

RUTGERS, THE STATE UNIVERSITY OF NEW JERSEY
NEW BRUNSWICK

AN INTERVIEW WITH GEORGE LEVINE [AND PAUL CLEMENS]
FOR THE
RUTGERS ORAL HISTORY ARCHIVES

INTERVIEW CONDUCTED BY

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and
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TRANSCRIPT BY

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Molly Graham: This is an oral history interview with George Levine. The interview is taking place on February 18, 2016 in New Brunswick, New Jersey. The interviewers are Molly Graham and I am joined by--

Dean Melchionda: Dean Melchionda.

MG: I like to start at the beginning, if you could state for the record when and where you were born.

George Levine: I was born in New York City, and [phone ringing] that's my phone, [on] August 27th, 1931.

MG: Did you grow up in New York City?

GL: Yeah, in the Bronx.

MG: Tell me a little bit about your family history, starting on your father's side.

GL: Wow, okay. My father was a first-generation American. His father came from Lithuania, I think, yes, it was Lithuania.

MG: Maybe talk about when he arrived and what their lives were like.

GL: The family immigrated to the U.S.A. somewhere in the 1890s. I don't know exactly where. My father was born, what was it, 1899. He was born in 1899, one of a family of four or five children. A lot of stuff I don't remember. He was born in the U.S. The family, which was quite poor, sort of pooled its funds and groomed him to become a doctor. He became the big hero of the family, and he became a doctor and did well. Then, the [Great] Depression hit. I had some diaries that my father left. He struggled a lot when he was a young doctor, because his patients couldn't pay him. He had no car. He had to go by train to see them. Of course, doctors then did house visits. We lived in a two-family house in the Bronx, all attached houses. That's where I grew up. You had to go up a flight of steps to get to my house, and the living room was my father's receiving room for patients. When I came home from school, I had to tiptoe through the receiving room, and his office was right in front of that. Then, he became a fairly successful general practitioner, and we grew up comfortably enough in the Bronx, where I stayed until I went to college. His wife was also first generation. She was born in the U.S. Her father, who was wealthy, owned a hotel, my God, this is interesting, owned a hotel. He was a successful man in Lithuania. He also came from Lithuania. I think he was in real estate, but he owned a hotel. It was called the Luxor Hotel, which was sort of a bath house, and my father became the medical attendant at that hotel. My mother was a teacher. She wasn't full-time teaching all the time I was growing up, but she was a substitute teacher. She would get calls in the morning to come and teach. Every once in a while, she'd come and teach my class, which was very embarrassing. It was basically a middle-class family living in the Bronx. At that point, they tell me that when they moved into the Bronx, there were farms just a few blocks north of that. By the time they left, when would that have been, in the '60s or '70s, by the time they left, they

moved to Manhattan, it was a place that was burning down. It was very spooky to go back and visit when I came back East. I don't know what else you want to know, but that's my family.

MG: I was curious if your father was a doctor during the flu epidemic in the 1920s.

GL: That's very interesting. I really don't know. We've never talked about it. Probably he was in school, in medical school, at the time, because he never did talk about it. As a doctor, he would go out every day, get on the subway, and go visit patients. Just imagine that. Anyway, he didn't have a car, and there wasn't a car in the family, in fact, ever as I was growing up. My brother was five years older than I, and he taught me to drive. I can't remember when, but I didn't have a car until I was in graduate school.

MG: Do you know how your parents met?

GL: No, I have an idea though.

[RECORDING PAUSED]

MG: I had just asked you if you knew how your parents met.

GL: Well, I don't know for sure. Actually, there's a diary. My mother left a diary, in which she talks about meeting my father, but it doesn't make clear what the conditions were. I know that her father was an avid Zionist, and I know that as I was growing up my father was too. My guess is that they must have met at some Zionist meeting in the 1920s. Do you have any water? [Editor's Note: Beginning in the late nineteenth century, Zionism was the movement to reestablish a Jewish homeland in Palestine.]

MG: I have some here, or we can take a break and get some. There is a water fountain in the hallway I think.

GL: I may have to do it.

MG: It is hard to talk and eat at the same time.

GL: Yes, it is. I'm going to stop.

Paul Clemens: There is a water fountain on the first floor.

MG: Just one floor down.

PC: One floor down.

GL: Sorry.

PC: When you get to the bottom of the stairs, turn right.

GL: Okay.

[RECORDING PAUSED]

MG: You were talking about the meetings your parents might have attended.

GL: That's possibly how they met. I don't [know]. They never told me how they met. My mother, good heavens, my mother's diary showed that she was in love with another person, and he jilted her. My father turned up, and she didn't like him. It's funny to read that after my mother died. He kept coming to visit, and they married finally. The actual conditions for their meeting I would guess would be the Zionist connection.

PC: What are the years we are talking about here?

GL: They married in '25, 1925.

PC: They were going to Zionist meetings in New York in 1925. Did they know Louis Brandeis by any chance? Do you know that? [Editor's Note: Louis Brandeis (1856-1941) served as an associate justice on the U.S. Supreme Court from 1916 to 1939. Brandeis became an avid supporter of Zionism later in life.]

GL: My father did.

PC: Okay.

GL: Yeah, yeah.

PC: I was curious, yeah.

GL: Yeah, yeah.

PC: He was probably the leader of American Zionism in that period. That is why I was wondering.

MG: Say more about him and that movement.

GL: I just grew up in the shadow of a very active Zionist life. I assumed that everybody lived that way. I used to, good heavens, every year, there'd be a fundraising activity, and they would give you little tin cans. I would stand at the edge of the subway and say, "Please help the Jewish National Fund. Please help the Jewish National Fund." My life was punctuated with trips to conventions, a lot to Atlantic City before Atlantic City totally declined. I would hear a lot of stuff that put me to sleep. I never was engaged, but at the same time, I always ended up at some kind of affair or other. I know that my parents had weekly meetings. He belonged to an organization. He was president or whatever of the organization called the Bnai Zion, and he

became the president of the Jewish National Fund. He would always be introducing me to famous people that came to speak at these meetings. Conversation at dinner was always about the organization in some way or other. My biggest thrill was meeting Judy Holliday's father, whose name was Tuvim, which means holiday in Hebrew. I met Gerald Ford. [Editor's Note: Judy Holliday, born Judith Tuvim, was an actress and singer. Her father, Abe Tuvim, served as the executive director of the Jewish National Fund in the 1950s. Gerald Ford served as the U.S. president from 1974 to 1977.] [I met] all sorts of people because there would be big meetings, to which famous people were invited for various reasons, politicians usually wanting to get some votes. That was the context in which I grew up. I was totally naïve about Zionism and what it meant and what it was, except that this is what you did. My father's life was totally involved in that, and my mother similarly worked in the organizations that my father led. Zionism was clearly the center of their lives. It was also interesting that my father was intensely anti-religion. He really disliked, and I inherited that part completely, he really disliked public displays of religious activities. We lived in a very Jewish neighborhood in the Bronx, which bordered a very Irish neighborhood in the Bronx. This is bringing stuff back. During the High Holiday seasons, you weren't allowed to do any shopping or anything. He would send me out to get the newspaper. I remember doing that a lot. Zionism was just the context in which I grew up without absorbing much of the ideology or the history of it but recognizing there were rituals in the house and there was all kinds of politics that my father would talk about. I just sort of absorbed that stuff. When I was a teenager, I assumed that that was a great thing. My father was president of the Jewish National Fund, so I would tell people that. I actually worked one year, it must have been in my late teens, I worked one year at the Zionist organization and would write little things for the newspapers that they released. I never really absorbed the passion. He would go off to Israel at least once a year before it was Israel. I remember the celebration in [1948], when it became a state. He would go back regularly and do stuff. [Editor's Note: In November 1947, the United Nations voted to partition the British mandate Palestine into two states, one Jewish and one Palestinian. On May 14, 1948, Israel declared its statehood.]

MG: Let me just pause real quick.

GL: Yeah, sure.

[RECORDING PAUSED]

PC: Before you go on, I have a question.

GL: Sure.

PC: You mentioned you remember 1945. Was there any knowledge in the household that you had of this sort of virtual civil war that was going on in Israel against the British occupation?

GL: Yeah. There was celebration of the heroism of various Jewish groups. What was it, the Haganah? [Editor's Note: Haganah was a paramilitary organization that defended Jewish settlements in Palestine between 1920 and 1948.]

PC: Yes.

GL: Yeah, I remember a lot of talk about that, yeah.

PC: Did Menachem Begin's name come up ever at all? [Editor's Note: Menachem Begin served as the prime minister of Israel from 1977 to 1983.]

GL: I don't remember. I really don't remember.

PC: Okay, yeah. Those were contentious times.

GL: Yes.

MG: Was there footage on the television that you would pay attention to or in the news? This might have been before television.

GL: We got a TV in '46, actually. [laughter]

PC: Wow.

GL: Yeah, yeah. I used to watch *Kukla, Fran and Ollie*. Nobody knows who *Kukla, Fran and Ollie* is. [Editor's Note: *Kukla, Fran and Ollie* was a television series that aired from 1947 to 1957.]

PC: I do.

GL: You do, right? Okay. No, I don't remember. I don't remember. I remember in the movies, there was this guy, *Eyes and Ears of the World*. You'd go to the movies, and there'd be this short news thing with some authoritative voice giving you headlines and showing you pictures. I have a vague memory of that, but, no, nothing else.

MG: You mentioned some rituals in the home related to Zionism. What would those be?

GL: Well, no, not rituals. My family was not a ritual-type family actually. At dinnertime, we would all sit around the table. I would expect to hear discussions, in which I did not participate obviously, about the politics of the various Zionist organizations that he belonged to. I don't remember so much discussions of national politics, although my father was a worshiper of [Franklin D.] Roosevelt. By the time he was older, he was a Republican the way so many liberal Jews became. We kept a semi-kosher home for the sake of his family, but it was really fake. [Editor's Note: Franklin D. Roosevelt served as the president of the United States from 1933 until his death in 1945. Kosher means serving or selling food prepared in accordance with Jewish dietary laws.] In fact, one of the comic things of my childhood was that we would have a dinner with meat, but my father loved ice cream. He would get up from the table and go into the living room and have his ice cream there, so it was kosher. We never had bacon or anything like that in our house. I remember my first taste of bacon, at a place we used to go to in the summer,

because when you went out, you could eat not kosher, but in the house you couldn't. I still have, actually in my kitchen now, I have some leftover utensils from my childhood, and I find it very difficult to use the ones we used for meat when I'm doing dairy or vice versa. Even now, it's that strange aura of childhood. We celebrated Passover. We celebrated Hanukkah, and the tradition was you got Hanukkah gelt. You got money. I remember an envelope specially cut out with a little oval in the middle, so I could see George Washington's face. There was usually a dollar bill in the envelope. That was pretty much it, because my father, as I said, was really not, not religious would be putting it too softly. Everybody in my family grew up more or less atheist, and I am more atheist than less. [laughter] It's been that way for as long as I can remember.

MG: Were you bar mitzvahed?

GL: Yes, I was. You had to be, but the bar mitzvah was for my father, not for me really. I got lots of presents. I spoke with my brother recently. My brother just recently died. He complained, he loved my father, but he really complained about the way my father used the bar mitzvahs as ways to invite people and, you know, do the right thing sort of thing. It was a big thing, but he didn't believe in any of it.

MG: Do you know the reasons for his opposition to religious practice?

GL: I've thought about it a lot, but I grew up in a home where belief just seemed silly, just completely. We didn't have long discussions about it. It's just the way it was. I have no idea why, because his father was quite religious. I remember visiting his father, my grandfather. I hated it, because at Passover, there's a big ritual and you've got to read the whole of the book and so on. Whereas the Seders that I went to at home were brief and peasant, the ones in my grandfather's house were long and tedious and all in Hebrew, so I didn't understand a word. My father did not grow up in a non-believing house. I really don't know why.

PC: I am amazed you grew up without learning any Hebrew at all.

GL: I did.

PC: Oh.

GL: I had to, not that I can remember it now.

PC: Okay, but you had to learn some.

GL: Oh, yeah, I did.

PC: All right.

GL: In order to get a bar mitzvah, I used to go at least once a week to Hebrew school.

PC: Okay.

GL: I remember Mr. Aller, and it was tedious beyond belief. We learned to read Hebrew from probably the age of nine until the age of twelve when you were bar mitzvahed. I could read, I can still actually, more or less, read aloud without any idea of what it is I'm saying. I have two or three words of Hebrew, [laughter] and that's it. All my friends did; I used to lie. We used to have to hand in our little *machberet*, it was called, our little homework book, notebook, and Mr. Aller would say, "Well, I don't see your work in here." I would say, "But I did it," but of course I hadn't done it. It was just a terrible pain but something that I knew I had to do, and everybody did it without a lot of moaning and groaning. I did learn at least to read the symbols, and I learned a little of the meanings. All that, from the time I was twelve on, that was the end. I wasn't going to do that anymore. I'm sorry. I should have stayed with it. It would have been useful. I don't mean I should have stayed with the religious training but with the learning the language, because I love languages and I don't know enough of them. I certainly don't know Hebrew. Well, I can still read the prayers at holiday time.

MG: Did you have other family members that were Zionists, uncles and aunts?

GL: Some of my uncles were. Nobody was as important as my father. My mother's father was a big shot. My father became a big shot. Nobody else in my family became particularly important in the Zionist movement. Maybe not like all families, but our family had its divisions. There were aunts we liked and aunts we didn't like. My uncle lived above in our two-family house. Why I'm revealing all these secrets, it's suddenly emerging. My uncle lived upstairs in the second part of the house, and there was a back stairway, where I could go from our house up to his house indoors. For many years, we didn't talk to the uncle upstairs, but we would swap the Sunday funnies. That's what we called them, funnies. We never bought the *Journal-American*, which was a Hearst newspaper. We were against *Journal-American*, but it had all the good funnies in it. I would give him the *Herald Tribune* funnies, and he would leave the *Journal-American* funnies on the back step. We would swap every Sunday. Now, there's a memory that suddenly came flashing back. The family was frequently quite divided. [Editor's Note: William Randolph Hearst's daily newspaper the *New York Journal-American* was in publication from 1937 to 1966. The *New York Herald Tribune* was published between 1924 and 1966.]

MG: I was curious how your grandfather on your mother's side made his money that he could own a hotel.

GL: I don't know exactly how. I think he was in real estate in Lithuania. When he came over, he was not like my father's father, penniless, so he had enough money to get started. He was apparently very successful. This hotel, which I learned in its later phases became a brothel, [laughter] the Luxor Hotel was a place where lots of famous people went to get their equivalent of saunas or whatever else. Luxor Hotel and Baths it was called. It was in the Forties in Manhattan. He had a lovely apartment on Central Park West, which we used to go to to watch the Macy's [Thanksgiving] Day Parade. We could look out his window, and it'd be coming down Fifth Avenue. I don't know exactly how he made his money. In America, he owned this

hotel, which was the main source of his income pretty clearly, but I think he brought over real estate money with him. Apparently, Lithuania was a good place for Jews to get out of. Both my poor grandfather and my wealthy grandfather were escapees from Lithuania.

MG: Do you know anything about their lives in Lithuania?

GL: No, no. I always regretted that. The short answer is no, I never did pursue that, and I wish somebody had sat my grandfathers down and done an oral history. It would've been really interesting. I know more about my wife's family in Poland than I do about my own family in Lithuania.

MG: Where did your father's father settle?

GL: In Brooklyn.

MG: Okay.

GL: Yeah.

PC: Let me circle back to one question.

GL: Yeah.

PC: I will tell you the obvious that you know. Right after World War II, there was an enormous discussion about what we now call the Holocaust.

GL: Right.

PC: It disappears and it reemerges in American culture. Did you hear anything about the Holocaust right after the war? Was that something discussed? Did it in any way tarnish Roosevelt? Was there any connection with your parents becoming Republicans?

GL: No tarnishing of Roosevelt, absolutely not.

PC: Okay.

GL: No, no. When I learned later in life some of that stuff, it was very painful for me. No, my father worshipped him, and there was no talk in my family about the rejection of Jewish immigrants.

PC: Did the Holocaust itself come up in the late '40s?

GL: In the early days, I really can't say, Paul. I don't think so. I mean, it certainly wasn't a powerful element. I mean, we knew everybody wanted to get out of Germany, but I hadn't heard

about the mass exterminations at all. I'm pretty sure I hadn't, and I don't know when that started. It must have started in the late '40s.

MG: Do you have memories from before the war, growing up in the 1930s?

GL: It's interesting, very few. I have pictures of me in my backyard when I was a little kid. I remember my dogs. My father didn't [like dogs]. That was another black element in my childhood. We had dogs because my brother loved dogs. I love dogs, but my parents didn't. So, we'd have dogs, and they would suddenly disappear. I even made up a little rhyme about that when I was a kid. I remember a lot from teen times, but the early years, I really [do not remember a lot]. I remember sitting on the steps in 1939 and hearing about the invasion of Poland and being scared out of my wits. I remember that pretty vividly for some reason. I remember my father was upstairs listening to a football game on the radio, and that game was interrupted with the announcement of Pearl Harbor. No, I got those two confused, sorry. That was Pearl Harbor when my father was listening to the football game, but the invasion of Poland, I was sitting on the front steps with some people. We were somehow talking about it, and it sounded really scary to me. I would've been eight years old, I guess, then. I don't remember a lot. I remember my first taste of bacon, [laughter] which overwhelmed me with pleasure, because we used to go to this place in the Catskills, which wasn't one of the, you know, like Grossinger's. It wasn't one of those [resort] places with the comedians. It was just a farm, and the people who ran the farm rented out rooms for the summer. We used to get it cheap, because there was an outbreak of some disease there, and my father helped them suppress it and keep it quiet so it didn't scare everybody away. I think we paid thirty-five dollars a week for the family. Somehow I remember thirty-five dollars a week. I remember that. That's funny. I remember that more than I remember living in the Bronx. Every summer, we would go, from the time I was able to remember, we would go to this place in the Catskills, which didn't even have a pool. They used to dam up the brook. We would use that. It never got fancy, but it had a ping pong table. That was '45 when we dropped the bomb, right? I remember that day coming back from, we used to, after breakfast, we'd walk into town. It was about a mile or so away and I would walk to get the newspaper. I remember reading about the atomic bomb and being scared again, but then I was already fourteen. Yeah, I was fourteen already. I remember the farm. I remember working on the farm. I remember really loving to go there. I remember the bacon [laughter] and a lot of the people. I still remember the names of some of the people that I used to play with, but in the Bronx, not so much. The school that I went to, the public school, was P.S. 91. It was two-and-a-half blocks from my house, so I'd walk by myself every day. I'd walk home for lunch. That's right. I would walk home for lunch, and my mother would have left a sandwich or something. I would sing through the house. There was an alleyway. These were attached houses. The back part was attached. In the front part, there was an alleyway about the size of this desk. If I was singing in my kitchen, the poor people living in the house across the way would hear me. Somehow, we got along fine, but we were totally connected. That, I remember. Maybe other stuff will come back, but that I remember. [Editor's Note: On September 1, 1939, Germany invaded Poland, which began World War II in Europe. After the Japanese attacked Pearl Harbor on December 7, 1941, the United States declared war on Japan and entered the war. The U.S. dropped an atomic bomb on Hiroshima, Japan on August 6, 1945

and on Nagasaki on August 9, 1945. Japan surrendered unconditionally within a week and signed the formal surrender on September 2, 1945.]

MG: Were you singing the popular songs of the day?

GL: Yeah, oh, yeah, yeah. I could still sing some of them. [laughter] That's amazing. I have a very good friend who grew up just about the same time I did. Some years ago, we were driving somewhere a long distance, and we started to sing. We didn't know the words were there, and we just kept singing these songs, astonished that we still knew the words, even though we hadn't sung them in fifty years. Yeah, popular songs. We used to listen to the *Hit Parade* on the radio. Do you remember the *Hit Parade*? [Editor's Note: Between the 1930s and 1950s, *Your Hit Parade* played popular songs on the radio and later on television.]

PC: I do, absolutely.

GL: Yeah, okay, yeah.

MG: You brought something up that I wanted to ask you about.

GL: Yeah.

MG: Your father practiced medicine during the depression. Would families find ways to pay him?

GL: I don't know how it worked out. I really don't. I think a visit was two dollars or something like that, but lots of people didn't have it. He complained in the diaries that I saw. I mean, he wasn't complaining that they weren't paying him, but he was complaining that he didn't have any money. I don't know what they did. He developed a really movingly loyal body of patients, clients, whatever you call them, so he must've done them a lot of favors. As a doctor, I suppose he was better off than most other people were. That's one thing I remember about my childhood is that even in the depths of the depression, I never felt deprived. I was very lucky, and he could keep up the house. I have no idea. When he died, I discovered that he had a closet full of liquor. He didn't drink much at all, but patients would give him [gifts]. I still have some bottles. Does whiskey age well? I have some bourbon in my own closet that somebody gave my father. It must have been sixty years ago.

PC: When I found my father's cache of whiskey, which we never drank in the house, I threw it out, but I don't know. [laughter]

GL: I should have thrown it out, but it just struck me, it's my father's. I shouldn't throw it out. I have three or four bottles of something in my front closet that he had. I know that he did get gifts of liquor. If he had one glass of wine, his face lit up like a lamp. We never drank in the house at all. Wine on holidays, that's it, and sweet wine, no less.

MG: What was the interaction between the Jewish part of the neighborhood and the Irish?

GL: There was none. I mean, every once in a while as a kid, I would remember something like turf wars, but we were mild middle-class people, so they never got serious. It was very clear that there was an area where they were all Jews and there was an area where they were all Irish and there was virtually no contact at all. In rougher times, it probably could've gotten nasty, because there were occasional mini-rumbles. [There was] no integration and no serious fights at all. It was just really separate. Even growing up, that always surprised me, but, no, none whatsoever.

PC: In public school, you didn't overlap with Irish.

GL: I must have. I've tried to think about that. Certainly in junior high school, I have a picture hanging in one of our bedrooms, a guest bedroom, of my junior high school class, and I will bet you that ninety-five percent of those kids are Jewish and the names are definitely Jewish. I don't know how it worked out that way. It was quite a peaceful and cozy part of the world, but I grew up surrounded by Jews in every class that I can remember.

MG: Tell us now about your experience with school, maybe teachers that stand out to you or memories from your grammar and high schools.

GL: I don't remember a lot about grammar school, but there was one teacher whom I adored. She was a very tough lady. I used to be fascinated, because she would always keep her hand like this and I later discovered that she had breast cancer. I didn't know that when I was a kid. I was sort of shy, and I guess when I was in grammar school, I was also pretty tubby. I remember her really knowing how to reach me, and I remember her saying, I think to my mother, "He's dumb like a fox." I've never forgotten that.

MG: What does that mean?

GL: It means that I'm really very clever. It looks like I'm not, but I really am. That was the first time I ever had a feeling, I remember, in public school that I was okay because I always felt, like any good, future English major, not in the normal run of things. She, I remember with great vividness. I've always regretted that I never went back when I was mature to thank her, but she had apparently died of breast cancer when I started to look for her. I remember a few other teachers. I remember my mother coming into class. I told you she was a substitute teacher. That was weird. I remember falling in love with Beverly Chase. I must have been eight or nine. She was not Jewish. That's right. She was a beautiful blonde girl, and I thought she was the end. I remember her name. Can you believe that? I had a fairly normal grade school. In junior high school, I somehow oozed into the rapid advancement classes. They had, I don't know what they do now, they probably don't do this, but there was a rapid advancement program. The very best students could skip a term in junior high school, and they got more advanced training. I just slipped in. There were three classes. There was 7-BR1, 7-BR2 and 7-BR3, the r stood for rapid advancement, and I just made it into 7BR-3. That meant that I skipped a term in junior high, and I got out of high school a year early. I finished high school at sixteen, I think it was. I was just a kind of awkward teenager who belonged to a group. Did you grow up in New York? Where did you [grow up]?

PC: No, no, Maryland.

GL: Oh, Maryland, yeah. In those days, everybody formed a club, and they would buy these sort of satiny jackets with the name of the club written on the back. My club was the Demons. I remember, black jacket with yellow writing. Usually, they would stitch your nickname on it. I had no nickname, so since I was tall, they put “Shorty” on it. We had a softball team, which wasn’t very good. I tried to pass myself off as sixteen with a girl who was already sixteen and I was only fourteen or fifteen, and that didn’t work out very well. [That was] junior high school.

MG: Your junior high years overlapped with the war years. Were you getting updates on what was going on in World War II?

GL: Let me try to figure this out now. If I graduated from high school at sixteen, that would’ve been ’47. We followed the war. That’s right. We did air raid drills and we had dog tags and we were supposed to crawl under the desk. Did you do that? You’re a little younger.

PC: I’m younger than you.

GL: Yeah.

PC: I crawled under the desk [during the] Cold War.

GL: Oh, for Cold War.

PC: Cold War atomic bomb drills, they were called.

GL: We had air raid warnings. We had to turn out all the lights in the house, and we had a song, “Whistle while you work, Hitler is a jerk, Mussolini is a meanie, Hirohito’s worse.” Yes. What was the Disney movie [with] “Whistle While You Work”? Oh, that’s *Snow White*, right? [Editor’s Note: Walt Disney released the animated movie *Snow White and the Seven Dwarfs* in 1937.]

PC: Yeah.

GL: I remember very clearly thinking when the war is over in 1945, what are people going to write about? What’s the newspaper going to be like if it isn’t about advances in Normandy or whatever? I got a rude awakening. That was the norm of our lives. We all could recognize silhouettes of fighter planes. What else did we have to know? I knew all about fighter planes at the time. We lived in a sort of war mentality but always really feeling pretty safe. I don’t know that I ever expected that those air raid warnings would be serious, but we did have the dog tags. Did you have dog tags, too?

PC: No.

GL: Virtually from 1939, when I was eight, until 1945, when I was fourteen, it was all war.

MG: Were you worried that your brother, who was five years older, would go in?

GL: He did go in. We only found out about some of this later, but he was on a troopship that was attacked by submarines. He got to Europe just before the end of the war, and he worked in a prison camp. He actually had some close calls, so I was worried. Sure, we were [worried]. I guess we got mail that reassured us that he was okay. Somehow, we knew that he was okay. After the war, he came back and told us some stories about his troopship adventures. My whole childhood, when I was coming to consciousness, was war.

MG: Where was the prison camp that he worked?

GL: I don't know. It was in Germany, but I don't know where. God, there are so many questions I could've asked him. No, I don't know.

MG: You said some of the stuff you did not find out until recently. When did you find out about his experience in the war?

GL: If I said recently, I don't mean it. I mean after he came back, I found out. He's told those stories many times since. [laughter] Finding out how close he was to getting it was a little scary, but he managed fine. He was always much tougher than I was anyway.

MG: In school, is that where you developed an interest or passion for literature?

GL: Somewhere in there, yeah. I don't have one of those moments like you get in a Victorian novel. Through my high school, I was already committed, although, no, I mean, I shouldn't say I was committed. I wasn't committed to literature as a profession. As a matter of fact, I didn't even think about spending your life getting paid for reading books. No, I didn't think about that. I was really interested and I used to, increasingly, of course when I went to college at NYU [New York University], by the time I got there, Fourth Avenue was just endless bookstores. Eighth Street had a great [bookstore], Eighth Street Bookstore, where I bought many books that I still have and that mattered a lot to me. Somehow, it developed. My guess is that teachers had a lot to do with it. My father had a library. The front room that was his office became, by the time I was in college, it had become a library. There, I saw the collected works of Dickens, the collected works of Balzac, the collected works of Conrad, the collected works of Mark Twain and Krafft-Ebing, which is another story. There were books everywhere. I gradually realized I could read those books, and it might be fun. I didn't for a long time. They were just there. He belonged to the Book of the Month club. Apparently, when he was young, he was very literary too, but he stopped being literary. He said reading books is too depressing. He didn't want to read anything sad or painful, but they were all there as a way to start. I still have the Conrad that he had on my shelves. I was surrounded by it. Since I was not one of your super athletes, I spent a lot of time with kids who knew a lot and sort of introduced me to the culture. By the time I got [to] the middle of my college career, I just drifted in the direction [but] even then not realizing. I kept looking for a different major. I thought about psychology, and then I thought about

journalism, because I saw I liked to write. I ended up with a bunch of good teachers. One of them, interestingly enough, was investigated by the McCarthy committee, he was a Communist named Edwin Burgum. He was one of the editors of a journal called *Science and Society*. [Editor's Note: Edwin B. Burgum served as an English professor at New York University from 1924 until 1952, when he was suspended from teaching after refusing to answer questions about alleged ties to the Communist Party when subpoenaed by the McCarran Committee. Also known as the Senate Internal Security Subcommittee, the McCarran Committee conducted investigations during the Senator Joseph McCarthy-led Red Scare of the 1950s.]

PC: That, I know.

GL: Do you know that?

PC: [Yes].

GL: He was investigated by the McCarthy committee. He was a great teacher.

PC: This was a college teacher.

GL: Yeah, yeah. There was a not very great teacher named Eda Lou Walton, who was apparently at the center of a New York intellectual community and was a good buddy of the poet Hart Crane. I just got sucked into this world, without ever saying, "I'm going to grow up to be a professor." It was the only thing [laughter] that followed from whatever I was doing and what I was interested in, but there was no one moment. It was a kind of cultural accumulation.

MG: I want to ask you about New York University but first want to check with you guys and see if there are any questions about growing up, the war years, the depression.

DM: Yeah, I had one.

GL: Sure.

DM: Speaking about popular culture.

GL: Yeah.

DM: When you went to the movies, do you remember big names like James Cagney, Bette Davis or Greta Garbo?

GL: Oh, yeah, of course, I grew up with them. Greta Garbo, she seemed to me older than the rest. I don't know. I don't know whether chronologically she was, but I don't remember ever seeing a Greta Garbo movie at the time it came out, whereas Cagney, *Yankee Doodle Dandy*, sure, and Edward G. Robinson and Errol Flynn. Who are the other guys? Tyrone Power, Robert Taylor, sure. The women, wow, Rita Hayworth. Yeah, sure, I was a regular to the movies then,

yeah. Since there wasn't television, well, there was *Kukla, Fran and Ollie*, but the movies were still king. They've become king again, haven't they?

MG: Paul, did you have anything?

PC: No, I'm fine.

MG: How did you settle on New York University, or what was the college application process like?

GL: I hated New York. I wanted to get away. I applied to Columbia, and I didn't get in. That hurts. [laughter] I wanted to go to Columbia, and if it wasn't Columbia, I really wanted to go somewhere else, but I really couldn't afford to go anywhere else. NYU was, I guess it must have been expensive at the time, but it was twenty-five dollars a credit. If you took sixteen credits, that's four hundred dollars. I could handle that.

PC: That's the Rutgers tuition back then, too.

GL: Was it?

PC: Yeah, four hundred dollars.

GL: Wow. I ended up at NYU, and then I could live at home. I took the subway to school, but I really felt oppressed by New York. Do you remember the movie *Marty*? [Editor's Note: *Marty* is a 1955 film starring Ernest Borgnine and Betsy Blair.]

PC: [Yes].

GL: Remember *Marty*?

DM: Nope.

GL: I'm trying to figure out when that came out. It must have been when I was in high school, but I have this vivid memory of this bunch of young men just like me standing around the corner and saying, "What do you want to do today, Marty?" in the streets of New York. I didn't have the cultural savvy. I've met, in the course of my life, I've met a lot of wonderful pure New Yorkers who grew up roughly at the same time I did and who knew how to take advantage of [Greenwich] Village and all that sort of stuff. I didn't. I used to stand on the corner in the Bronx and say, "What do you want to do today, Marty?" Occasionally, we'd take the train down to Manhattan. There would be stage shows with the movies. I remember going to a few of those. My mother also said, "Don't go into Central Park after dark," which is probably still a good idea. I don't know. I never knew in those days how to take advantage of New York, and I wasn't sophisticated like some of my [friends], like the Woody Allen types. I have a bunch of Woody Allen friends. I just wanted to get out, and I went to NYU. It wasn't a bad experience, but it was very urban and I didn't feel that I was breaking out of my childhood and New York seemed big

and dirty and noisy. I did go to NYU anyway, since Columbia wouldn't take me. It was an okay experience, but my brother, for instance, went to the University of Wisconsin. That sounded like a good idea to me.

MG: What was that first semester like at NYU?

GL: Not particularly interesting. [laughter] It wasn't like a change for me. I used to have to take the train to go to high school, so now I was taking the train in a different direction to go to college. I didn't get any particular stimulation that first year. I do remember the first day of a literature class, which really struck me. From the first thing, I walked in, and the teacher said, "Here's a poem by Blake. Tell me about it." He just threw this poem, which I had never read before. That stuck with me, but other than that, not much.

MG: Were you able to find a sort of niche for yourself there that maybe you had not found in high school in terms of a social group?

GL: Not adequately. I had a bunch of friends who I would meet virtually every day. It never much extended beyond the school, so my social life was similar. I met a few girls there, with one of whom I fell hopelessly in love. It's true. It was too much like the rest of my life. Along the way, I had some classes and teachers who really [stuck out] and made a few friends, but friends whom I rarely saw outside of the university. That one girl, I chased her. I was more like an incipient English major. [laughter] I don't know what else to say. I do remember that Communist's class, which was very powerful for me. Even by the time I finished college, I didn't know what I wanted to do. That was a little worrying. What I did do is I went to the Bread Loaf School of English. Do you know about that? [Editor's Note: The Bread Loaf School of English is a graduate-level program located on three different campuses, Santa Fe, New Mexico, Oxford University in England, and Middlebury, Vermont.]

PC: I know what it is, yeah.

GL: For the summer. That was revelatory. Six weeks up in Middlebury, near Middlebury. Do you know where Bread Loaf is?

MG: I know where Middlebury, Vermont is.

GL: Bread Loaf is on a mountain near Middlebury. I felt like that was my first step out. There were lots and lots of fascinating, interesting people there. Robert Frost was there and would be sage in his way. There were famous poets who came through along with Frost. The teachers were all very famous and distinguished. I roomed with a wonderful man, who was very sophisticated and clever and was very good with women, too. It was just a total education, but even then, I wasn't sure that I was going to be an English professor, although what else I could do after that, I don't know. I went into the Army is what I did.

MG: How did that opportunity in Vermont come up?

GL: I'm trying to figure out how I heard about it. I applied. What made me apply? I had read nice things about it; that's all. It was lucky. I don't think I knew anybody who had gone there. It was something to do in the summer after I graduated. I know, because I was waiting to go into the Army. I was not that bright. When would that have been? When did the Korean War end?

MG: '53, '54. [Editor's Note: The Korean War began on June 25, 1950 and ended on July 27, 1953.]

PC: I was going to say '54, but I'm not sure. I should know this.

GL: Well, I'm talking to these historians. Come on. [laughter]

PC: Yeah, I should know this.

GL: The Korean War.

PC: It ended after [President Dwight D.] Eisenhower was elected, so it's got to be '54.

GL: Well, I got a deferment for college, and then I guess the Korean War had just ended.

MG: In my notes, it says you joined the Army after getting your master's degree.

GL: Oh, my God, you're right. [laughter] You're right, absolutely, yeah. I've got to back up. I'm right about Bread Loaf. I went to Bread Loaf after getting my B.A. and then I went to Minnesota to get my M.A., and then I knew that I was going to be drafted. When I finished college, I still didn't know what I wanted to do, but I was already an English major and I thought I was going to be a writer actually. I was writing poetry at the time and short stories. I still have some, and I should have burned them. [laughter] The other night, I found the file. I've been rummaging through the house with all the garbage, and I found the file of poems in there. They were so bad. Anyway, yeah, I wanted to get out of New York. I didn't know quite what to do. My parents said they would help me, and so I went to Minnesota. Why did I go to Minnesota of all places? Minnesota was an extraordinary place for literature at the time. Allen Tate was there. I don't know if this rings a bell. Allen Tate was a major poet. I guess he's faded.

PC: One of Rutgers' great publications was by Allen Tate, Rutgers Press. That is where I know him from.

GL: Yeah, okay. A lot of the great teachers who couldn't make it at Harvard, because Harvard never hired anybody from its own ranks, were there. Saul Bellow was there. John Berryman was there. So, John Berryman, Saul Bellow and Allen Tate as writers, and the faculty, there were just extraordinary people on the faculty. I had heard that this was a great place to go, and I wanted to get out of New York. I went there and got a one-year M.A. [Master of Arts]. Even then, a one-year M.A. didn't get you very much, but I was going to go into the Army. When I came out of the Army, I still didn't know what I was going to do. I started to rent an apartment in New York and look for a job, and then I decided, "What the hell, I'll go back to Minnesota."

Then, my fate was sealed, but it wasn't until then that the narrow line to becoming an English professor worked out. Yeah, I'm glad you caught that. I forgot. Yes, I did get the M.A. before I went to Bread Loaf.

MG: Can you tell me a little bit more about Bread Loaf? Was there a curriculum, or was it more of a writer's retreat?

GL: No, no, it was a very heavy literary curriculum. I did more reading in six weeks than I would do in a year in college, but it was idyllic. The place was beautiful, you're really in the country but you're surrounded by all these tremendously sophisticated people. I took four courses I think it was, and I read novels and poems. We'd meet around the fireplace, and it was gorgeous. The food was okay. [laughter] It was a wonderful experience. It really was, and we all felt like we were on the Magic Mountain. Coming back to real life was actually pretty hard. A lot of my friends since have taught there. I've never been back. I don't suppose that magic could've been repeated because I really was still an adolescent.

PC: Did Bread Loaf have any sort of political orientation in those early days?

GL: There was almost no politics as far as I can remember. Does it have now?

PC: No. I was just wondering because a lot of schools that were set up in that era had some sort of left leaning, not politics, but left-leaning sort of ambiance.

GL: This was really literary. After all, you're not expecting Robert Frost to wave the Communist banner.

PC: No, no. [laughter]

GL: The literary people, I mean, Allen Tate converted to Catholicism and was fairly conservative.

PC: I was thinking more in the sense of social experiment these schools are.

GL: No, this was not a social experiment school. It was constructed in a very traditional and rigorous way.

PC: Okay.

GL: Absolutely not. They were hard courses and no whatever-you-like sort of thing. You really had to read, and you had to write. The funny thing is it was a lot of work, and I never felt any pressure except the intellectual pressure. It was a perfect ambiance. Let me see, that would have been '52 or '53. I don't remember a presidential campaign going on at that time.

PC: Well, if I've got my dates right.

GL: Yeah.

PC: Eisenhower is '52.

GL: '52.

PC: He's elected in November of '52. He starts in '53, and then the war ends somewhere after that. [Editor's Note: Dwight D. Eisenhower defeated Democratic candidate Adlai Stevenson in the presidential elections of 1952 and 1956. Eisenhower served as president from 1953 until 1961.]

GL: Yeah.

PC: Well, there would have been that summer, yeah.

GL: There would have been that summer, yeah.

PC: Is that right?

GL: Do you have my CV [curriculum vitae] there? What year did I go to Bread Loaf? Do you know?

MG: My guess is '51 is when you graduated.

GL: No, no, I graduated in '52, I'm pretty sure.

MG: Okay. It does not say. I did not know about Bread Loaf.

GL: Maybe it isn't on any record there. Bread Loaf had to have been the summer of '52.

PC: Okay, he's elected by then.

GL: Yeah, he's elected.

PC: So, it's not an issue. [Editor's note: George Levine's edits state that this "must have been an issue."]

GL: On the other hand, I remember, this was at Minnesota, oh, no, Stevenson ran in '56 also, right?

PC: Correct, twice.

GL: I remember the day, [laughter] this was at Minnesota, not at Bread Loaf, one of the great teachers ever, everybody worshipped him. He was sitting on the top of the steps leading to the classroom. As I walked by, he looked up at me, he said, "Every one of those bastards got in."

[laughter] I remember that really vividly. Even then, at Minnesota, I never felt any political pressure coming from the faculty. Things changed after that, but at Bread Loaf, I don't think we talked politics.

DM: Did you experience the beatnik movement at all?

GL: Did I experience it? I experienced it in the sense that I remember when *Howl* [by Allen Ginsberg] came out and I remember all the talk and stuff, but I did not live a beatnik life, no. Yeah, I mean I was there, [laughter] but as with most other things, it passed me by.

MG: When you joined the Army, where did you report to? Where was your basic training?

GL: Fort Dix right in New Jersey. I had had virtually no experience of New Jersey, because New Yorkers thought New Jersey was the pits. They probably still do. It was Fort Dix. It was the big Army base on the East Coast as I remember, and I spent how many weeks at basic training, I can't remember now, a lot. I went in September, and I shipped out to Europe. I don't have the exact dates. When I had leave, I could go home in a flash. It was very easy. My parents also came down to visit me and bring me supplies. My wife-to-be actually came down to visit, too.

MG: Had you met her before you enlisted?

GL: No, I met her in the Army. She just died recently.

MG: I am sorry.

GL: I'm trying to remember now. In my basic training outfit, there was a guy who said he had a cousin and he bet he could arrange a blind date for me. That's interesting what the dates are because I had met her on New Year's Eve, so it would've been New Year's Eve '53-'54. I said, "Okay, I don't have anything for New Year's Eve," so we set up a date for New Year's Eve. I met her at 42nd Street on the subway, and we went to some party or other at that time. That's when I met her. I saw a lot of her when I was on leave. She'd come down to see me before I went to Europe. She came to visit me in Minnesota, after I came out of the Army.

MG: When did you leave for Europe?

GL: Well, I'm trying to figure out, because I met her on January 1st of '54, so it must have been in the winter of '54 that I went over.

MG: I saw this somewhere, maybe in *Lifebirds*, but the name of your ship that you were on. [Editor's Note: Dr. Levine's memoir *Lifebirds* was published in 1995.]

GL: Oh, my God. *General Blatchford*, US *General Blatchford*, yes. [laughter] I mean, there's no reason why anybody should know it. It was a dump. That was horrible. [Editor's Note: The

USS *General R. M. Blatchford* (AP-153) was a transport ship commissioned during World War II.]

MG: Yes, you wrote about that experience in your book.

GL: Yeah.

MG: That things were a little loosey-goosey on the ship and you made the best of your time there.

GL: Yeah. The thing is that we all lived in a hold with bunk beds. I guess it was three, so we lived in piles of three, very tight together in this smelly room, and some people peed in their pants. We were thirteen days on the USS *General Blatchford*. I met a fellow, quasi-intellectual, and we used to have long, long debates about Marx and all kinds of stuff. People would say, "Would you guys shut up." It was not very pleasant down there. There's nothing to do on the ship but throw up, or if you're not seasick, go eat on the occasions. Then, they'd sweep you out of the hold, so they could clean it up. You'd have to stand on deck no matter what the weather was, and then you would pile down. Travelling on a troopship was not fun. I remember that.

MG: Had you done some advanced training before that?

GL: Advanced training?

MG: Yes, after boot camp.

GL: No. In boot camp, I was surrounded by people, that's right, of course, I had the M.A., who like me had been getting deferrals for education, so [there were] a lot of smart guys. Some of them were selected for intelligence units and pulled out. Unfortunately, I was not one of them. Do you know what my training was? To be a base plate carrier in the armored platoon. There were these big armored personnel carriers with mortars on them. My job was when the command of dismount happened to pick up the base plate, run to a spot, put it down, and hide, and then somebody would put the mortar down on top of the base plate and shoot it off. That was my advanced training. [laughter] The first place I ended up in Germany was a town called Baumholder, which was pretty backwards and uninteresting. Because I was virtually the only person in the platoon who could write, they made me company clerk.

MG: Yes, I was going to say clerk.

GL: Yeah, yeah, I was the company clerk, right. As company clerk, I contacted the headquarters of the battalion that I belonged to and asked if I could come up and be on their newspaper, division, not the battalion, but the division headquarters. I was in the Second Armored Division, which was the division of what famous general?

PC: I am going to guess, Patton.

GL: Yes. [Editor's Note: General George S. Patton commanded the Second Armored Division in 1941 and the Third Army in 1944-1945 in its campaign in France and as it reinforced American units in the Battle of the Bulge.]

PC: Yes.

GL: Yes.

PC: That's a pure guess.

GL: I hustled myself a pass. I went to, was it Darmstadt? Where was it? Mainz, I think it was Mainz. I'm not sure now. I spoke with the editors of the division newspaper. Then, I went back and did my company clerking for a while, and they invited me up to go on the newspaper, which was fun. At first, I had to write all kinds of crappy stuff about how wonderful the enlisted men were, but then I became sports editor of the division newspaper. I travelled all over Germany watching division teams play baseball or football or whatever, and I could do it in my civilian clothes. Once a week, I had to go to Darmstadt, which is where the presses were, to see that the copy was appropriately printed. For my last nine months in the Army, as far as you can have in the Army, I had a nice time. Being in the Army, well, I'm glad I did it. It's an experience I'm glad I had, but I wasn't enjoying it much while I was doing it.

PC: Did you speak any German?

GL: I tried to learn it while I was there.

PC: Yes.

GL: I could do *bahnhof* German. I could order an ice cream cone and find directions and stuff like that. I tried to read a few novels in German and I stumbled through it, but I lost it after. I'm sorry I didn't press it further because I could've with a couple of years more. Yes, I did enough, and in fact, I remember, there was a secretary there with whom I read *Hamlet* in German, "*Sein oder Nichtsein- das ist die Frage.*" [Editor's Note: "To be, or not to be, that is the question," is the well-known line from William Shakespeare's *Hamlet*.]

PC: Did Germany look like a country that had been battered to pieces ten years ago?

GL: Depended on where you were.

PC: Yes.

GL: Darmstadt looked like it had been battered. It was divided in zones. There was the French zone, the British zone. One of the zones, they didn't want to do anything, so they left it pretty ruined. Parts of Munich were a mess while I was there too. Some of it looked fine. The little town I stayed at with the newspaper called Bad Kreuznach was actually a *bad*. It was a bath, what we'd call baths [spa]. That was a lovely, lovely town. I really liked it a lot. It looked

beautiful, and there was no sign of any wreckage at all. Some of the big cities, I think it was the French zone, were untouched and [there was] debris. [Editor's Note: After World War II, Germany was divided into zones controlled by each of the Allied Powers, the United States, Great Britain, France and the Soviet Union. The capital Berlin, located in eastern Germany and deep in the Soviet occupation zone, was also divided into four zones. As postwar tensions developed into the Cold War, divisions in Germany became permanent. The United States, Great Britain and France combined their zones, which became West Germany, while the Soviet Union controlled East Germany and installed a pro-Soviet Communist government. In 1948, when the Soviets attempted to block western access to Berlin, the U.S. responded with the Berlin Airlift to deliver food and supplies to the city's inhabitants. In 1961, the East Germany government erected the Berlin Wall to separate East Berlin from West Berlin. The Berlin Wall stood until November 1989.]

MG: Can you explain why there were operations in Germany at this time and what they were?

GL: I was just a GI trying to get out of being in the Army. [Editor's Note: GI, or government issue, refers to an enlisted person in the U.S. armed forces.] There was all this Cold War negotiation about who owned what. Germany was trying to get on its feet as the kind of vital country it became. When I was there *Der Spiegel*, which is now sort of the authoritative magazine, just came out, and I tried to read that, as a matter of fact. Berlin was divided. I never got to Berlin. The postwar relations were just being resolved, and I'm sure there were negotiations among all the different zones. I think there were British, U.S., French, Russian. I'm pretty sure that's the way it was. I don't know exactly what we were doing. What I was doing was trying to goof off as much as possible, and I didn't pay much attention to whatever the politics of our being there was. I do remember, in the first place, in Baumholder, I had to do guard duty in the country. I had to walk around with a rifle, carbine, and fend off the invading hoards. I mean, there weren't any invading hoards, but we kept acting as though this was a defensive active front. We did maneuvers, all that serious Army stuff. I don't know exactly what the politics of it were, and I never did investigate. You guys would know better than I. Why did we hang on to the U.S. zone for so long, and what we were doing there?

PC: Preventing the Soviet Union from moving west.

GL: It's the Cold War, yeah, that's it, yeah.

PC: You're not there at the time of the Berlin Airlift, which is when your stay would have been most politicized.

GL: Yeah.

PC: Because people would have been vitally aware.

GL: No, I was not there.

PC: War could break out.

GL: Yeah.

PC: Other than that, no, I'd say it's completely like any other soldier serving over there.

GL: Yeah.

PC: You're vaguely knowledgeable about what's happening.

GL: Yeah. When I was in the Army, I was quite literally out of the world. There's a curious phenomenon when you're in the Army. It's very strange. Oh, I shouldn't say "when you." "When one is." It's when I was in the Army, there's a curious comfort in the Army. You don't have to think about anything. You're not responsible for anything except what they tell you to do. When I came out of the Army, I was really disoriented because I suddenly had to live. I had to make my own choices. I had to decide what I was going to eat. I mean, everything was suddenly on me, but for somewhat less than two years that I was in the Army, nothing, no responsibility. It's an odd thing because you say, "Look how responsible you are, you're a soldier." Well, all you're responsible for is doing what they tell you and [nothing] beyond that. If I could find somebody who would talk about literature, I would do that, but more important was whether you could get good cheese at this bar on the way back to camp. You knew what you were going to eat in the morning, in the evening, at night. You knew where you were going to sleep. You just did what you were told. It was twenty-one months. I got three months off, so I could go back to school, that's right. There was very little contact with the rest of the world. My world, when I was sports editor of the division newspaper, was to go to Mainz and watch a bunch of amateur baseball players play baseball and write about them and that was it. I was surprised when I came out of the Army how I had lost the capacity to make decisions. I realized I had to decide what to do with my life, because in the Army, you don't have to decide. Not only don't you have to, you can't. There's nothing to decide. You can sort of work your way up if you do x, y or z. I would not be a good commentator on the [Cold War]. I didn't even know how the Yankees were doing, which is, having grown up in the Bronx, that's sacrilege.

MG: That was something we did not ask about during your childhood. Did you get to go to any baseball games?

GL: Oh, yeah, yeah. It's become a lifetime addiction that's never gone away really. My father used to take me to Yankee Stadium, and I fell in love with the Yankees. I know you're not supposed to fall in love with a corporation, but I've never been able to shake it. I tried. When was Jackie Robinson, '46?

PC: No, later than that.

GL: Later than that.

PC: Later than that, yeah. I can't tell you the year.

GL: Yeah, it has to be later than that, yeah.

PC: Yes, it's later than that.

GL: In any case, at the time when baseball was integrating, it was pretty clear that the Yankees were quite reluctant to do it. They had some players in the minor leagues, and they didn't bring them up. I said, "I'm going to stop rooting for the Yankees." I couldn't. [Editor's Note: On April 15, 1947, Jackie Robinson broke the color barrier in baseball when he debuted for the Brooklyn Dodgers. Several months later, Larry Doby began playing for the Cleveland Indians, the first American League team to integrate. In 1955, Elston Howard became the first black player on the New York Yankees. The last Major League Baseball team to integrate was the Boston Red Sox, which signed Pumpsie Green in 1959.] I still do. I haven't been to the stadium in a long time now. I haven't been to the new stadium. Those are some of my best memories of when I was a kid. Yankee Stadium was fifteen minutes away. When I didn't go with my father, when I got older, I'd go with my friends. On Sundays, there'd be doubleheaders. I'd get there about ten o'clock, eleven o'clock in the morning and watch batting practice or fielding practice and then watch a game and then have a break and then watch a second game. I'd get there about ten or eleven, and we'd leave about seven or eight. It was pure baseball, yeah. Those were good days. The year I got interested was the year that Joe DiMaggio hit in fifty-six consecutive games. Does that mean anything to anybody? [Editor's Note: Joe DiMaggio played centerfield for the New York Yankees from 1936 to 1951. In 1941, he hit in fifty-six consecutive games, setting a Major League Baseball record that still stands.]

PC: Yes. [laughter]

GL: Yes, baseball was very important to me. It's actually gotten me through a lot of bad times. I don't go to the games much anymore, but if there's a game on at night, it helps me when things are bad, as they have been recently.

MG: Did you have lined up that you would be returning to Minnesota when you got out of the Army?

GL: No, I did not. I said there was this guy that I met at Middlebury whom I really liked and admired. I was in awe of him. He said, "Why don't we take an apartment in New York and we'll work." He was looking for a job. I was looking for a job. I thought, "Well, I could do that and maybe I could go to NYU." The stresses of coming out the Army, like I've just described, were such that I couldn't stay in New York. I couldn't deal with my own family at that point. I said, "Well, maybe I'll go back to Minnesota," and they took me. Then, my fate was sealed.

MG: In what year would that have been?

GL: '55.

MG: Did you take Marge with you to Minnesota?

GL: No, we weren't married yet. [laughter] She came out to visit me one winter day. This was really weird and funny. I think she came by train. We got a taxi to go to the little room I rented, and I went to pay the taxi driver. Then, I looked back, and she had disappeared. From the ice, she had slid under the taxi. [laughter] Her legs were under the taxi. The winters in Minneapolis were pretty serious. I mean, that was a running joke all our lives that she disappeared that day. That was '55. That was the winter of '55. The summer after that first year, then we got married.

MG: She came out with you to live in Minnesota.

GL: Yeah, yeah.

MG: There is a quote. I do not know where I found this. It says, "My major interest when I went to graduate school was poetry."

GL: That's true.

MG: "Yet the natural development of my work kept pushing me to think about the relations between science and humanistic study."

GL: That happened. [laughter] I was very literary and very unscientific, not that I was anti-science in any way, but it was a world that I didn't know. I was passionate about literature and passionate about poetry. I thought I was going to be a poet. Well, I didn't think I would be a poet, but I wrote poetry. The teachers that I had there, they were all very, very literary people [and] not at all political, not at all scientific. In fact, they sort of not discouraged but they were puzzled by my growing interest. The guy who became my dissertation advisor taught a course that absolutely fascinated me, which was not in Victorian fiction or Victorian poetry, although some of that appeared in the course but in Victorian prose, non-fiction. All of that begins to border on scientific questions, certainly large cultural questions, and I got fascinated by them and I started to read these guys who were always on the edge of science. Then, when I finally wrote my dissertation, it was on George Eliot, whose husband was always playing with science, who was in the center of an intellectual community full of scientists. [Editor's Note: Born Mary Ann Evans, the widely respected and unconventional Victorian-era writer George Eliot is best known for her works *Adam Bede*, *The Mill on the Floss*, *Silas Marner*, and *Middlemarch*.] [It was] not that I lost my interest in poetry, but I got fascinated by ideas, which is probably not a good idea for a literary major actually, and fascinated by the way in which developments in the science I knew very little about were affecting people that I cared about. Slowly but surely I began to drift towards science, but I didn't really start writing about science until after the book that made my career. I was well past graduate school by then. It was a book called *The Realistic Imagination*. [Editor's Note: Dr. Levine's book *The Realistic Imagination* was published in 1981.] That did make my career actually. I had written another book before that, but this was probably the most important book I've written even up to now. I realized by the time I finished that, which was primarily about novels, that I couldn't go on without really reading in the science that so many of these writers had been alluding to or bouncing off of and so on. It really started in the early 1980s, and, what is it, it's now thirty-five years that I've been reading in nineteenth century science. My scientist friends, they laugh hysterically when they think that I'm writing about

science, but I'm writing about nineteenth century science and I'm writing about it in relation to literature. I have been fascinated by it, and I've had moments over the last twenty years when I said, "I wish I had become a biologist." It's too much work probably.

MG: Yes, I had read in your book that you almost wished you had become an ornithologist.

GL: Ornithologist in particular, yeah, because this was parallel. I had a sabbatical in England in, when was it, '71-'72. My son was going to school. He met a young man who was the son of an American who was also there, and it turned out that that guy was a bird nut. He would take my son out birding. My brother had been a pretty serious birder when he was young as well, and I thought, "This is crazy. You go out there, you freeze your what's-it's off and you see a bird, big deal." For his birthday, when we were in England, I took him and his friends out to a forest in Wales and drove them around while they watched birds, still not quite comprehending what they were doing. I got fascinated by it. When we came back home, I bought myself a pair of binoculars and told my son, "Well, I'll go out with you. We'll go look." Well, that lasted about three times, and then my son in his oedipal phase stopped doing it. There I was with my binoculars, just getting really interested. Well, the father of his friend and I became very, very close friends, and he sort of introduced me to the world of birding. Probably even more than the Yankees I like birds. I'm trying to get going again. I just went to Costa Rica and took my son, and we went through the jungles and looked at birds with a group. Finally, I wrote that book, which you apparently read or looked at anyway, *Lifebirds*, which explains the whole commitment. There's a line of [Charles] Darwin's, which I think I quote somewhere, that he doesn't know why everyone doesn't want to become an ornithologist. I went to Galapagos a couple of years ago to follow Darwin and to see those famous birds. Two days ago, I did something I've been putting off for years. I bought myself a high-end pair of binoculars, because I realized in Costa Rica that a good pair of binoculars wasn't adequate to seeing what you really need to see. I went down to (B&H?), and I bought myself a pair of fancy binoculars. That's going to be an even more important part of my life from now on than it was. That ornithology thing tied in with my increasing interest in Darwin. Yeah, if I were a biologist, I'd probably be a bird biologist.

MG: I was curious about the journal you started in Minnesota.

GL: Oh, yeah. Boy, you're really dredging around here. [laughter] Where did you get all this?

MG: A lot of it is online.

GL: Is it?

MG: In your book I read.

GL: In my big graduate years, there were a group of us who were not content with the conventional teaching and criticism of English, and so we said, "Hey, why don't we start a journal?" It's a lot of chutzpah, as we say. We, together, this was way before digitalization of anything, we produced a journal called, fascinating title, *The Graduate Student of English*, in

which we wrote essays about literature and about the culture of literary academia, criticizing it, analyzing it, being smart. It was hard work, because we had no money and we didn't want to get money from the institution because we didn't want it to be institutionally supported. We wanted it to be free to critique. I'm trying to remember. The mode of reproduction was not mimeographing. It was better than mimeographing, but they were sort of paper plates. I can't remember what they called them. You would type [makes the sound ding, ding, ding, ding, ding] on these paper plates.

PC: Stencils?

GL: They weren't stencils, no. They worked like stencils. I can't remember the name now. In any case, we did it all by hand. We wrote the essays. We typed them. We got our wives to type them. We printed them ourselves. We tried to get a nationwide distribution. I think the most we ever circulated was about four hundred copies. It was really a wonderful education for all of us, not only in the problems of printing but in learning how to negotiate. I remember we wanted to quote something from Edmund Wilson, and we wrote to Edmund Wilson. He gave it to his secretary, and she wrote back, "It's going to cost you nine million dollar to do this." We had all this basic stuff that was very useful to learn, and at the same time, we felt that we were making a real contribution to the culture. It was interdisciplinary in orientation, which at the time was more or less adventurous, and it ranged from cultural analysis to criticism. We had one article, I remember, about MLA [Modern Language Association] as a slave market. It wasn't outrageously revolutionary at all. The guy who was the big brains behind it was a Leavisite. Do you know who Leavis was?

PC: No.

GL: F.R. Leavis.

PC: No.

GL: He was a major, major gadfly of the literary establishment in England in the '30s and '40s and '50s, a really interesting guy, a little dogmatic. He got into a big battle with C.P. Snow, C.P. Snow's *Two Cultures*.

PC: Yeah.

GL: You know about that.

PC: That I know.

GL: Well, he was the big attacker of C.P. Snow. This fellow that I worked with was a Leavisite, who indoctrinated me to a certain extent as well. We felt that we were sort of avant-gardely doing a critique. Some of that critique developed through the culture at large, not because of us of course, but through the culture at large into the '60s and so on. We felt that literary study was too narrow. It was too formalist. Compared to what people are now, I'm a formalist, but we

were trying to break out and I guess we were just part of the zeitgeist, if we can use that word. It was a great experience for all of us. [It was] very demanding, and it couldn't last too long because all of us eventually left Minnesota. I did it for one year after I left, and then I think it just died a quiet death without a lot of lamentation in the culture. It was a great thing to do, and I think it probably helped me get my first job. I don't know if that's true, but I got an offer from Indiana immediately. Those were the days, by the way, when getting offers was a piece of cake. I had five offers the year I graduated, and there were others in my group who had more. They were all good. I mean, it wasn't like you had to go to a backwater or to an institution lesser than the one you were coming from. I had offers from Illinois, Indiana, Dartmouth, Cornell, one other. Anyway, I went to Indiana. It's been very sad for me as my career unfolded to watch students better than I was not get anything or get something not worthy of them. It's hard. That was the moment of the explosion of academia. I didn't have any trouble; nobody in my group had any trouble getting a job. I think the Indiana job came partly because I had published a couple of things and edited this journal. I hadn't published anything in the usual journals. I think it wasn't until '62 that I started to publish. In those days, you didn't have to have a book to get promoted.

MG: Let us pause real quick.

GL: Yeah.

[RECORDING PAUSED]

MG: I wanted to ask you about your dissertation and the research involved and how you even settled on the topic.

GL: You really want to know all of this stuff? All right. Let me go back and see if I can reconstruct. I told you that I was getting all involved in ideas, right? John Stuart Mill figured very importantly in my thinking about the Victorians, and I knew that I wanted to do Victorians in my [dissertation]. The guy I was going to work with was a Victorianist. I wanted to do something, believe it or not, on free will and determinism. It's an issue that Mill deals with really importantly at a certain point in a book that I admired. I realized that determinism and free will was a sort of running issue in literature for a long time, and it was a live philosophical issue then. I thought I wanted to do it in the novel. My original idea, which I proposed to my director, was to do a kind of survey of the ways in which novelists through the Victorian period dealt with this issue or the way in which it emerged in narrative. That was too ambitious. [laughter] I began to think about the novelists where the issue was really critical, and I thought about [Joseph] Conrad. In fact, I was going to write my dissertation about Conrad, because with him it was really critical and he was neurotic as hell. It looked really interesting. I had become a Conrad addict, and I had sort of read the complete Conrad. I started to do that and take notes, and, in fact, I remember my wife, God bless her, had a little notebook, and she would do entries for me of stuff, I still have that notebook somewhere, of stuff that I should look at. The more I read of Conrad the more depressed I got. This literally happened. He's such a bleak figure in so many ways, and reading, not the novels, some of which are really fantastic, reading his letters and all the stuff you have to read, [I realized] I'm not going to enjoy doing this. I thought about

other novelists, and the one who had most surprised me and fascinated me among the Victorians was George Eliot. I dived in and found that that's really what I wanted to do. I've been on George Eliot ever since. It's interesting how whenever you go to Victorian conferences, if there's a major issue that comes up, George Eliot is going to have to figure in it some way or other and does. There's a little Victorian group that every year defines a subject that is going to have to run through its next conference. One woman always gets up, and she says, "My subject is 'Why always George Eliot?'" She is absolutely central. She's been absolutely crucial to everything I've written since, and so that's how I ended up with her. It was the right choice. Conrad probably would've been a mistake. The big book turned out to be a different book. *The Realistic Imagination* is the sort of equivalent of what I was dreaming of when I was a graduate student.

MG: Did you have a question, Dean?

DM: You wrote *Darwin and the Novelists*.

GL: Yeah.

DM: Can you elaborate on the significance of that publication? [Editor's Note: Dr. Levine's book *Darwin and the Novelists* was published in 1988.]

GL: Oh, well, [laughter] could I elaborate on it? As I said hours ago now, I've never talked about myself so much in my life, as I said, I got interested in Darwin because of everything that led up to *The Realistic Imagination*. I sat down and did a really, well, I shouldn't say a thorough reading of Darwin because there's still stuff of his that I probably am never going to read, but I became fascinated by Darwin and astonished at the nature of his writing, which I had never paid much attention to before. I realized that much of what I had been reading in the other novelists relates in some way to stuff that he wrote and said, and so I knew that my next project was going to be to talk about the relationship between what Darwin wrote and what my novelists are blathering on about. It was a really long slog because I found myself, to my surprise, reading a lot of nineteenth century science, not just Darwin, and I'm sure that I've emphasized Darwin too much. There's a quite reasonable movement in Victorian criticism today that says, "Hey, hold it. It wasn't only Darwin. There were lots of other people writing similar kinds of arguments" and so on. Nevertheless, I love Darwin. I love George Eliot, and I love Darwin. Of the non-living people that I've read, those are the two I care about most. It turned out in one of the most interesting and difficult moments of my scholarly life, there's a scholar named Gillian Beer. I don't know whether you've heard of her. She's the most distinguished scholar of Darwin and literature and nineteenth century literature around. They made her Dame Gillian, and she's a big shot. She was a friend of mine. She invited me in the early '80s to come be a fellow at Cambridge at the women's college at Cambridge, [Girton College]. I went there. She knew I was doing research on Darwin. She said, "Well, you know George, my book is going to come out sometime this year. Would you like to look at the galleys when they come?" I said, "I'd love to. I need it." I'm there for about three months, and they invite me to give a lecture to the English faculty at Cambridge. I [think], "Okay, I'll do my Darwin thing. I'm on my way. I have something I can do." Then, about two days before I give the talk, her galleys arrive, and

it's a great book. It's a major, major book, the major book on the subject. I read it. Every page, my mouth fell, because everything that I had thought of, she had thought of, and everything that I had written, she had written better. I actually had to give that talk, but I felt like this is ridiculous. I gave the talk. Gillian was the only one there who knew that everything I was saying she had said better, but the appearance of that book forced me to change direction because I couldn't just say what she said. I mean, I did shift a little bit. The consequence was that our two books are always mentioned together when they're talking about developments and the study of literature and science in the nineteenth century. They say, "Beer and Levine." I mean, I always feel like I'm a phony in there. Because she had written what she had written, I sort of changed, I mean, I kept writing about Darwin but roughly the differences that where she wrote about writers who were directly influenced by Darwin, I wrote about contemporary writers who weren't directly influenced by Darwin but in whom one could see relations and so on. Those two books are often mentioned together as sort of founding the current interest in Darwin in literature and science and literature. I will take it, but she really did it. I'm not Sir George. She is Dame Gillian for a good reason. Not to get pompous, but the two most important books I've written, one is *The Realistic Imagination* and the other one is *Darwin and the Novelists*.

MG: Getting back to your dissertation, what about Eliot were you writing on?

GL: I was writing about free will and determinism actually. I think the official title is "Free Will and Determinism in the Novels of George Eliot." [Editor's Note: Dr. Levine makes the sound clunk, clunk, clunk.] I review the arguments, really, I'm not a philosopher nor am I a scientist but sort of review the arguments that she would've been engaged with and try to see how the novels reflect these kinds of tensions and difficulties and how she resolved the issues. It's already more about ideas than in my original commitment to literature I had been. The dissertation, I really felt that the dissertation was not a book. I spoke with my dissertation advisor, and he said, "Well, you know what you should do, George, is just mine it." The first publication beyond *The Graduate Student of English* that I wrote was an article about George Eliot and determinism. It's published in *PMLA* I think in 1962. That made it possible for me to stay at Indiana and go on to become associate professor. Then, I did another piece also related to the book, and then I shifted gears entirely. I left George Eliot and went to the non-fiction prose writers, which was my first full book. One of the things that's fascinating to me and sad to me about the profession as it developed after I got into it is that I didn't publish that book until after I had tenure. You have tenure, yes or no? [Editor's Note: In 1962, *PMLA*, the journal of the *Modern Language Association*, published Dr. Levine's article "Determinism and Responsibility in the Works of George Eliot."]

MG: I am not in a tenure-track position.

GL: Oh, you're not in a tenure-track position, but you know that nobody here is going to get tenure without a book, right?

MG: Right.

GL: When I started, you could, if you showed evidence that you're thinking and so on. I think my first book came out three years after I got tenure. [That is] unthinkable here. I know a lot of really good people who got bounced from here because they didn't finish their book, even though they did later. I happened to get into the profession at the best time.

MG: What year were you married?

GL: '56.

MG: Did you start your family while you were in Minnesota?

GL: No, no. I waited until I got my first job. It was four years. My son was born in '60.

MG: Did you come back to the New York area for the wedding, or did you get married in Minnesota?

GL: I went back to Brooklyn. [I was] married in Brooklyn, yeah, [where] all my family is. They weren't going to fly out to Indiana to do it.

MG: Was Marge's family in this area too?

GL: Yes, yes, Brooklyn, yes. [laughter] They lived in Brooklyn. Well, my parents by that time lived in Manhattan. They had moved from the Burning Bronx. I was very angry with them. "Why do you want to leave the Bronx?" I said. Well, it was burning all around them. They were right. They had to get out. The neighborhood where I grew up [had changed]. I came back I think in '68. I drove through my neighborhood. My house was actually still there, but all the big buildings were down, were burned.

MG: How did they burn?

GL: Landlords burned them for the insurance. Well, that's the story. I don't know whether it's true, but I think it is. Many neighborhoods in the Bronx just got razed. The argument is that the landlords encouraged that. Of course, the migration in of Latinos and blacks and all those "terrible people" made the landlords recognize they weren't going to make any money out of the houses, so they just went down. It was not a good place. I was very sad about that. My parents weren't kids anymore. It was time for them to move. They went to a nice apartment house in Manhattan, where everybody else moved.

MG: Well, let me pause for just a second.

GL: Sure.

[RECORDING PAUSED]

MG: We will pick up with your time in Indiana next time.

GL: Okay.

MG: I really want to thank you for all the time you have spent with me so far, and thank you for your help. I look forward to when we can do this again.

GL: Okay.

-----END OF TRANSCRIPT-----

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