

RUTGERS, THE STATE UNIVERSITY OF NEW JERSEY

NEW BRUNSWICK

AN INTERVIEW WITH LEONARD MINCH

FOR THE

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INTERVIEW CONDUCTED BY

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Nicholas Molnar: This begins an interview with Mr. Leonard Minch on July 12, 2013, in Whiting, New Jersey, with Nicholas Molnar; thank you, Mr. Minch, for having me here today for the interview. To begin, for the record, can you tell us where and when you were born?

Leonard Minch: I was born June 2, 1918. As far as I know, I was born at home, at 665 Woodward Avenue, corner of Woodward and Gates [Avenue], in ... Ridgewood, New York. It's part of New York City, Ridgewood, New York, Queens County.

NM: Okay. You mentioned that you grew up there until you were six, and then, you moved.

LM: I lived there until I was six, yes.

NM: Okay.

LM: My father bought a house; we moved out. Where we lived in Ridgewood was an old-fashioned, cold-water flat. It consisted of a kitchen with the coal stove in the corner, two washtubs, and there was a two-burner gas stove above the washtubs on a shelf, but that was only used in the summertime. The bathroom just had a commode in it. There were two bedrooms, but there was just an aisle going from the front of the unit to the back of the unit--in this case, vice versa, from the back to the front--and there were no doors or walls, just walked down the aisle, and there were these two rooms. ... You came to the front room, which had a window in it, and it had a fireplace with a gas burner in the fireplace. There was no electric in this house. There was no hot water. We used gas for lighting. Actually, people went to bed when it got dark, simple as that. It was over a drugstore. ... There was an apartment next to us, which was the better apartment, because it had windows on the side by the street. We had no windows in the length of the apartment. We had a window in the kitchen and there was one window in the front living room and that's all the windows. In those days, there wasn't a window in the bathroom. They had a law passed in New York requiring a window in the bathroom. So, I lived there until I was six and we moved. You want to hear ... some of the things I remember? I remember going to my grandmother's house when I was three or four and that consisted of a kitchen, a living room and one bedroom. The bathroom was down the hall and the bathroom consisted of just a commode. I liked to go there because there was a big Airedale dog and I could play with this dog. ... I remember laying in the hall, the dog laying down, I'm laying on his belly, he's nice and warm, [laughter] and that, I remember. I remember things like being on a street corner and watching the hokey-pokey man. Hokey-pokey was ice cream wrapped in a piece of paper, before we had chocolate-covered ice cream. That was what it was, hokey-pokey man. You could get three-cent and five-cent bars. I didn't have either three cents or five cents. [laughter] I just looked on it. I remember going to a house, a brownstone, two blocks away, where there was a good friend of my mother's, and she always used to give me a banana when I went there. Bananas, fresh fruit, was fairly scarce in the diet. ... I used to call her "the banana lady." One time, my Uncle Otto had died and I liked Uncle Otto, because, every time I saw him, he reached into his pocket and got a nickel, and you could buy an ice cream cone in those days for a nickel. So, he had died and my mother and father went to the funeral, to the viewing. ... My sister was supposed to watch over me. My sister's twelve years older than me, so, she was about seventeen at the time. ... She gave me two dimes to get a malted milk and I was very, very much annoyed that my mother and father would go and leave me. So, when my sister's

back was turned, she was talking to a girlfriend, I slipped past her. I walked down two blocks to the elevated, went up and got on the elevated and rode it. The conductor said something which I didn't understand about stopping. So, I got off at the next station, waited for the next train and got on it, took it to the end of the line, which was at Metropolitan Avenue. I had to walk alongside of the cemetery. I don't know what the name of that cemetery is. It's across the way from the Lutheran cemetery, had to walk next to that cemetery, and it was dark at this time, about a half a mile. Then, I had to cross Metropolitan Avenue, which had a trolley car on it in those days, and go down the hill and into my aunt and uncle's house. ... I rang the bell, and then, the woman came and she looked at me and said, "What do you want, little boy?" I said, "I want my mother." So, she turned around and said, "(Lina?), I think your boy is here." When my mother came out--and, of course, I was six years old or five years old at the time--I broke out into tears. She comforted me, and then, she said, "Do you want to see Uncle Otto?" I said, "Yes, I do." So, at that age, I saw the first dead person. ... All the ladies were sitting in a living room. Funerals were from your home then. There weren't funeral parlors. Funerals were from your home. ... All the ladies were sitting in the living room, where the casket was and the flowers were, and all the men were in the kitchen drinking beer. So, I was a male, so, I went with the men and my father gave me a couple of sips of beer there. ... I remember my father carrying me home on his shoulder. Let's see, what else did I do there? Oh, on my fifth birthday, my Uncle Leonard--I was named after him, he was in Europe, in the AEF [American Expeditionary Forces] when I was born and I was named after him--he gave me his scooter. ... I took the scooter down, I was playing with it and I laid it down and played in a lot. ... When I came back from it, someone had stolen my scooter. I never saw it again. One time, when my mother was sick--I imagine, they didn't tell kids these things in those days, but I imagine she was having another baby. I had three or four brothers and sisters who all died in infancy. My mother was a bad diabetic, which they had no cure for or no treatment for. So, when she was in the hospital, ... I remember an ambulance coming for her and I don't remember who took care of me. I was home. I don't remember who took care of me. I know I ... was in school. I was either in kindergarten or first grade and I walked about five or six blocks to school. ... They gave me a dime and the school was all day. ... At lunchtime, we went across the street to a bakery. In those days, all bakeries had four or five tables in the back. The front would be the retail store, the center would be, like, a restaurant and the rear would be the actual bakery with the ovens. I'd get a dime and have my lunch there and, for a dime, I got a bowl of soup, a hard roll, a glass of milk and a bun. That was ten cents. Another time, I was in school at the time, must have been when I was six, I had the chickenpox. Well, they let me out on the street, I think. I was out of school; I [was] kept out of school. ... I went down where this elevated was. There was a trolley line underneath it and there was a big fuse box on the piers that held up the elevated. ... Someone had told me that that was a pigeon trap and I climbed up on it. ... There were all of these openings and, actually, I know now that they were fuses, and I put two fingers in and got a tremendous shock. It's a wonder it didn't kill me. I remember staggering over to the telephone pole and putting my arms around the telephone pole to hold myself up. Another time, my mother gave me twenty dollars to go downstairs and get a quart of milk. So, as I was coming back, I was only about five at this time, this young lady stopped me and said, "Let me count your change. I'll see if you've got the right change." So, I let her have the money and she says, "Oh, you've got the right change." ... I went upstairs and my mother said, "There's ten dollars missing." I says, "This is all the money I gave." So, she went downstairs and went into the store right away and she said, "He's ten dollars short." He says, "No, I gave him the right money," and my mother said, "Did you speak to

anybody before coming up?" and I said, "Oh, yes. This girl stopped me and asked to count my change." ... She said, "Do you know the girl?" I said, "I don't know her, but I know her brother," and she said, "Do you know where they live?" I said, "Yes, they live down two blocks away from us, upstairs." So, she said, "Let's go there." So, we went there and it was one of the few times I ever saw my mother angry. [laughter] ... She got the woman of the house and talked to her, and then, the girl was somewhere inside, in one of the bedrooms, and got the girl out. My mother got her ten dollars back and we went back home. Also, one of the things that happened, and it should be taken up to this day, the Department of Agriculture sent seeds. ... You could buy them for one penny a packet, one cent, and I bought about five packets. I got about five cents--and it was pennies, too, it wasn't a nickel, [laughter] five cents--and I bought five seeds. ... My father dug up the back. ... Although there was a store, there was a backyard. There's nothing in the backyard. So, he dug up a little corner and we planted some of the seeds. Unfortunately, we moved out before anything came to fruition, except for the radishes. So, we moved out to South Ozone Park. We had a one-family house. It had a ... sun area, a sun room, a very small room, a living room, a dining room, a kitchen and, upstairs, it had three bedrooms and a bathroom, with a complete bathroom, a sink, a commode, a bathtub. They didn't have showers in those days. They didn't think of showers, and this would be 1924. ... To go to school, I had to go up to the corner and I had a yellow pass given by the school and I'd take the bus down to Baisley Park. ... Then, I had to cross Rockaway Boulevard to walk, go up, to the school. ... I only went there one year. One time in the winter, a milkman's horse fell and broke a leg and I guess a policeman shot him. ... There was blood all over the place, frozen into it. At the school, I had a friend who wanted me to come over to his house and he lived out on the Meadows, the Jamaica Meadows, which is now the [John F.] Kennedy Airport, you know. It was only a block-and-a-half from us. There was an open canal there, which drained the sewage. You didn't have sewage plants much in those days. They didn't have sewage plants then. ... I went out to his house and he took me into the garage and these people were living, more or less, the way people lived a hundred years ago. They hunted and fished. They had all kinds of game hanging up on the walls. Apparently, there were deer out on the Meadows and I know there were waterfowl hanging up there. They had a whole rack of weapons, rifles and shotguns. [laughter] He showed me this stuff. So, when I registered, my mother took me down to that school on the bus to register and it was in the spring. That would have been the ... early Summer of 1924. ... We went down and registered, and then, my mother and I went to a bakery. ... For a nickel, in those days, you got three rolls or four rolls in the bakery, hard rolls, good, hard rolls, and then, we went to a butcher and got ten cents' worth of liverwurst. You'd get about four big slices of liverwurst, like a half a pound of liverwurst. ... I remember going to ... Baisley Park. It had a big lake and, on the edge, it had wild cherry trees and I remember sitting there and having a picnic with these hard rolls and liverwurst. I remember looking at my mother and feeling, like, a wave of love come over me for my mother, at the time. We rode this bus and, one time, one afternoon coming home, (Henrietta McCabe?) ran around the back of the bus. ... In those days, there was no regulations about cars stopping for the bus and she ran out right in front of a car and got hit and I was scared. You know, I was just only six years old. I ran home. I couldn't stay there, ran home. Later on, she had a terrible calamity. Her father was a policeman and the policemen used to moonlight guarding payrolls. In those days, everybody got paid in cash. ... He was guarding a payroll and ... a group of people come in and murdered him, right on the spot. I remember feeling sorry for her. So, I went to school one year down there, Baisley Park. Then, I transferred. They built a new school. You know, they were building up Queens then. It

was something that you can hardly imagine. You would look at a street and walk past the lot and you'd see a man and a horse and a scoop digging out a foundation. ... You'd come back from school and half the foundation was up on cement blocks. ... Two days later, the building would be framed and they'd have the building built in about two weeks, complete. People would be occupying it in two weeks. This was in 1925, about. ...

NM: I just want to say, for the record, that the detail you are providing is great. Before we go on, I want to ask a little bit about your father and your mother.

LM: Right.

NM: What do you remember about them? Could you tell me about your father, what he did and his name?

LM: Well, I don't know much about my father. I know that his father was orphaned and the name was (Wiggins?). He was adopted by a cousin or an aunt who was married to a man named Minch and he took up the ... Minch name. So, my father's parents, I don't know anything at all about except that. ... My father, I don't know where he was born. I think he was born in Manhattan. I don't know when he was born. I don't know his [birth] date. Somehow or other, he got up to Binghamton, New York, and I think he must have gone to a Lutheran school up there, because my father could speak, read and write English and German. ... Actually, the German that he knew was very close to the Yiddish. He worked on a subway and these people would ask him questions in Yiddish and he would answer in German. ... He had a various number of jobs, none of them good. At one time, he worked in Middle Village, in a crematory. He had the house pointed out to me, where they had lived at that time. He worked in (Wallaba?) Market at one time. As a kid, ... his father died when he was thirteen and he was the oldest in the family, so, at thirteen, he and his older sister had to support the rest of the family. The rest of the family was one, two, three girls and one boy, plus, the mother. ... His job, he sort of worked around a cigar factory and it was all Cubans in there. ... They would give him thirty-five cents and he'd buy a pound of peanuts and a pint of whiskey, ten cents for peanuts, twenty-five cents for whiskey. ... These men worked until they ran out of peanuts or whiskey, and for getting it, he would get a penny or two pennies, sometimes. ... They lived very close. ... He said they'd go to a vegetable store and they bought soup greens. Soup greens would be two or three cents and it'd be a broken stalk of celery, a broken carrot or turnip, anything else they had, a pepper. ... They'd go to a butcher. All the butchers in those days made their own bologna and they'd buy two cents' worth of bologna water and hoped that they got a piece of bologna in it, and, with that and the soup greens, they made supper. So, I guess he stayed at home until some of the others, girls, were old enough to support the family, and then, he got married. My father and mother married in my grandmother's living room. ... They didn't go to church. Neither one of them were very much church-going. So, his education ended when he was thirteen. ... My mother's the same way. She was going to, I guess, a Catholic grammar school and she saw a young priest and a nun walking down the path, holding hands. ... She said that they looked like lovers, without knowing really what lovers meant, and they said, "You have to apologize for saying that." ... My mother said, "I'm not apologizing. That's what it looked like." So, that was the end of her schooling, too, at thirteen. So, neither one had any kind of an educational background, and, of course, that carried through to my sister and I. Although there was about six children in

the family, only two of us lived, my sister and I. My sister was twelve years older. She finished school when she was sixteen and went to work. ... I didn't know any better. I just wanted to get out to work and I said, "Well, it would be nice to have a diploma." So, like, there was a three-year agriculture course in Newtown High School, three years. I took that course. Well, it was a real dumbed-down course, really dumbed-down, but, at any rate, I wound up with a diploma. I could say I was a high school ... graduate, because I had a diploma, but, in my youth, I used to read. I read everything. I walked a mile-and-a-half up to the Jamaica Library and I'd get five books on piracy and I'd read them and I'd get five books on Indian chiefs and I'd read them and I'd get five books on privateers and read them--all kinds of books I would read. ... I would read four or five of them in the same vein, which carried through. You know, when I was in the Army, the Army has what is called the AGCT, Army General Classification Test. You have to score seventy to get into the Army, seventy or above. You have to score 110 or above to go to OCS [Officer Candidate School]. You have to score 120 or above to go to West Point. I scored 146 the first time I took it. ... I got out of the Army after the war and I'm going to come back in, I took it again. I scored 135 the second time, and the reason I dropped is because ... that was after the whole World War II. You didn't get a chance to read anything; you didn't have anything to read. ... I was in the infantry. You had your backpack and that was it.

NM: You talked a little bit about your father and his background. Where was your mother from?

LM: My mother was from New York. ... Both of them were born American citizens. She was born, I don't know whether it was in Manhattan or Queens, but I think it was in Queens, in Ridgewood, I think there.

NM: You mentioned before that you had uncles and aunts in the area.

LM: Oh, yes. You know, in those days, everybody sort of lived in the area. When I was a small child, my grandmother and my Uncle Joe lived about two blocks away [on], I think it was Bleecker Street. My Uncle Joe had been married and had two children and lost all three of them in a fire. When we moved, we moved to South Ozone Park, where my Aunt Clara and Uncle Bill bought a house right around the corner. They were, like, two half-blocks away from us. ... My Uncle (Ernst?) bought a house about three blocks away from us. Now, my Uncle (Otto?), he was a very successful plumber and speculated and he had lots out in Hollis. ... My Aunt Margaret, who was born in Germany, and she married Mike Marino, they built a house out there in Hollis on the lots that Uncle Otto owned. He sold them a lot and they had two boys. On the lot behind them, my Aunt (Helen?) and Uncle Morty bought and they built a house and they had two boys. Now, the (Marinos?), they were older. They were the age of my sister. ... The (Rothschilds?) were younger. They were slightly younger than me. Today, out of seventeen cousins, I only have two left, and the one cousin is a (Rothschild?). He lives out in Phoenix, Arizona, I think it is. I think that's where he lives. I don't know. I've got his address. ... The other one, on my father's side, we didn't get together as much there. He had two girls and they were quite a bit younger than me. ... One was a bank president--she died--and the other one lives down in Florida. ... She sends me birthday cards or Christmas cards, something like that. Once a year, I call each one of them up. That's all I have left out of seventeen cousins, two.

NM: You mentioned that where you lived in Ozone Park, it was developing at the time.

LM: Yes.

NM: What was the makeup of the community, in terms of ethnicity? Were there a lot of Italians or Irish or a mix?

LM: You wouldn't believe what it was. ... We were in five houses, [all] the same, and the guy that built it was an engineer from Virginia. The people across the street from me were English, the people next to them, the (Pecans?), were Spanish and the people next to them, the (Larsens?), were Norwegians. Now, these were immigrant Norwegians and immigrant Spanish. ... The people next to them came from Buffalo and they were Germans, but they were related to the next two groups. ... I can't remember their names, ... it starts with an "S," but they were Krauts. ... The next ones were Irish immigrants. The one fellow was a fireman. The other one was a police lieutenant and they had one child. The fireman was married and the police lieutenant was a bachelor. ... They had one child, Margaret. She was a little bit older than me. The next house was the (Trezniacks?) and they were Polish and I used to pal around with the boy, Johnny (Trezniack?). The house next to them, no children, and they were Germans. Beyond that, I don't know what they were. I think the next one was Irish, but, after that, I don't know. Somewheres down the line, two or three houses down, was the (Fritzes?). I remember them, because she went to school with me. That's on the other side of the street. These houses had a party driveway between them, which you could just about squeeze a car through. I don't think you could have got the 1950s cars through, but ... the present-day cars are smaller and you can get them through. ... Then, they had an alley between the two houses with a side door on each house and the alley is about four feet wide. The lots that they were on were about twenty feet wide and about sixty, seventy feet deep, quite small lots. A lot of the people, ... the parents were immigrants and they were working their way up in life, you know. ... None of the parents had gone to high school or anything like that, and a lot of the males, when they got to be sixteen, they went out and got work. They didn't finish high school.

NM: Did your mother work while you were growing up?

LM: No, except, well, she worked, she kept house. Don't forget, she was always sick from this diabetes.

NM: Okay. As a child in South Ozone Park, what did you do for recreation?

LM: Well, there was a lot right behind us and we used to play ball in there, baseball, football. We used to dig a hole in the ground and swipe some timbers and make an underground hut. ... If a dog got killed on the road, which happened, we'd build a fire over him and burn him until he burned up, until he was completely disintegrated. ... We got into mischief. We'd go into this dairy and try and steal a small can of fruit, not that we needed it. It was just for the hell of it. The big, big deal, this one kid, when they had the watermelons out in front of the store on the ground, he went there and he started kicking the watermelon away from the window and he stole the whole damn watermelon. Then, there was a bowling alley underneath this building. They had a side stairway, a concrete side stairway, going down, enclosed with a wall and a roof. ...

We would get a box or two boxes of milk bottles. They came in a very heavy box, wire and compartments--put a dozen milk bottles in there and we'd stack them up. ... Then, you'd throw a couple of milk bottles over the top and they'd smash. ... Somebody would be coming, running out of the door to chase us, and we'd push the milk boxes down and run like hell. By the time they got the milk boxes out of the way, we were gone. ... Then, there was a little kosher butcher there and he had a sign out over his door. ... The (Ralstons'?) door, which was on the corner, used to throw their garbage out in a lot. They didn't put it out for the garbageman, and we'd get rotten oranges and we'd pelt this store sign hanging and he'd come running out and we'd run. ... It was a little Jewish fellow. He got into a little dogtrot and he could go a long time on a dogtrot. ... I would run just a certain amount and I'd run out of breath. I found out later, the reason why was because I had a leaky heart. So, when I got tired, I'd cut between houses, jump the fence and be on the next block, and then, circle around behind him. ... He'd chase the other ones until he was down to one and be down to (Joey Trezneck?), and then, he couldn't catch (Joey?). He'd just give up and come back, but he used to be determined on his runs. Yes, we got into all kinds of mischief. We used to take long walks on some Saturdays, be a bunch of us, four or five of us, and we'd talk a long walk. We'd leave, like, about nine o'clock in the morning and we wouldn't come home until four or five o'clock at night. ... We used to have mischief on that, too. Sometimes, we'd move on and (Joey Trezneck?) would get a rock and throw it right through somebody's window, into their porch. When we were on one of these walks, we came past the Long Island Railroad freight yard in Jamaica and there's a little bit of a swamp there and we're cutting through the swamp. There was a beaten path through it. It was a small swamp, like a third of a square block. ... We found a sealed cardboard box, about two-and-a-half foot long and about eight inches-by-six inches, and we opened it up. Now, remember, this was sealed and it's next to a freight yard. ... We looked in the box and it had all kinds of things for cars. I picked up this thing, which I know now was a filter wrench for a car--I didn't know what the hell it was--and I threw it back in the weeds. ... (Joey?) took a taillight for a Buick. ... We were walking home, I guess we were on Jamaica Avenue, but way out, and he offered this taillight to a man sitting in front of a funeral parlor. Apparently, that guy called the cops, because the cops picked us up on the next block and took us into the Jamaica Police Station. ... They played the "good cop/bad cop" on me, you know, and I broke out crying and everything. You know, they said, "Oh, the others blamed you," and I said, "No, ... we didn't steal it. This is what happened." So, we finally got a ride by the cops back to where this happened. Apparently, there was a lot of looting going on in the freight yards and that's what this was tied in to. ... The only thing we found was that wrench that I threw in the weeds. Somebody had come back by and taken that stuff. So, they took us back to the police station. They called up our mothers. My mother came--fortunately, the bus stop was right across the street on Jamaica Avenue--and got us and took us home.

NM: As a teenager, did you have any jobs?

LM: No, this was the Depression. These jobs that you see kids having today, a grown man had. You've got to remember what the salaries were at that time. My first salary, when I went to work in ... 1936, I got a job, it started at fifteen dollars a week. ... You know where I worked--you know where the Holland Tunnel is. When you go into the Holland Tunnel, that building right behind you, I worked in that building [for] five years, started at fifteen dollars a week. I got a dollar raise when they come out with the minimum wage of forty cents an hour. You know,

these people talk about the minimum wage--that's as big a farce as you could have. You know, the more you get in the minimum wage, the less you can buy.

NM: I do not want to jump ahead too much.

LM: Go ahead.

NM: I want to ask about the Depression and its effects on your community and your family. Would you be able to speak about that?

LM: Well, my father was working steady. My father worked hours unimaginable. He was working for the IRT. That's Interborough Rapid Transit. He was a conductor. He worked five days a week at eight hours a day, and then, he put in two hours' overtime without overtime pay. His pay was about sixty cents an hour. ... When he worked this overtime, he was on the platform, on the heavy train stations, 14th, 18th, 23rd Avenue, 42nd Street, and he worked two hours there every day. So, that was five days a week; that was fifty hours. He worked Saturdays. That was another eight hours. Now, he only had a Sunday off when there wasn't a work train going out. If there was a work train going out, as a senior conductor, he took the work train. ... The reason he took the work train is because he only worked about four or five hours and he got paid for eight. It looked too good. So, he worked, normally, thirteen days straight, and then, when that work train went out, he worked twenty-one days--let's see, seven, fourteen, twenty-one, yes, ... twenty-one days straight. He worked twenty-one days straight. ... He never made much money. They didn't make much money. I know, in about 1939 or 1940, my sister worked for the telephone company and she got a raise and was making a dollar an hour, which was a big thing, forty dollars a week. That's what the police and fire department were paid, forty dollars a week. My father, ... after all those hours worked, he could only make, like, forty-six dollars, worked very, very hard. When I woke him up, he'd be home on Sundays, he'd be exhausted and I'd have to wake him up for Sunday dinner. ... You couldn't shake him, you couldn't call him, couldn't do anything. The only way I could wake him up was to lift up his eyelids. When I lifted up his eyelids, I ducked, because he went like that, [swung his arm]. When I lifted up his eyelids, I ducked at the same time. ... On his day off, he got up at five o'clock in the morning, went downstairs, had a cup of coffee and a piece of bread and went back to bed, and this is when I woke him up. In the afternoon, he'd take a bath and get dressed. ... Usually, somebody would stop in, usually my aunt and uncle, Aunt (Helen?) and Uncle Morty. ... They'd give me a dollar or a dollar and a quarter and I'd go and buy rolls and ham and potato salad and we'd have that for supper, both families. ... Then, we'd play cards, played cards, pennies, play for pennies. You win sixteen cents or you lose fourteen cents, play cards.

NM: You mentioned that you studied an agricultural program.

LM: Yes.

NM: Can you talk about, in general, what you remember about elementary school, junior high and high school?

LM: Well, I went to the first school in Ridgewood and I only went there, I guess, until I finished kindergarten. I went to the second school, it was down in Baisley Park, took the bus there and that only lasted one year, when they opened up another one. I think the number of that school was 123 or 117. [Editor's Note: PS 123 is located at 145-01 119th Avenue, Jamaica, New York.] I don't remember which. It was about six blocks away. I went to that school until the seventh grade, sixth grade. I don't remember which--sixth grade. ... Then, I went to Shimer Junior High, which was right down the street from me, about five blocks away, and I took a commercial course, which was stupid. I should have had a general course. ... I remember having typing in that school. I remember, the first year I was there, the seventh grade, the same homeroom [teacher] was teaching us everything except music, gym and typing. She was supposed to teach us everything else. When it come to the final examination, she found out that ... she was supposed to have taught us geography. We had to take a final examination in geography. So, she said, "Well, you can have an open-book test." Well, we didn't know what the hell an open-book test was. We didn't know how to take it. So, we took the test. ... In the final test, out of the class of about forty, I was the only one that had passed. ... I only failed one question and that question is, "What is a monsoon?" I know what a monsoon is now. [laughter] ... Imagine that, though, out of the whole class, I was the only one that passed the test and she had never given us this. It was just a matter of me, while they were doing English, I was reading geography. [laughter]

NM: You mentioned that your father had steady work throughout the 1930s as a conductor.

LM: Yes.

NM: From what you stated before, you knew a lot of the folks in your neighborhood.

LM: Yes. As I said, there was two families right within walking distance I saw every day, and there was two families in Hollis, which was about six, seven miles away. ... We saw the (Rothschilds?) every week without fail.

NM: Did your friends in the neighborhood, and your aunts and uncles, have steady work during the Great Depression?

LM: No. My Uncle Morty did, because he was a salesman. He sold office supplies, did very well at it. My Uncle Will was an expert brush maker for (Williams?) Shaving Brush, and the history comes into this business. These shaving brushes were originally made with bristles from China. These Chinamen would put a pig up on their lap and pull out the bristles on their nose one at a time and bundle them up. So, when the Japanese went into ... Manchuria, Manchuria, yes, that stopped. So, then, they started getting the bristles from Poland, from badgers. ... When the Germans went into that, in 1939, that stopped. ... They did all kinds of stuff and he was, like, a very superior artist in making brushes and they made them out of feathers, they made them out of hair. ... He would only get, like, one or two days' work a week. That was all. ... My other uncle was a weaver. That had been in the family, on my mother's side, their family group, the weavers. ... In the '20s, all the women wore ribbons on their hair, on their hats, and they had all had steady work then. ... He didn't get any more steady work. He worked on the WPA. You know what that is? Workman's Progress Administration, and they cleaned up.

[Editor's Note: The Works Progress Administration, or, after 1939, the Works Project Administration, was an agency that was part of President Franklin D. Roosevelt's New Deal and employed millions on public works projects like buildings and roads, as well as in specialized areas, such as the arts, from 1935 to 1943.] That was interesting. He was working on a job about ... a mile away from us, on Merrick and Linden Boulevard, and I had to go over there after lunch. ... They used to feed these men lunch and there'd always be lunch left over. I used to go over there with a milk pail and get some of the leftover stew and bring it home. What was interesting, like, they cleared all the brush out of this place and you could see a canal bed in there. It was ... a little bit wider than this room and it was only about that deep, but that had been a canal bed for the farmers. They could take a lot of weight on a little canal boat and tow it with a horse or a mule, or even a man, and take it out to Jamaica Bay, where they put it on a schooner and brought it around to Manhattan. That was interesting, looking at that. My other uncle, Uncle Joe, he was a weaver. He lost his job. He got a job with the trones. They put the Prohibition in. He lost that job. That's the one that lost his wife and two kids. ... Then, he got a job with the city, as a laborer, (brogue?) laborer. Grandma had moved out and [was] taking care of the (Marino?) kids, because Aunt Margaret, who was born in Germany--Aunt Mary and Aunt Margaret were born in Germany, all the rest of them were born here--and he [Joe] had this place in Ridgewood to himself. He said he used to come home after a hard day's work, he'd take his shoes off--and they had brought beer back--he'd get a bucket of beer and a cigar and take his shoes and socks off and put his feet in the refrigerator and drink his beer and smoke his cigar. [laughter] He would come out to our house once in a while, about every other Sunday, and play cards. I was, like, what? thirteen or fourteen. ... They'd give me a quarter and I had to go up to the corner with a milk pail and get a pail of beer. ... These Krauts would drink it up and they would count the number of glasses you got for a quarter. ... Then, they raised it to thirty-five cents, but you didn't get any more glasses. [laughter] ... You can't imagine how frugal they were, how they pinched a penny. They did everything possible. You know, some of them were living very close, like my Aunt Clara and Uncle Will. He only worked, literally, part-time, and they had a son to support. ... My Uncle (Ernst?), he worked WPA and he had a wife and two kids to support. ... Yet, both of them managed to keep their house through the Depression. You know, when these people complain, like the college students complaining about raising their interest on their debt to ... six-and-a-half percent, these people were paying six percent on mortgages, nothing off, six percent. ... You had to pay your insurance and your taxes, too, and they did it on practically nothing. I don't know how the hell they did it, to tell you the truth. My father worked steady, my sister worked steady, but these others, they didn't work steady at all. As a matter-of-fact, every once in a while, my mother would have my Uncle (Ernst?) come and paint something on the house, do some painting, ... so [that] she could give him some money. They were proud. ... They didn't want relief--you know, not like people today, they want the government to give. These people wanted to do something. They wanted to work.

NM: You mentioned buying beer. How did Prohibition affect the community?

LM: We just didn't have any liquor. I mean, I wasn't interested. I remember there being a bottle of Golden Wedding [Whisky] in a china closet, which had to be from before the war, you know, before World War I, and that bottle of whisky was there, as far as I can tell, forever. I used to go to the china closet when I was a kid and my father had about three or four gold coins. ... I used to look at the gold coins, you know, when I was eight or nine, and I would look at the pint of

whisky and put it all back. ... I never heard of them drinking wine, period, no wine, and they drank beer. ... It was only when I was an older kid, eighteen or so, that I used to go with my sister to my aunt's to play bridge and they used to serve ... Tom Collins [cocktails], serve Tom Collins. That's the only time I remember. ... There was a limit. You know, the limit was two, absolutely two. That's maximum--the same as here [in the retirement community]. Once in a while, we have cocktail parties with another group and the limit is usually only one. You only have one. I've got a whole closet full of liquor over there, but you only get one drink and once a month.

NM: Can you talk a little bit more about your academic program in high school?

LM: It was a dumbed-down course. The mathematics was simple arithmetic and you had the course in agriculture. We had gardens. Now, this school ... was Newtown High School and it was in Elmhurst, but they had gardens some miles away. They had a station wagon that we'd jump into, an open station wagon, and they'd drive us there. ... They had a couple of acres of land and it was very good. You know, the land on Long Island, some of it is extremely good. It's like about twenty-four inches of topsoil from the glaciers, you know. ... We'd go there and, under the direction of our teacher, plant things. ... Then, what would happen was that the term ended, you know, but the crops didn't stop growing. [laughter] So, when the good crops came in, nobody was there. My sister had a car and we used to drive over there and pick the crops on my plot. There was a stable there and there was an Irishman there that took care of the horses. I don't know whose horses they were. They were saddled horses. ... I remember this Irishman. He got cornstalks off of our lots and he was breaking the roots off the cornstalks and he cut himself in the web between his thumb and forefinger and got blood poisoning. He was out for a long time. He used to, you know, kid with them, laugh with them. What else there, in agriculture? Oh, they had physiography. I liked that. That was sort of, like, geography-plus, had English. We had biology. I didn't know anything. I didn't do well at all in biology. I didn't do well in English. History was a snap for me. ... As long as it wasn't algebra, ... math was a snap. As long as they gave you straight arithmetic, it was a snap. ... History, I liked history. I didn't like to remember the dates, but I liked to know what the results were of wars, what happens after the war.

NM: What were your plans for after high school?

LM: Working. There was really no direction whatsoever. You've got to remember, my mother and father were working when they were thirteen years old, so, they had no education and there was no thought of education. The only piece of education that ... happened was, when my sister was about seventeen, she took a comptometer course, and that was the equivalent of all of the courses you have today. ... She did very well at that. She worked for Auston Nickels for about a year, and then, she worked for the telephone company.

NM: Can you talk about some of the jobs you had when you entered the workforce?

LM: Well, ... the first year, I must have had eight jobs. ... Well, I worked on the greenhouses as a helper on the truck. ... On Mother's Day, Valentine's Day, you'd get one or two or three days' work and that was good, because you got three bucks a day. ... Me and Johnny

(Trezniack?) worked for a painter [for] about three weeks, two dollars a day, and he didn't pay us. Well, we went to court. We got a whatever-you-call-it from there, but it was useless, because you had to pay to have it served. ... After it was served, it didn't mean a goddamn, and this guy had five kids and a wife. All he had was a couple of ladders and an old car. So, we didn't get paid for that. I worked with ... Rudy Hantosh. We sold Christmas trees. I got twenty bucks from my mother and he couldn't get any money, but we bought twenty bucks' worth of Christmas trees and sold them. We made about forty-eight cents a day for a week, forty-eight cents a day. We got a job, he and I got a job, painting a store and they didn't have the shake-up on the cans. You spent about two-and-a-half hours stirring the damned paint can before we could paint with it, but we wound up getting paid about two-and-a-half dollars a day for our work. I worked for a ... lawn man, you know--what do you call them, people that take care of your lawns, you know?--an old German. He put me out by a house with two dump trucks of topsoil and a shovel, a rake and a wheelbarrow, and he'd come back about three or four hours later and expected all of that to be done. So, I worked for him for one day or two days, three dollars a day, and that was it. I worked for a contractor in Kew Gardens and it was breaking out a wall between two bedrooms, so [that] they could have a big bedroom. That was in ... Garden City, not Kew Gardens, Garden City. That was a wealthy place then and it's a wealthy place now, Garden City. So, I had a lot of jobs the first year. None of them paid anything and none of them lasted. ... My mother talked to a woman down the street who talked to her son and told me to go in for an interview--well, we didn't have interviews--to fill out a form in this printing place. It was at 52 Varick Street, (National Processor?). It was a lithographer [job]. ... I got in there and I started at fifteen bucks a week. ... This was a flatbed press. The bed went back and forth, like that, heavy bed, maybe a couple of hundred pounds. One time, a nut come loose and fell down in the track and stopped that thing and jumped a mile when it stopped, terrible noise. Everybody in the shop came over to see what happened. I worked there for five years. There was no advancement at all. ... See, this was an isolated piece of equipment, something that had been brought over from Germany. They brought two of these presses over in about 1911. ... In the place, it was the Amalgamated Lithographers of America and it was a strong union, but this was the Depression. Now, if the company wanted to promote somebody from being a boy, [the union had to approve it]--a crew on the press was a pressman, an operator and a boy. The pressman took care of the printing, the operator took care of feeding the paper in and the boy ran the errands. So, if they wanted to promote somebody, they had to talk to the union first and the union only allowed one apprentice for three journeymen. ... They had to ask the union. I don't know how it worked too well, but they couldn't promote people beyond that scope. They had to hire from the union and, if they wanted, like, another pressman and an operator, they had to go to the union for it and the union would supply them. I had a funny occurrence on that, you know. Back in about 1947, they had too many master sergeants in the Army and they had boards that re-designated them, interviewed them and re-designated wherever they could. ... When I told this board I had worked five years as a lithographer, they said, "Well, five years, you can get an assignment in the Army Reserves as a captain in active duty down in Governors Island, because we're looking for a lithographer." [laughter] I said, "Thank you, no." So, that's the way it was then. There was no raises. ... When they raised it to sixteen dollars the second year I was there, I was [at] twenty dollars when I was drafted five years later, ... twenty dollars plus two dollars night differential. ... One of the worst things that happened to me was getting that job, because I worked nights. So, I lost all contact with the kids I grew up with. They were on an eight-to-five schedule and I'm on, like, a five PM to one ... AM schedule.

NM: Prior to being drafted, did you ever consider joining the military?

LM: No.

NM: Can you talk about when you were drafted?

LM: I've got the draft cards in the other room.

NM: Oh, really? [laughter]

LM: What they did was, first off, you registered for the draft. Then, they pulled the number. I think my number was something like 163. Then, they tell you, like, you were subject to induction and they give you an appointment with a civilian doctor for an examination, a medical examination. Then, they decided that they were drafting you and you reported to the draft board. It was in Jamaica. ... The draft board gave me a nickel to get on the elevated and go to Penn Station and, in the middle of Penn Station, they said, "You'll see somebody." ... I went there and there's two sergeants. ... They each have a roster and they line us up and take us out to Camp Upton, Long Island. ... We're there for two days or so, three days. They show us a VD [venereal disease] film, which, you know, people, at that time, didn't know about VD, not like today, and I remember the film. The guy's got a needle stuck in his arm and the blood's running down his arm. [laughter] They didn't even have uniforms for us. You got ... three pair of pants and three shirts, but one was a khaki shirt, matching the pants, one was poplin, plain, and one was poplin with stripes in it. So, we're there for about three days and they send cards home that you're here and they send another card home that you're being sent somewhere else. ... We go down to Camp Croft, Spartanburg, South Carolina, and they're just building this camp by the hour. All you hear is hammers, "Bang, bang, bang," twenty-four hours a day, seven days a week. I don't know how large this camp became. I was in Company A, 32nd Training Battalion. A training battalion has about a thousand recruits in it and maybe ... about forty Army men, Army personnel. ... They had taken over all these peach orchards. When we got down there, it was pretty hard duty. You go on mess, ... kitchen police. In the afternoon, when things were slow, the mess sergeant would take you out into--he'd use his own car--he'd take you out to a peach orchard and you'd pick peaches. ... We used to have a basket of peaches on the top floor, a basket of peaches on the bottom floor and three baskets of peaches when you walked in the mess hall. [laughter]

NM: Before we go further, you mentioned that you had a heart problem.

LM: Yes.

NM: Was this when you became aware of this problem?

LM: No, I didn't become aware of it until I was in my eighties.

NM: Oh.

LM: I had an open-heart operation. I've got a lot of scars up here and I saw this Dr. Tsan. I saw a regular doctor and he sent me to this Dr. Tsan. ... He said I had a leaky heart and it was getting worse and I went to Deborah [Hospital] and had a heart operation there.

NM: You said, when you were younger, you would sometimes get winded.

LM: Yes.

NM: Did that affect you in your training?

LM: Yes, it did, to some extent. ... Yes, in the basic training, we had to run and I fell out. ... This sergeant, ... Welch, his name was Welch, too, he made me put on a full field pack and march around the square, and the platoon leader, who was a little Texan, ... he saw it and stopped me and he got that sergeant and balled him out for doing that. The sergeants do not have authority to discipline personnel. They do not. Even today, the sergeant cannot discipline them. He has to report them. Company commander is the only one that can discipline them. So, at that time, yes, it did. That was the only time I ever had to run. I was never strong, physically. In fact, I never had upper arm strength. Something as simple as a push-up, I'd never done a push-up in my life, never, much less a chin-up, but most things in the--I was in the infantry--most things were on your legs and that was all right.

NM: Tell me a little bit more about being at Camp Croft. Was this your first time being out of the New York area?

LM: Yes--no, it was the second time. When I was in high school, as part of that agriculture course, you're supposed to work on a farm for a month, for a summer, and I went up to a place in New York, West Burn, New York, I think it was, and I was only there for about two weeks--no, only there about a week. I got home sick and I went home. I quit.

NM: What were the differences between being in the South and being in the North? Was anything unusual or different to you?

LM: It was damn hot, that's what. [laughter] You know, in those days, you had blue denims for your drill uniform, not khakis, not greens, like now, the same as the blue denims that you wear, and we'd sweat like hell going down there and these were cheap dyed blue. ... When you finished your day, from your upper ankle to your wrists, you were blue, blue, and there's only three showerheads in a building with sixty men in it. So, you ... didn't even get a damn shower and only the first two guys in there got hot water. So, anybody else who wants to shower, you did it with cold water.

NM: You mentioned that when you got to Camp Croft, it was still under construction and that your uniforms were denim. What type of equipment were you using to train with?

LM: No equipment. We just had our rifle. I never saw anything else. I don't even remember seeing a Browning Automatic. All we had were our rifles and we had '03 rifles, 1903 rifles, from World War I. ... Within a platoon, there was one M-1 [Garand] rifle and we're supposed to learn

from that. When I went overseas, our regiment had M-1 rifles and we went to Hawaii and it was a big advance in the strength there, because they had four regiments, but they all had '03 rifles and they had machine-guns, but they didn't have machine-gun tripods. They had machine-gun tripods from the water-cooled machine-guns, which weigh about forty-eight pounds. No, we didn't have anything. We didn't do any kind of map reading, that I remember. We did close-order drill. I remember that. We did marksmanship. That was a good program, right, started right early. Like, the second or third day we were there, they started on that. We went and did some antiaircraft training. They run a plane across on a wire and we had twenty-two-caliber rifles and we fired there. I can't think of anything, any other training. I know the damn parades were hard. They'd parade with fixed bayonets on this field that you had to jump over a ditch and you're afraid, if the guy in front of you stumbled and you jumped, you'd get that bayonet in your chest. [laughter] Oh, it was hot there. It was really hot. That's where we learned how to relax. You know, we'd come in in the morning for lunch. You started out at seven-thirty in the morning and, at training, you had Reveille, first call, and police call, and then, you had drill call at seven-thirty and you trained until eleven-thirty, and then, you come in and, if you were lucky, you washed your hands. If you weren't lucky, you went with dirty hands, and you had lunch and you went back to the barracks and the Sergeant'd say, "It's quiet hour now," and, if you sat up and started talking with a neighbor, he'd come out and yell at you. Everybody would lay down and relax and you'd actually go to sleep, and then, five minutes before drill call, he'd come in and blow his whistle and everybody'd get up and get ready again, but you learned how to relax. You'd go out in the field--sometimes, you got a ten-minute break between hours of training--and you'd lay down on the grass and go to sleep for two or three of those minutes and it really relaxes you.

NM: Were the men that you were training with, about a thousand men, all from the New York area or were they from all over the United States?

LM: I have no idea. The men in my platoon, which is all you knew was your platoon, were mainly and mostly from New York City. They were all from New York City, a whole bunch of them. The one fellow, ... his family was noted in opera in New York, (Salmage?). Yes, that's that last name, (Salmage?), Guido (Salmage?). I think his mother was a singer, his father was a producer and he sang some, and one of the men was a veteran of the Spanish Civil War and he worked with the Communists. They were on the Communist side. One of the fellows, the one next to me, John Horito, he had a course in welding. When we were in Hawaii, he managed to get transferred out of the infantry into the Air Corps as a welder down at Hickam Field. One of the things that was interesting, we'd only been in the Army, oh, about two weeks, maybe about two weeks, and we're down at the range the first time and I'm standing or sitting, standing, on the ready line and this officer comes over and calls me over. ... He starts asking me questions and a first sergeant comes running up and he answers one of the questions and the officer brusquely dismisses him and he sits down on the bench, a bench like this, on the ready line and he starts talking to me and asking me questions. I didn't know nothing. You know, I'm in the Army for a week or two weeks. ... I didn't know nothing, but what he was finding out was how well the instruction had gone for rifle marksmanship. This guy was a bird colonel. He became a major general, a division commander, in the Pacific and he was taken out of there and I think he had a corps in Europe. So, he went from colonel to a three-star general. ... The funny part about it is, twenty-five years later, my son was at Fort Dix and the general officer was his son.

NM: What year were you drafted into the Army?

LM: I was drafted before the war, in 1941, July 1941. [Editor's Note: The Selective Service Act of 1940 required all twenty-one to thirty-five-year-old males to register for the draft. These age parameters were expanded to eighteen to forty-five years of age after the United States entered the war.]

NM: How long were you in Camp Croft?

LM: I guess sixteen weeks, basic training.

NM: Where did you go after Camp Croft?

LM: I was assigned to the 34th Infantry, which was based at Fort Jackson, but they were out on maneuvers, the Carolina Maneuvers of '41. So, I was at Jackson for about three or four days. We went out and we lived on dirt then, you know, and was out approximately a month when they changed--well, they had changed the organization. The Army divisions had been four infantry regiments and they changed it to three infantry regiments in a division. So, the 34th Infantry was the odd regiment and we were assigned to the Philippines Department. So, we traveled across the country and we got to Presidio, San Francisco, about the 2nd or 3rd of December of '41. We occupied barracks. They had big barracks there and loaded all our equipment--rifle company didn't have any equipment to any extent, they had one vehicle--on the USS *President Johnson* and that was an old bucket of bolts that had been built in the 1900s, 1910 or 1911, got everything loaded on. We were going to load our personnel on on December the 8th. So, December the 5th, we all had--oh, I guess the 4th--we were given passes and we had a good time, spent all our money and we're in our barracks. I remember, I was on the bunk, laying there, just waking up Sunday morning. The radio was on the shelf there, by the window, by the sill, and this guy is screaming, "They're bombing Pearl Harbor. They're bombing. It's Japanese planes," ... screaming at the top of his lungs and I said to myself--I figured that I was going to get out of the Army. To start with, you know, I was drafted for a year. I was in the Army for about four weeks and they said, "No, we're going to have to make it ... a year-and-a-half or two years." I was in the Army six weeks and they said, "Oh, we're going to make it two-and-a-half years." So, I had expected to get out, but, then, he's screaming about this and I'm saying to myself, "Oh, shit, I've got to stay in now until this war ends and Lord knows how long that'll take." [laughter] That's all I was thinking about. So, they issued us ammunition and this was December the 8th. They sounded an alert alarm and I remember ... they had a little PX [post exchange] building right in the center of the square and we were drinking Miller High Life, pouring a round for five or six of us, and the alarm went off. We poured the beer around fast and drank, drank our glasses, ran in the barracks, got our steel helmets, our gasmasks and we had ammunition then, our ammunition belt and our rifle, form down on the street, ran up the street to the cemetery, and then, spread out and everybody got their own gravestone, sat down, leaned up against it and went to sleep. So, they took us from there, you know. On the 13th of December, we loaded on to a ship. They had converged the three fastest passenger ships on the Pacific. ... *Lurline* is one of them. These three ships were all [troopships], been converted. ... The *Monterey* was one of them, I think--*Matsonia*, *Monterey* and *Lurline*, that was the three ships. You know, it's funny how there's

blanks in your mind and, if you wait a minute or two, the blank fills, you know. So, we loaded on these ships and we ate the ship's rations for the first two or three days. ... We loaded on on the 13th and we sailed on the 16th and I remember going out underneath the Golden Gate Bridge, and then, thinking, "Well, that's the last time I'll see America." I had read a lot about World War I and how these infantry platoons went up with sixty men and came back with eight, or go up with sixty men and come back with three. So, I figured that was it. So, we didn't know where we were going. We had these three ships. That was the total amount of the ships being convoyed. There's Navy on one ship, filled up on one ship, and the other ship had a field artillery unit, plus, I guess, some of my regiment. ... When we woke up in the morning, there was a heavy cruiser, a new destroyer and two World War I destroyers escorting us and we zigzagged during that day and, for antiaircraft guns, for antiaircraft, we put all the men that had BARs up on the top deck. You know what a BAR is?

NM: Yes, Browning Automatic Rifle.

LM: Yes, you're right, automatic rifle--all the men up with them, on the top deck, and they had some thirty-seven-millimeter antitank guns. They were lashed down. They were supposed to be able to fight off the enemy ships. So, we sailed with those four escorts that day and, that night, those two four-stack destroyers left us, because, when we woke up in the morning, we only had the cruiser and the one new destroyer and the three transports. I don't remember wandering around the ship much and seeing the other ships when we were making that passage. We thought we were going to the Philippines, ... because that's where the fighting was, but, at dusk on the fifth day, we saw the Aloha Tower [Honolulu, Hawaii] and we could recognize the Aloha Tower. ... We knew that from pictures, somewhere. So, we unloaded there and put us on trucks. It was dusk. By the time they got us to where we were going to stop, it was dark and they said, "Get off the trucks. Go to the left and bed down." So, we got off the trucks, we went to the left. We had our full field packs and a horseshoe roll and we bedded down there. It was nice grass. The weather was nice and warm. So, I was woke up in the morning by these terrible, big noises of motors, and what it was, we were on the edge of the main channel going into Pearl Harbor, the little strip of grass there, between that, the main channel, and Hickam Field and these PBVs from Sand Island were coming along and going down this main channel and taking off. ... That's what woke us up, these damn motors going. You could see Hickam Field. Sand Island still was burning and smoke coming out it. You'd look at Hickam Field--Hickam Field was just across the macadam road and the fence was right there--and you could see a big pile of airplane parts still burning [at] Hickam Field. You know, aluminum burns--you get it hot enough, it burns and that's what it was, the aluminum planes were burning. So, they took us from there to Hickam Field and they put us in the 19th Infantry's barracks. There was four regiments there, the 19th, which was the Rock of Chickamauga, the 21st, which is, "I'll Try, Sir," that's their song, the 27th, which is the one in that book, which are the Wolfhounds. They served in Siberia and China. ... The 21st [Infantry] served in China, too, and the ... 35th, they had a cactus for their insignia. I think that was the regiment that hunted down Geronimo. So, we were in there, and then, in about three or four days, the men come in. They were all out in the field and they cleaned out their footlockers and their foot lockers. I've still got a memento from that. You know, you have these regimental insignias that you wore on your coat. There was one of these regimental insignias in the bottom of the footlocker that I got. It was chipped. I've got it to this day. It's right in the other room. That was funny, though. We were in there and I had guard

duty. I think it was Christmas night; it was Christmas or New Year's night. I had guard duty and I had this other rebel, there were two of us on guard. I don't think I spoke six words to him in all the time we'd been together. We got on this guard post and he started talking and I found out all about how a sawmill, one of these portable sawmills, works in West Virginia. [laughter] He talked all night long. I listened to him, very interesting. Then, finally, we went out. We went out in the field. We relieved some regiment out [there] and we went to what they called the other (AWA?) and ... there was a sugar mill and sugar fields and we were right up off the beach. There were high trees and all coral and what we were doing in the daytime was clearing the brush and burning it and, if there were any lumps of coral, and they'd be lumps like this, they'd put them in this place where there was a low spot and pulverize them with the sledgehammer and there were some positions dug in. They were dug in with a double diamond and each corner of the diamond had two machine-guns. When they fired from this corner to this corner, they would fire like that and have crossfire, and then, they had two going out, like that, matching the other two machine-guns. So, you'd have a platoon in one of those dugouts, one of those strongpoints. There was barb wire and everybody had an automatic weapon. If you weren't serving on a machine-gun, you had a BAR. If you didn't have a BAR, you had a Thompson submachine-gun, but everybody had their rifle, plus, an automatic weapon. I remember there, one time, we had busted some stone and there was a hole in the coral about, oh, as big as this room and I don't know how deep, and I walked passed it and I turned around, looked back, and there was a damn wildcat coming out of it. ... That cat had the meanest face on him I ever saw in my life. You actually startled when you saw him. [laughter] ... That duty wasn't too bad. What happened there that was funny, you know, we're out in the field, you've got to have a place for sanitary reasons. So, we were cutting in a hole for a commode, ... a three-hole commode, wooden thing, box, and I got a detail there. ... We had two jackhammers. There's me and an Indian and some kid from Jersey and we're down, we've got a lantern lit, you know, one of these old-fashioned lights, kerosene lights. We're down there and two of them are using jackhammers and I'm throwing the stuff out and a hose blows. Well, when the hose blew, I knew immediately what happened and I jumped out of the thing. These guys got trapped by the hose and the hose whips back and forth, beats the hell out of them, scares them completely. They jump out of the hole and they run right through a barb-wire fence, double-aproned barb-wire fence, they ran through it. How they did it, I don't know, but we kept a light burning all night long, even though we were on the beach, because it was down in the hole and you couldn't see it. They would give you these compressors and, when they gave you this compressor, they gave you one engineer man that could run the compressor and you had to run it steady, with two people on the jackhammers, steady until you got your hole dug. ... As soon as you got your hole dug, it went away to some other place.

NM: How long was your duty in Hawaii?

LM: Thirteen months.

NM: Where were your defenses being set up? What part of Hawaii were you in?

LM: Oahu, I was on Oahu. Oh, see, I started out as a rifleman in F Company and they expanded the regiment to have a cannon company. So, I volunteered for the Cannon Company and I was with the Cannon Company five months, but we had real dumb company commander, a real

redneck. You know how they make the cartoon rednecks? Well, he was the model for a cartoon redneck. I heard--I don't know how true it was--but, when he went into action, they relieved him. They wouldn't let him take the company in. So, he was the company commander and they had one lieutenant there who was a straight infantry officer, but, then, they got in a second lieutenant who was an artillery officer. He had been an artillery first sergeant, went to OCS, and they sent him over to Hawaii and they put him in this Cannon Company. ... He picked me. Well, you know, I told you, I had a very high AGCT test. He must've gone through those, because he came in, he was only there about five or six days, and he picked me and he was teaching me map reading, fire control, range finding, how to set up your guns for parallel shooting with the aiming circle. He was teaching me all of that stuff. I was a willing student.

NM: Not many people could talk about Hawaii during the time you were there.

LM: Yes.

NM: Could you talk about how life was there at that time?

LM: Okay. First off, you're very, very restricted. For a month or so, I don't think we were allowed outside of the company area, and then, we could go to a movie on post, but, when you went to the movie, you took your rifle and gun belt and steel helmet and gasmask. Then, after a while, you didn't have to take your rifle and gun belt. Now, don't forget, the gun belts had ... sixty-four rounds of ammunition in them. So, they were pretty damn heavy. ... After about a month, they allowed ten percent of the men on pass. So, theoretically, you got a pass every ten days, but, actually, something would happen--there'd be an alert, you'd have a movement, there'd be something happened--and you were lucky if you got two passes a month. When we started, the passes were from eight o'clock in the morning to four o'clock in the afternoon. ... You got them wherever you were, but I'm thinking of Schofield Barracks. You had to go by bus from Schofield into Honolulu. Now, I'll tell you what we did in Honolulu, but I don't want this on the record.

NM: Okay.

[TAPE PAUSED]

LM: ... After breakfast in Honolulu, we would go out to Waikiki and go swimming and we'd get one of these surfboards, and these were really surfboards. They were boards about twelve to eighteen feet long and they were heavy. It'd take two people practically to lift them up. They weren't like these Styrofoam things they have today. These were real heavy, and we'd swim there for a few hours, and then, we'd try and go into a bar that would be there. ... No matter how much money you had, you couldn't buy more than two drinks. That was the absolute limit, two drinks. They wouldn't sell you any more and we'd go into a bar there, and then, by that time, it was time to go home. Discipline was terrible. They had these prewar MPs and, if you had your tie--we used to wear our tie tucked in in-between the second and third button--if you had your tie out, they'd write you up and, if you got written up, it went to your regiment. It went down to the company and the Company Commander'd put you in for a summary court-martial, which was ridiculous, for minor things, if your hat was on backwards or anything. Any time you got written

up, they gave you a summary court-martial. ... A summary court-martial, you wind up in the stockade and they used to take the prisoners out and up above Schofield Barracks was this pass over the mountains, Kolekole Pass, and on the Schofield side was a rock quarry. ... Those guys had to use sledgehammers and hand drills and drill holes into the rock. The rock was pretty soft, wasn't granite or anything like that, and then, they'd load it up with explosive and they'd blow the side of the hill out, and then, they'd have to go in with sledgehammers and make little ones out of big ones. ... When they made them small enough, they'd pack them up and take them off for roads somewheres. I never saw one of the roads. I saw the trucks go by, but I don't know where they went. ... Life was pretty damn tough there, no time off, discipline was very, very strict. It was too strict. As a matter-of-fact, after the war, all the civilians that had been in the Army's voice was heard and they changed from the Articles of War to the Uniform Code of Military Justice, which is what they have now. [Editors' Note: The Uniform Code of Military Justice replaced the Articles of War in May 1951.] ... During the war, a company commander could reduce a man for no reason whatsoever. He'd just say he's inefficient and he got reduced. Nowadays, a company commander can only reduce a man from PFC [Private First Class] to private. Anything else has to go before a board.

NM: When you volunteered for the Cannon Company, what were your duties and how had they changed from what you were doing before?

LM: Well, I'd been a rifleman and, now, I was supposedly on a gun crew, but this lieutenant took me out and I was what was called an (agent?) corporal or a radio operator, but I was never promoted. I was there for this period of time and what happened was that somebody had decided to make another regiment back in the States. They took a cadre. At this time, the 27th New York State National Guard was over in Hawaii and they took a regiment out of their--a regiment cadre--out of their division, but nobody had a cannon company. The reason the 34th had a company, cannon company, was because we had a smart regimental commander. The only guns that were available were some World War I British three-inch guns. They had been declared obsolete in 1936. He had them issue us six of those guns. He didn't have prime movers, so, we got cargo tracks, but they got all the instruments. ... As I said, this officer had trained me on these instruments and they had this ... regimental cadre coming out of the 27th Division. They had to get a cannon company cadre, so, they took it out of my regiment, the 34th Infantry, and I was jumped from private first class to sergeant. ... We came back to the States and, when we came back to the States, they didn't know what the hell to do with us. We landed at Camp Beale, California, for five months. We came back in March and, in September, they were going to form a cannon company up in the 91st Division. So, they took my cadre out of that group and sent us up to the 91st Division. There's about twenty-one or twenty-three men in a cannon company cadre. They split us up three ways; we went to each one of the regiments. ... While we were on the cadre, the first sergeant was AWOL [absent without leave]. He got tied up with some girl and they promoted one of the sergeants, the platoon sergeants. So, they had a board and I appeared on the board as a contestant and I got the promotion. So, I basically went from PFC to platoon sergeant. So, I got it, but it's now a matter of holding down the rank, and I did very well at that. ...

NM: What was the timeframe when you left Hawaii?

LM: I left Hawaii on the 20th of February, 1943.

NM: Then, you joined the 27th Cadre.

LM: Right then and there, I joined them.

NM: How long were you with the 27th Cadre?

LM: For five months, from February until September; it was February, March, April, May, June, July, August, seven months.

NM: Were you in California during that time?

LM: Yes. When I went to the Ninety-First, that was in Oregon. ...

NM: Does anything stand out about that trip, or anything else about your travels?

LM: Yes, getting on a train, I counted the number of men and what was on the train and what they were doing was putting two men in the bottom bunk and one man in the top bunk. So, I counted the men and made sure that I wound up sleeping by myself [laughter] and I did. I remember stopping in Texas. There's a damn (northabar?) blowing at the time. They'd stop us once in a while and we'd get out and exercise a little bit and get back on. It took us five whole days to go from South Carolina to Presidio, San Francisco, five whole days. I remember going through Salt Lake City and looking at the mountains there. There was ... nothing special. I don't remember what we ate on the train. I can't remember that.

NM: What were your duties during the five months you were in California?

LM: We were just in a cadre and the officers were supposed to give us some training--they gave us no training. We did some close-order drill. We did some PT [physical training]. We went to the, what do you call it? the field house, did some PT there. I remember fainting there. They had this exercise where you squat, you put your hands out and you tense all your muscles and you start to rise. When I tensed all my muscles and start to rise, I fainted. That's only twice in my life that I fainted. Yes, that's about all we did. We did, really, nothing there.

NM: Going back to the 91st Division in Oregon, what was your experience there like?

LM: Well, when I got up there and we got assigned to this cannon company up there, all the platoon sergeant positions were filled. So, the Company Commander said I was the recon sergeant and I was supposed to have a jeep and a radio operator, which we didn't have. So, I used to ride around with the Company Commander. The Company Commander, incidentally, was a West Point graduate. There were two regular Army officers, two regular Army officers, in the regiment, the regimental commander and my company commander. So, I used to ride around with him. So, these other sergeants had volunteered for Airborne and they were called and that opened up a platoon sergeant's job. So, here, I went from being more or less a PFC to being a platoon sergeant and, when I got in there, I was the senior platoon sergeant. So, that meant that I

handled the company almost all the time. Most times, when we were in barracks, an officer would be there for Reveille. ... I would form the company, take the Reveille reports from the platoons, give the Reveille report to the duty officer and he would leave. Then, we would go and have our breakfast. We would clean up our barracks, and then, we would fall out for drill. I would fall a company out for drill and march them to the drill area, which, in our case, was only a couple of hundred yards away, and I would start them off on drill. I would form the company for calisthenics or I would give them their first exercise. ... Then, I would pick a junior non-com who was either very new or was weak and I would make him give the exercises. I wanted the company to know that he had just been promoted to corporal, but, now, he was a non-com and could handle things and I would move them along like that. Then, after that, I would form the company back up at the end of drill call and we would do some kind of platoon drill, in which case each platoon sergeant would take his platoon and do that platoon drill. It might be manual of arms, it might be a close-order drill, it might be ... what we called "cannon company hop," formation to cannon company. We trained the men--you had about eight men on a gun crew--and you trained the men for each and every position on the gun crew. ... I'd bring them in for lunch, take them out again for drill, wouldn't see an officer in all this time. Sometimes, when we were out drilling, I would see the Company Commander peek around the gun shed and take a look at us. ... I had to read the drill schedule every day and, if nobody was posted for being the instructor, I did it and there were some things, like when you had close-order drill, manual of arms, each platoon sergeant would do it, but, if it was a company drill, I did it. If it was a company class, I did it. So, I got quite a reputation, I guess, at that time, without knowing it. Basically, see, the Executive Officer never got out off his ass. He never got out of the orderly room and he could've been a big help, because he was an RA [regular Army man] from before the war. The First Sergeant never got off his ass; he never came out. The three platoon leaders, they were all going to a school of one type or another and the Company Commander is giving the schools. So, basically, I was handling the company, without realizing it. That's what I was doing. ... In the evening, I brought them in at recall, took the company out for retreat and that was the end of the day, after supper, but, after supper, I had the drill schedule and I would read it and they would have reference, "You're going to teach paragraph such-and-such, field manual such-and-such, chapter such-and-such." I would look it all up and my training aids would be a pencil and two-by-three notepad. That was my training aids. One time, the Company Commander, it was raining like hell--you know, Oregon's quite wet in the spring, it was raining like hell--the Company Commander said, "Keep them in the barracks and keep them occupied." "Yes, sir." So, I put them all in the barracks. They're all in the barracks and I went through every weapon that we had, from the pistols to the carbines to the rifles to the machine-guns--we had fifty calibers in the trucks--to the canons and the use of them and how, "Someday, somewhere, sometime, we're going to ... be on the road and the road's going to be cut and we're going to have to fight our way out and this is why you have to know it." ... Two years later, that came true, two years later. The road was cut and we had to fight our way through. So, we ... formed at Camp White. We went out on maneuvers for about a month. We went into Camp Adair and we stayed there from the fall until the spring, and then, we were shipped overseas. We crossed the country by train again and we went to--let's see, I'm trying to think of the name of that post. It's the one down at Norfolk. I can't think of the name of it. We went through there and we got on ships. I don't remember the date we got on the ships and we went in a big convoy, you know, one of these convoys you couldn't see the whole damn convoy, it's so wide and deep. ... Because I had taken a group of men to an antiaircraft school, they took all of the men and

they went on the twenty-millimeter guns or fifty-caliber guns that they had along the sides of the ship and one of the ship's crew, one of the Armed Guard, was with them on that gun, but they put me out on the three-inch gun forward. These ships--it was a Liberty ship from World War I, that type of ship--they had a three-inch gun forward and a five-inch gun in the stern and they put me on the three-inch gun as a pointer. [Editor's Note: Hog Islanders, freighters built by the Emergency Fleet Corporation during World War I, were constructed in a temporary shipyard established on Hog Island near Philadelphia, Pennsylvania. They were the forerunners of the Liberty ships of World War II.] Well, it was a stupid thing to do. What the hell did I know about it? They should have kept one of their own Armed Guard on it, but you pushed this reel around and you're supposed to be aiming at an airplane. I don't know, they said, "Aim at a cloud." I didn't see nothing up there. So, every time a guy hit me on the shoulder, I fired the gun. So, that wasn't too bad, because it kept us out of the hold. During the night, when we were over near Europe, the convoy split up and one part of it went to the Mediterranean and one part of it went to England, and my part went to the Mediterranean. ... There was an alert and, ... aboard a ship, that's a scary damn thing, an alert. You're down in this hold and the bunks are five or six high. There's no room between them, there's hardly an aisle, and everybody's got to stay in their bunk. ... Because I was on the Armed Guard, I was allowed, and my other men, were allowed up on deck to man the guns. So, I manned my three-inch gun along with the gun crew and the sirens are blasting away and there's searchlights searching around and I could see a French destroyer cutting in front of us, painted all crazy. It lasted about a half-hour and I'll tell you, you're scared shitless when you're on one of the ships. ... Somehow or other, I got down in the engine room and those Liberty ships have got one huge piston that goes like this, one huge piston, very big piston, and the catwalk is right up against the outer part of the hull. So, there's only an inch of iron between you and the ocean when you're on this catwalk and you can actually hear the water going past as the ship goes through. You could actually hear that water. It's a scary situation. I would never let personnel go down there that didn't belong there. It's that scary. So, we got into North Africa and we landed at ... Oran. There's a big fort up on the top of the hill. I forgot what the name was. We saw nothing about Oran. We got off the ship, on to our trucks. Somehow or other, they got our trucks out there and we went east, past a little town called Port-aux-Poules, and we went up on the ... Mediterranean. There's only this beach, a road, and then, a slight rise in the ground, maybe twenty feet or so. We're up on this plateau and there's an old French fort there. We couldn't go in it; they had the gates barred, an off limits sign and a lock on it. It wasn't inhabited, but it was an old square. It was something out of Hollywood, was a square and the back of the square had three rooms on ground level and the center room had two rooms above it to make it a tower. There was a firing step around this wall and it was two planks and there was just the timber about the thickness of your wrist stuck into the wall that these two planks were on. ... When you think of the time that it was probably built, probably sometime around 1850, and some of the rifles that they had at that time were good. They were accurate up to a hundred yards, but they were good as far as a thousand yards, you know. ... When they put a ball in, the ball was much bigger than the tube and they tapped the ball in with a mallet and the ramrod. So, it had a real good fit and those things would shoot a thousand yards. ... They controlled that road along the Mediterranean. That's what that fort was for. We had this little town of Port-aux-Poules. ... The MPs, they were a detachment in those days and the Division Commander and part of his staff had come over and half of the MP detachment was there. Well, the MPs had to guard his headquarters and they had to guard the water supply and they didn't have enough men. So, they got a group from my regiment. Well, it

came down to where they wanted a certain amount of men and three sergeants and my platoon, or one of the Cannon Company platoons, fit right in with it. So, my platoon and myself gets assigned to that and we get an additional sergeant in, a Hawaiian. He was William (Roebach?), was the sergeant, and we go down. They attach us to an engineer company that's on the beach. They handle DUKWs [pronounced "ducks"]. Do you know what a DUKW is? It's an amphibious truck. They handled DUKWs and they used my men for guards and each one of the sergeants has got a relief, that the MPs take care of it all. It was a pleasure working with these MPs. They had all been hand-selected by the original division commander and they were all prior law enforcement officers. Some of them were policemen, most of them were forest rangers. There was one guy who was a detective from East St. Louis. East St. Louis in the '20s was one of the worst places in the United States and this guy had actually fought Joe Louis [boxer and World Heavyweight Champion from 1937 to 1949] in the preliminaries. Do you know who Joe Louis is?

NM: The boxer.

LM: Yes, he was a terrific boxer. Joe Louis was a one-punch man. He even took out [Primo] Carnera [an Italian boxer and World Heavyweight Champion from 1933 to 1934] with one punch. So, it was a pleasure working with these guys, because all I did was talk with them. I didn't do anything, I just talked with them, but, after the drilling, we went next-door. There was a wine shop and we drank wine all afternoon. ... I had this one kid, Smitty--William Smith? I don't know what his first name was--Smitty, we called him Smitty, and he was--how can you put it?--a child of the Depression. He was raised on the streets, I guess, and he was drinking there and I said--he had a driver's license--I said, "Now, Smitty, don't drive the truck back. Leave the truck here. Wait." "Okay." So, I took the rest of the guys, about eight or ten of us, we're all half crooked from drinking wine, and we walk home. That damn Smitty takes the trunk and, on the way home, he hits a wall and, you know, all these people have--their gardens are walled, they're not fenced like ours were opened, they're walled. He hits this wall, knocks the damn wall down and there's a French family sitting on the other side of the wall having supper. [laughter] Well, nobody was hurt. The fender on the car had a dent in it and that was about it. Smitty, after the war, Smitty didn't make it on his own. He wound out, a year or two later, dead drunk, dead in the street. ... So, you know, down on the beach, for quarters, you just got a piece of ground. ... I laid up against a big rock. ... If you go on the south side, if you could, it absorbed the heat during the day. When you put your blankets up against the wall, you got that heat off it during the night. All right, when I got there, I saw three or four young women scrubbing clothes on the beach, where a little stream come out. So, I asked one of these engineers, "What the hell are those broads doing there?" He says, "They're washing clothes." I said, "Yes?" He says, "Well, what happened is, soldiers bought them and they're using them to help to wash their clothes and all and they use them, I guess, as prostitutes, too." You know, these Arabs sell their women when they're thirteen to fourteen. The poor Arabs sell them. I was reading, recently, a book about the French Foreign Legion and he describes life going out on an oasis. Now, an oasis isn't what we think of, three palm trees and a well. An oasis is a swampy piece of ground out in the desert. He said these Legionnaires, they'd go to one of the farmers and, for a tin of fish or six packs of ... wax matches, they'd get the use of his tent and one of his daughters, fourteen years old. ... That's their sex. In their posts, like Sidi Bel Abbès, that has a bunch of whores right

there with it. The French carry whores with them, you know. The French Army does. Most armies do, except the United States' and Britain's.

NM: In the situation you are describing, were you working with the French Army?

LM: No.

NM: Were you working with the French Foreign Legion?

LM: No.

NM: Okay. This is the unit that you were attached to.

LM: Yes, yes, this is my regiment. My regiment came over first of the division and we went over to Italy first, too.

NM: Okay.

LM: While we're in North Africa, they had a problem where I missed [it]. I had a one-day pass there and they turned over a DUKW with a group of men. Well, everything went down, you know, the toolboxes, the sight box, the men's rifles--carbines, we didn't have rifles--men's carbines, their gun belts; it all went down. ... This one sergeant, whose name was Bill, William (Roebuck?), he was a Hawaiian, he skin-dived, brought everything up that went down, except one guy's gun belt. They didn't have ammunition in it and he didn't have water in the canteen, so, it had floated away. We got him. He wasn't in our platoon. He worked with us in North Africa. ... One of the squad leaders, who was very much disliked, got busted when we were in Italy and we got (Roebuck?) over into my platoon. I had this one-day pass and I was in an off-limits area. ... I looked down the street and there's something going on down there. So, in Oran, I walked down to look at it and there's a big open field, like the equivalent of four football fields, two long and two deep, and there's a straight line across of people. ... You know, your brain is working, you know, and you say, "Straight lines of people? Isn't so--there's something wrong here." So, when I looked at it closer, there was bundles of rags between us and those people, but that line was being held by a line of gendarmes with batons. ... These people moved back when they got hit with a baton and these bundles of rags were people that were cold-cocked. They probably had fractured skulls for the most part. ... I said to myself, "That's not right, either, because those people can just run over those gendarmes in nothing flat." ... This isn't like fifty or a hundred people, this isn't like three thousand people--this is like ten thousand people. You know, I knew how many people there [were]. I wouldn't say I knew--I knew there was a lot of people. I'd gone to the World's Fair in 1939 and I got right up in the front, where I watched Franklin Roosevelt come in in the car. ... There's a double street behind us and two lagoons and this double street was filled with people. ... This was three hundred thousand people, according to the paper. This group in North Africa had to be a hundred thousand people, as many as that. So, I said, "Even those gendarmes, they can't hold that mob--something else," and I looked around and, as I said, all of these places had walls, you know, all the courts. Sure enough, along the wall, there was a rifleman every three steps, [laughter] and that's what's backing up the

gendarmes. I said to myself, "They're not going to hold North Africa." You know, it took the French twenty years and they lost North Africa.

NM: I am going to pause this.

[TAPE PAUSED]

NM: This concludes the first interview with Mr. Leonard Minch. We are going to schedule a second interview. I am looking forward to coming back to Whiting, New Jersey.

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

Reviewed by Kathryn Tracy Rizzi 3/14/14

Reviewed by Norma Flores 4/1/14

Reviewed by Shaun Illingworth 6/25/14

Reviewed by Leonard Minch 7/2/2015