**Deborah:** This is interview number 188 with Harry Laufer. This is Deborah Ali. It is five minutes to four on Thursday the 5th of June 1986. We’re beginning the interview with Mr. Laufer about his experience of emigrating from Austria in 1921.

If you could just start by telling me about where you were born and when you...

**Harry:** Yeah, right.

**Deborah:** Okay.

**Harry:** I was born in a place called Jadwal that was ... and the province was Bukovina. That used to be one of the eastern provinces of the Austrian empire. In 1912, our father died and my mother was left. She was about 34, 35 years old with seven children. I was the oldest, 15 and the youngest was three weeks old.

Beginning, it was not too bad then came the war. The Russian raid once, then the Russians raid the second time, most of the Jewish people fled. The family marched about 250 kilometers across the [inaudible 00:01:16] ranch on the Hungarian side. From there, the government took them, they distributed them to refugees.

I was in service then, I was taken to service. Then when I came home, 1918 when the war ended, the family was also home already. I was over the winter home ... Romania occupied that territory. I was over the winter in the spring of 1919. I was drafted in the Romanian army where I served a year.

Then when they released me, I had to give up the uniform because ... to the country. Here the soldiers take the uniform home. There you have to give it up. By the way, Romania was one of the allies and the British gave them surplus uniform, British gloves [inaudible 00:02:05]. But I was wearing American uniform at that time so when they released me, I had to give the uniform back. They sent me home for clothing and we were poor.

I came home; I didn’t have any clothes home so I was desperate. They had a neighbor, a peasant that had just come home the United States and had American clothes. He gave me a pair of pants and a shirt and he lent me a pair of shoes and there was a jacket. I gave up the uniform, I came back home.

We were very poor. Sometimes we just didn’t have what to eat so my mother decided the only thing, if she could somehow ship me to the United States. People, come to United States, they get jobs here, they work and we had nothing else there.

My mother was nice lady, trustworthy. She contacted several people and they lent her money. It was enough to reach a port in Western Europe. We had here some relatives, distant relatives so I arrived to a cousin of my father. They were here before The War. They were the kids that used to go with me to school; I figured they wouldn’t let me down.

I wrote this cousin a letter that I’m trying to get to the United States, I’ll come to a port, I’ll send him a telegram, he should send me a ticket. When I reach the United States, I’ll start to work, I’ll pay him back with thanks and interest and I never got an answer. I was stranded in Paris, the Hayas, you know the Hayas?

**Deborah:** Yes.

**Harry:** I was stranded there waiting. During that time, another relative, a woman with five children was going to the United States. Her husband was a brother to the man that I sent the letter. To the United States [inaudible 00:03:59] she came to the United States. I have here aunt, she went to visit her, she was relatives. She told her about my plight there in Paris.

This aunt contacted a cousin of mine that was about a few months in the United States but he had sisters and brothers that were here before World War 1. He went to his sisters and brothers and they all contributed and he brought this money to my aunt and they send me that money to Paris, there the Hayas. I bought a ticket and I boarded a boat on February the 3rd and after a stormy trip...

**Deborah:** Where did you...?

**Harry:** Paris.

**Deborah:** In Paris?

**Harry:** Yeah, and I sailed from the harbor. I arrived here. The boat arrived here on February the 14th. The next day, the 15th, the ship docked but that time so many immigrants came here that Ellis Island couldn’t handle them all through, so we were kept on the boat for 12 days, the third class. Second class, they discharge early. Then they decided to work overtime, that’s what we were told.

On Sunday, that was February the 27th, they took us to Ellis Island and they start to examine us, pass us through. I went to several doctors. When I came out, I took my [inaudible 00:05:27]. While going out, there was a long corridor and there was fence between ... a wire fence and in front was sitting a man in front of a desk.

He marched me over and he says, “You know how to read?” I say, “Yes,” he said, “Read one of those things.” They had more than one card, I could read, I said, “Which one?” he says, “Forget it. Do you have any money?” I said, “No, I don’t have any.” I had a little left so I spent it on the boat.

He says, “I’m sorry, I can’t leave you go. If you show me you have full fare, this way I can leave you.” The ones that went to the right of that fence went out to the boat. The ones to the left, he marched me to go to the left, I went the whole length of the corridor and I landed in a large room.

There were more people there. When I came into that room, there was another man sitting at the desk. He stopped me, says, “Where are you going?” I gave him my uncle’s name and address. He wrote it down and he says, “You have 25 cents, I said, “No,” he says, “Go ahead.” Then I learnt he was from the Hayas, he was sending telegrams to the relatives here.

After 12 o'clock, they stopped examining. Those at the left were taken back to the boat. That was the next day. Us, after they marched into a large dining hall. There were beautiful tables set there all covered white and they served dinner.

I do not remember now exactly what I ate but that’s one of the best dinners that I maybe ever ate. I never forgot it. I thought to myself, “Is this how the United States received its immigrants?” I just couldn’t imagine it.

Then after a dinner, they march us into a place, it was like a theater and they have a concert. They played different music. They announced ... they had different people from different countries, so they played different kinds of music. Then towards the evening, we went out there and they directed men separate in our room to sleep overnight. See there were bunks [inaudible 00:07:37] so we spent the night there.

The next morning they woke us up early and we went to another room, a large room, all the immigrants. Alongside, there were like bars. We stay here, somebody said we wait here. Here we have to wait for our relatives or friends to come meet us.

After a while, I saw through the window, a boat came to Ellis Island. People disembarked, came off the boat and they went into the building and they came like from here and ... so all I was all eyes and there was my aunt. When she saw me, I motioned, she came over to greet me. Then she went out to window, they asked her a couple of questions and they let me out, my aunt took me home.

A little while after, we came home. One of those cousins that contributed to the ticket came to see me. As soon as she ... the first thing after she greeted me, she says, “About your ticket, you don’t have to worry. You don’t have to pay anyone back,” and that was my second great surprise because I received in Paris $120. It was so much money, I never had so much money and now she tells me I don’t have to pay it back.

Then the evening, I had an uncle that came here a few months before. He was abroad at my aunt. My aunt was my father’s sister and he worked at a Jewish hospital in Brooklyn. He came a few months before and ... in the laundry there. He knew I was coming off the boat so he spoke to somebody there and they told me...

I got off Ellis Island February 28th and [inaudible 00:09:18] March the 1st, my uncle took me with him and I started to work. I came there, he introduced me to a certain lady by the name Mrs. [inaudible 00:09:27]. I followed her into the hospital, they gave me a pail and a mop and they showed me how to mop the floors, only the hallways and the bathrooms.

I worked there for a few days then they put me ... I was a waiter with a black boy ... the nurse’s dining room. There were at that time 139 nurses there. Anyway, I worked at the hospital until about the end of the year.

Then we discussed with the family. They said I need something better for the future so they decided that I should try to learn a trade. They knew some furriers so they tried to put me into a shop to learn.

There was a cousin that I met here. I didn’t know him before. He put me in the shop that he used to work. I started to learn the trade. I started to work and I earned very little. I went as far $13. There, there was a man working, he was carrying [inaudible 00:10:35] coats also, he told me.

He says, “Harry,” he says, “You are worth more, you wouldn’t get anyways here. You’d better leave the job. Go down to market, you’re going to get a better job.”

I listened to him and Monday, I didn’t come in. I went to the fur market on 7th Avenue and was out there for a couple of days. Then a man called me, he says, “You are an operator?” “Yes,” I followed him, I went to a shop and they put me to work. When I finished the day, he said, “How much you want?” and from $13, I didn’t know how much to ask. I was afraid I’ll ask too much and I wouldn’t get the job, there’ll be another job.

I say, “$40.” Bargaining, bargained and finally, I had settled for $30 a week. When I finished a full week and I got $30 for one week, I thought I’m a millionaire already. That time I was sent [inaudible 00:11:30] they should come here [inaudible 00:11:31] after a couple of months.

After a couple of months, I told them to come to a port, they send me a telegram. I didn’t have enough money. I didn’t have enough money. They sent me a telegram ... I will send them a ticket. They arrived here October or November 1922. That was the second time when I was in Ellis Island.

Then after that, we tried to bring the rest of the family. We saved a little money. In 1923, we went, I bought tickets for the rest of the family, my mother and four sisters and brothers. But at that time, Congress enacted immigration laws that not too many people would come, especially Romania had a very small quota so we had to wait.

I wasn’t a citizen yet. I first became a citizen in 1927. Normally, I would have become a citizen in 1926 after five years but there were so many applications the courts were jammed so I had to wait another year. That time I started, the immigration law, they said any immigrant that comes to the United States that has left behind a family, a wife and minor children, they can come on a preferred quota.

I explained that to my mother because my youngest brother, he was nearing 18 years. I was afraid they wouldn’t let him out because of military service. He was below ... less than 18 and then there was the younger sister.

I explained to my mother if she’d come. She can bring the younger children. My mother listened to me. As I said, I made a petition to Washington and she came without a quota. She arrived here in the fall of 1927. After she arrived, she took out the first papers as declaration of intention to become a citizen.

With this, she make papers out, affidavits and the two younger children arrived so we have four here. Then my sisters, the two older sisters, they were left there. They had to wait for a while until finally, they arrived and the whole family was together here.

Here, you like to see pictures?

**Deborah:** I will in a minute. I was going to ask you to tell me a little bit... to go back to Romania and tell me a little bit of what life was like there when you were young before your father died when you had to be Romanian army.

**Harry:** Well, my father was a cattle dealer and he made a living, it was nice. That time, it was Austria; it’s a different country, different than Romania. It was not too bad, not rich but not too bad. But after he passed away, it was very bad.

**Female:** Our father was killed by a peasant.

**Deborah:** Oh.

**Female:** Yes.

**Deborah:** Do you want to tell how that happened?

**Harry:** It was an accident. The wagon something killed my father. I don’t know how it went, and he grabbed ... he had a pitchfork and he hit him.

**Deborah:** In the army, did you fight in World War I then?

**Harry:** Yes, I served in the Austria-Hungarian army.

**Deborah:** Yeah, what kind of a soldier were you?

**Harry:** I was first infantry then I was transferred, I was in the pack train. It was even worse. We used to deliver everything to the front. Right to the trenches, we used to deliver under fire and mostly artillery fire.

**Deborah:** So it was a hard time?

**Harry:** Yeah and beside where we were stationed, the front was in the mountains. Now, our line was on top of the mountain, [inaudible 00:15:42] and here was a valley and we were like under the mountain so we were shielded. In our artillery was on the other side of the valley. Then they used to have artillery duels, the shells used to fly over us.

**Deborah:** You could have gotten hit by your own army?

**Harry:** Our artillery was flying over us, over the mount to them. The Russians were fighting back and they also spotted there were some units like us, we were there a unit, there were like 200 horses. Pack train, we used to deliver up to the mountain. They flew over. They tried to hit us but they just ... they were just yards away, so happens they couldn’t get it. We were very close already. We had to move to another place.

That other place, they knew also where we were. They used to shoot ... fire shrapnel, shells that explode in the air but nothing happened. Although, only something little happened to me. We delivered from there something and I was up the night before but a buddy of mine from another platoon was sick and called.

The staff sergeant asked who wants to volunteer with his horses. I volunteered and I went up. While we were unloading, we carried some barbed wired so that things ... a shrapnel came and killed a horse, the leading horse that was holding. My cap flew off and I got a little scratch on my head, that’s all.

**Deborah:** You were lucky.

**Harry:** Yeah. Otherwise, we were all mostly under fire.

**Deborah:** Did you feel a lot of loyalty to Austria in the war?

**Harry:** Yes, Austrian was a fine country, a wonderful country. It could be compared to the United States as far as freedom, everything. Wonderful country.

**Deborah:** From what I gather, it got broken up at the end of the war and the Europeans came into your part?

**Harry:** Yes, that’s right. Yes, Romania was a friend to Austria but in 1916, Romania declared war on Austria and joined the allies. But when she declared war, the German and Austrian armies marched in and they figured them right away.

But then after the war when the Austrian army was remembered, Romanian was kind of resurrected. She occupied many territories that were formerly Austrian, especially Hungarian territories like there’s Transylvania, [inaudible 00:18:24] Romania occupied that.

**Deborah:** Was it different under Romania again?

**Harry:** Yeah, a little different. As far as soldiering, it’s almost the same. They teach you to train you rifle, same direction, the same place. But it was a little different.

**Deborah:** What war was it you were in? Why did they want you in the army, the Romanians?

**Harry:** The Romanians, in the First World War, they joined the allies. They declared war against Austria.

**Deborah:** You were in the army again in World War I twice? I mean, when you were in the Romanian army...

**Harry:** No, that was after the war.

**Deborah:** That’s what I meant.

**Harry:** Yeah, that’s after the war.

**Deborah:** Why did they want you?

**Harry:** Well, they trained men so either way, they have draft so they first thing and a new province. They organized the first one, two infantry regiments and I was in one of them.

**Deborah:** You were already experienced.

**Harry:** Yes, that’s right.

**Deborah:** But you only had to be in for a year so that was the...

**Harry:** Yeah, after a year, they let me go. The fact, we were all former soldiers many of whom were buddies that I knew from the Austrian army.

**Deborah:** Life was not much different under Romania except...?

**Harry:** Well, maybe a little difference.

**Deborah:** Your sister says it was very different.

**Female:** Excuse me, may I help you? Why don’t you tell them that you were hiding from the Romanian unit?

**Harry:** No, it was my brother [inaudible 00:20:01]

**Female:** What?

**Harry:** I wasn’t hiding in anything. I was left home. That’s right...

**Female:** Yes.

**Harry:** No, no.

**Female:** No?

**Harry:** No, you don’t remember. I served a year.

**Deborah:** Did you have any problems because you were Jewish or anything with the Romanians?

**Harry:** In Romania?

**Deborah:** Yeah.

**Harry:** Well, I didn’t have a problem but there were problems. I was in one company, the third company and there was a lieutenant ... it was nothing really but there came the holiday, Jewish holidays. It came the first when Rosh Hashanah New Year’s, there was a ... all different regiment, all the Jewish boys should be released for the holidays but there was no train. Many didn’t go home. I had an uncle about three hours away so figured out I’ll go there so I went away.

Somebody from the city [inaudible 00:21:01]. Then came the next holiday, we call Yom Kippur, they gave us off just. In a temple, they had had room for the soldiers so we went to temple. Then came the next holiday, the full holidays, you know, it’s eight days. The companies got lined up in the morning to march out in the training field. A messenger brought a message from the regiment that all the Jewish boys should be released for the two days, the first two days holiday.

The lieutenant said, “All the Jewish boys step out,” but I didn’t like his face, the way he looked, the lieutenant. I said, “Lieutenant,” I say, “I’m a stranger in this city. I have no place to go. I’d rather not miss a day of instructions,” so he sent me to back to my lines, to my squad.

The other boys, he ordered their rifles for inspection. They opened up their rifles, he looked at them. He right away told them that ... we were about five Jewish boys. He says, “You’re going to get three days in the lock up for not keeping the rifles clean.” They left, they went away for the holidays and then after the holiday when they came back after two days, they were locked up for three days.

Then after a while, I decided I’ll get out of this company, so I asked for a transfer. I asked for a transfer to another city, one battalion of this regiment but in a different city. I asked, “I’d like to be transferred to the third battalion.” There was a staff sergeant in the office not the outside. He said, “If you want to transfer this company, I’ll transfer you but not where you want, I’ll transfer you where I want.”

I figured maybe he’ll send me away to another regiment [inaudible 00:22:46] here I was all buddies to former Austrians. So he sent me in the same building upstairs to the first company. When he transferred me there, there was a captain there, he was an aristocrat. He was Abuyer, Abuyer in Romanian means a big landowner.

In fact, there was a man, a sergeant in the same company, he came from the same place where the captain. He said he’s so rich he can keep his company on his estate on his expense. This man was a real aristocrat, a wonderful man, he was like a father. All the soldiers really loved him. That’s where I finished the service.

**Deborah:** Oh, you were lucky then. About the journey here, you went to Paris. Did anything interesting happen on the way to Paris? Did you go to...?

**Harry:** No, I went to Romania. I went to Bucharest. The passport I took out in our capital city where I come from in the province. Then I went to Bucharest, there I went to a steamship agent. I told him I’d like to go just to a port and he had just transport ready to go away. Immigrants transport, like you have now tours and transports. Then they took us to the American consulate and I got a visa there. Then after a couple of days, we started out.

They had some going to Antwerp and some to Paris. I went to Paris. Here, I saved a ... a piece of my passport is still left. When I got married, it was my mother’s house then I don’t know what happened but this is saved here.

**Deborah:** That’s you, you were very attractive.

**Harry:** And here, here is our Mrs. Here is the American visa.

**Deborah:** So you wound up going to Paris then?

**Harry:** I beg your pardon?

**Deborah:** You wound up going to Paris?

**Harry:** Yes.

**Deborah:** How did you like Paris?

**Harry:** Paris is a beautiful city. It’s a nice city. Tourists have money, they go around spending it but I was just walking around.

**Deborah:** Did you have to stay there a long time while you waited?

**Harry:** I was there altogether about seven weeks. When I received the money, I ... yes, I sailed February the 3rd 1921.

**Deborah:** The ship, what was the trip on the ship like?

**Harry:** Well, it was a ship was ... at that time, so many immigrants came they converted a former transport. They converted it ... the French convert it into a passenger ship for civilians.

**Deborah:** Did ... were you seasick?

**Harry:** What?

**Deborah:** Did you get seasick? Was it...?

**Harry:** Yes, it was very stormy. For five days I was laying on board, I didn’t eat or drink anything. Then I got better and better. When we neared the coast here, I remember I was standing on the front deck on the right side, somebody spotted land.

[Inaudible 00:26:16] America [inaudible 00:26:20] something, I just couldn’t stop looking at it. It was late in the afternoon and then when it was dark we reached New York. I said, “That’s the land of hope, finally, I’m arriving here.”

**Deborah:** You saw the Statue of Liberty?

**Harry:** Yes, we passed by there on the way in.

**Deborah:** Did you know about the Statue of Liberty?

**Harry:** There was a man, a German man, German nationality. He was a former Austrian but he came from Yugoslavia. Yugoslavia took part of the territory. He explained to us about America and showed us the Statue of Liberty, what it means. When I came, I knew [inaudible 00:27:06].

**Deborah:** What did you think of ... well, when you went with your uncle, you stayed in New York, yes?

**Harry:** Yes.

**Deborah:** With your aunt. Where in New York did you...?

**Harry:** My aunt lived on the Lower East Side.

**Deborah:** What did you think about New York City itself and the Lower East Side?

**Harry:** Well, it was a big city, not like we were used there out in the streets.

**Deborah:** Okay, did it seem noisy, filled with people or did you like it?

**Harry:** Well, you just got used to it. I never saw so many people together and I got used to it.

**Deborah:** We’re going to turn the tape over now so I’m going to just say, “End of side one.” End of side one.

This is the beginning of side two.

Do you want to tell me a little bit about your life here?

**Harry:** My life here? Well, I live in America, a free country. There were years ago, there were depression years.

**Deborah:** Did you work in the fur business the whole time?

**Harry:** Yeah.

**Deborah:** Down on 7th Avenue in the ‘20s and ‘30s?

**Harry:** Yes, I spent my life there. I’m retired now.

**Deborah:** Did you have your own place making fur or just you worked...?

**Harry:** No, I worked ... yeah.

**Deborah:** Let’s see, how did you meet your wife?

**Harry:** How I met my wife?

**Deborah:** Yeah.

**Harry:** I met her on a boat. A friend of mine was going to Europe and I went to see him off. He was there with his wife. He went for ... his sisters went to see him off. I went there and I saw the girl on the boat. Then afterward, I called her, I asked her if she would go out with me.

**Deborah:** And that was it?

**Harry:** That was it.

**Deborah:** Then how many children did you have?

**Harry:** I have two daughters.

**Deborah:** You said you have two girls.

**Harry:** Yeah, I have two daughters.

**Deborah:** Two girls.

**Harry:** Yeah, my elder daughter lives in Staten Island, she has three boys. She has the one that’s graduating now and there’s the other one and the third boy, the youngest, he graduated last year and he works for AT&T. My younger daughter lives in Westchester and they have two boys also. The older one has now two years college and the younger one, that’s the youngest of my boys. He’s entering college this fall.

**Deborah:** Congratulations.

**Harry:** Yeah, very nice boys.

**Deborah:** Did you ever go back to Europe? Did you ever go back to your homeland?

**Harry:** No, I never went back there but I travel, I was in Israel a few times. In fact, in March I had an invitation to a wedding there. We have relatives that came from Europe after the holocaust. I went to the wedding. I was there for 10 days.

**Deborah:** That’s last March?

**Harry:** Yeah.

**Deborah:** Did you ever think about what the difference would have been if you’d stayed or if you came here? How do I put it? Well, you and the family made a decision that you should come here.

**Harry:** That’s right.

**Deborah:** That started you all coming here.

**Harry:** Yes.

**Deborah:** Did you ever think of what it would have been like if you hadn’t made that decision and if you had stayed?

**Harry:** I don’t know what it would have been like. We were just ... we were really very poor, in a hopeless position. When I came, that was ... my mother’s [inaudible 00:31:42] when I will come here then I will try and bring the rest of the family. In fact, I ... how should I say, I acted like a bridge out here. You know what I mean?

**Deborah:** Yes, yes.

**Harry:** Because I expected to bring them here. That was our only hope.

**Deborah:** And it was fulfilled, they came.

**Harry:** Yes, that’s right. It took a long time, the quota laws and all that but ... and then I had my youngest brother. I served there in World War I, my youngest brother served here in the United States Army.

**Deborah:** In World War II?

**Harry:** Yeah.

**Deborah:** Was he in the whole time for the whole war?

**Harry:** Yes, he was drafted after the war started and he served.

**Deborah:** Is there anything else that you would like to talk about, to tell about your experiences coming over?

**Harry:** About what?

**Deborah:** Is there anything more that you’d like to talk about and tell me?

**Harry:** Well, what can I tell you? We live in the United States, we are all very happy. When my mother came here, the time came and she became a citizen, it was the greatest thing to her. I told her, “Mom, now you are an American citizen. You’re not the same that you were there,” and that was the greatest thing to her.

She went to vote, she used to go to vote. To her, it was a great day to her. She was an American and she goes to vote. In Europe, there was no such thing even in voting. Here it was a wonderful thing. She lived nice few years here, wonderful, happily. She was not well and she passed away.

**Deborah:** Wow.

**Female:** Can I offer you a drink or something?

**Deborah:** Sure, let me just think if I have any other question. I don’t think so. Nancy, have I forgotten anything?

**Nancy:** No.

**Deborah:** Thank you...

**Harry:** You’re welcome.

**Deborah:** To let us come and tape you.

**Harry:** You are very welcome.

**Female:** Would you like a soda or...

**Deborah:** This is the end of interview number 188 with Harry Laufer. The time is now 4:35. Great.