long-lived family. And, I think that eighty is young in our family to die, and, I think the war may have had some impact on that. And, plus, ... his life, ... well, this doesn't affect Rutgers, but, he ... didn't have a very exciting life.

SH: That's one of the things we are interested in though, is your family, your mother and father's background and history.

LB: Yeah. Well, three of my four grandparents were born in the United States. The one who was not born in the United States came here as an immigrant from what was then Russia, then went back and forth with Poland. He was the one who made it. ... He had six children, four of whom were daughters. And, in the early twenties, when it was unusual, he insisted they all got college educations. So, I guess that had an impact on me. My mother was a college graduate. And we were a well-educated family.

SH: Do you have any siblings?

LB: No. I'm a spoiled, only child, and that's why I love to be interviewed. I like the attention. [laughter.] That's why I write the kind of editorials I do. [laughter.] I get a lot of attention, you know.

SH: All right. Well, we'll get to that in a moment. So, one of the things you had listed on your survey was that your father had a clothing factory.

LB: Yes. Yeah, he did that. After his tuberculosis, he ... fiddled around with the clothing factories. They were very small operations and he jobbed clothing. And he never was really terribly successful. When I retired as the publisher of the newspapers in Southern California (I'm still [a] publisher of papers but these were ones that I ran myself, with my partner) the San Diego newspapers ran big articles on me, virtually a full page, and all this sort of thing. I sent them to my mother. And, my mother confided to my wife something that I never knew before. She said, "And, I thought he would never amount to much, like his father." [laughter.] But, she never told me that.

SH: Your mother had briefly run an employment agency. Was that after World War II?

LB: Yes. That was for about two years. That was right after World War II. She had a squabble with her partner. It didn't work out. But, mostly, she stayed at home. Women didn't work in that period of time. And, I ... I'm just trying to think, she married the day I graduated from Rutgers. She and a man she had been seeing, took me out to dinner and told me they were getting married. So, I think she felt that she had done her job with me. [laughter.]

SH: Well, I was going to say, was it rather unique for a woman to have an agency like that in the Forties?

LB: I don't know. I know she was getting bored. She wanted to do something, so, she went to the agency. And, she didn't like the agency business. For one thing, she had to ... they had all kinds of codes, whether the applicant was Jewish, or Puerto Rican, or black, and, you had to ... there was a lot of subterfuge. The agencies had to practice discrimination and she was very much opposed to that sort of thing. And, she only did that for about two years. That was her, really, only professional thing. She used to sing in choirs when she was a young woman. She had a marvelous voice. She sang in the early days of radio. I'm tone deaf, like my father. The wrong genes, I guess. [laughter.] ... My mother, she read a lot, she played the piano. She was a very attractive woman when she was young. She would date, but, not seriously, because you didn't go to bed in those days and that type of thing was forbidden.

SH: Was she active in any organizations?

LB: She was quite active in social causes. She was an early member of the World Federalists, which was then called the United World Federalists, and ... unfortunately, it was after her death that I became president of the San Diego chapter. She was very much involved in the United Nations, as I am, again after her death. I was too busy making money in the early days. And, yeah, I've been a member of the National Council of the United Nations Association and president of the local chapter in San Diego. And, she was generally for good causes. My father was [a] big flag-waving, patriot, MacArthur type, right wing, and my views don't, ... never coincided with his.

SH: There was a conflict, politically, within the marriage?

LB: Yeah ... never in the marriage, there was no marriage. I wasn't married to my father.

SH: [I mean] with your mother and father.

LB: Oh, with my ... well, the marriage didn't last that long. I think the conflict was more over my father didn't do the things that merited respect from my mother. And, he had a clothing store up in the suburbs of New York, in Westchester County, and ... he charged goods for his store to my grandfather, without telling my grandfather. That isn't the sort of thing that encourages marital fidelity.

SH: All right. I wanted to back up a bit. You said you went through high school through a special program in three years? What were your special interests?

LB: Yeah. Well, the program was in, the City of New York had this special school and they gave tests for kids who wanted to get in. And, it was a great honor for the elementary schools to get their kids into Townsend Harris. So, at least the school I went to and, I think, others, drilled the brightest kids as to how to take tests to get into Townsend Harris. And I was one of the elite nine hundred ... in this school, that was operated by the Board of Higher Education, the University board. And we learned such things as how to get ... make telephone calls without paying by making believe you had the wrong number. [laughter.] And, getting free salads at a cafeteria by bringing your lunch, just buying a nickel glass of milk, and then, eating all the free salads. We were very bright kids and we thought that every other kid in New York was an idiot. [laughter.]

SH: Were you involved in any sort of activities as a high school student?

LB: Not, not really. For one thing, the high school was closed after two years. Mayor La Guardia said it was tremendously expensive for a limited number of kids. And, by that time, the regular schools had started “tracking”, so that the brighter kids actually had special programs at regular high schools. So, after two years, the school was closed and, my second year there, we had the threat of closure. And so, I went to a regular high school in my third year. And so, I still graduated in three years.

SH: You weren't involved in journalism at that age?

LB: Well, I, I was greatly involved in journalism, but not in that way. When I was in ... the elementary, when I was in the fifth and sixth grades, another student and I put out newspapers, which were mimeographed in my grandfather's office. And, we sold ads to stores that our parents patronized. He went on to become a fairly well-known writer, too. We still keep in touch, and we see each other fairly often, even though we're on opposite coasts. His name is Martin Mayer. And, he's written a number of books: *Madison Avenue, USA*, *The Schools*, [and] *The Great Bank Robbery*, dealing with the Savings & Loan industry. And, ... so, he became a fairly successful writer of books.

SH: That's very interesting.

LB: In fact, he interviewed me. He did a book on the newspaper industry and the first chapter deals with his introduction into journalism with me! [laughter.] Then, he did an article on small newspapers, and, he went up to one of the newspapers I owned and used that as the basis for a chapter in the book.

SH: Why did you choose Rutgers?

LB: Well, I chose it because it had a good journalism program. And, ironically, I realized, after I was here a year or so, that I was doing so much journalism that I never majored in it. I worked

on *The Targum*. Because it was during the war and there was a shortage of journalists on campus, I found myself the campus correspondent for *The New York Times*, *The Associated Press*, *The United Press*, *The Philadelphia Record*, *The Philadelphia Bulletin*, and the *New Brunswick Daily Home News*. I'd have to write the same football game in five [or] six different ways. And I must say, if, at the end of the third quarter, Rutgers was trailing, I would hope they'd stay behind, so that I wouldn't have to change my lead. I'd start writing at the end of the third quarter. In one of the articles, for example, I'd lead with how a, "Swiveled, hipped half-back cut through the Lehigh line to place Rutgers victory." In another one, I'd lead with how they came from behind. And, every one of [the articles] was different. I remember, I'd sit there with a telegrapher, in those days, who was going [taps on table to make the sound of a telegraph]. I don't know if you can pick that up on this machine [taps on microphone]. And, I'd send out the *Associated Press* story first, and I'd get a thing back from *The New York Times*, "What, are you falling asleep up there? We already have the *AP* story!" So, ... [laughter] not knowing I had written that one, too! That was quite an experience. There were some pluses and minuses, being on a campus where there were so few students during the war. Mostly, there were soldiers here, the A.S.T.P. program. One advantage was that I made a fair amount of money for those days, being correspondent for all of these papers. And you felt you were in a small school. You knew people. The ... disadvantage was that many courses were cut. And, I still feel a deficiency in the arts and in ... music, because ... there were no cultural courses. And, I feel ... well, music, of course, I had avoided, because of my tone-deafness, but, I'd like to understand it a little better, anyway. And ... in the arts, I feel a deficiency. I wish I had had more courses of that nature. In fact, I had none. But, the history ... so, I started to say, so, I came here to major in journalism. But, I found I was getting enough journalism and the journalism courses were all technical courses. So, I switched to History and Political Science. And, I also urge people going into journalism now, people who talk to me about this, to take a broad Liberal Arts program. It's more important in journalism than Journalism. They could take a couple of news writing courses, work on the college paper. I don't hire people who have not worked on their college newspapers. I won't hire people just for having had courses [in Journalism]. And, I get a lot of young people, 'cuz my newspapers are sort of farm teams for bigger papers. The people go on to something else. We keep them one, two, three years at the most. But, I urge them to go on ... to major in the Liberal Arts. And, I give preference to people who have a good Liberal Arts background, other than [a] straight Journalism curriculum.

SH: So, do you keep up with *The Targum* at all?

LB: Not really. Someone called me a couple of years ago and wanted a hundred dollars for some project, ... a professor, and I sent her a hundred dollars and she sent me a couple of issues. ... I worked on *The Targum* and last night my first editor at *The Targum* came up to me, Harry Kranz, who, of course, looks a lot different, after fifty ... I guess it's fifty-three years, and, ... we compared notes. I remember, I admired him greatly because he was very liberal and his greatest Rutgers hero was Paul Robeson. Not for his thespian abilities or the football heroics, but because he was real Lefty in those days. [laughter.]

SH: Now, one of the projects of the class linked to our project is to go back and take a semester of *The Targum* and write an essay on *The Targum*. Did *The Targum* you were writing cover anything other than sports and the society?

LB: Yes. Well, it depends who the editor was. When Harry was the editor, which was when I was a freshman here, there was a social conscience. He, I forget specifically what, but, he was a real political activist, and, it ... [is] interesting, through his life, he worked for labor unions and remained that way. And, here, his son, I discover, is now, also, in newspapers, but he's selling advertising. [laughter.] But, I guess, it's the change of generations. But, later on, I quit *The Targum*. There was an editor named, I still remember his name, ... Antonozzi. And, that was more fluffy, and, besides, by then, I had my hands full as a correspondent for all these newspapers, professional papers, and I had other things to do. And, I frankly, wasn't crazy about Antonozzi, 'cuz I thought I should be editor. The only child again! [laughter.] A strong power drive. ... And so, that's what happened.

SH: Did you find, when you wrote for *The Targum*, at that point, was there any coverage of the world scene?

LB: I don't think so. I think only as related to Rutgers. I could be wrong, but my recollection is that it was essentially a campus paper.

SH: Were you involved in any fraternities or any organizations?

LB: Yes. I'm not a fraternity person, but, in order to get ... good living quarters, and not to have to live in Winants Hall, I joined Phi Epsilon Pi, which was a Jewish fraternity, but it took in some non-Jews to help pay the rent, so to speak. They wanted to become members ... [but] they weren't allowed to become members because they weren't Jewish and this really offended me about barring non-Jews. For me, it was a place to live. But, actually, I found out after the fact. In those days, I was rather shy. I was introverted. I guess I still am, although I'm good in public, in public speaking, but, I matured late. I didn't have a lot of close friends and fraternity life wasn't for me. But, I stayed there as a place to live. I was a member and that was it.

SH: As far as your education here, did you have a professor who you felt really gave you good instruction?

LB: I thought there were two professors, who I remembered, and, I think, I made a note of that on the questionnaire. One of them was a Professor Burns, who was a marvelous History professor, with great perceptions. He would stand up there, without a note, and talk for fifty minutes and really had a lot of insights, and a lot of depth. He was wonderful.

There was an economics professor, named Peabody, who was also very good. And, I remember, at the end of the term, ... he was quite conservative, Burns was liberal, and Peabody, he called me in for an interview at the end of the term. His final exam was verbal and we talked for two hours, and we argued, and my views were very different than his, and I ended up with an A in the course! [laughter.] Maybe that's why I remember him.

SH: Now, you mentioned a Dr. George.

LB: Dr. George, Professor George, was notable for his, his witticisms, and his extreme political bias on the Left. He obviously had a masochistic streak, because in a very Republican area, here in Raritan, or whatever the district is, he ran for Congress as a Democrat four or five times, I think, and always lost by a lot. And, I remember him marching up and down in front of class and saying, “Those Republicans! They’ve got what it takes to take what you’ve got!” [laughter.] And, ... he didn’t beat around the bush. I agreed with him, but still. [laughter.] He also said, ... he had philosophical advice, like, “It’s [as] easy to fall in love with a rich woman as a poor one.” I didn’t do that in either of my two marriages. [laughter.]

SH: Was there still the mandatory ROTC at Rutgers?

LB: Yes, there was. There was mandatory ROTC, which I disliked. I think I probably have an anti-military bias, as quite a few people on the Left do, and, of course, this was during the war and it was mandatory. But, I took it, of course.

SH: What about chapel? Was chapel still mandatory then?

LB: I don’t think so. I remember going a few times and I don’t know whether I went because it was mandatory or, or not. It may have been mandatory a few times a year. But, I really don’t remember.

SH: All righty. Can we take your career from after you graduated?

LB: Well, the first thing I did, I got a job at a suburban New York newspaper, in Yonkers, as a sports writer. And, I was the envy of the rest of the staff because I was hired under a new policy ... attracting better talent by paying more money. ... I was getting thirty-five dollars a week, and those, the staff members, were getting \$26.50, \$28.00, [and] had been there six, eight, ten years. I was hired as a general news writer and then, I was moved into sports, and there was a sports editor and me. The sports editor never even read my copy. I, really, wrote practically the whole page, every day. This was a small daily. I grew up in Manhattan, where the newspapers’ sports writers had a lot of leeway, and they stirred up controversy. They made the idea of writing is to make it exciting. ... There was a football game in which the players from one high school had moved to the other high school and they were playing their old teammates. I quoted one of them as saying their opposing left guard wouldn’t have any ears left when he got done with him and there was a riot at the game, and I got blamed. And, also, there was other colorful writing that, maybe, they didn’t like. So, I was called in by the managing editor and told that I’m very bright, that I’ll go very far in the newspaper business, but not there. [laughter.] So, I got fired from my first job. And then, I got a job ... with the Newhouse paper, the *Long Island Star Journal*. I was in an outlying Flushing bureau ... I was promoted and I ended up by becoming night editor. I was there about two and a half years. One of the people I interviewed was a person involved in resettling refugees and he said I should work abroad. So, through his, through that contact, he gave me the name of the *Stars and Stripes* hiring bureau ... in New York. ... *The Stars and*

Stripes was the Army newspaper in Germany. I went down there and interviewed, and they hired me. But, they had a problem ... there wasn't enough money in their budget. So, they said, if I can get to Paris and call the editor, he will have a job for me. Well, this was right after I'd gotten married, so, it was sort of a honeymoon. So, I got to Paris and found that the managing editor, in Darmstadt, [West Germany,] who had written me, had left the day before, for the United States, for three months. And, there I was, I didn't even have enough money to get back to the States. Though, I could have called my family, I wasn't going to do that. So, I went to *The Herald Tribune* and they didn't have anything, but they said there was a British paper, *The Daily Mail*, that I should [see what they] have there. So, after being "vetted," as the English say, by the guard, the liveried guard at the door, which was unusual for American newspapers at the time, and having to wait while the editor [LB mimics British accent], "Oh, you can't see Mr. Barber now. He's having his tea.", I finally got in to see him.

They tried me out on a column on George Raft, the American movie actor. I have to explain to younger people who the movie actor was. Do you know who he is? Yeah? You're still younger than I. And, ... so, I made an appointment. He was at the George Cinq, a fancy hotel in Paris. I was living in a dollar-a-night room on the Left Bank. ... They changed the sheets every four weeks, but, one every two weeks, the other another two weeks, so, you had the illusion they changed them every two weeks. And so, we made an appointment for the next day at two o'clock. And, luckily, I got there at a quarter to two, because he was going out the door and he probably had forgotten about the thing. And, he says, "Oh, Jeez, kid, I'm sorry. I forgot about it." So, he says, "Okay, I can give you five minutes." Well, you know, it's hard to do an interview in five minutes. So, I went in, and he was a terrible interview. ... Where was he? He was in Monte Carlo. To begin with, he said, "I don't gamble." It was just awful. And, he had a terrible reputation in the States. So, ... I was fortunate on two things. They had a pretty good file on him in the morgue, now they call it the library, of *The Herald Tribune*. I looked him up and I found out he'd been involved in a crap game which the police had raided and ... all kinds of stuff about him. And, that ... he was a great collector of shoes and he had all kinds of pairs of shoes. And then, also, I was lucky, because there was a Raft movie playing in Paris, I went there, with my notebook, and wrote down all kinds of quotes which might be useful [from] the film. So, I put together ... I must say, I fibbed a little bit, I made believe I saw his closet and saw these hundred and twenty pairs of shoes [laughter.] .. and all this kind of thing. And, anyway, and I made him look a little ridiculous, because I took some of the quotes from the movie and related it to his life. And so, they took it. [LB uses British accent]: "Oh, Bully, Old Boy!" And, I was hired.

It was a very interesting job. ... I did a personality column, three times a week. Everything from former King Peter, who still thought he was king of Yugoslavia, to the starving publisher of a Parisian Chinese newspaper, and, to a guy who lived on a houseboat in the Seine. ... I remember, the guy who lived on the houseboat invited us for lunch, us being my wife, also. ... He served spaghetti, and the spaghetti got caught in his beard. He took a fork and tried to get the spaghetti out of his beard. And that became the highlight of that, [I] started off the article that way! [laughter.] And, it was a fun job. But, the pay was terrible. My ... starting pay was the equivalent ... I was paid in guineas, that's a pound and a shilling, convertible into francs. My starting pay was forty dollars a week, but that was just the starting pay, because after I was there

two weeks, the pound was devalued, and that cut it down to thirty-three dollars a week. We could barely survive on that. We certainly couldn't travel on that.

So, when the editor at *The Stars and Stripes* came back, I got in touch with him and went over to Germany, where we had an apartment and a German maid, who black-marketed for us. And, it was a boring job, just copy editing. The copy came through London, and I would have to take it, having just learned to write it the English way with all the extra "Yous," and the British expressions, and turn it back into the American way.

But, then, after that, my wife and I traveled ... [in] and around Europe and, a little bit, in North Africa. We came back with six dollars. We took a freighter, which I had fast-talked into giving us a discount, a French freighter, a twenty-six day trip from Marseilles to New York. I promised that I would make them famous. And, I did mention them a couple of times in articles I did. But, anyway, [we] got back to New York. No job; six dollars. [I] borrowed two hundred dollars from my mother, got a small apartment on the East Side, and got a job with *The Wall Street Journal* as a copy editor. And then, they moved me over to write the column that still runs today, that summarizes world news. I wrote that out of New York. And, for that, I got paid seventy-seven dollars a week. I was beginning to learn about capitalism. And then, I moved ... I got a job at a magazine called *Quick*, which is now sort of the *Quick and the Dead*. It died, like many publications I worked with. It died while I was there. It had had a million circulation, but ... was owned by *Look* magazine, *Cowles Magazines*. ... When our biggest advertiser, Curtis Candy, when the owner died, he loved the magazine, his son cut back from four times a month to twice a month. We were a weekly. It was a news digest. So, Cowles moved the subscribers into *Quick* and we were out of a job. We then found a printer who wanted to keep us. And then, it became complicated. Anyway, that didn't work out and I ended up with a deal ... being, the printer bought all of us out, and I suddenly had five thousand dollars. And, my wife and I got in our Henry car and I decided that, if I was going to stay in newspapers, I wanted to own them. Under capitalism, if you don't own anything, you don't have anything. I didn't make the system, but I understood it. And so, we did. We bought a newspaper after stopping here and there on a two month trip across the United States, including some sightseeing.

In San Francisco, we heard of this paper, just south of San Francisco, that was going bankrupt in a town called Sharp Park. And, I, with my five thousand dollars, I could qualify. So, I bought it for twelve thousand, five thousand dollars down. I borrowed three thousand dollars from relatives for working capital and the owner went around town saying how he had found this sucker from New York to pay him so much money for the paper. Well, actually, I didn't pay twelve, because I bought back the mortgage later, for less, and so, paid ten-five. [laughter.] And, five years to the day later, August 1, 1954 was when I took over, and coincidentally, August 1, 1959, I sold the paper for a hundred and fifty-five thousand dollars. Then, my wife and I took off for a round-the-world trip. Jets had just come in, there wasn't a lot of travel, this was in the end of 1959, 1960. And, we were a month and a half in the Soviet Union, driving our own car. We were in Nepal, in Afghanistan, in India for a month, and in Japan, and, as I say, a month and a half in the Soviet Union. And then we came back, and I decided the small newspaper business is better with a partner. ... I had contacted a fellow beforehand, and, to make a long story [short], he sold his paper. And, we bought a paper, where the owner had died, in the San Diego area and

we each put down \$25,000 and borrowed fifty thousand from the bank. Because we had some assets, money coming in from the sale of our papers, we borrowed fifty thousand from the Bank of America. And then, we put down the fifty we owed. We owed the old owner's widow about \$400,000. We kept it for eleven years and we sold it for \$3.8 million. However, that came at the same time that there was some personal tragedy, tragedy no, but problems in my life. My wife for what under the laws of Saudi Arabia she would have been stoned to death, under the laws of California she got a million of my two million dollar share of the assets. [laughter.] So ... anyway, I still had a million left and I've more than made back what she got. [laughter.] Afterwards, my partner and I, continued to operate the paper for the people ... who bought the paper from us. And, we operated that for another five or six years. Meanwhile, we learned how the big chains operated. And, meanwhile, also, I got married. I remarried very quickly, about a year and a half after the divorce. After about five or six years, my partner and I had a very good deal with the buyers, because when we negotiated the sale, we had six weeks vacation paid for by the company as business expense. We had all kinds of stuff. Of course, we wrote on these vacations. I like to write. I mean, that's my thing. I've won a lot of awards ... I'm a good writer, but I find I also know how to count, so, the two seem to go together, anyway for me they do. But, unfortunately, it's hard to hire editors who have a business sense. I'm a little unusual in that respect. In any event, we saw how the chains operated and, even in our last year there, we started to buy up other papers. Instead of running them ourselves, we began teaching people how to run them. And, it worked out. And, at one time, we had something like seventeen or eighteen. ... About five or six years ago, we made a decision that we would start peeling off the smaller ones. We had a choice. We could either get very big and be the Gannett of the small newspaper business, in which case, we'd have to hire middle management, and the people who run them would not report directly to us. ... Our whole fate would be in the hands of these one, two, or three guys. Or else, we could continue to control them ourselves. But, I got tired of leaving home on a Monday and not getting back 'til a week from Friday. By this time, I'd become pretty affluent and we had an apartment in London. My wife and I also liked to traipse around on a major trip. I'll pause here.

[A series of knocks can be heard on air. The tape pauses for a second, presumably while someone answers the door.]

LB: So, every year, in addition to spending time--my wife two months, I about five weeks--in Britain, we would go to places like South Africa for a month. Or, we'd go down to Nicaragua during the civil war and do articles. I'm really a frustrated foreign correspondent ... I couldn't afford to buy *The Wall Street Journal*, so, I ended up with these small-town papers, so, they've got to read my incisive stuff [laughter] about the world. In any event ... last year, for example, we were two months in the Balkans, Albania, Macedonia, Romania, Bulgaria. [The] year before, [we were in] the upper tier of Eastern Europe, Poland, Hungary. I've, been in, oh, probably 110, I haven't counted them lately, 110 to 120 countries doing articles ... I've interviewed a lot of top people in all of these places and it makes life exciting. To me, it's more exciting than interviewing the mayor of Plainview, Minnesota, [laughter], which is ... one of the places where I have my newspapers. But, in any event, the lifestyle was such that I really didn't want to spend my time traipsing to these smaller papers. So, we've been gradually peeling them off. ... We have one that's grown very, very large. It's a newspaper in a small town in California, [a] three-

times-a-week paper, called *Paradise*. It was once-a-week when we bought it, now it's three times. There was no printing plant, it was just a store front operation, and we printed it at another newspaper. Now, we have an enormous printing plant. ... Two years in row, we've been listed by a printing publication as ... among the fifty fastest-growing printing operations in the United States. ... It's really a big operation. It enables me to afford to come to New Brunswick for the reunion. [laughter.] So, we've scaled that down. I do a lot of writing. I write a column on national, or international, things. Obviously, I can't write about local things. And, I do major series of articles [on] the Balkans, Eastern Europe, the Southern Cone, Argentina, Chile, Antarctica. China ... I've twice been, done two series on China. I was, in 1977, I was in the first group of American journalists after Mao died, the first of two years. We were all California newspaper publishers. I've been three times to the Soviet Union. [I've] been their guest in Uzbekistan, [at] the Uzbek Academy of Sciences. I've had an interesting life. I've met interesting people. And, I've been active in organizations. I've been president of, I mentioned, the Federalists ... in San Diego, president of the United Nations Association, president of the American Civil Liberties Union and I've just been notified, three days ago that, starting in July, when I get back from my trip to England, I will be president of the World Affairs Council in San Diego. So, I like that. As I say, I'm an only child. I like the attention. ... I like doing things. ... I feel very active. ... As I look around, ... I see an awful lot of retired people, but, I think I'd go crazy if I retired. I'm not working for the money, obviously, but, what would I do? Sit at home and read books?

SH: Do you have children?

LB: I have one child. He's thirty-four years old. ... He owns a computer store and service center in Monterey, California. He did not want to [go to] college. He had dyslexia when he was a child. I guess you always have it, and he got turned off to the academic life I guess. Up till the third or fourth or fifth grade, the teachers didn't understand it. My wife and I knew he had dyslexia. We told the teachers. They couldn't understand a kid who was so articulate not being able to read. And so, they told him he was lazy. He knew he wasn't lazy, but, yet, he got a very bad self-image. When I finally pulled him out of the public schools and put him into a private school, by then his attitude toward school was poor. When he got out of high school, he wanted to get a job. And, somehow, I was able to get him a job at a newspaper in Colorado which I owned. [laughter.] ... He became very good at the mechanical end of newspapers. And then, he developed there into a wonderful advertising salesman. ... He went into the next town and opened up a whole new territory, and made so much money for me that, even splitting it with a partner, I figured he paid me back for the cost of raising him. So then, he went to some other papers. He worked for somebody else. ... Then, he went to a shopper, ... my partner and I had an interest in a shopping publication in Monterey, and there he became quite fascinated with computers. He'd always been interested in them. ... He put in computer systems there. He put in computer systems at several of our papers. ... He went to work, part-time, to learn the retail end of it, with the biggest computer store in Monterey.

-----END SIDE ONE, TAPE ONE-----

LB: He came to me, I remember, it was July 4th. I live near the Mexican border. He came down from Monterey, and we were in a restaurant in Mexico, having lunch, and he pulled out a piece of paper. ... He said, first, "These guys I work for, they don't know how to run the business. They keep short hours. The owner runs around in a Mercedes. They don't treat customers right. They didn't know how to advertise until I came and did their advertising for them." I said, "And, you'd like to compete with them." He said, "It'll take \$75,000."

Well, he had that money in a trust fund, because, under the tax laws, I can put aside \$10,000 a year for him, tax-free. And ... he could do what he wants with it. But, he also was told, he could do what he wants with it but no more would go in unless he consulted me on the use of it. Now I don't care. [laughter.] But, I did at that time. So, he said that ... for \$75,000, he figured he could break even if he did \$75,000 a month. Well, he started out with one employee, he now has twenty. He did four and a half million dollars last year. He operates not only a computer store, he sells IBM clones. The store is called *PC People*. And, if you're ever in Monterey, I want you to go there and buy a computer from him. [laughter.] Not that he needed the money, ... he also has an outreach business. He has three guys who call on businesses and they develop special programs for them, learn about their business. And then, he has a big service van, [to] run around town. He puts out a newspaper, because of his newspaper background, which is tremendous. He has a guy who used to work for the *Reader's Digest* doing it. ... He's terrific in advertising. He really knows how to market it. And even though he was shy about being able to write, his advertising copy is wonderful. ... His accountant, I happened to meet him, said, "Jonathan, what's his academic background?" I said, "He didn't go to college." [He said], "I thought he had a Master's in Marketing!"

I'm a little disappointed because I would like to have seen him go into the newspaper business. Because newspapers, to me, are more than just a business. They're an opportunity to do something for, for your society. You know, Phillip Wrigley ... who owned the Chicago Cubs baseball team, said that, "Baseball is too much of a business to be a sport, simply a sport, too much of a sport to be simply a business." And I've frequently said that, "Newspapers are too much of a business to be strictly a public service, but also too much of a public service to be strictly a business." Although, [for] the newer breed of corporate ownership, I'm afraid, it's strictly business. And, you see, it's one reason for the deterioration of American papers. I think that Jonathan didn't really want to go into the newspapers because, in addition to not wanting to do what your dad did, in his view running a newspaper means that you've got to ... be a great writer. My image in the community was not as a successful entrepreneur and businessman, but as a writer who stirred things up. It essentially was my editorial writing that got all the attention. So, as he sees it, because of the dyslexia thing that he was not much of a writer. Actually, he's great with words, in his advertising.

SH: The oral history needs to have your awards on the tape.

LB: I think, something like seven years in a row I was first or second for the best editorials in California, non-daily newspapers. I've won the best editorials in the nation for the National Newspaper Association of Suburban Newspapers Association. I've won awards from the

American Bar Association and California Education Association. You have all that in my C.V. there.

SH: Okay. All right. Well, one of the things I'd like to put on the tape today, if I could back up, when you first went to Paris what were the conditions that you found as you first traveled across Europe? This was immediately after the war.

LB: Well, it was in 1949. ... It was close enough to the war you could still feel it. The conditions were very poor. ... Today, you go to Europe and it's like the United States. In fact, in some respects ... the living standard is even higher, a better choice in foods, the fashions. But, Europe in those days, people wore very drab clothes, their haircuts were different. The ... food in France was not bad. Actually, I was on a very tight budget then, and in those days, you could go into any French restaurant, even the cheapest, and be assured of a decent meal. That's not true today, I might add. In Paris, there are a lot of tourist traps. You've got to watch out. The ... shabby ... toilets were not cleaned, in France, in particular. Some places still had toilets like they have in the Far East, where there's a hole in the ground in restaurants, and you have to squat. You have ... still have, those in the Soviet Union. ... I saw one like that four years ago. I took my son to the Olympics, in Albertville, in the French Alps, and there was one there like that, still left over. ... There are very few cars. My wife and I had [one], ... after, I moved over to the *Stars and Stripes*. I was rich enough that I could finally buy a car. When I lived in Paris I did, and went back to Paris on vacations, ... you could drive up and down the Champs-Elysees [with] no traffic. I mean, you could really just whiz, whiz around. And, the same thing in Rome. It ... it was really poor. And, ... it reminded me, when I was in Albania, about seven or eight months ago. ... Albania, as you know, may know, was a closed country for half a century, by the dictator. ... You can still drive a car down the streets of Tirana, the capital, like in Paris [in] the old days. And, I was thinking of that. It's a tremendous change.

SH: Now, the writings that you've done, the editorials and such, do you have a theme that you usually stick with, or do you write on any world topic?

LB: Well, if you write two editorials a week, like I did, that's a hundred a year, [and] if you write the same theme every time, people are going to stop reading you! I wrote on a lot of local things. I would crusade for environmental protection, and against developers, greedy developers, who took big ads in my newspapers, I might add. I was sort of biting the hand that feeds me! [laughter.] But, I got 'em results. The people read the paper. It was a very popular paper. And, ... I would do a lot of local stuff. Also, in San Diego which is a big military base, I campaigned against the war in Vietnam. I had been in Vietnam in 1960. I spoke from personal experience there. And, San Diego, was, and still is, a little less-so now, a very conservative community, and I ran a very liberal paper, and made lots of money doing so. It was also a good paper. Also, some of it wasn't just my editorials. A lot of it was simply being a good newspaper. It covered the town. We really knew how to cover the city council. We did depth articles on what was going on in the community. We exposed a school board member, who was a builder, who had some earth taken off the school property and used it as top soil on one of his developments. You know, that kind of thing. [laughter.] Sort of a ship disturber, as they say. And, people read us. And then, I also did a lot of national, international things. Now, in my columns, because I don't

live in these communities, they're all national or international. I was always very internationally minded, and yet, I ended up with these smaller papers, which is ironic. I've interviewed so many people ... Castro, Benazir Bhutto in Pakistan, Li Peng in China, let's see, that guy in Costa Rica, I forget his name ... Carazza, who was the president of Costa Rica, Kiro Gligorov in Macedonia. Last year, I also interviewed the prime minister of Albania. ... I've met [and] interviewed a lot of heads of state, the king of Tonga, all four hundred and twenty pounds of him. I've done interesting things and I've written about them. ... This is fun for me. And, of course, my wife writes also, not as much as I do. And, they're all business trips, which is useful and helpful. I think it's helpful to the newspapers, although the main thing we sell in these newspapers, is local news. But, there was a letter to the editor in the newspaper, in Paradise, California, our largest paper, when I came back, from a newcomer to town, who said that she had subscribed to the paper for local news, but she finds she had read my series on the Balkans and she's learned more about, about what's going on in the world from reading Mr. Blankfort's articles than she does from reading *Time* and *Newsweek*. So, that made me feel good. [laughter.]

SH: Do you find with your perspective now, after coming from a small campus paper, *The Targum*, here at Rutgers and writing the sports columns for different newspapers...

LB: Sports columns? What do you mean by sports columns?

SH: You said you did the copy for the football games.

LB: Oh, yes. Those weren't columns. Those were covering the games. Yeah.

SH: Right. Excuse my terminology.

LB: Columns mean something very different. [laughter.]

SH: Would you like to leave something with the archives from this perspective that you've developed over the years and what you see from that vantage point?

LB: Oh, I don't know. ... That would be more writing, and more things to do. And, ... I'm on my way, I won't be back ... from Britain and Ireland, until July. And then, I've got the World Affairs Council on my hands for probably the next two years. And then, I'm national director of several other organizations in Washington, New York, [and] San Francisco, involved with Vietnam, the United Nations, [and] foreign policy. If I ever do ... write it, I'll send you a copy. [laughter.] But, I really don't think I'm ready, I want to take the time. That's a big project.

SH: I know, but I just meant, do you have something to say to the tape?

LB: Oh, to the tape. Oh, you said write.

SH: No, I said, taking your perspective that you've developed with all of your writings.

LB: Well, I have perspectives on, on a lot of subjects. I'll give you my views, which aren't necessarily the right ones, on any subject you want! [laughter.] Even if I don't know anything about it. But ... my perspective on what?

SH: Education. Higher education.

LB: Higher education. Well, the problem with higher education today, in my view, is that colleges are essentially becoming trade schools. They train people for specific professions, but, they don't train them as human beings. There's not enough emphasis on the Liberal Arts, on making them well-rounded individuals. You talk to people who are doctors. They don't know anything. Maybe, they know how to operate, or bandage your foot if it gets cut, but, they don't know much about the world. This is true of most Americans, and it's including college graduates. I don't know the statistics, but, I think over half of Americans now graduate college, and they don't know anything. I get people who work for me who don't know much about the world. And, here they're writing for the public. ... I go off every few months and spend a few hours with the staffs, and I educate them. But, it's very hard if they don't have any background. It starts with the elementary schools. I think American education, it's limited, because the number of days that American kids go to school ... elementary and high school, is much less than it is in foreign countries. It's probably because of the nefarious influence of the teachers union, which keeps pushing for high pay. And, I think, for nine months pay American teachers do pretty well, frankly. ... But, they keep trying to shrink the day, shrink the day, shrink the days, and shrink the number of hours, also. It varies from state to state, but, they try to shrink the hours, shrink the days. They never give essay questions anymore, or seldom. Now, everything is multiple choice. I used to do well on essay questions, because I write well, of course. ... But, you had to think for essay questions. The multiple choice is there, ... just [to] make it easy for the teacher to grade the [tests]. So, ... this is reflected at a university level, at every level. Studies show that only at the very top end, kids who come out of families which are highly educated, and who go to Harvard, ... and UCS, UC Berkeley, schools like that, [only there] do American [kids], test as well as most ... foreign students. ... We have the affluence, but, we have a tremendous percentage of our budget going for the military. ... Also, education is starting to cost more and more. When I first went to California, in the early sixties, higher education was free. It was a wonderful university system. But now, they need money for prisons, ... California spent more on prisons last year than on higher education. And, the tuition keeps going up. ... As the tuition keeps going up, you keep excluding more and more kids from what is supposed to be the Land of Opportunity. It's the Land of Opportunity only if you're born into a good deal of money. ... When you start putting price tags on things, you start eliminating opportunity and the gap between rich and poor in the United States is greater than in any developed country in the world. More and more, to be educated, you need money, for computers, you need [money] for textbooks. A kid comes out of a poor family, where's he gonna get that? You need [money] now even for access to television. You need money for the cultural programs, for the programs that are oriented to a better class. Thirty bucks a month is nothing for me, but it's a lot for a poor family. And so, right from the beginning, the poor kid is excluded. So, the gap between haves and have-nots is widening. It's true from birth, really. ... The kid who was born about four miles away, in the Latino area of San Diego, on the same day as my son, has nowhere near the opportunity. Now, my son, who, thanks to his own intelligence, but, also to the fact that he has a well-heeled father, is a very successful

businessman, is against Affirmative Action! I wrote a column about it. It disgusts me. [laughter.] He's not so against it. After awhile, he said, well, ... we talked about it on the phone, and he said, "Well, I was just trying to pull your leg." But, he really just didn't want to argue about it. But, he wanted to say something on the subject. But, ... that bothered me. He said, "I really don't care." And, as I wrote, I said that bothered me more than even that his views were different than mine! [laughter.]

SH: What about your involvement with the U.N.?

LB: Yeah.

SH: You've been all over the world. What are your dealings with the U.N.?

LB: Well, I'm on the National Council of the United Nations Association. I was the former president of the San Diego chapter. ... To me, you know, people are people. I don't think, heresy as it may be, that an American life is worth any more than a British life or a German wife. Did I say wife? My first wife, actually, was German, and my second wife is English. So, I guess, I'm sort of an international person. But, to me, people are people. And ... they've got to learn that, or this planet doesn't have a very good future. People have got to learn to live with each other and not to think in group stereotypes. I remember, many years ago, when I was first in Bulgaria, in 1960, I met, at a monastery, by accident, a Bulgarian who had learned English on BBC, and was speaking to a native English speaker for the first time in his life. ... He was an attorney, a maritime attorney for the Communist government. And, he took us to [his] house, showed us to his wife as a great prize, as if he'd captured ... shot a deer and captured it, except we were alive. ... But, he said to me, during our conversation, "I'll bet you have better rapport with me," and he was a good guy, with a good sense of humor, very smart, ... he said, "I'll bet you had a better rapport with me than [with] a lot of your countrymen." And that was true! The fact that he was a Bulgarian and I was an American didn't make any difference. ... I've found this all over the world, people are people. But politicians stir up people. They manipulate people and play the nationalist card. [Politicians] stir people up to get power. In Bosnia, the Serbs and the Muslims got along well for, for decades. I mean, yes, there was friction. But, in Sarajevo, there was all kinds of intermarriage. Nobody asked, "Who's a Muslim?" and, "Who's an Orthodox Christian?" Everybody lived together, a sophisticated city. I've been in Sarajevo. And then, when communism fell, the leaders had to have something to stir the rabble with, and ... this war is the result. People really need to be suspicious of power-seekers.

SH: All right.

LB: Okay.

SH: I thank you for this interview. Is there's anything that you would like to add before the tape ends, to leave with your old Rutgers Archives? [laughter.]

LB: No, that's fine.

SH: This ends the interview with Mr. Blankfort.

LB: Very [good].

-----END OF INTERVIEW-----

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