

INTERVIEW: Senator Carl Levin

INTERVIEWER: Stanley Meretsky

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STANLEY MERETSKY: This interview is being recorded as part of the Albert and Pauline Dubin Oral History Archives at the Leonard M. Simons Jewish Community Archives. My name is Stan Meretsky, and today is March 14, 2016. I have the pleasure of interviewing Senator Carl Levin in his office at the First National Building in Detroit, Michigan. Senator Levin, do you give permission to the Leonard M. Simons Jewish Community Archives to publish, duplicate or otherwise use this recording for educational purposes and for use as deemed appropriate by the Archives?

SENATOR CARL LEVIN: I do.

MERETSKY: Thank you very much. And now let's get started. I'd like to focus on your early life in Detroit and talk about those sorts of things. So let's start with where and when you were born.

LEVIN: I was born in 1934 in June in Detroit. We lived then on LaSalle Boulevard. I guess we'll get to that with a later question. But the when and where is 1934, Detroit, Michigan.

MERETSKY: And we'd like to hear some talk about your parents...who they were and what they did and the family.

LEVIN: All right. My dad was originally—he was born Solomon Levin. He changed his name to Saul—S-A-U-L—Levin. He never liked the name Solomon for some reason. I think because people called him Sol, and he didn't like the resonance Sol. So he changed it to Saul. A lot softer, and my dad was a softie. He was a lawyer. He was raised—he was born in Chicago. He was one of a family of eight. He was the second chronologically, and the oldest member of his generation was his big brother, Ted Levin, who later became a federal judge. My dad was in law practice with Ted Levin and Behr Levin at the firm called Levin, Levin, Garved[sp] & Dill. After he was born in Chicago, the family moved to London, Ontario. His dad was active in the cigar-makers union in Chicago, and I guess the owners didn't like people trying to organize the union. And so they kicked him out. And my grandpa, my dad's father, lost his job, and they went to Ontario where they lived in London, Ontario, on Grey Street. And eight boys and girls with their parents had a real struggle. They were poor. My grandpa was, again, a cigar-maker in London.

My mother was Bess Levinson. Her name was Levinson. And she was a—she had three brothers. They lived in Birmingham, Michigan, and she was born in Birmingham, Michigan, in 1898. Actually my dad was born the same year in Chicago in 1898, both born in January of that year about five days apart. But my mother's family was the only Jewish family then in Birmingham,

Michigan, and they were fairly strict in terms of keeping kosher. They went in for kosher meat. Every Friday I think my grandpa went in and came into Detroit on the railway or street railway and bought kosher meat. He started off as a peddler. So he just peddled things like twine and rope and threads and rags. He had a horse and a buggy in northern Oakland County. He'd go around to the farms, saved his pennies, and ended up buying the corner of Woodward and Maple, which is *the* corner in Birmingham—or was a few years ago. And he bought a little store called Levinson's Dry Goods, I believe. And then saved his money and bought a store next door and bought a store next door. He ended up with four stores, all named Levinson Hardware, Levinson Dry Goods, Levinson—we have a wonderful postcard with one Levinson store after another. And then when he retired, he swapped those four stores for a building down the street a little bit, still on Maple, which is still in the family. My mother was probably the only Jew ever born in Birmingham because there was no hospital in Birmingham—still is none. And so she was born in her home. And her brothers were born in a hospital in Detroit. So my mother—at least for decades—was probably the only Jewish person born in Birmingham. And she has an oral history, as a matter of fact, with the Birmingham Historical Society. And I guess that's— My mother went to the University of Michigan, was one of the few women in those days. She was very independent and, for instance, drove—she had a driver's license, drove her big brother, Aaron Levinson, who was a lawyer, to California. He was sick, and he needed warmer weather. And she drove him when he moved to California, and actually did the driving all the way out there at a fairly young age.

My dad, as I said, was a lawyer in a firm called Levin, Levin, Garved & Dill. He was the second Levin. He then moved...he never really loved the practice of law. He told us late in life he did it because his brother Ted said, "Hey, come join me in this law practice. We can make a living here and help raise this large family that we're part of." Later on he went into business and lost most of his money, which wasn't a whole lot anyway, in a business that he didn't know much about. And he always taught his family to make sure you try to do what you love, not what you are told to do by someone else or urged to do. If you have to do something for financial reasons, that's one thing, and that was his situation. But if you can afford to follow your own heart, do that.

MERETSKY: That sounds like what you did as you grew up.

LEVIN: Well, I hope so. And by the way, my parents were active Zionists. My mother was very active as a volunteer in Hadassah, which was on the corner of Claremont and Twelfth Street above a bank. And Sandy and I and our sister, Hannah, used to call ourselves Hadassah Orphans because when we got home in the afternoon, my mother was never there. She was volunteering for Hadassah. My father was an active Zionist as well and active in the Jewish community. He was, I think, secretary of the Jewish community center that was on Woodward.

MERETSKY: Interesting. So your family life growing up was very oriented around Judaism.

LEVIN: I wouldn't say.... We were very Jewish, but I wouldn't say that we were—we weren't Orthodox. We were Conservative Jews. We were proud Jews, but I wouldn't say that we spent an awful lot of time in synagogue because we didn't. We'd go there on holidays. We celebrated holidays at home. We did not keep a kosher home. I would say that my parents, though, as I said,

were active Zionists. We were not...I can't claim that we were very observant Jews. But again, we were proud Jews.

MERETSKY: Okay. Were you as a child involved in any Jewish organizations besides your mother's Hadassah?

LEVIN: No. Not an organization. We went to camp which was basically a Jewish camp. We were to a high school which was basically a Jewish high school.

MERETSKY: Central.

LEVIN: Central High. But I was not involved in any Jewish organizations as a kid.

MERETSKY: No. And religion didn't play that—it played an important role, but not a religious role.

LEVIN: Yes. And not a dominant role, I'd say.

MERETSKY: Right. I had the pleasure, as I mentioned before, I had the pleasure of hearing you speak at the Old _____ Synagogue about your bar mitzvah. And I'd like to have you talk a little bit about that.

LEVIN: For me it was kind of a hard job, I'm afraid, _____. We had a wonderful teacher, a man named Goldophus[sp], who was really a fabulous human being. And he and his wife, when my brother and I used to go there together—I don't know why my brother went with me, because he had already been bar mitzvahed. Probably to make sure I'd get there. We walked from our house on Boston Boulevard to where they lived. And I remember we had— There were two rabbis then at _____ Bema. Probably it took two rabbis to get me through my Mafter[sp]. And one was Rabbi Hirschman and then Rabbi Adler. But it was, I guess, not a very notable bar mitzvah particularly. I don't know that I was very adept; I don't think I was. And it's interesting. I've had trouble remembering how to read Hebrew. To this day we have a little synagogue downtown. And of course when we read our passages, I have to read them either in English or phonetically. I still have trouble reading Hebrew. It's kind of a pity after all these years of going to synagogue, because we did form a synagogue actually, my wife and I. And a small group of Jews in 1970—

MERETSKY: That's the Reconstructionist.

LEVIN: Formed a Reconstructionist congregation of Detroit with about a half dozen other people. We actually formed it in my synagogue. It was then called Tahia[sp], which means "renaissance." And that name reflected our desire that there be a Jewish family presence, a synagogue that would kind of appeal to families. There was a downtown synagogue, which was the only other synagogue in Detroit. But that was kind of single guys who were older who were practicing something downtown who, you know, went after work to synagogue maybe just for a particular short-time purpose, not the holidays. But at any rate, one other thing on that is that the name Tahia, which was the original name of this organization, then later on, a few years later,

joined the Reconstructionist Movement, which is an offshoot of the Conservative Movement. And then many years later we split. And Tahia moved to the suburbs. And we became, the part that was left, the Reconstructionist Congregation of Detroit, RCD, which is our current name. So even though we were very small, probably 30 or 40 families at the most, we did that traditional Jewish thing: We split our synagogue. Because those of us who remained wanted to have a Jewish presence in Detroit. Now, the downtown synagogue has grown a lot in recent years. But it still, for instance, does not have High Holy Day services. But we do. The RCD Reconstructionist Congregation, we do have services for the holidays, the High Holy Days.

MERETSKY: What led you into the Reconstructionist from Conservative?

LEVIN: My dad was a Reconstructionist, and I know my Uncle Ted was a Reconstructionist. It was a more progressive form of Conservatism. For instance, they had the first women rabbis. The founder of Reconstructionism, I guess, had five daughters, and he was going to have a kid who was going to follow in his footsteps and was going to be a girl—or a woman.

MERETSKY: He started with the bat mitzvahs.

LEVIN: He started—yes. My sister was confirmed at_____. My Jewish wife was more Orthodox than I am. Her parents came from the old country. They were immigrants, unlike my parents. My parents were second generation while Barbara's parents were first generation, were more Orthodox, more observant, kept a kosher home. And so she was raised in a more kosher, actually, environment than I was.

MERETSKY: Now, Reconstructionism is such a modern version, and it's very interesting how that's developed. Do you go to services regularly?

LEVIN: Well, not enough. But we have services twice a month now. We have the High Holy Days services. We have other holidays we celebrate like Sukkot. We have the High Holy Days services. We have other holidays we celebrate like Sukkot. And it kind of fits what we are, which is we're traditional in terms of kind of wearing tallits and yarmulkas, speaking at least half in Hebrew half in English usually. If you come into a Reconstructionist synagogue, it kind of looks like a very observant synagogue, as a matter of fact, because we observe the religion. We obviously observe our religion: we're Jewish, and we're very proud. But we're not...we don't speak solely in Hebrew. We're very...we're progressive in terms of our programs. Our services, for instance, are kind of interactive. After reading the Torah service, we'll usually have a discussion about the Torah service. Sometimes that'll be a very lively discussion, and it'll sometimes get into politics. We're a liberal group, a progressive group usually politically. But that's not a requirement to belong to the Reconstructionists. I'm sure we've got mostly Democrats, but a few Republicans have slipped in there as well.

MERETSKY: Well, as your high school years and you're active, then you went on to which university?

LEVIN: I went to Swarthmore College. One other thing about my high school—sort of a Jewish footnote. When I was running for my class officer, treasurer, we were wearing billboards. Kids

would walk around the school wearing signs who they were for because we had regular campaigns for president and vice president and treasurer of our class—secretary. So my billboard that my supporters wore around their necks with a piece of string and a piece of cardboard had a piece of matzo on it. And it said: “This is what happens to bread without Levin.”

MERETSKY: Oh, great.

LEVIN: L-E-V-I-N. And I had that. I kept one of those billboards from many, many years as a matter of fact. But it helped elect me. And that’s...my earliest elective office helped produce....

MERETSKY: If you still have one of those, the Archives would love to have that in the collection.

LEVIN: [Laughs] I’m afraid not. I haven’t had it for many years now. Kept it for many years, but all of my buddies from Central High School, we talked about a lot of things. We’d get together a lot. As my family does. We have a very large family, as I’ve mentioned. My dad was one of eight, but there’s probably 25 cousins that I have in that family. And we got together for reunions until very recently, family reunions.

MERETSKY: Now as I said, you probably went to Durfee Junior High.

LEVIN: Went to Durfee, right. And to Roosevelt. Actually started in Brady Elementary and then Roosevelt. Back to college: I went to college called Swarthmore in Pennsylvania, a little town outside of Philadelphia, a little Quaker school traditionally. It’s not a very observant Quaker school, but its origin was Quaker. And it was a great college. Still is a fabulous college, and I loved it.

MERETSKY: What led you there?

LEVIN: I can’t really remember how I happened to go there. It had a great campus when we were visiting campuses. I know we were taken by the campus. It’s a very.... It’s a liberal arts school. It’s one of a group of liberal arts schools like Antioch and Oberlin and Kalamazoo College. Sort of these great small liberal arts schools. I wanted to go to a small school, which it was, about a thousand students. And I think I also wanted to be a little way from home. As close as our family is, I think I kind of wanted to go a place not right nearby home. I thought maybe it would...I’d have more independence somehow, psychologically or otherwise.

MERETSKY: Was there much of a Jewish life on that campus?

LEVIN: There was some, not particularly strong. I remember taking my non-Jewish girlfriend to a synagogue in Chester. I want to show her what a synagogue looked like. And so we spent one Saturday morning in an Orthodox synagogue. And I remember very vividly when they asked me, you know, what are you? Or, what’s your name? I said, “Levin.” “Now, you’re a Levi. Come on, come up to the Bema. We want you to have an Aliyah.” And I said, “Unless you’ve got it phonetically, I’m afraid that I won’t be able to read the Aliyah. I can’t read the Torah in any event.” So they understood.

MERETSKY: I've been through that same situation.

LEVIN: Yes.

MERETSKY: And they really understand.

LEVIN: Well, it can be embarrassing, you know. You're very Jewish, but you can't read Hebrew. But how do you explain that?

MERETSKY: So you majored in basic liberal arts?

LEVIN: I majored in political science there, and then went on from there to law school at Harvard where my brother, Sandy, was already there. He was in his third year when I began my first year. So we roomed together, as we had as kids, by the way. My brother and I are extremely close. Always have been very close. He's an amazing big brother. An amazing human being, but he's just an extraordinary big brother who always involved me and my gang in his games with his gang. So even though he's three years older than I am, you know, we had basketball games and football games and baseball. We were athletes, and we loved sports. And so the two groups would come together, and we'd just split the younger guys in my group with the older guys in his group. But he always included me. We travel together as kids. As soon as he got his driver's license, Sandy and I...he drove; I couldn't drive, I was only 13 or 14. So as soon as he had a license, we drove off to the Upper Peninsula. We drove to Washington. But he and I spent a lot of time together. We drove out West together. We drove cabs together. We did everything together.

MERETSKY: Wow! I knew you were close. I didn't realize you were that close. That's interesting. So you did a lot of traveling then as a kid, too, around the country.

LEVIN: Yes, we did. My dad was consul for Honduras. My father spoke Spanish. He taught Spanish to World War II Navy flyers who were, I guess, being based down in Central America. And he then was appointed an honorary consul for Honduras in Detroit, which he was until he passed away.

MERETSKY: Interesting. Well, after several years, after law school, you came back to Detroit, started in a law practice. What firm were you with or were on your own?

LEVIN: No, I was with a firm—it was called Grossman, Hyman & Grossman. A little firm first in the David Stock Building downtown. Then came to the First National Building. And it was a small firm. I think there were only five of us at the time. And just general practice. I then also with a friend of mine from high school opened up a little street-front office, storefront office, on Twelfth Street. So I actually practiced in two places: one downtown with Grossman, Hyman & Grossman in the First National Building, but also then had a small walk-in office on Twelfth Street right at Claremont. Actually right where the riot began in 1967. So a man named Marvin Gerber and I opened up a firm. So I was actually in two places at one time practicing law.

MERETSKY: Now you're back to the First National Building. It's kind of like you've come full circle here.

LEVIN: [Laughs] That's right.

MERETSKY: But you then, while you were practicing law, then got involved with politics and started with the Detroit City Council.

LEVIN: Right. I've been active in politics. My brother, of course, was active in the 'sixties. He was in the state legislature and the state senate, where he was elected in '64, I believe, 1964. And we'd been active in the Kennedy campaign. Here in 1960 we were active in the gubernatorial campaigns here, the Democratic campaigns. I had been active in college in the campaigns for Stevenson in the 1950's. And then in the late 'fifties I was active in the presidential campaign, also from Harvard, for Stevenson. And then when I got active myself, my brother had already, again, been in the state legislature for six years. By then he was chairman of the Michigan Democratic Party. I was by that time, when I ran for council, I had moved from private practice to first the Michigan Civil Rights Commission where I was their attorney for about three years, from 1964 to 1967, roughly. And then helped open up—or 1966. And then I opened—helped to open up—the Legal Aid Defenders Office in 1966, and was there for about three years. Headed the Appellate Division of the Legal Aid Defenders Office. And then ran for city council in 1969.

MERETSKY: What made you decide to get—I mean you'd been involved with all these liberal causes and involved with the—suddenly decide to get into politics?

LEVIN: Well, we always loved politics. My brother, of course, was in politics. My father, mother, and my sister, Hannah, who was also in politics, very heavily.... Her husband was the chairman of his Democratic district in Northwest Detroit. His name was Bill Gladstone. My sister, Hannah, was active in my brother's campaigns and then my campaigns and her husband's efforts to become chair of that Democratic district. But I think the most immediate thing that caused me to run was the fact that Detroit had been torn up by riots in 1967. And then because I had been active in the civil rights community as lawyer for the Civil Rights Commission and then in the poverty community representing indigents who couldn't afford their attorneys, a lot of people suggested I run for city council as somebody who might be able to get support in both the white and the African-American communities. And then thereby perhaps help to heal the city. To be one of the ways in which we could heal the city would be to have a city council which was biracial. And so I ran in 1969. Was elected. Began to serve January of '70 for four years. And then was reelected at the end of '73. And so I—I may be a year off here—and then in my second time I came in first in the city, and thereby became president of the city council.

MERETSKY: Who was the mayor then?

LEVIN: The first mayor was Ray Gribbs, in my first term. And the second term it was Coleman Young.

MERETSKY: Interesting.

LEVIN: So I served as city council president in Coleman Young's first term as mayor.

MERETSKY: Can you talk a little bit about that even though we weren't going to get too much of the politics? But Coleman Young was such an interesting person for this city.

LEVIN: Yes. He was a very proud African-American. He was the first African-American elected as mayor. We got along fine personally. Politically—because I was the head of a legislative branch, city council, and he was the executive branch, as the mayor—we of course had differences, which are fairly normal between legislative and executive branches. We had differences as to what his powers were and what our powers were. We had a couple of charter amendment differences, where the whole city council was for charter amendment of a certain kind, and he opposed it because he thought that would take away from his power. But we got along well. The city saw—it began long before that; it began even before the riot. But at the start of the 'sixties the city saw a real decline in white population. Later on, in the 'seventies, began to see a decline in African-American population as well. And began a long series of dwindling populations and increasing problems that are the result of a lot of things but mainly poverty. And now as we talk here, we see a city who's kind of roaring back. This city is amazing now with what's happening here.

MERETSKY: That was going to be my next question to you: How are you enjoying—how are you seeing—the rebirth of Detroit that's going on?

LEVIN: It's an amazing phenomenon. I've always fought for this town. You know I was born here, educated here, represented this city on the city council for eight years. When I went to Washington during those 36 years, of course I represented the whole state, not just Detroit. But I obviously had a special feel about my home town. And so I was able to get a lot done in terms of earmarks, financial support for Detroit. Down on the riverfront helped in terms of getting the M1 rail going. But in a lot of other ways was able to get some special funding for Detroit. But at the same time I was able to do that, I saw the city gradually lose population and have greater and greater problems, mainly in neighborhoods that were being destroyed by vacant buildings. And then vacant land. And then I still, despite those problems, said, "Our city will someday come back." I was always optimistic that someday this city would come back. But I didn't see evidence of it until recently. And then I'd say starting a few years ago, things began to happen, mainly young people moving into the city. And young people saw here a way of being with other young people, being an exciting place, being a place where there's lots of music and sports and events. Where our riverfront has come back strong so we have a great river walk now. We have midtown coming back strong, where there's a great university and a number of other things that are going on in midtown, where our medical center—medical centers are located from downtown or midtown all the way out to Ford Hospital. But there's a real momentum here. Restaurants opening it seems like one a week. My wife and I go out.... We say we're going out one—every Thursday we're going out to dinner to a different restaurant. And we stick inside the city, and we can't keep up with the new restaurants.

MERETSKY: Well, you've remained a resident of Detroit all your life.

LEVIN: Right. We've always lived here.

MERETSKY: You live down in the Lafayette—

LEVIN: Lafayette Park. We're in the process of moving a few blocks away to a place where we can buy our residence in a high-rise. We've been renting for 36 years down in Lafayette Park. We always owned our house in Northwest Detroit before I was elected to the Senate. But then we had to buy a house in Washington because we were raising our kids there most of the time; most of the time we were there. So we bought a larger place there, a house. But we rented our apartment here in Lafayette Park where we've lived for 36...37 years now. But finally we're able to...it's hard to find a place downtown. Believe me, there's a huge demand for places. But finally a few months ago we found a place we liked, bigger than our current rental, and we could own it as part owners of a co-op. So we own shares in a co-op at 1300 East Lafayette now.

MERETSKY: Oh! Very nice.

LEVIN: Yes. Great views of the river. And watch our city's comeback.

MERETSKY: Are any of your children involved in politics? I know you have three daughters, right?

LEVIN: I have three daughters, three sons-in-law, six grandkids, two per daughter and son-in-law. None of them are involved in politics.

MERETSKY: Are they involved in community?

LEVIN: Oh, yes. They're all involved one way or another in their communities. They're raising their kids, though. That keeps them busy. But they're involved in education in their own home towns. They're scattered. My oldest daughter, Kate, is the president of the McGregor Fund here in Detroit. Her husband is a physician; teaches at the University of Michigan. They live in Ann Arbor. She commutes daily to Detroit to come to the place where she works at the McGregor Fund. Our middle daughter lives north of New York City, married to an Israeli, as a matter of fact. They live in a town called Nyack, New York. And our third daughter lives in Pittsburgh.

MERETSKY: A bit of traveling to see the grandkids.

LEVIN: It is a lot of traveling. When we lived in Washington, we were able to get a lot to New York. So we saw that particular daughter and her family a lot. But now we see—now that we're full time back home, we see our family in Ann Arbor more than any of the other ones.

MERETSKY: Well, when you were first—you were the first Jewish senator in Michigan elected to the U.S. Senate. And you were one of seven Jewish senators when you took office. Did you have a support group there? Did you have kind of a minion of Jewish senators?

LEVIN: Well, we did meet when the Israeli prime minister or a major Israeli figure came to town. The Israeli Embassy watched and asked whoever was the senior Jewish senator to bring the Jewish members together. And the same thing on the House side with the senior Jewish

members of the House of Representatives. Sometimes we'd meet senators and Jewish House members, but sometimes separately. And then there were more Jewish senators as time went on. I think we grew up to as many as 13. I became the senior Jewish senator. So I was the convener at that time. I know you want to talk about politics. But my father-in-law gave me a couple of great opening lines, you know, running as a Jew in Michigan. I don't think there ever had been a Jewish statewide official. Now, I may be wrong. You guys can check your archives and find out. My brother would have been the first Jewish governor had he won—and he came close in the 1970's. But when I was running for Senate in 1969 or '70—and I may have gotten my year mixed up—my father-in-law gave me a great opening line, because people were saying, Well, okay, he's a Jewish guy running statewide. Can a Jew get elected statewide in Michigan? Of course I felt definitely yes, because my brother almost won. And not only that, people really vote for the person, not for the religion of that person. And so my father-in-law said, "I tell you, I'll give you a great opening line to let everybody know you're Jewish. And you get beyond that issue and talk about issues." So I was always running late to the meetings, the political meetings and rallies and so forth. And so when I'd arrive late, I'd say, "I hope you're running on Jewish time here." And I'd get a little nervous laugh, you know. And I'd say, "Let me tell you for those of you who don't know what Jewish time is, let me tell you what Jewish time is." I said, "I was in Israel a couple of years ago, and I picked up the phone to get the time. See what time it was because of the time change between here and Israel. And the voice at the other—the recording at the other end of the telephone said, 'At the tone, the time will be eight-thirty. Eight forty-five at the latest.'" [Laughter] You know Jews are famous for being late. It turns out every other "group" has their own late times, late-time jokes of being late for everything. I mean there's Italian time, there's... you know every ethnic group apparently seems to have a tradition of having a little story about: We're always late. We Italians or we Germans or we this or we African-Americans, you know, we're always late. So everybody has their own story about running on their own time. So I was on Jewish time.

MERETSKY: But you won, and then you became now the senior Jewish senator.

LEVIN: Yes.

MERETSKY: Or you were. How did your Jewish background influence your thinking, your votes in the Senate and your activities there?

LEVIN: Well, there's a tradition of Judaism of repairing the world, trying to leave the world better than you found it. _____ is something we were raised with. We had our own charities that we favored. Our parents were strong supporters of Federation. Again, they were Zionists. But the tradition I was raised in, it was a progressive tradition of Judaism, of social conscience, of caring about the underdog, caring about people who were poor or didn't have enough to eat or didn't have enough clothing. And so that's what I was raised in. My brother, I, and our sister, we were raised as Roosevelt Democrats. We were progressive Democrats. And that has always been my view, is that we have a responsibility to our brothers and sisters—and that means literally people; because if we're all children of one God, we're all brothers and sisters. And not just within our own community do we have a special obligation inside the Jewish community to take care of our own. First take care of your family, then do what you can to help your community. But then the broader community is also your responsibility. And so, you know, there are votes

on, obviously, various subjects, whether it's programs involving education or involving jobs or food programs. My instincts, which were a part of me as raised as a proud Jew, were to have a social conscience to seek social justice, to care about.... My father, by the way, was on the Corrections Commission. So he was on the Prisons Commission. And so he used to visit prisoners. I remember once he told me that he had Passover with the Jewish prisoners. And I carried on that tradition. I went to Jackson Prison one time only, but I did it, to meet with the Jewish prisoners. Not a lot of them, by the way. Very few. But there were a lot of non-Jewish prisoners who wanted to see what a Passover service was like. And so we had maybe 20 or 30 people there, some of whom weren't Jewish but claimed that they were Jewish in some way or another that they could in and see what it was all about. But at any rate....

I think in terms of taking care of the world, the obligation that we leave the physical world, hopefully, if possible, better than we found it. That gets into the whole question of climate change and whether we have a responsibility to the earth. So I got very active in environmental issues that were in the Senate. Very active in protecting the Great Lakes, for instance. Got a lot of funding to protect the Great Lakes and the Detroit River, to clean up the lakes. So there's that environmental responsibility. My brother and I worked on the assembly line a couple of summers, where we, I think, learned a lot about how people really have to scrape by even if they have a good job. And we drove cabs for a couple of summers—at least one summer, probably two—when we were in law school. As cab drivers, came into contact with all kinds of people. So our upbringing was not only our training that we have responsibilities as citizens and as Jews. But our early jobs kind of reinforced the idea that the strength that we have as a diverse people, that diversity in America is a strength, that everybody, every group, with different backgrounds can contribute to the whole with their histories, with their strengths. That was also part of it. But I would say that the Jewish upbringing was very much a part of my conscience. The little guy is first and foremost in my thinking. The average, Harry Truman might have called it. He had a word for it. He said, "the average American." The little guy who's struggling. Comes out of a Jewish upbringing, to care about that person and to realize that people when they have hard times can need a hand, and that has got to be treated with dignity.

MERETSKY: When you were living in Washington, did you belong to a congregation, you know, like the Reconstructionist, or anything?

LEVIN: No. We went to services on holidays. If we were there, we went to Jewish services on Yom Kippur and Rosh Hashanah—if we were there. But if we were back here, of course, we went to our own synagogue...first Tahia and then the RCD Reconstructionist congregation because we had our own services here that we were very, very involved with.

MERETSKY: Okay. I'll read you....a 1984 *Jewish Forward* article quoted your mother saying, about you and your brother: "If you really want me to be proud of you two, then hurry and stop the arms race, solve the budget crisis, and bring peace to the Middle East." It's from your first term as a senator until your retirement, do you feel you've made any progress in these areas towards your mother's statement?

LEVIN: I thought you were going to quote another statement. I'll get back to that one. But my mother had a statement which summed her up. She was a very private person, unlike my dad.

And I'll get back to that in a minute while I try to figure out how to duck the answer to that question. My mother had a famous comment once. When my brother was elected in 1984—and so there were two of us in the Congress starting in '84 all the way until I retired. And so my mother was asked by a reporter once: "You've got two sons in the Congress. You must be bursting your buttons with pride." And my mother's answer was: "If that's what they want, it's okay with me." [Laughter]

MERETSKY: You couldn't become a doctor.

LEVIN: No. No, no! What she's saying is whatever her kids do, she's for. And she didn't want to indicate any kind of a preference or any kind of a difference in attitude towards two sons who happened to be in the Congress, from her daughter, who is working at the medical center and raising a couple of great kids. So she didn't want to say anything which would indicate any kind of a difference in support or love. So she says, okay. So they're in the Congress. They want it? Hey, that's fine with me. But anyway, now to her other comment. Give me those one at a time. You've got four things there.

MERETSKY: Yes. "If you really want me to be proud of you two, then hurry and stop the arms race."

LEVIN: Okay. Well, the arms race....

MERETSKY: You were on the Senate Armed Services Committee.

LEVIN: I did it all by myself, right. No, I mean nobody can take credit for stopping the arms race, including Ronald Reagan, who never took credit himself for stopping it. But people give him credit for stopping the Cold War at least. The arms race was stopped by a series of arms control agreements essentially—and by the end of the Cold War. Those two things. And I obviously supported the arms treaties very strongly, arms reductions very strongly. I was chairman, as you mentioned, for about a decade of the Senate Armed Services Committee at the end of my career, where I always heard much support for arms reduction, particularly nuclear arms reductions. I can't take much credit for ending the arms race. But at least I lent whatever support I could in that direction, particularly in terms of nuclear weapons reductions. What was the second one?

MERETSKY: Budget crises.

LEVIN: Actually we made some progress at the end of the Clinton years, and I was a part of that, one part of it. At the end of the Clinton years, we actually balanced the budget for two straight years. And it was done—and this is a partisan comment; it'll be maybe the only partisan comment I'll make during this interview. But it was done without one Republican vote. The Clinton budget, which raised the gas tax a little bit, raised the tax on upper-income people a little bit, reduced spending in a number of areas led to, number one, strong economic growth. And number two, to a balanced budget in his last two years. Those were the only two years that the budget was balanced. But we won that vote by one vote and without one Republican. Not one Republican would vote for the Clinton budget. And it took the vice president of the United States

to break a tie. Al Gore was president. He had to come and vote. He rarely voted, but he did do that. And the speaker of the House, who was then a Democrat, who almost never votes, had to come and vote. And it was a one-vote margin in both houses. And so every one of us who voted for that budget—because it won by one vote—can take a little bit of credit for balancing the budget. And I'll take a little bit of credit for that because I very much supported the Clinton budget. Now, what was the third— You know, and I basically have been fairly cautious in the area of budget. I believe, for instance, then when we had a surplus at the end of the Clinton budget, that we should apply that to deficit reduction, at least in part. We had a big national debt that had been built up, but we had two surpluses. We could have used—and should have used—some of those surpluses to reduce the national debt.

MERETSKY: Mm-hmm.

LEVIN: We didn't do it. Why? Because Bush came to office. And what was his slogan? Hey, those surpluses are all your money. And so he handed them back in tax cuts mainly favoring upper-income people, which I opposed also. In other words, we should not have even had tax cuts to the degree we did. We should have used some of the surplus with debt reduction. But if we're going to have tax cuts, we should've helped middle-income people not upper-income people. So that's a comment on budget. I was fairly cautious about spending money. Number three of my mother's list?

MERETSKY: Bring peace to the Middle East.

LEVIN: Yes. We have not done that. And although I must tell you I'm a strong believer in a two-state solution, I think it's the only way that there's going to be a solution. It didn't lead to peace. Surely we have not had peace in the Middle East. There's been some peace between Israel and Egypt. And I actually was at the signing ceremony. I was elected in 1978, and I was there in '79 when Sadat and Begin and Carter in the Rose Garden signed an agreement. So I was there as a senator. So did I support that? Obviously I supported it. I had nothing to do with it, but I supported it. Same thing with Jordan. I've been a strong supporter of Jordan and aid to Jordan, who has made peace with Israel. So that you've got two countries there which, in any way I could, including arms, have helped to support both Egypt and Jordan after they made peace with Israel. But in terms of the other countries and things that are going on, we're a long way, I'm afraid, from peace between Israel and the rest of her neighbors. In terms of the other parts of the Middle East, there surely is no peace. There's more violence there now than there was even five years ago. Arab Spring led to Arab Disaster in a lot of ways. And we're far from achieving that, I must tell you. But, you know, you've got to keep working at it. You can't give up. You can't give up on trying to find a way to bring peace to Iraq; it's created a huge refugee problem. You can't give up on Iran joining the other nations of the world, stop supporting terrorism. Part of the Iranian government is moving in the right direction. The other part, the Revolutionary Guard, is moving still in the wrong direction, supporting terrorism. But there's been some things happening even inside Iran which over time can move that country in the right direction. So it's not a done deal by a long stretch. And there's steps forward and steps backward. But that recent election in Iran showed that at least the younger generation in Iran wants something other than a future dominated by the Revolutionary Guard.

MERETSKY: Do you think they'll be able to accomplish any of those goals?

LEVIN: Probably not in my lifetime. But over time, yes, I do. And, you know, even Netanyahu back in 19—it was right before the Iraq War. And he was not prime minister then. He had been prime minister and I guess had lost. And he came, and he was lobbying Congress, this Netanyahu in 2000—wow! I've got to get my year. It was right before the Iraq War. So I think it would've been the end of 2002. He came, and he actually lobbied Congress to support President Bush to go to war in Iraq, which was a mistake, in my judgment. A fundamental mistake, that the so-called Neocons in the Bush Administration I think talked Bush into; it didn't take much trouble and work, but nonetheless it was the big impetus for going to war in Iraq which, again, I think has been one of the causes of all the chaos in the Middle East. But my point here is—getting back to the Iranian question—when Netanyahu testified in December of 2002, urging Congress to support President Bush in going to Iraq which he was considering then, Netanyahu said something which will sound mighty strange 12 years later. He said, “The young people in Iran can make some real progress in Iran against the Revolutionary Guard.” So don't attack Iran, Netanyahu was saying. Attack Iraq. And why not attack Iran? Because even though you had these extremists on top, you had this younger generation in Iran. That was Netanyahu. Not Obama in 2015. This is Netanyahu in 2002 saying the same thing, something which is true. There is in the younger generation in Iran a desire to move towards the West and [away from] the fanaticism of the Guard, of the Revolutionary Guard in Iran. So I do have hope. And the elections in Iran, which are relatively free—a number of people aren't allowed to run. But there's enough moderates running, pro-Western people. They're not pro-Western exactly. But they're much more pro-Western than the Ayatollah and the Revolutionary Guard. That younger generation, against the wishes of the Revolutionary Guard, are voting for pro-Western-type people. So I do have some hope.

MERETSKY: There's some hope there.

LEVIN: There is some hope, yes. I'm not naïve, by the way. I'm not a dove. I'm a hawk in a lot of ways. I believe in the use of force at times. I believed in going to war in Afghanistan, for instance. I believed in what we did in the Balkans, using force, to get rid of a Serbian dictator. So I do support the use of force. I am not someone who's dovish particularly. On the other hand, I do believe that you've got to be very careful before you use military action, because it can unleash all kinds of consequences which you don't want. And that's what the Iraq War—again, which I opposed—did.

MERETSKY: Look what's happening now.

LEVIN: We see those consequences right now, I'm afraid.

MERETSKY: You've worked extensively with other cultural groups: Arab-American, Polish community. How do you approach interaction with a group that shares ideas different from your own and generate meaningful communication? In other words, you've been involved with a lot of things.

LEVIN: Sure. Well, the ideas that govern good people are basically the same ideas. The religions may be different, the ethnic origin may be different, but the ideals and the ideas of good people and decent people are the same: They want to live in peace. They want to have an opportunity for their kids—maybe better than theirs. They're willing.... They're patriotic people. Some of the most patriotic people you could ever find are immigrants, including our own people, our own Jewish immigrants.

MERETSKY: Sure.

LEVIN: I mean you want to talk about patriotism, you know? Look inside of our community. But you look in any community, you've got patriotic people. Look who's in the army. Look who fights. Look who puts the uniform on. It's every single one of the groups that are part of America. And so I've seen firsthand...there are really bad people in every group. You know obviously there are Muslim terrorists, there are Italian Mafia, there are you name it. We had Jewish Mafia, by the way. It was a Jew who killed Rabi[sp].

MERETSKY: Right.

LEVIN: So, you know, 95 percent of people of all religions, ethnic groups are good, decent people, who have the same ideals—maybe not the same ideas, but the same ideals—that all other people have. So that makes me hopeful and optimistic. I'm going to have to leave you, I think, in a— Okay. I'll be right there.

MERETSKY: Okay. A couple of last questions: In your 36 years as a senator, what are your proudest accomplishments?

LEVIN: It's a long list. It may be a short question, but it's a long list. In terms of specific accomplishments, anything that was positive relative to jobs for Michigan, and that is a long list: Armed Services Committee, getting major support, for instance, for our tank and automotive command, for research and development programs. For getting the auto industry and the private sector together with government. I was deeply involved in moving from a philosophy which said that government and the private sector should not work together. And believe it or not—believe it or not—30 years ago the conservative theology in this country was that for government to work, to pick a private sector anything to do something, was picking winners and losers. You can't do that. That runs against the conservative theology about keeping government and the private sector separate. It was called "industrial policy." That was a bad word. Well, I was very active in bringing mainly the Big Three and our military vehicle world together, so that there are all kinds of joint development and research projects. Okay? We got over that. I was very much involved in that. So there's a lot of things in the jobs area that I was very much involved with as chairman of the Armed Services Committee. I'm very proud of the parks that we created in Michigan—two new parks. One up in the Upper Peninsula, one off Alpena; one is an historical park. You folks know about history? This is an historical park up in the U.P. in copper country. It's called the Kewana National Historical Park. And the one...we created in Alpena, in the lakes, a way of preserving the shipwrecks that are there. And so we have a National—the word escapes me at the moment. I'll think of it in a moment. The Thunder Bay—not a conservancy.

MERETSKY: _____.

LEVIN: Yes. Now, we also have done a lot of other things in the area: the environment, protecting the Great Lakes. I helped to get a lot of funding to clean up the Great Lakes. Helped to get a law passed which would control what can be put into the Great Lakes. We created the—John Dingle was really active in a number of these things down in Monroe, a battlefield, a national historical battlefield. Along the river we created a refuge, an international refuge between ourselves and Canada. John Dingle led the way in the House on that. I'm very proud—We also have a national trail, the longest trail in the country; it is called the North Country Trail which I was kind of a godfather of as well. So there're a lot of environmental things, which were done. I was very proud of getting the funding that we got for various projects around the state, including the Detroit River where I got tens of millions of dollars, literally, for the river walk, for acquisition, for a number of other projects on the river. I was very active in helping to get the M1 Rail project functioning. So there's a lot of things in Detroit and around the state that I'm very proud of. I'm very proud of the ethics laws that I got passed. When I first got there, I saw that there were a lot of big gifts that were being given to members. For instance, a lobbyist would give World Series tickets to members. Well, those tickets were worth hundreds of dollars. And so I was the key sponsor, initiator of a gifts rule prohibiting gifts except for minimal things like hotdogs or something like that, but minimal gifts. So we have a new gift law. And that's not new anymore. It's about 25 years old. But that was my law. We also controlled—didn't control so much, but we required lobbyists to disclose who it is they're lobbying for. That was my law. It was the Lobbying Disclosure Law—Lobbyists Disclosure Act—which passed. And so now the media can go—anyone can go—and look up who the registered lobbyists are, who they contributed to and for what purpose. We can do that as well because of this another ethics law, which I got involved in. So now those are.... You know I hate to select things. I think what I did for Israel I'm very proud of, and what was to get a lot of additional money for their rocket defense program, missile defense program.

MERETSKY: Iron Dome?

LEVIN: Including—sorry?

MERETSKY: Iron Dome

LEVIN: Iron Dome was one of them. Arrow was another one. And the third one is David's Sling. So on the Armed Services Committee I was able to lead the way to additional support for those three programs which have really been critical in defending Israel against the rockets which have come mainly from Gaza. And I've been given an award for that to support Israeli defense. We did that as a joint program with the Israel and the United States. A number of other joint programs with Israel and the United States in terms of joint activities, joint training and exercise between Israel and the United States. And some of this gets classified, but I think I can say the joint...the location of a lot of equipment, U.S. equipment in Israel, getting ready for, if necessary, going against Iran, for instance, if should Iran ever get to a nuclear weapon. And by the way, I was very much in favor of the deal with Iran because I thought—and I believe still very strongly—that that agreement has kept Iran from moving towards a nuclear weapon. And at the end of ten years, if she decides to reverse course and go towards a nuclear weapon, all bets

are off. We're then free to do whatever we want to do to stop her, and what Israel wants to do to stop her from going a nuclear weapon. So I thought that was the right move. But, oh, I don't know. In terms of what I'm proudest of, I won't pick out any one thing. I guess, you know, fighting for my home state in a way which preserved the integrity of the office is something I have to put on the list as well.

MERETSKY: I know our time is short. You have an appointment. But the last question I'd like to ask you is who are the four or five most influential people in your life, your career?

LEVIN: That I knew. So you're not talking about who was a role model. You're not talking about presidents, you know, like Lincoln, Roosevelt. You're saying who personally in my life. I would say my—and that's someone whom I knew—would be my parents, my brother. Maybe family actually. They'd all be family members. You know, wife and kids. I wouldn't go far beyond the family for the *most* influential, if that's what you're asking for. I think politically I'd put for people, again, that I actually personally knew, I'd say Phil Hart would be on that list, who was in the Senate before me, who was kind of the conscience of the Senate, from Michigan. He would be up there.

MERETSKY: Okay. Well, I'd like to thank you.

LEVIN: Sure.

MERETSKY: Very, very much. It's been fascinating doing this with you. I really appreciate the opportunity. And I know that those who will hear and listen to this will learn a lot from you.

LEVIN: Well, glad to do it.

MERETSKY: That's the most important thing.

LEVIN: A pleasure to do it.

MERETSKY: Thank you very much.

LEVIN: Sure.

[End of Interview]