

BOOK 22

J A C O B   W O O L F E

Interview with Jacob Woolfe  
By Dan Woolfe  
December 5, 1973  
Time - 2 hours

C O N T E N T S

Emigration from Russia . . . . .	1
Early Life In America . . . . .	3
Operating a Laundry . . . . .	5
Earlier Work Experience in America . . . . .	8
Recollections of a union organizing effort and earlier strikes . . . . .	18
World War I . . . . .	21
Sacco and Vanzetti and Norman Thomas . . . . .	25
Experiences as a Laundry Owner . . . . .	27
Recollections of the Depression . . . . .	28

Oral History Project

I J a c o b W o o l f e , hereby direct that the interview  
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Elizabeth Balanoff  
Director, Oral History Project

Jacob Woolfe  
Signature of interviewee  
( by Louie Woolfe )

Interview with Jacob Woolfe and Kate Woolfe  
By Dan Woolfe  
December 5, 1973

(Jacob Woolfe was born in Russia in 1888 and came to the United States in 1905. He was interviewed by his son Dan Woolfe at the request of Dan's son Lorin Woolfe, who transcribed the interview for his Labor History class at Roosevelt University. "R" will stand for Dan Woolfe in this interview. Kate Woolfe spoke only occasionally to clarify some point.)

- I. Tonight is Wednesday, December 5, and Dad and I are just sitting here in the living room discussing the questions that Lorry asked in his letter. Apparently he's studying the history of labor in the United States and he wondered what Dad remembers about labor when he was first here in this country. Now, he starts off by saying, "We're studying the formation of the American Federation of Labor." Do you remember the formation of the AFL?
- R. No, nothing at all. I worked in a place when I just came and I was glad to make whatever I made. It was better than in Russia.
- I. So what you're saying is that you were happy to get any job?
- R. Yeah, sure.
- I. So you got a job, you made a living.
- R. Now, I'll tell you this. When I came here I had ten dollars and an address and I was free to do anything where in Russia I couldn't do anything. If I wanted to give lessons in Hebrew or Russian I was pulled out from there. Like, if I came to a Cheder. You know what a Cheder is?

Woolfe - 2

I. Yeah, a Hebrew school.

R. Yeah, I tried to teach them Russian, a policeman was right there.

I. You tried to teach them Russian or you tried to teach them Hebrew?

R. No, Russian. I spoke Russian.

I. Why should they object to you teaching Russian? Everyone was learning Russian.

R. No, but it's Hebrew and Russian

I. Oh, I see. You were teaching Russian to Hebrew?

R. Yeah, you know.

I. They didn't want you to teach Hebrew maybe.

R. No. Like they say in Russia in Jewish (Yiddish) they, you know, chased them out from the Cheder and no mere Cheder.

They chased all the people out of the Hebrew school. They didn't want them to teach the children. They didn't want them to learn Hebrew?

R. Yeah.

I. How about Yiddish? Were they learning Yiddish, too?

R. Sure.

I. Yiddish and Hebrew. They didn't want them to learn any?

R. No.

I. It was like they didn't want anybody to be Jewish?

R. That's the Russians. That was at the Czars time. I wasn't there in the Communist time. I wasn't there. That happened years later. I wasn't there, I was here. So I don't know anything what happened after that.

I. Not from personal experience.

R. No, see, but if he wants to know what, how the -

I. Well, the American Federation of Labor, You don't remember the American Federation of Labor being formed then?

R. No, no.

I. Do you remember the Industrial Workers of the world? He calls them the Wobblies. Did you ever hear of that, then?

R. No, I wasn't interested. That's the real truth. I wasn't interested. I was interested in making more money and a better job, a better trade. First when I came there somebody heard me playing a mandolin at a barber. So he said, "You just come. I can give you a job and give my brother lessons on the violin." So I was interested in different things. My mind wasn't on the labor movement.

I. You were interested in getting a job and teaching this other person's child how to play the violin. So that was a good deal at that time.

R. Sure, circumstances were different.

I. Well, I think you said you do remember Eugene Debs.

R. Yes. He was a Socialist.

I. Eugene Debs was a Socialist?

R. Yes.

I. Not a Communist?

R. No, no. Socialist. Like maybe you remember Thomas. What's his name?

I. Oh, Norman Thomas.

R. Norman Thomas.

Woolfe - 4

I. So he was before Norman Thomas.

R. Yeah, he had the same idea, see. And Debs--that was in--what's the year? The president that you mentioned?

I. Wilson?

R. Wilson and that was the war at that time.

I. You're talking about the first World War.

R. Yeah, that was the first World War.

I. That would be about 1916, 1917.

R. 1918 it was finished. (Kate - It started in '14 and ended in '18. It was four years,) Yeah. I had to register there but they found out I was married. (Kate - Lil was three years old and then you (Dan) were born.)

I. They found out that you were married and had children so they deferred you.

R. Yeah, and then there's another thing. I'm a foreigner. I wasn't a citizen, So they let me free. They didn't ask me where you come from or what. But I was a free man. I can go anywhere I want. And this made me a good mind about America, you know.

I. Well, it was certainly quite a change from where you had come.

R. Sure.

I. But what do you remember about Eugene Debs? Just that he was a Socialist?

R. He was a Socialist and he was against the war. (Kate - That's why they sent him to prison.) I was there--what was it? A hall or something, a big stage, and he was walking back and forth from one side to the other like this, from one side to the other.

And he said, "Our boys" you know, and he made a good speech.

I. That we shouldn't send our American boys over to war?

R. Yeah. That was the Kaiser started a war and so on.

I. Well, you know, really what we're trying to find out more about is what his impact was on the Labor Movement here. Do you remember what he had to say about what the laboring man should do here?

R. Of course. He made speeches about Socialism. The Labor Movement., means that Labor should take over, you know, like now. Now the Labor took over and they should make unions. My recollection is this. We went on strike -

I. When you say "we" what? We laundry workers?

R. Yeah, the workers where I was working.

I. And you were working in a laundry, a big commercial laundry?

R. Yeah.

I. It wasn't a hand laundry?

R. No. There were women, schwartze (black) by the machines and I used to finish it when they used to bring it over to my table on a horse, you know.

I. Like a dummy? (Kate - Wagon) You were doing shirts and other things?

R. Yeah.

I. And they would do the rough work and you would finish them up with the hand iron?

I. Yeah, yeah. But then I found a different job in a laundry where. they used to do laundry work. You know what I mean? A place

Woolfe - 6

where they send out a truck and they bring in from other smaller laundries shirts and they finish them by hand. So at that time. we wanted to organize all these places.

I. All the little small laundries?

R. No.

I. Or the truck laundries, the one which would pick up?

R. Yeah. There were plenty of them. There were a few "steam-rollers," they used to call them. You remember that?

I. That I remember, sure. Our laundry, the steam laundry used to come with the truck and pick up. But they would pick up all the heavy stuff, I remember, like sheets and pillowcases, the bigger things that weren't very good to do by an iron.

R. Yeah, but I wanted to say - (Kate - They used to bring you a wet sponge.) that I used to take them out, stack the clothes, and hang them up with a rope to dry them out. They would bring them in wet and I used to dry them out and in the morning damp them in. Overnight they would dry.

I. Oh yeah, I remember that. I remember many nights until 8, 9, 10 o'clock hanging up laundry in these things, these racks. Bring them down to your eye level and then you'd pull them up by the string and they'd go up to the ceiling. And the ropes from the ceiling down to your head was hanging shirts.

R. That's it.

I. And then in the morning you would bring them down and fold them and sprinkle them, get them just ready for ironing. And then a big heavy board go on top so that you'd squeeze together and a couple of big rocks on top of the board so that all the shirts were folded and evenly dampened just ready for ironing.

Woolfe - 7

And I used to have a schwartze (black person). She was very good and she liked to work there. I used to give her five dollars. Everybody used to give four dollars a day. You know from eight o'clock through about five or half past five.

I. That was the wage at that time? Four dollars a day for that kind of work?

R. Yeah, but I used to give her five dollars because shirts was the most important thing to me; On shirts I used to make more because it's more work on it. Well, it's hard to think about four dollars a day or five dollars a day for work today. But we were happier at that time than nowadays. What's nowadays? (Kate - Because everything was more reasonable.) Well, let me tell you. You have your food and that's all. Unless you're in a different profession, unless you're a doctor or a big businessman. Even a big businessman is no good anymore, nowadays.

I. But what you're really telling me about is what is certainly called sweatshop conditions.

R. Yeah.

I. You worked many long hours. You worked from eight o'clock in the morning until nine, ten o'clock at night. But you were happy. (Kate - Not nine or ten o'clock in the laundry, Jack. In our own laundry.)

I. Oh, in your own laundry. Now, you see you've skipped to your own laundry, What you're talking about now is when you had your own laundry.

R. Yeah.

I. When we talk about when you were working for other people--

R. For other people?

I. Yeah.

R. I was alright. I mean (Kate - Start about eight o'clock, eight thirty. When did you start?) Eight o'clock. Come home six. (Kate - That was enough) And I used to make in time about seventy dollars.

I. Seventy dollars a week?

R. Yeah (Kate - No, I don't know.) Yeah. That was when I worked in Beterson's. Three people, we were working on shirts only.

I. Well, that sounds like what? About 1920? It was just after the war.

R. After the war.

I. Yeah, 1920, 1923, '25, someplace in there.

R. Yeah, yeah.

I. You were working for other people. (Kate - Yeah, YOU were playing outside already) I was four or five years old? (Kate - Yeah.) So that would be 1924, 1923, right around in there. But do you remember anything about Woodrow Wilson? What about his labor policies toward the immigrants? Were there policies that you could think of that made its impact on you? Were they trying to do away with sweatshop conditions? Was the policy trying to make it shorter working, hours or what?

R. (Kate - Maybe you had less working hours. Even Kaufman had less working hours. Come home six o'clock.) Yeah.

I. Were you working five days a week or five and a half? Six days or what?

R. About one o'clock on Saturday, so it's five and a half days.

I. Do you remember anything about Woodrow Wilson making any statements, or any speeches about labor?

R. (Kate - He wants to know about Woodrow Wilson.) I went to Debs! I was interested in him,

I. You went to his speeches sometimes?

R. Yeah. He was different, he went to your heart. (Kate,- My brother Irving, he was a real Debs man.)

I. He was a good speaker? He must have been like Norman Thomas. Norman Thomas was a very good speaker, was able to put his point over very well, Debs you say went to your heart? What do you mean? He just made you aroused?

R. Yeah.

I. Excited?

R. Not excited. It went to your mind; he's not a politician. (Kate - He's working for the people.) He's really working. Take for instance, Javits. He speaks nice, but that's all. He doesn't mean anything.

I, Well, that's a matter of opinion. You don't think so. I think he's a pretty good man.

R. He's a good man.

I. I think he speaks from the heart. But that's the way I happen to approach it. Anyway, when you heard Debs, you had the feeling that he was really an honest man, for the working man, trying to help the working man?

R. Sure, He died in prison.

I. Why did he go to prison?

R. Because he was against the war. (Kate - They put him in there.)

I. So it was 1918 or '17 that they put him in?

R. You know people used to go there. Whenever they heard that Debs was going to be there and speak the crowds were there.

I. This is in New York City or Brooklyn then? Or were you in Boston then?

R. I was in New York. Manhattan.

I. Do you remember when you went for your first job? Was this the first job you had when the fellow heard you play the mandolin? He said, "Okay, I'll give you a job and you can teach my son to play the mandolin."

R. (laughs) Yeah. I said to him, to that man that I'd give you a job and he gave me, a job for 90 days. .94 cents a day. (Kate - That wasn't for shirts.)

I. What was the job?

R. Plate. Plating. Cyanide. You know what cyanide is?

I. Yeah, sure. It's a poison.

R. (Kate - They used to have combs) Yes it's a poison. And they used to have combs.,

I. Ladies combs you mean?

R. Yeah. (Kate - Combs with stones.) Little imitation stones, like rhinestones. (Kate - People were making a lot of money in that. After, it went out of style. )

I. The job he had for you was to put these little stones in these combs?

Woolfe - 11

- R. No. Those stones were put in somewhere else. They used to send them and I used to take something with hooks, you know, a handle with hooks all around and hang up those combs. No, before the combs. Plain metal. Hanging up all around, and dip them in a solution that he made.
- I. Oh, to coat the metal with some kind of plating? Electroplating! I see.
- R. You know what I mean. I thought I'll catch sometimes, so he used to weigh the cyanide.
- I. The plating had cyanide in it?
- R. Yeah. He used to weigh it. And I took a piece of chalk and I made on the scale, I should know myself how to make that solution. (Kate - Trying to be a mechanic.)
- I. Trying to take over his patent on the solution.
- R. Yeah. (Kate - But it didn't work.) No, maybe I'll get paid more because I'll take away from him.
- I. Oh, you mean maybe you'll learn how to make the solution so you'll take the job from him and help him so he'll give you more pay.
- R. Yeah.
- I. Was this the very first job you had?
- R. Yeah.
- I. Well, when you first came with ten dollars, how did you get to work? Is this the first day you were there?
- R. It's a car, a car. (Kate - You didn't need much those years.)
- I. You had ten dollars and you came here. There you were are you walked into a barbershop.

R. I came to East Boston. And from there he took me there I suppose. I don't remember exactly. After a while I met a girl, but she had a hunch back. So she said, "I'm making fifteen to eighteen a week. Why do you stay?" So she says, "I'll give you an address to a man that he's a shirt ironer and he'll teach you in two weeks for nothing." That is I should work for nothing the first week and the second week. Break me in as a shirt ironer and the second week I would make money for him because I would know. So I didn't know. I took the iron to make it a little cooler. There was always a pail of cold water. And I dipped the iron there. The water was so hot it came up and scorched my hand. I said, "I can't work." He said, "If you would work for yourself you wouldn't say I can't work."

I. That's what he said to you? So did you stop working?

R. No I kept on.

I. You kept on with the scalded hand? You dipped this hot iron into the water and it started to boil so that the steam came up and scalded your hand. Then, this was the second job, the shirt ironing. The first was the electroplating which you got just because you happened to be in a place playing the mandolin.

R. Yeah. The barber shop.

I. You sound like a 1900 hippie, walking around playing the mandolin. What else did you have to do? Where did you get the mandolin?

R. Right there. The Italian.

I. Oh, he had it there. You went in to get a hair cut and he said, "Play the mandolin if you want."

R. No, I took it. It was on the chair there. So I told the man that was waiting for his next I could play. So he said, "If you

play the violin can you give my brother lessons?"

I. His brother. It wasn't a child then?

R. No about sixteen years. Maybe he meant something else cause he had a sister.

I. So you gave the sixteen or eighteen year old boy some violin lessons?

R. Yeah. (Kate - What, a dollar a lesson?) I remember it even. (whistles a tune)

I. That's the song that you were teaching him?

R. Yeah.

I. So your first job, they paid you 94 cents a day and that was the electroplating where you dipped the combs in.

R. Since I switched to shirt ironing it went better and better.

I. So the first two weeks when you worked for the fellow you worked for nothing while he was teaching you.

R. Yeah.

I. The whole two weeks you worked for nothing? Did you have any more of that ten dollars?

R. No, I had to borrow for shoes. My shoes were very bad. So the man I was staying there, I had the address there. I had a picture with him, do you remember? That picture with the heart and a hand.

I. What time of the year was this? Was it winter and you had to have heavy clothes or was it in the spring? Do you remember that?

R. It was in July.

I. Oh it was in July so you didn't have to worry yet about keeping warm.

Woolfe - 14

R. I had a coat but I gave it away.

I. Why?

R. Because it was warm. In the winter time I didn't have a coat.

I wore a sweater and I was warm.

I. Did you miss the coat that you gave away?

R. No, it was like a tweed.

I. When you first had this electroplating job you worked from about eight to six or something like that?

R. Five, five-thirty.

I. And so you worked for about 94 cents a day. But how long did you work at that? A week, two weeks, a month?

R. Maybe two weeks.

I. So two weeks at that and two weeks of learning to shirt iron. And then you got a job as a shirt ironer,

R. Yeah.

I. In the same place where you were learning?

R. No. There was another one, another boy from Germany. And he got a likening to make like friends. He says,. "Come." He spoke English very good. At that time I understood whatever he spoke was good.

I. You mean you didn't speak any English?

R. No.

I. What did you speak, Russian?

R. Whatever I tried.

I. You spoke Yiddish?

R. Yeah.

I. Were you able to talk to most people in Yiddish or not?

How did you make yourself understood?

R. You know.

I. One guy was Italian. You couldn't speak to him.

R. Yes, we could speak.

I. But not in Italian. In Yiddish?

R. I worked in a place later on when I was good in it as a shirt ironer. He had a lot of Italian workers on shirts, too. So he told me, "You're a good shirt ironer." And little by little he says, "Fix my stretcher," you know. You remember.

I. Stretching curtains?

R. No, no.

I. Oh, stretching the shirts?

R. The shirts. "Fix my stretcher." So I fixed his stretcher. And I got to know him, his speech and he understood my speech. You know.

I. So whatever it was, it was broken Italian or broken English or broken Yiddish. You managed to understand each other well. You were starting to say how you got that first job ironing shirts. This German boy said, "Look I know a place. Come with me."

R. That's it, that's it.

I. "I know a place where you will get a job."

R. Yeah. "And you'll do good. You're better than I am."

I. So he took you to a laundry?

R. Yeah, Watertown. That's the name of it, near the Wanda's, another laundry. But that was new shirts. You know they wash them and we iron.

I. So how much did you make then?

R. About fifteen dollars. And from the fifteen I paid my board.

(Kate - Five dollars, you got board and everything? And ten dollars I used to put away to bring my parents over. My brother, he worked in a hardware store. And he used to make himself little doors, made out of metal. You know what "Haribe" means?

I. Haribe?

R. You don't know. In Europe on both sides up to the ceiling, two holes and inside between the two walls they made a platform inside and that's how we used to get the heat. What is that, like hay.

I. You used to get heat from that?

R. Yeah.

I. What was the heat for?

R. (Kate - To keep the house warm,) Winter.

I. Oh, you're talking about the house, I thought you were talking about the job.

R. No.

I. So then you were making fifteen dollars for a five and a half day week. You're making about three dollars a day then at that. Did you join a union? Did they have a union?

R. No, they didn't have a union. Somebody was trying and I was afraid to lose the job. (Kate - In order to have a union, they wanted you to join the Musicians Union. You had to pay \$300.)

Oh, that was when I came. (Kate-That's why he went to work.

He didn't have the \$300 to pay the union.) I had ten dollars.

I. The Musicians Union. We're talking about the laundry union. You were ironing shirts. Did they have a union to iron shirts? A shirt ironing union, a laundry union?

R. Not there, no. That was out of town. With a car it was about twenty minutes or a half an hour.

I. They were trying to make a union in this place where you were working?

R. No.

I. Well where was it that you just said that you were afraid to join the union because you might lose your job?

R. That was later.

I. But that was also a similar shirt ironing place?

R. Sure. You remember W-\_\_\_\_\_?

I. Yes, that was in Brooklyn.

R. Yes. And he was in a place and he took me out there because they used to pay a little better. But there was no union.

I. But did you later join a union? At some later time?

R. When I saw that I could get nowhere, I had about \$1600.00 and I couldn't get my parents back here, and brother, and I couldn't get anywhere. So I said, "I'll buy a laundry." I had \$1600.00. I couldn't get ahead working for somebody else.

I. Then really you never were a member of a union at all?.

R. No.

I. You never joined. But weren't you in some organizing situations when they came around and they tried to organize you? They tried to get you to join the union?

- R. No. There was in a place once that I was with a man that tried to organize everybody. It was a big place. He had a few of them with him that wanted to try and organize but they sent away to work somewhere else. This place would go on strike, they send it somewhere else. So we went to the other place where they sent it and we were trying to organize them. But there were men, they didn't like the strike. That's what was their living, you know what I mean?
- I. But if you weren't a union member why did you go to try to organize the others?
- R. Because they sent the work there.
- I. So when they sent the work there you didn't have any more work at your place?
- R. Sure.
- I. Were they picketing your place or were they striking?
- R. Sure, picketing.
- I. This was the union members who were picketing.
- R. Neither one. Journeymen we had. You get to be a journeyman when all the men go to a meeting and you get a charter. You get everything that a union has like any club.
- I. Well but they were trying to organize your place? You say it was a big place. How many people in the place? Two or three hundred?
- R. No. About one hundred. So I went to another place. I didn't want to be organized there.
- I. So you went to work at another place?

R. Sure. Out of town. I didn't think in my mind that I can do anything there, I didn't want to be involved.

I. You didn't want to be involved in the union or the organizing or the non-organizing? Why? Were there fights?

R. Maybe, yeah, you know, they fight.

I. Did you see any fights? Do you remember any?

R. I remember when we went about two or three miles from where I was working. And they saw people going out from there so they throw stones or other things or go there and fight.

I. These are people who wanted to organize?

R. Yeah.

I. As the workers were coming out they'd say, "Why are you working? You should be on strike," and they would fight with them?

R. Sure;

I. And the other people would throw stones back probably. so you didn't want to get involved in that kind of thing.

R. No.

I. So you yourself were never out on strike.

R. So.

I. Any time it got into trouble you went to another place.

R. Right.

I. How did the workers, especially the immigrants, feel about their work? How did your friends, the other fellows that were working in the laundry with you, how did they feel about their work? Did they like their work? Did they think they were working very hard? Did they think that it was good?

- R. It's a matter of making a living. I know that the people that I used to work, two more people worked in a place and nobody liked it. I didn't like it. It's a matter of making a living.
- I. Why didn't you like it? Why didn't they like it?
- R. Because it's hot. It was a hot place. You know circumstances has a lot to do with somebody that works for somebody else.
- I. Did you know any of your bosses? Remember when you got into a place of a hundred people, did you meet the boss ever?
- R. No, just the foremen.
- I. Was the foreman a decent guy? Do you remember?
- R. If he get a liking, is alright. If he doesn't like you, no matter how good you are, you know. W\_\_\_\_\_ was one that time that he could answer if somebody insults him or tells him something that it's not to his liking, he'll answer him. I would keep quiet, see.
- I. So when you kept quiet you think that that made them like you more? And so you kept your job where W\_\_\_\_\_ talked back and maybe he lost his job.
- R. When I did -it, he knows that I wasn't that type. (Kate - He was a good worker, too.)
- I. You were probably newer, too. They didn't know you that well.
- R. Yeah.
- I. Well, do you remember other people that went through strikes and incidents? Anybody that you knew or that you witnessed?
- R. No.
- I. You know I seem to recall at some time, and I can't remember the year, but I seem to recall going to a meeting in a big hall some place and it seems to me that it was a union meeting. There were a lot of men there and I remember this had to do with laundry workers. If I went with you I must have been about 10 - 12 years

Woolfe - 21

old. So that must have been in 1930. It was probably in the depression. Maybe it had to do with the new regulations, the NRA regulations that Roosevelt put into effect. That's probably what it was. There were a lot of workers though. Do you remember any strikes in Lawrence, Massachusetts?

R. Lawrence?

I. I don't know where. that is related to Boston,

R. What is it--shoes?

I. Loren doesn't say. The strike in Lawrence, Massachusetts, and Patterson, New Jersey. These were strikes of immigrant laborers in the textile mills. And they received a lot of attention. Making pants, skirts.

Do you remember how the European immigrants reacted to World War I? You, as a European immigrant, and the other fellows. Most of the other fellows you worked with were probably European immigrants, weren't they?

R. Yeah.

I. People who came from Germany, from Italy. What did they think of World War I?

R. They didn't like it. I saw plenty when I used to go to a meeting. Debs's meeting was full.

I, And he was saying, "Stop the war. Bring our boys home."

R. Sure.

I. So most of the immigrants felt the same way?

R. Of course, their children were going to war. First of all, unless he's a citizen, because they didn't like foreigners. They didn't

take me. I think I have the card yet.

I. But most of these people then, they weren't against the war because they were afraid they might have to go?

R. Those people? No, their children.

I. Their children would have to go?

R. Yeah.

I. They were old enough to have children? I see. They were older immigrants who were not citizens yet. So they wouldn't take them, but their children who were born here. They didn't want them to have to go. Did you ever hear about the Palmer Raids?

R. No. Sacco - Vanzetti, I remember that. There were two, they were against--I don't remember what was the crime. That was a terrible thing, Sacco-Vanzetti.

I. What happened? They were convicted of something?

R. That was against the government and like they convicted Debs. What did he do? He was against the war.

I. I don't know what he did.

R. He didn't do anything. He was against the war.

I. Well, as a citizen, did he refuse to serve? Was he supposed to serve.

R. No, he wasn't a young man. He was maybe about fifty, sixty.

I. Because he was speaking out against the war? He was keeping other people from going?

R. Yeah.

I. What about Sacco and Vanzetti? What exactly were they convicted of?

- R. I don't remember exactly what happened. But they were convicted of something.
- I. Why was everyone so upset about it and excited about it? If they were convicted of something that they did, they couldn't have been too upset about it. If they were convicted of something that they shouldn't have been convicted of, that's different.
- R. No, they're not murderers. They were against the government. What they were doing--now they were against the government, they don't do it. Even so, there were people here in America, I sent my boy to protect the United States, my country. Why didn't he go?" You know, the boys that ran away to Canada, boys that didn't want to go.
- I. You're talking about World War I? They did the same thing?
- R. Sure
- I. So there were some people who thought it was unfair that their children went and others didn't?
- R. Yeah, like this war. (Viet Nam)
- I. So the people whose sons didn't go, they should be punished because their sons had to go and someone else got away with it?
- R. It's a repeating thing. Yeah. There's another thing. Let me tell you about myself. My mind wasn't exactly to these questions. My mind is to bring my parents home. Here. My home is here. A n d I knew they were suffering. They wouldn't let him teach. And my brother was a rebel, they call him. (Kate - A Communist? A Socialist?) No, he wasn't a Communist. He was a Socialist like Trotsky, you know. Do you remember that?
- I. True, but wasn't Trotsky a Communist?
- R. No.

I. It was sort of a little different. It was communist-socialist. Did they kill Trotsky because he was a Socialist and not a Communist or because he was a Jew?

R. No, they didn't kill him. Somebody--

I. Well, he was killed by somebody. Do you think that was because he was a Socialist or because he was a Jew?

R. There was a difference. Bolsheviki - Mensheviki.

I. He was a Trotsky-viki. (laughs) And so it was competition between each other as to who was going to get power in the government?

R. Yeah. Do you remember the two names? Bolsheviki and Mensheviki? The minority and the majority.

I. The Bolsheviks were the majority and the Mensheviks were the minority. Well, he's talking about the Red Scare here, when Americans became so frightened of Communism because of the Russian Revolution.

R. Oh that was that senator, I forgot his name. He scared us.

"America's going to be Communistic." I forgot he was a senator.

I. You mean at that time?

R. No, now. About ten years ago.

I. Oh, you're talking about McCarthy.

R. McCarthy, yeah.

I. We're talking about the Red Scare when the Russian Revolution first took place. 1918, the Russian Revolution took place. Between 1920 and 1930, 1925 thereabouts, there were many people who were saying, "Look what's happening. The whole world is going to become revolutionized. And the Communists are going to come here and make the United States a Communist society if we're not careful, if we don't do something about it. Wasn't that what was going on,

or what? That's what they called the Red Scare. People here in the United States in the 1920's were saying, "If we don't outlaw Communists and Communism, they're going to come here and take over this country, make this country Communist."

R. Yeah, that was McCarthy.

I. That went on afterwards, too. It went on, but McCarthy was 1950. We're talking about 1920.

R. Well, that's what Sacco - Vanzetti and Debs, and all that, you know. When somebody says something we think they know exactly what's what. They want to scare you.

I. Sure. I remember and I can't exactly put the pieces together. I remember many cartoons in the newspaper of that time with these bearded, dark, ominous, black-cloaked people, always carrying around a bomb in their hands ready to go off. That was what was supposed to happen. I think that's what I recall as the Red Scare. Everyone was saying this, you know, they're going to bomb us. I assumed, I guess, at the time that there was Communist terrorism going on someplace in the United States, the same as there are people in Ireland.

R. I forgot his name. I think he just died recently. The one that was a Communist, but he didn't mean-- Was Thomas a Communist?

I. No.

R. They called him--

I. Not many people, no. Norman Thomas was called a Communist by some people, of course. So was President Eisenhower called a Communist or a fellow traveler or something by some people. But generally by the population certainly, Norman Thomas was considered a pretty good guy, a Socialist. He ran for President. He ran

Woolfe - 26

over and over on the ticket. (Kate - Like Debs.) So he was certainly not considered a Communist, Of course some people would say anything. Some people say Nixon is a fascist, Nixon is a Hitler. That's carrying things too far another way, But you can always find somebody who'll say something bad about others. Mr. McLaughlin would say you're a heathen. (Kate - A what?)

A heathen. You don't believe in Jesus Christ. Anyway you've got a different religion. That's probably not quite accurate.

R. If you know somebody, that is in this, like Hoffa. What's his name?

I. Oh, the Teamsters Union guy who got put in jail and out of jail for all sorts of, things.

R. Yeah, you ask him all these questions.

I. (Laughs) He'd give you different answers. Well, he's a little younger, too, He wasn't involved at this time. He's probably twenty years younger.

R. But he knows. He read about it,

I. Well, Loren is reading about this now in his history courses. But reading about. it is one thing, and he's trying to find out what one person who lived at that time, who experienced it, what he felt, what it was like: But basically what you're saying is you know? what was going on, It was all around you, you were just more busy earning your own living, getting enough for yourself to eat and drink and to save some money in order to bring your parents over from Russia, which was so much worse than anything, that all you could think of was to bring them over here to some kind of freedom and safety.

- R. (Kate - Well, they were here for five years.)
- I. Well, you succeeded. When you got your own laundry you succeeded: After you had your own laundry for a while you were able to save more money.
- R. Yeah. (Kate - We were saving. We were working together.) Yeah. We came here with \$7,000.00.
- I. You came where with \$7,000.00?
- R. To Peekskill.
- I. Oh, well I'm talking about when you brought them. You say you had \$1,600. That's what the laundry cost?
- R. Yeah \$1,600.00. And I gave it up for \$300.00 in '33. (Kate - But how many years we used to work together and every week I used to go to the bank.) Twelve years.
- I. You were there twelve years. So you bought it in 1921?
- R. '27.
- I. No. '27 your parents came.
- R. My parents came, yeah.
- I. So if you sold it in '33 and you had it for twelve years then you must have bought it in '21.
- R. (Kate - Must have. Shirley was only a baby in the carriage.)
- I. So you worked for six years before you were able to accumulate enough money to brine your parents here. So in '27 you brought your parents here. And they were here five years and they died in '32.
- R. Yeah, '32. By nine days.
- I. And then you sold, the laundry after that. Why did you sell the laundry?

- R. It's '33. (Kate - It was doing. It ran down.) And down and down and down.
- I. You mean people weren't getting their clothes washed? People weren't getting their clothes ironed?
- R. No, they were, but business went down. (Kate - And I didn't feel so good.) People lost their jobs. Because my trade was for boarders. You know boarders?
- I. People who were boarding in other peoples' houses.
- R. Yeah. And a bundle was nothing--a few shirts, some underwear, socks. And mother used to fix the socks. (Kate - Even Lil (the daughter) knew how to work on a machine. Or did I do all the mending?) No. Lil had the book. (Kate - Oh, she took care of the book and Dan was running around delivering. Oh dear.) You liked one customer. (Kate - He always gave you a dollar or a half dollar.) No six half a dollars or quarters she used to give you. The street, I think it was Lincoln Place.
- I. Yeah, Lincoln Place was the street and I think I remember there was an apartment house right up the street.
- R. (Kate - Especially on holidays. Maybe it was for Christmas or Thanksgiving, or different holidays they'd give you nice tips.) Only shortly, about how long? About ten years that you were trying to--Berkely Institute--to walk--
- I. To walk the railing.
- R. Nice, uh. I suppose, rich parents--the girls used to go there.
- I. Yeah, I remember those girls. We used to throw snowballs at them. And they used to love it. (laughs) I don't quite understand why

Woolfe - 29

in the depression, 1933 why the business went down. People weren't bringing their laundry in? Or they were bringing their laundry in and not paying their bills?

R. Everything was down. (Kate - There was another laundry opened up across the street. That was another thing. He stopped everything. No money was going out or in and he stopped everything. And he straightened out everything.

I. Yes, but from your standpoint as a laundryman, there wasn't money coming in?

R. No.

I. Were people bringing in laundry just as much?

R. (Kate - Not as much, no.) They lost their jobs.

I. So what'd they do, wear dirty clothes?

R. (Kate - Who knows?) No. They went away to look for a job.

I. So there weren't as many people bringing in their clothes. And when they were bringing in their clothes, were they having trouble paying their bills? Or did you always work on cash business?

R. No, it was cash business. Mostly, maybe 95%.

I. So was it that the prices were going down?

R. Everything was going down. And everybody got scared. So he left town. The next one left town. This left town.

I. So at that time, that was '33, I was 14, 15 and I remember that laundry that opened up across the street and that took a lot of business away.

R. (Kate - That's right. They gave cheaper prices. And I guess we were getting kind of tired.

I. You were getting kind of tired. You were working very hard and you said, "Look, I can do just as well going to work for somebody as I can here running my own business."

Woolfe - 30

R. (Kate - Then we went away for that summer. That's the summer we went to R\_\_\_\_\_ 's for a few weeks.

I. I remember, too, that another thing is that these big laundries were coming into business. Instead of little hand laundries they were doing machine ironing.

R. (Kate - That's right, they didn't care for hand ironing anymore.)

I. So hand ironing wasn't that important anymore.

R. (So many things together. And he came along, what was his name?)  
You remember the Bayshore?

I. Oh yeah.

R. (Kate - He took away the darning machine. That's one thing I was sorry for. Why didn't we put away the darning machine? The darning machine alone was over a hundred dollars.)

I. Who took the darning machine?

R. The one that bought the place for \$300. (Kate - So we thought he was just taking the business cause there wasn't much business. But he took the darning machine. He comes and says, "That belongs with it." We couldn't stop him. We should have taken it away before. Oh dear.) At that time I was to Walter as a dress presser.

I. Oh did you get a job there?

R. Yeah.

I Oh, you were doing that for awhile? As a dress presser for Walter.

R. What a person goes through. (Kate - So many places, so many years.)  
And I'm still--

I. You're still going through it. But some of the pitfalls that you've gone through, some of them were pretty bad in a way, but they were really pretty great for you. They were really wonderful

Woolfe - 31

experiences. Even though they were hard, they were experiences that if they hadn't been hard--the way you brought your parents over, the years of struggle to do that. And then the final culmination of that. I mean that was a great experience. If you could have just said, "Here, send five hundred dollars or a thousand and bring them over, and we'll come and visit for awhile," it wouldn't have been such a big experience.

R. I had to go through certain hard times because I was only eighteen years. I didn't have any help,, Not only help. Some people when they come here have a trade. They can do something. They can do this, they can do that. But I didn't--nothing!

I. You came just with your two hands and your ability to work and you couldn't even speak any "English."

R. No, not only that. Even the violin. If I would have somebody that give me a help, a push, or go with me where I could get into the musical if I was ready, alright. If I wasn't ready, I can make myself ready. I had buried the first, I had to bury the second. (his parents)

I. Well, there's no question that you had a lot of talent that wasn't used because you didn't know how to approach it. You didn't know where to go or how to go.

R. I moved in to a person where I had an address. And he was an ice-man. And when I was there about a year I made money already. I made about \$300. or \$400. saved up. He had to have a horse to sell ice, you know, buy a truck, and buy a horse, and I gave him money. (Kate - He was good,too. He gave somebody money. Never got it back.)