INTERVIEW WITH MAX LEVINE

May 6, 1974
Philadelphia, Pennsylvania

by Alice M. Hoffman

INTRODUCTION

Born of Russian parents, Max Levine grew up in South Philadelphia. He started working in the printing trade at age seventeen as a shipper's helper at Dunlap's, which led to an apprenticeship and membership in the Bookbinders Union in 1951.

In the interview Levine discusses why Philadelphia is no longer the printing center that it used to be. He talks about organizing Curtis Publishing Company in the late sixties, embezzlement of the pension fund money, and the eventual dissolution of the company.

Levine started as a shop steward for his union, was then elected to the executive board, and finally became president of his local in 1956. Throughout his career he has been a delegate to the Allied Printing Trades Council and has been vice-president of that organization for the past nine years.

Levine also discusses the main issues confronting the Bookbinders in the fifties and sixties--automation, membership turnover, declining numbers of print shops in Philadelphia, and the relative non-union climate in Philadelphia.

Oral History Interview

with

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LEVINE: My name is Max Levine. I was born and raised in Philadelphia. I was born October 1, 1914.

INTERVIEWER: What section of Philadelphia did you grow up in?

LEVINE: South Philadelphia.

INTERVIEWER: Why don't you describe something about growing up in South Philadelphia.

LEVINE: Well, in South Philadelphia I didn't have to be number one. South Philadelphia was kind of a melting pot for all ethnic groups. We had Irish, Polish, Jewish, blacks, all living on Mountain Street, famous Mountain Street of South Philadelphia. We all played baseball. Some of us wound up with better careers such as my very close friend, Jack Klugman, of "The Odd Couple." I never dreamed that he would ever become a movie actor.

INTERVIEWER: Oh, he was a friend of yours?

LEVINE: Personal. . . lived next door! Never dreamed that he would ever become a movie actor. But nevertheless, as I stated, we were a composition of many, many ethnic groups. You name them. We all got along well. Attended the Kirkbride School. . .

INTERVIEWER: K-i-r-k?

LEVINE: Yes. B-r-i-d-e School. Up to the sixth grade. I wasn't the dumbest guy in the class, but I got through and went on to Furness Junior High School.

INTERVIEWER: Well, now, when you look back at your schooling, Max, do you think that it was a relatively good education that was being provided in the public schools at that time? What was it like? Was it highly regimented? Were you encouraged to think for yourself?

LEVINE: It was highly regimented. I think some of the things that were important, at least when I went to school, was the fact that the teacher always had complete control of his or her class. And that was awfully important. Did we learn? Well, we had to learn because, if we didn't, we wouldn't remain in that school or class. They would just take the kids out of that school and send them to some kind of special school that would more suit their particular needs. Were we encouraged? All the time.

INTERVIEWER: Now, was this just your family, or do you think most of the kids came from families who. . . ?

LEVINE: Most of the kids, yes. My family encouraged it because my parents came from Russia; and when they landed here, of course, they had no jobs or anything like that. They came off the island at New York there, and they came to Philadelphia. That's where they landed.

INTERVIEWER: What brought them to Philadelphia? How did they happen to come from New York to Philadelphia?

LEVINE: I've heard a lot of tales about that, you know. They said so many remain here, so many go to Philadelphia, and so many go to New Jersey.

INTERVIEWER: So they just parceled them out like information service?

LEVINE: Yes, they were parceled out. Exactly right. These were the tales that I heard my parents often talk about.

I think the school system then was better handled than it is presently.

INTERVIEWER: Hm-hm. And you think that the discipline was a very important factor?

LEVINE: Oh, indeed! Indeed it was. Because when I go into schools today. . . My son is a recent graduate of Temple University, the School of Communications, and I did a broadcast with him on marijuana. I think it was an hour broadcast with him, consistent with his learning. And when I see the young gals or young men that are instructors or teachers in that class. . . . When I see kids sitting in seats and their feet hanging over and all spread out and what have you. . . Our teachers wouldn't permit that. They just wouldn't permit that. You had to come in neatly. My parents always sent me. . . my mother always saw to it that I wore a shirt and tie when I went to school. My hair was properly combed, the little bit that I have left. (laughter)

INTERVIEWER: Okay. Well, what was your family like? Are you the eldest, in the middle, the littlest, or. . . . ?

LEVINE: No, no. I had a family of five sisters and two brothers. One brother beside myself. My brother, at twenty-one, used to work in what I think was a rug factory, learning how to weave rugs, and at night he went to school. He was a pre-law student. My sisters, well, they worked at varied jobs. Two of them worked, for example . . . . I think that they came over with my parents from Russia.

INTERVIEWER: Were you born in this country?

LEVINE: I was born in this country, yes. My two oldest sisters came to this country with my parents. Two of them worked. There was this cigar that you see--Philly's Cigar--well, anybody that lived in that immediate area always had a crack at working at the cigar factory, and my two oldest sisters did work there. My three other sisters were school children. All three graduated from high school.

My parents: My mother, of course, was a housewife. My father became a paralytic at around age forty-three so that we kind of had to help support the whole family, and we did. We took odd jobs, and what have you. None of us, of course, had any degrees or anything like that, outside of my brother who unfortunately died at age twenty-two, going through school at that time. He was probably the sole support of the family.

INTERVIEWER: What did he die of? Was it an accident?

LEVINE: No, no. Double pneumonia. He had it about two or three times; the third time just burned him up. He died in the Pennsylvania Hospital.

INTERVIEWER: Oh, my. In other words, if it had been in the age of Penicillin he would probably still be with us.

LEVINE: . . . . still be with us. That's right. Now I'm probably. . . . Let's see. One, two, three. . . I'm probably the number six. . . I'm second oldest.

INTERVIEWER: Uh, huh. You mean you're second from the bottom!

LEVINE: Second from the bottom.

INTERVIEWER: (Laughter) You mean you still had someone to kick.

LEVINE: (Laughter) That's right. My little sister.

INTERVIEWER: Right. How old were you when you went to work, Max?

LEVINE: I was about seventeen years old.

INTERVIEWER: Pretty young.

LEVINE: Yes.

INTERVIEWER: And did you start right off in the printing trade, or did you start with something else?

LEVINE: I had a job in a store, a well-known men's store right here on Chestnut Street--McDonald and Campbell. They were very famous in Philadelphia, like Jacob Reed's and Jackson and Moyer.

INTERVIEWER: McDonald and Camel?

LEVINE: Yes.

INTERVIEWER: C-A-M-E-L? Those are two words?

LEVINE: C-A-M-P.

INTERVIEWER: Oh, Campbell.

LEVINE: McDonald and Campbell. They're two words, Alice.

INTERVIEWER: Hm-hm.

LEVINE: I worked as a shipper's helper and thought that I might like that kind of line and perhaps graduate into becoming a salesman. Of course, that did not materialize so I said, "Well, this is not for me." And I came home one night and gave my mother, as I always did, my pay envelope and told her that I had quit.

INTERVIEWER: Was she upset?

LEVINE: Upset. Terribly upset! And she said, "Why? You didn't give it a good enough chance" and so forth. I guess I'd worked there about six or seven months. She was terribly upset. And of course, as European women go, they are the bosses of the house. They run the ship.

She always put my pay envelope into the bank, by the way. She never kept my money.

INTERVIEWER: Did you know that at the time?

LEVINE: No, no.

INTERVIEWER: She just did it without your knowing it?

LEVINE: That's right. And she just couldn't understand. . . I sat around the house for about a week, and then I made up my mind: "Well, I'm going out to find a job."

So I was walking in this very particular area that we're located. The employers didn't advertise in the newspapers like they do today for help. They always had signs out there: "Dress Manufacturer", "Printer", or you name it.

INTERVIEWER: I saw that just now.

LEVINE: Did you?

INTERVIEWER: Yeah. And I hadn't seen that before, and I wondered if that was kind of a product of difficult times or something. Just down here in this employment they've got a blackboard with all sorts of jobs written on it.

LEVINE: Oh, no. Oh, yeah. Well, that's been the thing for I don't know how many years. However, these employers would take a corrugated box and break it up and in their own handwriting say: "we need sewers." or "we need pressers," or "we need printers," or "we need bookbinders" and so forth. And they would list them on this. . . .

INTERVIEWER: What sort of an area was this right here? Was it largely garment industry or. . . . ?

LEVINE: Garment. Printing.

INTERVIEWER: Garment and printing.

LEVINE: Yes. So that I saw a large group. . . .

INTERVIEWER: That's still true, isn't it?

LEVINE: Yes.

INTERVIEWER: That's still true? In other words, it really hasn't changed that much?

LEVINE: It hasn't, no. So I was walking up Cherry Street at that time, and lo and behold I saw a large line of young fellows like myself standing outside. That was one of the things the employers made you do: form a line wherever you were going to make application for a job, and they would interview you. So I went up, and I saw this long line of young men along with myself out there. And I went up, took the sign off, and said, "The job has been filled." And I went up to the employer. . . at that time Mr. Dunlap. He was my first employer in the printing trade. And I said, "Are you looking for a young man?" And he said, "Yes, I am." And I said, "I'm your young man."

INTERVIEWER: (Laughter)

LEVINE: I'm hired!

INTERVIEWER: You didn't lack in good_____. It's a wonder you didn't get attacked by the other people in the line!

LEVINE: Right. And he hired me.

INTERVIEWER: I've just made a few calculations. This was right during the depression?

LEVINE: Yes,yes. And that employer, by the way, was one of the few who paid off in cash even though they were talking at that time about paying off in script money.

INTERVIEWER: Hm-hm. And what did he hire you as?

LEVINE: As a helper in the shipping department.

INTERVIEWER: What kind of work did Mr. Dunlap do?

LEVINE: Well, they did all types of commercial printing, but their prime customer was the city of Philadelphia.

They had a contract for every piece of election printing that was ever done in the city of Philadelphia, both Republican and Democrat. They did it.

INTERVIEWER: Now, did this mean they were kind of involved in the Vare machine? Was there sort of hanky-panky, or was everything pretty much on the up-and-up?

LEVINE: Well, you guess at that one, you know. But it was not on the up-and-up, I must admit. I was probably an innocent guy in some of the things that took place as to what they wanted me to do, and being young I didn't know any better. But I was an innocent guy. I came home and told my parents, you know, what they wanted me to do; and I told them that I rebelled, but I did it.

INTERVIEWER: Like what? What kinds of things did they want you to do that you felt were not particularly straight?

LEVINE: Well, during the sixty-three years of Republican administration--and that was after maybe twenty-five or thirty years of it--for example, they would charge the city for a lot of printing, and all they did was just take and recharge the city for the very same thing that they had in the basement. And they would send us over and say, "Hey, take these and take a sealing machine over with you and tear the old one off and make it look like it was a new one and recharge the city."

INTERVIEWER: A sealing machine?

LEVINE: Well, they would think the. . . whatever was on that printed sheet in that package is what I mean. And they would take and print a number of those sheets, maybe a couple hundred of them, two or three hundred of them, and they'd say, "Take a machine over with you, tear the old one off, and put a new one on top of it."

INTERVIEWER: So that you could recharge the city?

LEVINE: And they did it. They did it!

INTERVIEWER: How did your parents respond to these tales?

LEVINE: Oh, they were very unhappy about it. They could understand my feelings, and they thought, "Well, it's graft, and it's not right. If you don't feel that you want to do it, don't do it." That was their answer to me. "Don't do it."

At that time, of course, after about two and a half or three weeks, I went to the employer and said, "Look, I don't want to be working in the shipping department any longer. If I don't have an opportunity to move ahead, then I'm leaving." He asked me, "What do you want to do?" I said, "I want to get on the equipment and learn how to operate--whether it would be bindery equipment or printing equipment--but that's where I want to be."

It took about a week and a half or two, and there I was. I was put on what was called the old coffee grinders folding machine. It's a tape-folding machine that folded sheets into booklet form anywhere from thirty-eight and fifty in size to six by nine. . . scaled down to six by nine. So they put me on there, and they said, "Okay, if you learn your trade here, we'll see that you get into the union and become an apprentice if you prove satisfactory after a trial period." And I apparently proved to be satisfactory.

The person in charge, of course, thought that I might become a threat to him because he had the run of the thing pretty well. He was a little reluctant to put me on, and I just went over to the business agent at that time and said, "Listen, I've been working in your unit for some time now, about three or four months, and Bill Lewis hasn't approached me about joining the union, and I want to join." And they took my money, and I joined. Being an apprentice, of course, subjected me to a lot of things that normally happens to an apprentice, you know.

INTERVIEWER: Things like sending you for a left-handed monkey wrench! (chuckle)

LEVINE: . . . And all of that kind of thing. Or looking at the. . .Did you ever hear of the expression in the Typographical Union of "type lice?" Okay, that's an expression they use. And they have these galleys of type, see? And they set them up, so. And they put water underneath it. And they go up and they say, "You go up there and (Alice Hoffman) wants to show you the 'type lice'." Typographers use magnifying glasses to a great extent, you know. So they took me up and they showed me the "type lice." And while you're down there looking, you know, they use mallets, wooden mallets, and they hit that thing; and you come up, and your face is just <u>black</u> with oil and water and everything. (Laughter)

INTERVIEWER: Oil, water, and ink!

LEVINE: Everything, everything! (Laughter) You know, I was the butt end of all of that stuff: paper stretchers, and odd-sized paper. Just all kinds of crazy things. That's what you go through as an apprentice.

INTERVIEWER: Now, did it bother you, or did you find it as kind of a part of the comradery?

LEVINE: It didn't bother me because I thought well, okay, that's part of the ball game, and I have to go through all of this.

And I went home and told my family about it; what they did to me that day. I always had a report for them every day: how they glued my shoes to the floor, etc. (Laughter)

This might sound funny to you and a little smutty too: We used to have a lot of gals that worked there, and these older gals. . . I'll never forget them in my whole life! As angry as they could be at one another during the morning period of working, when it came to the lunch period, they sat around at a large table like this; and everybody sat down and had their lunch. Mr. Dunlap, he was a handsome gentleman. He had real white hair and a beautiful ruddy complexion; dressed just beautiful! And he used to come out and sit down and kid with them. And when the gals got a newcomer in there, you knew it because they're going to pull your trousers down, you know. The gals used to work with. . . You know these pails? They used to have paste in them, you know? They pasted you all up! And they used to roar, you know, when that darn thing was done. Anybody that was new went through all of <u>that</u>! PLUS! (Laughter)

I don't know if that's good material for you, but. . .

INTERVIEWER: No, I think it says something to read. You know you don't usually find out about these things that are going on in the shops. (Laughter) What were these girls employed doing? Sewing mostly?

LEVINE: Sewing, hand gathering, taking out of folding machines, wrapping, various jobs within the bindery unit. But they were real nice gals, you know.

INTERVIEWER: Were they union members?

LEVINE: Every one!

INTERVIEWER: Now at that time did you have a female local and a male local?

LEVINE: We had a female local and a male local up until 1946. Of course my predecessor, Nick Battista, he had the foresight. . . I don't know that he knew that we were going to be having EEOC and so forth at that time, but he had the foresight to know that being three or four different locals--we had four, by the way, that you see here--being apart, split apart and working at different wage levels was certainly not good as a union, nor was it good for an industry. And in 1946 they merged them. They merged all four locals.

Oh, there was quite a bit of squabbling going on because one had more, maybe a thousand dollars more, than the other in the treasury, and "what's happening to our money?," and "who's going to be the officers?," and all of that business. But on the whole it was a fine move, and of course they have been merged since that time.

Prior to that I didn't know the meaning of the word"sweat shop", but those poor gals really worked! It was terrible! Really worked!

INTERVIEWER: What kind of hours did you work?

LEVINE: Forty hours.

INTERVIEWER: Forty hours. You had an eight-hour day?

LEVINE: Forty-eight hours.

INTERVIEWER: Forty-eight hours. You worked on Saturday?

LEVINE: Worked on Saturday. Six days a week. And then, of course, by way of the union contract they reduced it to forty (hours). No Saturday work then. Of course that was overtime.

INTERVIEWER: When did you begin to get involved in the union?

LEVINE: Around 1951.

INTERVIEWER: Now, all this time you were working at Dunlap's?

LEVINE: I was working at Dunlap's serving my apprenticeship, yes. I worked there twenty-three years.

INTERVIEWER: What was the trade called? Were you a journeyman folder? Is that the correct name?

LEVINE: I was an apprentice folder operator at that time, And I served my four year apprenticeship. At that time they gave certificates out. They did; they didn't. It all depended on how you looked at the business agent at that time. He happened to like me, and he said, "I'm going to make something out of you some day." That was Mr. Wenzel.

INTERVIEWER: What was his name?

LEVINE: Mr. Wenzel. Emil W-E-N-Z-E-L. He said, "I'm gonna make something out of you some day." I said, "Why do you say that?" He said, "Well, you seem to be the only one who has an interest in the union. You collect the dues even though you're not designated. You do a lot of things for me. You help me out in the elections." Not that I was obligated to, but that was his feelings at that time.

INTERVIEWER: Now, was the business agent at that time a full-time worker for the union, or was he also working another job?

LEVINE: Yes, yes. . . No, no, full time.

INTERVIEWER: So that the printing industry, being a very large and important industry in Philadelphia, these were for the times strong unions?

LEVINE: No question about it. Philadelphia was the printing center of the U.S.A. They had more printing here than anywhere in the whole country. We had it.

INTERVIEWER: What happened to it, do you think, Max? Why is it that it had a tendency to move towards Canada and. . . .

LEVINE: . . . . the Midwest.

INTERVIEWER: . . . . move to St. Louis and Chicago?

LEVINE: The employers offer the reason that they have no heirs to their business. And why should they be investing and continually be investing in a business that they know they have no one to leave it to?

INTERVIEWER: You mean this was a family consideration here in Philadelphia?

LEVINE: Oh, yes. Most of the printing plants here in Philadelphia were family owned. Oh, yes. And they thought, if we have no one to leave it to, why should we be investing all of our hard-earned dollars in any new equipment or you name it? So that it started going downhill and rather rapidly! Try as they might to stem that tide, it wasn't easy. And it was only through the intervention of the unions that they were able to keep as much work and bring in work to the city.

INTERVIEWER: Well, it's always struck me, you know, as an outsider just kind of casually looking at it. . . like Curtis Publishing, which was at one time such a very large growing concern putting out a good number of magazines. . .

(End of tape one, Side A)

INTERVIEWER: (Starting in mid-sentence) . . . which were pretty high wage markets too. Was there a wage differential between Chicago and Philadelphia?

LEVINE: Oh, no. Philadephia is a very conservative city, moderate for all trades, for that matter, in its wage rates. At least I see it (that way.) In fact, Pennsylvania as a whole seems to be pretty moderate.

INTERVIEWER: So, in other words, it wasn't the flight of business from Philadelphia to Chicago; it was simply other companies who were already in Chicago took the market?

LEVINE: Took the market. That's absolutely right! You talk about Curtis Publishing Company. . . Oh, sure, they were an institution here. By the way, I organized Curtis Publishing Company.

INTERVIEWER: Oh, you did!

LEVINE: Yes, I did. They were non-union for fifty years, and I went to a meeting in Chester with this fellow who is now trying to organize DuPont, Elmer Chatak.

INTERVIEWER: Oh, yes. Right.

LEVINE: Okay. Elmer called me one day, and he told me who he was, and he said, "Are you interested. . . (he worked with the IUD Department)"Are you interested in organizing Curtis Publishing Company?" They had an office located in Conshohocken. "Of course I'm always interested in organizing companies non-union for a long period of time." He said, "I don't know who you are, and you don't know who I am, but your name was given to me. Can you be at a meeting in Chester on a Sunday?" He said, "I'm going to have three or four hundred people there from one of the departments in Curtis." He said, "Bring cards with you, and we'll get them signed. It will all depend on what you say whether these people will want to go union."

INTERVIEWER: When was this?

LEVINE: Oh, about 1967 or '68. Somewhere in that time. I went to that meeting, and we had four hundred people there. And I got four hundred cards signed.

INTERVIEWER: It must have been a good speech! (chuckle)

LEVINE: Well, he's an excellent guy! He is. He's good!

INTERVIEWER: His father wasn't bad either. Smalie Chatak.

LEVINE: Smalie , yeah. You know Smalie.

INTERVIEWER: Yes.

LEVINE: And we filed for an election the next day. Of course, the company just wouldn't hear of it. A union after all of these years? It went to the board that very same day. And Elmer did a lot of background work to this so that in the end result we filed, we had an election, and won it by a large margin.

Once that took place, the company, knowing this was going to be the forerunner to something bigger and the full plant being organized, they called me and said, "Okay, you can have the full plant." Well, I'm a bookbinder by trade, and we have an unwritten code amongst ourselves that we will not cross lines. If you're a pressman, you're going to remain a pressman, and you're going to go with that union. So we called the pressmen in and got enough cards signed for that. Unfortunately, they lost their election, and the company came to me a second time and asked me to take the full plant. I told them that I couldn't do that. But my union here we had three elections, and we won all three elections. We were the only union to win them. And that was the forerunner to the company saying, "Okay, the plant will be a hundred percent union." And they recognized the various trades.

INTERVIEWER: So they did recognize all the unions. Were they mostly women that you organized--the bookbinders?

LEVINE: Oh, no. Women, male paper handlers, the people who did all the mailing of the magazines, and the male bookbinders. Yes. But a terribly, terribly mismanaged company!

And I hate to use this word, but it's the truth, that once they decided to close the plant the things that we discovered! For example, they thought they had ninety million dollars in a pension plan. And this is why we have these bills that are being talked about in Washington today.

INTERVIEWER: Pension bills, you mean.

LEVINE: Private pension plans. They brought in one president, Mack. . . a guy from California. He was in the broadcasting field. He bought himself two jets, not one, but two, at company expense. They had this fellow with the patch on his eye, he bought himself a helicopter and built a pad right on the premises out there in Sharon Hill.

Every president. . . they had Mort Ackerman from the Perfect Photo Service, and Hudson Vitamins, and what have you. There's a guy that came in, and in about two and a half to three months he walked off with six million dollars as a settlement to him. But more important is that people thought that they had ninety million dollars in the pension plan. We had an interest in that, although we were not trustees.

We had Pete Marwick and Mitchell come in to protect our people, and we found in searching that they only had thirty million dollars, not ninety million dollars. They didn't know what happened to the money. They couldn't pin it on anybody.

Some of our people because of our intervention. . . The company was going downhill whether it was organized or not. It was going to go broke from what they were doing. But some of our people, some came off with three or four hundred dollars--short-term employees. And some came off with as high as thirteen thousand dollars that were put into annuities for them. Without the union. . .

INTERVIEWER: They would have had nothing.

LEVINE: Nothing! Absolutely nothing! But the stealing that was going on amongst the executives was unbelievable! Anywhere from typewriters to machines like this (tape recorder), furniture.

INTERVIEWER: At the time the company was dissolving you mean?

LEVINE: That's right. It was unbelievable! Some of them started up their own printing plants with the equipment that they stole out of there. Of course, that's not what you wanted to hear.

INTERVIEWER: What was Elmer Chatak's interest in organizing a printing establishment?

LEVINE: Well, he, being close to the Curtis plant out there in Sharon Hill, he told me, confidentially of course, that someone had come to see him, that there was unhappiness within the group. They didn't try to organize us since 1921 when they were located down here at Seventh and Chestnut. That was the last time they had had a strike.

INTERVIEWER: 1921 was the year of the big printing strike.

LEVINE: Right. And they didn't try it any more. It lay dormant. However, he said that someone had come to him. He wouldn't tell me who, but they came to him. And in his inquiries of who was somebody in the printing trades that we can come to, I was very active, even as active as I was then and as I am now. He called me, and that was his interest. He could have very easily have turned them over to the Steelworkers.

INTERVIEWER: Yeah. [unintelligible] the steelworkers.

LEVINE: But this kind of organizational drive was a forerunner to the parent AFL-CIO trying to organize the non-union Donnelly plant that they worked on for two and a half to three years.

INTERVIEWER: The Donnelly plant. Yeah. Hm-hm.

LEVINE: That's right. They thought for sure that the same thing would work but they're too tough.

INTERVIEWER: Hm-hm. Well, I think we ought to back up a little bit. We got ahead of ourselves here a little bit.

LEVINE: Right.

INTERVIEWER: You were saying that you worked at Dunlap's for twenty-three years, and you became a journeyman. And you said you got active in the union in 1951. What was the occasion of getting you active in the union? Did you run for office?

LEVINE: I became a shop steward. We had a shop steward, a female, dear Stella Hayes, she's still alive.

She was also our financial secretary who would sit at the union meeting and collect dues. That was her only function, really. She wasn't doing much there really. Like any politician, I got enough forces behind me to elect me to shop steward at that time. Then, of course, my star was on the rise from that time on because my business representative, Nick Battista, was having internal problems in this office here with his president, who was giving him very difficult times on the negotiating committees as well. It reached the point where he came to me one day while I was on the job, and he says, "Say, listen.". . . . He was telling me all about his problems. And he said, "How about you running for the executive board?" I said, "Okay. Nobody knows me outside of the old stand-by's that come to the meeting." "Well," he said, "I'll take care of that." And I was elected to the executive board. There was some minor opposition; not too much. I was elected to that.

And in a very short period of time it became so unbearable for him--since he had placed some confidence in me, I had served on a committee with him--it became so unbearable for him to live with this president that he just couldn't wait for an opportunity when that election was coming up. And he said, "How about you running for the presidency of the union?" I said, "Well, Nick, you must remember they just about accepted you as an Italian. I said they just about accepted you because the whole union was. . . All bookbinders came from the other side, and they came from Germany particularly." I said, "These Dutchmen eat you up alive at every meeting!" I said, "How do you think I'm going to fare with them?" He said, "Don't worry; stick with me." And I did, and we had an election--usually every two years--and I was elected the first time president of the local.

INTERVIEWER: What year was this?

LEVINE: Oh, it had to be around 1955 or '56, somewhere in that area.

INTERVIEWER: What was the source of his problems with this other president? Were they personal, or did they have to do with some kind of substantive issues?

LEVINE: He placed an awful lot of confidence in him and brought him up to date pretty much. He was the heir apparent.

INTERVIEWER: Nick Battista was the heir apparent?

LEVINE: The president was the heir apparent to Nick Battista's job, see? Or if they were going to put a second person on, he was going to be the heir apparent. There was no question about it.

INTERVIEWER: Now, what was Nick Battista, the business agent?

LEVINE: He was the business agent, corresponding secretary. And the president was not a full-time job. You worked in the plant, and the only thing you did was preside over meetings. However, he went a little further. He needed help in his negotiations and what have you. He used to call him up every night and tell him exactly what went on in the office that particular day, or what happened, you know. And it became such a ritual with him that when he stopped, he recognized that this president was working behind the scenes. One thing he said, "No, I have to stop this." He had some internal problems with that person. And when it happened, of course, he broke loose from him; and when he wasn't calling him anymore or letting him know, or didn't even appoint him to the negotiating committee which he should have been on, that kind of broke the straw there. And that's when he came to me and said, "I'll support you if you run for president."

INTERVIEWER: Now, the president didn't put Battista on the negotiating committee?

LEVINE: That's right.

INTERVIEWER: Now, this was about 1955 or '56?

LEVINE: Around that time.

INTERVIEWER: I wonder if you could tell me what kinds of relationships through these years when you became active and had some reason to know, what kind of relationships did this Bookbinders Union have with the other printing trades in the city?

LEVINE: The relationship was good. They always treated the Bookbinders as little brothers, you know. The printing trades are an odd group of people, you know. They are awfully pompous, particularly the Pressmen. Pompous people. I don't know why, but they think that they're better than anyone else, and unfortunately so did

the Typographical Union think that. But the Printing Pressmen and the Typos always thought that they were the cream of the crop. Frankly, all of the trades are an offspring of the Typographical Union. It was at one time, one union.

INTERVIEWER: Were your locals active in the Allied Printing Trades?

LEVINE: Oh, absolutely. Absolutely. Probably the most vocal.

INTERVIEWER: Now what about the Lithographers. Were they. . .

LEVINE: The Lithographers were CIO at that time. They're active now, but they were part of the CIO and they were not part of the Allied Printing Trades Council.

INTERVIEWER: Right. But the Photoengravers were?

LEVINE: Yes. And the Electrotypers. and the Stereotypers. Right.

INTERVIEWER: Did you ever serve on that Allied Printing Trades Council?

LEVINE: I was always a delegate, yes. I was always a delegate. I guess I've been vice president of the Allied Printing Trades Council for the past nine years.

INTERVIEWER: Well, what do you see as the issues for bookbinders through this period of the '50's and '60's? What kind of impact was automated techniques having for example?

LEVINE: Automation has been slow coming to the bookbinding trade. Most of the automation that took place, the unions were so strong against anything coming in, anything new in the way of equipment coming in, that they actually fought it. They actually fought it.

INTERVIEWER: And you didn't approve of that?

LEVINE: Well, I. . .

INTERVIEWER: I mean, you sound as if you didn't approve of it. That's what I'm asking you.

LEVINE: No, I didn't. I always felt that I liked to look forward. If they're bringing in automation, fine, as long as it isn't going to displace our people and it's going to bring more work into the area. I just felt that it was good for us to have automation. But New York seemed to be the focal point of bookbinding, and it was until recently. In the last five or ten years it's been going downhill, They fought it bitterly. They just wouldn't permit automation to come into the area. And they controlled it pretty well, frankly, for the whole country. Much to their dismay it's had its effect on them.

INTERVIEWER: Hm-hm. Do you think that this has been a part of what has driven some of the business away from the East Coast?

LEVINE: Well, that might be part of it, but there are other factors, more important factors, I think. Transportation, for example. Chicago, being the center of the country, just about has the most and the best of everything. They were the factors. And Chicago's rates were not that great until within, maybe, the last ten years that they've substantially moved ahead.

INTERVIEWER: What kinds of changes in the number of people in your local have gone on? Are you losing people or gaining people?

LEVINE: We have an awful large turnover of people in our organization, particularly amongst the females. I would say this organization has in the area of between a ten and twenty percent turnover each year. As our organization moved ahead number-wise, Alice, I would honestly say that we have just about stood still. In spite of the organizing and everything else, we've just about stood still.

INTERVIEWER: Now, what's the primary factor for that? Automation? Or does it mean businesses are folding up? Or both?

LEVINE: I think the prime factor is that at one time we had seventeen hundred and fifty print shops in Philadelphia.

INTERVIEWER: What time was that? In the thirties you mean?

LEVINE: In the thirties and forties and fifties, yes, and even sixties.

INTERVIEWER: Now how many are there?

LEVINE: Oh, God, we're reduced to less than a thousand.

INTERVIEWER: Does that include letterpress? . . . .

LEVINE: Letterpress, offset, typography, all of them. That's total, right. So there are a lot of factors, But the most important is the number of print shops in the city of Philadelphia had dropped considerably. As I stated earlier, where we were number one, we're probably number eight or nine now as a printing center. We just don't have that anymore.

INTERVIEWER: And there are a number of printing establishments that are non-union too. Is that not true? I'll tell you why I ask. When I first came here I was looking for a union bindery. I had only been here just a few months, and I went to the Free Library and asked them where they got their binding done. They gave me a name of a place where a man did all kinds of bindery jobs for the Free Library, and much to my surprise I discovered he was non-union. I thought, "How can this be, a public library in the city of Philadelphia doing business with a non-union bindery!?"

LEVINE: Well, number one, for your information, the city has its own bindery. And their rates are in the area of maybe two to three dollars less than ours. Secondly, the 1948 strike of the Typographical Union caused them to lose a considerable number of shops. The offset people are only fifty percent organized in Philadelphia. The Printing Pressmen, they are about the same or even less. My union is probably the best organized of all the graphic arts. I would say we have about a ninety-percent organization of all the printing crafts.

INTERVIEWER: Now is that just in the city of Philadelphia?

LEVINE: And Delaware Valley, South New Jersey, out on the Main Line, out in the area of Valley Forge and so forth. Yes, as far as Allentown. We are probably better organized than any of the graphic arts unions.

I'm very surprised, of course, that the Lithographers are not better organized, but they're not. They are about fifty percent organized.

INTERVIEWER: What you're telling me really is that Philadelphia, as far as the printing trade is concerned, is not a very organized town, not as well organized as Indianapolis was.

LEVINE: No. That's true.

INTERVIEWER: Was Curtis' attitude, as opposed to the attitude of Bobbs Merrill or one of the Indianapolis printers. . . . Correct me if I'm wrong, but I have the impression that Philadelphia and Indianapolis in the period of the thirties and forties were about on a par as printing centers. Of course, Indianapolis was a different kind of town with the headquarters of the United Mine Workers there and with all the union printing that was done in Indianapolis.

LEVINE: Right.

INTERVIEWER: But I was just wondering if the attitude of Curtis had something to do with this kind of relative non-union climate.

LEVINE: I kind of think that the labor organizations, particularly in the printing crafts after 1921, that strike that they had, just disregarded Curtis. They were there, but paid no attention to them. They did not become a threat. They weren't a threat to anything in the bindery or the printing industries because they had their own publications. So they disregarded Curtis.

INTERVIEWER: Yeah. With what consequences would you say? What were the consequences of disregarding Curtis? I mean, do you think that if there had been a strong, active union at Curtis. . . It's possible to imagine--you'd never think so--but it's possible that it would have been a healthier climate for Curtis itself.

LEVINE: Oh, there's no question about it. Your point is well taken. No question about it that Curtis probably would have been still located in Philadelphia or part of the Delaware Valley because, when the unions became active in Curtis, all kinds of good things happened to the attitude of people. Management of the plants, and what have you, became better because of the unions.

INTERVIEWER: We are sort of running out of tape, but there is one big, broad subject that I would like to ask you about. And then I would also like to ask you to think about some issues that we ought to talk about in a concluding session.

One of the things that I would like to ask you about is this relative climate of non-merger which we seem to have in the city of Philadelphia, not only in the printing trades, but everywhere. When I first came to Philadelphia, I very rapidly concluded that there was something in the water here. You know, even the AF of L and CIO couldn't really merge in the city of Philadelphia where they had merged everywhere else. I'm wondering if that's something we can talk about is the Photoengravers and Lithographers not merging.

The other thing that I want to ask you to think about is that it occurs to me, not knowing very much about it, but just on the basis of talking to John Connelly, that here you had a president who was kind of a darling man, you know. He didn't make enemies very much anywhere, and he was kind of able to move from one side to the other. Maybe the Bookbinders on an international level, with the fact that they had very good relationships with the Allied Printing Trades, were going to make it somewhat easier and smooth the path for the old Photoengravers and Lithographers in this merged Graphic Arts Union, and whether you think that is a possible role for you to play here in Philadelphia too?

LEVINE: Thanks, Alice!

INTERVIEWER: (Laughter) Well, I don't know whether it is or not, you see. Because I really don't honestly. . .

(The End of Interview)

Max Levine

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