

Peter Silberstein

Name: Peter

Surname: Silberstein

Nationality: Currently US citizen

Date and Place of birth: 1924 - Hamburg, Germany

Gender: Male

Profession: Retired as administrator for KLM

Camps of imprisonment:

Kavajë - Kavaja End of August 1941 - October 1941

Ferramonti Di Tarsia October 1941 - early January 1944

Major topics and particularities of the interview (Summary):

Peter Silberstein began the interview by discussing his lifelong interest in politics and his family's flight from Germany to Yugoslavia after the Nazis came to power. After spending some time in Yugoslavia, the security of the family was in danger, so with the consent of Peter's father Peter's mother divorced his father and married a Yugoslav policeman, in order assure that her children could remain with her. The family was eventually sent by boat first to Albania and then to Italy, where they were housed in various camps. The family was treated reasonably well and suffered a great tragedy when Peter's sister was killed by a grenade, while walking outside the camp just after it was liberated. After the liberation Peter went first to Rome, and subsequently to the US. He lived with his parents in Texas before coming to New York, where he met the woman, who would become his wife. Peter had a long career working for KLM. Peter and Lori Silberstein currently live in Rye Brook, New York, a comfortable suburban community, where they raised their two sons. The Silbersteins, who are both retired, enjoy opera, gardening, and spending time with their grandchildren.

Date, place and duration of the interview: July 13th 2012 at the home of Peter and Lori Silberstein in Rye Brook, New York, 83'45"

Language used: English

Recording quality: wav, 48 kHz.

Name of the researcher and copyright holder: Lauren Taylor, Campi Fascisti

Facilitator: Lauren Taylor, M.A., M.S., L.C.S.W. – Columbia University, New York City, Oral History Archives

Fundamental elements of the meeting: Peter Silberstein welcomed the opportunity to be interviewed, as he wishes that his, and similar stories, not be forgotten. Although he had already been interviewed several times, including by Steven Spielberg's Shoah Foundation, he graciously accepted the opportunity for another interview. He is a resilient and optimistic man, who, despite the hardships he endured earlier in his life, is committed to enjoying what he has achieved and the life he is living at present. As his wife Lori said at the end of the interview: "Peter wasn't always an easy man to live with, but it was worth the wait!"

Researcher *This is Lauren Tayler I'm sitting with Peter Silton in his home in Rye Brook, New York and it's July 13th 2012. So first of all, may I call you Peter or shall I call you Mr. Silton?*

Peter Silberstein Oh, you can call me by first name. Call me Pietro if you want to, because it's for the Italians. *(laughing)*

R *If you could begin by telling me a little bit about the circumstances of your birth, the names of your family members and a little bit about their heritage as well.*

PS Well we were a typical middle class German family. Most Jews in Germany considered themselves good Germans. So did my parents and my grandparents. My father was a volunteer in the First World War fighting for the fatherland and the *Kaiser*, (he) got very badly injured during the war.

R *And what was his name, your father's name?*

PS Kurt.

R And the last name was?

PS Silberstein. His home was in Königsberg which today is called Kaliningrad and it's part of Russia. My mother's parents lived in Hamburg.

R *And your mother's name, including her maiden name?*

PS My mother's name was Elli and the last name, maiden name was Laqueur.

R *So did she have French roots?*

PS No, her family came from a part of Germany that's Silesia, which is now Poland. Her hometown was in Breslau which is now Wroclaw. We don't know, where the Laqueur name came from, but the theory is that German Jews got their right to use last names during the Napoleon period, when the French came into Germany. And a number of local people adopted French sounding names, sometimes connected to their professions. There was an engraver, who called himself Graveur, there was somebody, who spoke some French and was translating, and he called himself Translateur. *(laughing)* And we think that one of our aunt sisters was putting varnish on coaches, *Lakierer*, and called himself Laqueur. But that is a theory. Some thought that the family came from the Alsatian area, but there has been no proof that they came from France originally.

R *And where were you actually born?*

PS I was born in Hamburg, 1924. My sister was born in 1928. My mother was an opera singer and since she was professionally too busy, my sister and I were in a private children's home for three years.

R *What was that like?*

PS That was close to Potsdam, which is outside of Berlin. It was a very nice, nice place. Then in 1933 the Nazis took over.

R *And how did you learn about what was going on in terms of the politics of that time? When did you first understand that there was some problem?*

PS As a kid I was always interested in politics. I remember at night I was playing games with my sister, where we would call to each other and playing parliament. And I would make speech, I don't know why, *(laughing)* but I would make speeches for... And she had to shout *Sieg Heil* and she had to shout Redfront which is *Rotfront*, which was the communist at the given time. I don't know, but I was interested in politics.

R *And your sister was older or younger?*

PS Younger, she was four years younger.

R *And her name was?*

PS Ruth. Anyway after the Nazis took over in January and in March a couple of Storm Troopers came to the apartment and did a search, didn't find anything. And my parents decided, "we are getting out of here, this is not..."

R *Did they explain to you, what was going on or did you just figure it out?*

PS No, my father just thought, "I don't want to live in a place where people come in the middle of the night. Let's get out". My mother had a friend, who had been to Yugoslavia. He was raving about it, about Dubrovnik. And so my parents thought, "Yeah let's go to Yugoslavia, this thing is going to last two, three years and we will come back home".

R *And did you have experienced at that time anti-Semitism at school or among friends or things like that?*

PS No. No, because they took over in January and we left in July and for the three months before we left, my parents were busy liquidating whatever affairs. I stayed with my grandmother in Hamburg and went to school in Hamburg. And my best friend was a little, what do you call it, *Hitlerjugend*-guy. He was very interested, "You're going to Yugoslavia?" He was very interested. No, there was no..., I had no feeling of anti-Semitism.

R *And what was it like for you to leave your homeland?*

PS No, "we're going on a trip...". I don't think I knew why we went. I don't think my parents explained to me why we wanted to leave, "We are just going to go to Yugoslavia". And ...

R *So the family arrived in Yugoslavia, and how did you get established there?*

PS Well, this friend of my parents - now this is hearsay, because I don't know that first hand - knew quite a bit about Yugoslavia and she took my parents into starting in a small pension. And later we found out that this whole thing did not work out at all. But the ... (*pause*) I think my parents lost quite a bit of money on that. And then they ran a restaurant for a while. That restaurant went broke. In '34 the King of Yugoslavia got assassinated in Marseille, and for a year you couldn't play music in public places including our restaurant. And the restaurant went bankrupt.

R *What are your memories of that time in Yugoslavia, your memories of that time for yourself?*

PS Oh I don't know, I had a good time, your know. Dubrovnik was a beautiful place. I learned the language within about a year and lived, I would say, as a child a normal life. I had no idea of the trials and tribulations of my parents, what their problems were, how they managed. I think they, my mother had an uncle in Holland, I think, who occasionally sent us some money. And for the first two years we could get money out of Germany. As a matter of fact, my father went back to Germany twice to see his mother and to take care of some affairs. And the third time at the Austrian German border one of the officials told him, "If I were you, I wouldn't come in!" So my father got off the train, crossed the tracks and came right back to Dubrovnik.

R *And when was the first hint of trouble for your family in Yugoslavia?*

PS There was talk... You know as foreigners you needed a resident permit, and that had to be renewed, I don't know, every six months or maybe every twelve months. And we were never quite sure, "is it going to be renewed or not?" So my mother divorced my father, and married a Yugoslav man, became a Yugoslav citizen, and - busy idea - at least she could protect the children if they were to send us back to Germany. Luckily that never happened. Interesting enough, my parents actually never remarried, so (*laughing*) you could say that they lived in sin the last fifteen or eighteen year of their married life.

R *So they continued to live together even though she was officially married to a Yugoslav?*

PS Right.

R *And in terms of being a Jew in your own family and your own communities, did you grow up in a religious home or in a secular home, what was your relationship to Judaism?*

PS We were very what you could call non practicing Jews. We had a Christmas tree at home. I know my grandparents had one. I know my great grandparents had a Christmas tree. No, we were non practicing Jews, although my mother's great great grandfather was a rabbi. The first Laqueur was a

rabbi. But we never practiced Judaism there. Although I was bar mitzvahed, because that was a thing to do in the Jewish community in Dubrovnik, they expected that I should be. So I was bar mitzvahed in the second oldest synagogue in Europe. It is in Dubrovnik, the oldest is in Prague, the second is in Dubrovnik. (pause) So ...

R *So when things started to heat up in terms of the situation for your family, your mother took this drastic measure of divorcing your father, what came next?*

PS Well my mother then went to Belgrade to get a job, and my father stayed with me and my sister in Dubrovnik. And somewhere in '39 when the war started, they forced us to leave Dubrovnik and move to the interior, to Mostar. Supposedly they wanted all foreigners away from the coast. So we lived in Mostar, and then in April '41 the Germans arrived in Yugoslavia. (pause). Luckily my mother had come back to visit about three or four weeks earlier, so when the war broke out, she was with us.

R *How did you hear that the war had broken out?*

PS Oh, it was on the radio, it's, I mean, I knew what was going on. One of the greatest and happiest days in my youth was the 27th of March of 1941. Two days earlier the Yugoslav Prime Minister and Foreign Minister went to Berlin to sign up with the Germans. When they came back to Belgrade, they were arrested by some army officers and they declared the pact, the agreement is null and void. And we kids were running through the streets yelling, "Better war, than a pact! Better a grave than a slave!" So there were ten happy days and then on 6th of April the Germans bombed Belgrade and ten days later it was all over. And the Germans came into Mostar. My mother wanted to flee into the mountains. My father, who was much more (pause) down to earth, said, "this is army, they are not looking for Jews right now, let's calm down and see what happens." And the Germans withdrew and handed it over to the Croats. Who in some aspects, actually as a matter of fact, were worse than the Germans. And with the help of a Moslem police official we got a permit to go to the coast, to the Italian zone. So with four little suitcases we went to Herceg Novi on the coast.

R *Do you remember what was in your suitcase?*

PS Change of clothing, I suppose. I mean, there was a

R *Any special objects or toys?*

PS I don't remember, I have no idea. And then we arrived in this Herceg Novi, this was July '41 and about four, five weeks later, we got arrested. Our father was told by the ... to show up at the police station. And we showed up, and there were large number of other Jewish refugees from the interior of Yugoslavia. They put us on a ship. The ship sailed and we arrived in Albania.

R *Do you remember what the ride was like on the ship?*

PS No, not really, I mean, your know, there must have been about close to two hundred of us, people of all ages, so there were teenagers like myself. And we got of the Ship in Durazzo¹ and they put us on trucks and took us to this army camp in the interior of Albania².

R *Did you know about the concentration camps at that point or not?*

PS We knew about concentration camps in Germany, the name of Dachau and Buchenwald was known. Of course the camps in Poland didn't exist in '41. They started about '42, and they started with the final solution³. So we didn't know about that, we knew the concentration camps in Germany and

¹ Italian name for Durrës in Albania.

² Kavajë (Kavaja) http://www.campifascisti.it/scheda_campo.php?id_campo=92.

³ The final solution and the establishment of the extermination camps began after the Wannsee Conference of January 20th 1942. But the concentration camps on Poland were established long before. Auschwitz began working as concentration camp on May 20th 1940, Chelmno on December 8th 1941 and Majdanek on October 1st 1941, whereas the first Jews were transported to Chelmno, Sobibor and Treblinka only in 1942 (Benz, Wolfgang and Distel, Barbara and Königseder Angelika (Ed.), 2007, Der Ort des Terrors. Geschichte der nationalsozialistischen Konzentrationslager, Vol. 5, München: C.H.Beck, Benz, Wolfgang and

we also knew that people got out of those camps. My aunt's husband was at Buchenwald, and the day he got his Chilean Visa he was let go and he could leave. I mean, until 1940 most German Jews could have been saved, if there had been a country willing to take them and if they had been willing to leave, because many did not want to leave, they didn't believe how bad it could get. It all went piecemeal. First you couldn't go to the movies, you couldn't sit on a park bench, then you couldn't have an Arian maid, then you couldn't teach at the schools, or you couldn't practice at a hospital. It all went, you know, every few months a new order. So a lot of people didn't believe how bad it can get. Some said, "Oh we were good German citizens we fought in the First World War, we were good patriots", and...

R *So when you arrived, when you got off the ship, what happened at that point?*

PS Well, we got off the ship and they took us to the camp in Kavajë, which was an army camp, a big building with three sections. One section was for single women, the middle section was for married couples with little children and the third section was for single men.

R *Was there ever a fear that your family would be separated?*

PS No. There is one thing about the Italians, they kept families together. There were no separate women's or men's camps. Whether it was in Ferramonti or whether in different other camps, I don't know of any camps, where they separate families and children from the parents or anything. You know, *famiglia* is one big thing, (*laughing*) you know *famiglia*, *bambini* (*laughing*). You know, the Italians shock up when I talk like that. (*laughing*)

R *So, when you arrived at this camp, where was your family housed?*

PS Well we were assigned, my parents stayed in the middle section with my sister and I stayed in the unmarried section with the men. So there must have been about 60 of us in our, in the men's section. We slept on wooden beds and two tiers. Army blankets and straw mattresses. It was all...

R *And food, how was food?*

PS Oh the food was good, I mean, there was pasta and spaghetti, and the food was OK. Hygiene was terrible. There was no outhouse. We had to dig up a ditch behind the barracks and put a little wooden fence there. And somebody would have to stand guard, say, "Now it's male, no it's for men, now it's for the women". We had no running water. Once a week we could take showers in the army shower room. But they left us, the Italians left us alone. As a matter of fact, I'm not sure that they really knew why we were there.

R *And how were you treated?*

PS Oh no, the Italians were... you know, the camp commander came in and talked to us, but I don't think he really knew, what to do with us and why. (*laughing*) It was an army man, and ...

R *Did you already speak Italian at that point?*

PS I spoke some Italian, because after four years high school in Dubrovnik, I went to a commercial school. And instead of French, the curriculum was - one of the languages to obligate was, one of the, how do you call it...

R *The required languages?*

PS Yeah, was Italian. So I had a basic knowledge. And Italian is easy, it's an easy language to learn. So I spoke some Italian by then.

R *And did you continue to speak German with your family?*

PS I think, with my parents I spoke German, with my sister I spoke Serbo-Croatian, I mean she spoke better Serbo-Croatian than German, she was four years old, when we came to Yugoslavia. And then

with the other inmates I spoke Serbo-Croatian, because they were all Yugoslavs. I think there was one Czech couple and I think there was one other German. But basically it was all people from Yugoslavia.

R *So can you describe daily life, the rhythm of daily life in the camp?*

PS Oh, the daily life in the camp: some people played cards, we had a Czech chess master, and he organized, he got all the chess players together. So we had chess tournaments. (*pause*) The Italians allowed us, or took us to the dentist in town, when some people had dental problems, so... They took some of the younger people to the course for swim.

R *Did you have any jobs that you had to do in the camp?*

PS No, there was nothing that we had to do. I mean, we had to keep our, you know, beds in order and we had to clean the barracks and the food was brought in by the, from the Army kitchen. And no, we basically didn't have to do anything. We knew very little what was going on. I mean it was no radio, there was no newspapers. Sometimes rumours came through that there was a resistance in Montenegro that there was some fighting, and I think there was a camp next to us, where they had some Montenegrin prisoners⁴. And after three months, they said, "get ready, pack up". So we got on busses, and (they) took us back to Durazzo, put us on a ship, and the ship sailed west.

R *Did they explain why?*

PS No. The next morning we arrived in Bari. And we got of the ship and they took us to a railroad station and we boarded a train. And the train departed. And then somebody said, "Hey, we are going south that's a good sign. The further away from Germany the better." And the next morning we arrived in the middle of nowhere. The train stopped, we got of and there was Ferramonti⁵.

R *And had the camp become a sort of structured society in any way, and were there any interpersonal problems? How did things go? Did you become a community?*

PS I would say, we became several communities, because when we arrived, there was a group of German Jews in the camp, there were some Czechs and Poles so it was a mixed group and I think each group pretty much stuck together. You had one barracks they were all Yugoslavs and the next barracks were all Germans. Later on they brought in a group of Greek political prisoners. And then a while later, we got some Chinese. Because China was then considered an enemy because since Italy was allied with the Japanese and the Japanese were fighting the Chinese, China was considered an enemy. So we had about twenty or thirty China men in there, in the camp. And each group organized itself. We had our own school. We had our chess club. We had some kind of a library. Single people stayed in barracks, about thirty men or women in a barrack. And the families stayed together. There was a barrack consisting of about, I think, five or six units. Little room as big as... smaller than this living room. There was enough room for four beds, four chairs and a table. And there was a little stove a little, you could heat something, burn some wood and heat something. No running water. No toilet facilities. For each two barracks in the centre there was a common facility with running water and toilets.

R *So what were the conditions like in Ferramonti as opposed to where you had been before?*

PS Well, my mother said, I think, in her diary, she said, "finally we can have privacy." When the four of us were together in that one room compared to in the big barracks with hundred ninety people in one room. So there was at least privacy you could close the door and, you know, you were alone.

⁴ Not far from the Kavajë camp, another concentration camp called Shijak (Šijak) (http://www.campifascisti.it/scheda_campo.php?id_campo=1030), build at the same time as Kavajë, was used from summer 1941 onwards by the Italian fascists for interning Jews and other prisoners from Bosnia and Serbia, which have been transferred in 1942 into camps in Italy (See Romano, Jaša, 1980, *Jevreji Jugoslavije 1941-1945. Žrtve genocida i Učesnici narodnooslobodilačkog rata*, Belgrade, p. 152, 158, 167, 169, 187, <http://www.znaci.net/00001/191.htm>).

⁵ Ferramonti di Tarsia, http://www.campifascisti.it/scheda_campo.php?id_campo=50.

R *And how did your parents seem to be bearing up with the pressure of what was happening in their lives?*

PS Well, I don't know what they were feeling, I mean, I'm sure things were much harder on them, in that generation, than on us youngsters. I mean we teenagers, I don't know, you know, we tried to have girlfriends and boyfriends, you know. We didn't feel particularly bad there. I think one good thing for us was that we had completely run out of money. When we got arrested we were just about at the end of whatever we had. So in a way we were taken care of. And in the camp we all got a certain amount of money, a daily allowance. And we could go to the camp store and buy whatever we wanted.

R *And were did the money for the allowance come from? Who was providing the funds?*

PS I don't know, the camp administration. I don't know how many Lire a day it was, I think, it was something between... I think something around twenty Lire per person, I think. And you can go to the camp store and buy spaghetti and bread and whatever else there was. We were not starving. And I know there was always milk and sugar for the *bambini*.

R *And was there any sense for you as a teenager of being trapped in this place that you couldn't do what you wanted to, or was it big enough for...?*

PS No, we did, within the camp we did what we wanted to. As I said, we played chess, we had soccer teams, the Yugoslavs against the Czechs or the Poles, and we had schools. There was a synagogue. There was a small church because there were some non Jews in the camp that was run by a very good monk. He has been written up, I think, that's why I have bid of information on him. He went to Rome a few times and tried to see to it that we would not be send back. How true that was and how influentially he was, I don't know. The fact is we were not sent back to Germany.

R *What was his name, do you remember the monk's name?*

PS Oh *ja*. His name was Callisto Lopinot⁶. And I think I even, I have a letter from him to my mother after we left the camp, writing to her about my sister's grave. He described the grave. He was a very good man.

R *So how long were you in Ferramonti?*

PS October 1941 till early January '44. We were liberated in September 1943.

R *Can you describe the liberation?*

PS Well, two months before liberation, no not two months, about six weeks before, Mussolini was kicked out. I know we kids had a ball, we were running through the camp and singing and making a lot of noise, and the *Maresciallo* put six or seven of us in the camp jail for the night (*laughing*). And then in the morning he came and said, "Ok. it's all over, Mussolini is gone, go back to your barracks". And we went back. Then a few weeks later the camp was machine gunned by a couple of British planes. They flew over, there was some machine gun fire, three or four inmates got killed.

R *Was that the first experience you had of...?*

PS Of... actually yes. And when the camp was liberated, the British officer told us, "We are sorry, we thought it was a military camp". And they apologized for it.

R *Did you actually see people die?*

PS No, we only say two planes going over, we heard some machine gun fire and they were gone. And then we heard that a few people got killed. And then a few days later, we saw German trucks and tanks moving, passed the camp north. What happened was that the allies had landed further north so

⁶ "In occasion of the first visit of the apostolic nuncio Francesco Borgogini Duca on May 22nd 1941, the internees of Ferramonti asked to have a permanent spiritual assistance. Two months later the Capuchin monk Callisto Lopinot has been sent to the camp, 65 years old by then. He managed to be respected also by the non catholic inmates." Vallini, Gaetano, *Il lager che salvò migliaia di ebrei*, in: *L'Osservatore Romano*, 4 giugno 2009, http://www.vatican.va/news_services/or/or_quo/cultura/127q04b1.html.

the German were afraid they gonna get caught, now and in the boot. So they were retreating. A couple of Germans came into the camp asking for water. And then the Italian camp commander opened the barbed wire behind the camp and said, "Why don't you go into the hills?" I don't know whether he was expecting that this become a combat zone or what, but anyway we went up onto the hills, stayed with some local farmers. And then two, three days later: no more Germans leaving. The roads were empty. And then the next day we saw some trucks moving into the camp. It was the States' army. And it was over.

R *Can you describe the atmosphere and the feelings?*

PS Well it was a good feeling, we survived.

R *And did you have any idea, what was next for you and your family?*

PS No we were just, they told us, "Well you've got to stay here, there is nowhere to go." The front was somewhere, I guess, around Naples at that time. So there was no place to go, so we all stayed in the camp and we were free to go out of the camp. And ...

R *Looking back from that time backwards, what had been your dreams for yourself, when you were young, in terms of what kind of work you might do or what your life might have been like, before all this began?*

PS I think, while I was in the camp, my idea was to go back to Yugoslavia. I mean, to me, Yugoslavia was home. There was no desire at all to go back to Germany. That meant nothing (to me). No, I was, felt that I wanted to go back to Yugoslavia. And then my sister got killed, she went for a walk, a few miles, no, not a mile, a kilometre from the camp. Some kids were carrying unspent grenades across the road. And one dropped on the road, exploded and my sister got... *(pause - interruption of the interview)*

I mean, it wasn't all terrible. And in retrospect really I could almost say it was the best thing that could have happened to us.

R *Is it Ok if we start recording again?*

PS I say it I a minute again, yes.

R *OK, I mean, I can imagine anyway what it must have been like to loose your sister, but to have that happened, when your family was...*

PS You know, the thing was that on that day I went with a couple of guys to Cosenza, which was the nearest big town, about maybe ten fifteen miles from the camp. And in the afternoon *(pause)* Father Lopinot came to my parents and said, "a tragedy has happened". And my parents first thought, something happened to me. You know, my sister went for a walk, I was in town, you know, something must have terribly happened. But he said, "No it's ..." *(pause)*

And my plans were too to go back. Many of my friends went back to Yugoslavia to join the partisans. But then after my sister got killed, I said, "I can't do this to my parents." So I decided, "I'm not going to go back at that time". But that is roughly, where we stopped, it was after liberation.

R *So after the liberation and this tragedy in your family, what happened next?*

PS Well, after liberation we stayed in the camp for about three, four months, it was nowhere to go.

R *Was it a different experience, being there after liberation?*

PS Oh sure, because we were totally free, there was no guards at the ..., no barbed wire, no roll-call.

R *And where did food come from and money to buy?*

PS The food then came from the British army. I mean, we got British army food, whatever they.... Then later, I think, some Americans came into the camp and ... *(pause)*

R *So when was the moment that you left the camp and where did you go?*

PS Four months after the liberation the allies decided that all the Yugoslavs in the camp would be taken to Egypt. What the idea was? I guess, they didn't know what to do with us.

R *And where you considered a Yugoslav or a German?*

PS Well, get out of Europe and go to Egypt and then we didn't know really... Since my mother was a Yugoslav citizen and my father was not, my mother went to some British office that was dealing with this, and said, "Look, I'm a Yugoslav citizen, my husband is not and my son is not, but we want to get out with the Yugoslav group, we want to join." So they approved and we were taken to a different camp somewhere south of Bari, ready for eventual transport to Egypt. That never happened. That group never left, the trip to Egypt never took place. And next to us, this was an Italian village they had put us into different houses. I don't know what happened to the population actually, whether they had left, or... Well I think it was some kind of a summer resort.

R *So these were empty houses...?*

PS There were empty houses, yes. And there was a ... (*pause*) other little camp for refugees from Yugoslavia. The Germans had taken over the Italian zone, and some people from the islands and the coast came over to Italy and they were brought to this camp. Both my parents spoke fairly good English. And my mother was given a job with the British Red Cross, to take care of these refugees. And my father was given a job at the camp's office that registered all this refugees, got their names, their ages, where they are from and pretty much. Since they both spoke Serbo Croatian, they spoke English, they both could do that job.

R *Where had they learned English?*

PS Oh I would say just, educated people in Germany spoke English. My father spoke fluent French. He had a French governess, when he was a child. Or actually she was Swiss, but from the Geneva area. So he spoke fluent French.

And I worked in the Yugoslav office that registered these refugees. (*pause*) And this was summer of 1944. My idea was still to go back to Yugoslavia. But that year I found the new regime, the communist regime, was not what I had hoped for. I found we were told one day, you can be friendly with the British and the next day we should not be. And it was, the relationship between the Yugoslav administrator of the camp and the British was not very good. My parents had in the meantime been moved from that camp further north. My parents and the British felt that both my parents could be helpful in these. Because there were camps all over the place there, there were displaced persons coming up from all over the place and they had to be registered and sorted out.

R *So you were separated from your parents?*

PS I was separated from my parents for a little while. And then I decided, "I'm not going back to Yugoslavia, this is not for me", I went to the British camp commander and I said, "I would like to get out." So a couple of mornings later there was a Jeep in front of my lodgings early in the morning and I got on and that took me out of the camp. And some other transport and the next day I arrived in Rome.

R *And were you in communication with your parents that they know where you were going at this point?*

PS I knew that my parents were running at that time in a camp in Bari. So yes, my parents and I had been in touch. As a matter of fact, I visited them in Bari once and jointly, you know, decided with my parents, they are not going to go back to Yugoslavia. So that was the end, I think, to Rome, took of my red star (*laughing*) and became a civilian.

R *What was it like the transition?*

PS Well it was all of a sudden it was a new life. Then I started, I looked for a job, and I went to the - since I spoke English by that time - I went to the different American or British, the allied organisations, and I went up in UNRRA, which was United Nations Relief and Rehabilitation Administration and said,

"Can I have a job?" And they said, "Yes, we need a mail room boy." So I became a mail room boy in UNRRA. And I ...

R *And did you know what were your parent's intentions at that point?*

PS Well they were in, at that time, I think, they had moved further north. I mean they moved as the army went up view miles behind the army they got all these refugees and had to deal with them. I mean, there were forced labourers people that had been in camps, they had to sort out really who were genuine refugees and who were not.

R *And it was their intention to go back to Yugoslavia eventually as well, or?*

PS No, I think we decided that's not the thing to do. Eventually the camps closed and my parents came to Rome too. So we lived in Rome. Now before the war, when we lived in Yugoslavia, we tried to get anywhere. We tried to go to South Africa, Australia, United States, Canada, but nothing worked. Finally we got an affidavit from a distant, distant relative of the Warbrook Family. I think my great great great grandmother was a born Warbrook. So this Warbrook had given us an affidavit, we took it to the American consulate in Zagreb in Yugoslavia. And he said, "This is fine, you are in the German quarter your number is going to come up in about ten to twelve years from now." And when we lived in Rome we somehow contacted this Warbrook man again, who was an officer in the army, and he gave us a second affidavit. And then we took that to the consulate and three years, two years later our number came up, because the German quarter hadn't been used for..., during the war, so in 1948 we came to the States.

R *And how was the decision made to come here as opposed to going somewhere else?*

PS Oh because we had the affidavit and you know, none of the other countries were we able to go to, so we said, "Ok, we come to America."

R *So what was it like when you first got here?*

PS Oh, I don't know, we got of the ship and we were put up in a Hotel on 103rd street and Broadway. It was called the Marseille Hotel.

R *It is still there that's my neighbourhood.*

PS Oh, so we were up there. And the Hotel was run by, I guess, the Highers I think ran the Hotel. And after about two weeks they said, "Ok, now this is fine. Now you have to decide, where you gonna go." And my parents said, "Ok, where can we go? We would like to go to Los Angeles", because my mother had a friend in Los Angeles. And they said, "No, there is too many refugees already in Los Angeles." "So where can we go?" I think it was Indianapolis, Cincinnati, and, I think, Minneapolis, were the three cities. And my mother had a Cousin in Austen, Texas. And she wrote to my parents, "Why don't you come to Austen? It's a nice little place, you will like it." My mother was very close with that cousin's mother. So my parents went to Texas, and I decided, I liked New York, I would stay in New York. So the organization told us, "Fine, that's what you want to do. You are on your own." And I went job hunting through different employment agencies. And after a couple of days one asked, "Can you type?" And I lied, I could type with two fingers. And he sent me to an air freight forwarder. There had been a railroad strike. The railway express strike I think. And many people shipped by air. And this forwarder had done a lot of businesses and needed somebody to send out bills, to bill the costumers. It was a pile of bills. So the man again said, "Here is a typewriter, send out these bills." And I got the job, 40 dollars a week. And the air freight forwarder and I, so airline timetables and airline tariffs and I got interested in that. As a child I liked railroad timetables. How can I go, I don't know, from Berlin to Cologne, or, you know, from Berlin to Paris. I liked railroad timetables. So this intrigued me, and after a week the man said, "Well, would you like to stay in this business?" I said, "Yes, I would like to do this." So I kept sending out these bills and I learned a little about how the air freight business works. And a view weeks later he called me in on a Friday afternoon and said, "We didn't collect enough from these costumers, we are closing shop. And I have to let you go." I said, "When?" "He said, "Today is your

last day." So now I knew something about the air freight business. And another relative of mine in New York said, "I know, there is a Swiss forwarding company that is just opening an air freight department the might be looking for somebody. So I went down for an interview and got the job. That was the office where we met. (*referring to his wife Lori*)

R *And where were you living at that time?*

PS I was living in a furnished room in Kew Gardens. There was a family of Yugoslavs whose son was with me in Rome. And his mother and sister lived in that rent, they gave me a room to stay.

R *So do you mind telling the story of how the two of you met?*

Lori Silberstein We worked at the same office.

PS Yeah, as I said, we worked at the same office and went out on a date about a year later. And then I moved from the Company to Scandinavian Airlines, and they gave me a job at the airport. It was on the four to midnight shift. And I went to see her several times and after view nights of travelling in the middle of the night to Washington Heights and back to Kew Garden, I decided, "let's get married." And I started my airline career and I worked for two years with Scandinavian Airlines, who decided one day there was no future in the air freight business and, let everybody in the freight part go. And I went to go to work for the Dutch airline KLM, who were very freight minded, the Dutch were always good on trading and shipping and I stayed 31 years with KLM, till I retired.

R *And did you stay in touch with some of the people, who had been in the camps with you?*

PS Not too many. I did in the beginning in New York, because a view of them were in New York. I have been in touch with this Lady, who wrote this article on the website Vera Robichek⁷, who lives in California. And we occasionally talk to each other. I'm in..., actually we are in touch with her two nieces, who live in the New York area. I have one friend in Jerusalem, who I'm in touch occasionally with, but most of them are gone.

R *When did you change your name?*

PS The day we got of the boat.

R *And how did you choose Silton?*

PS My grandfather's brother in Germany, my father's father, converted and changed the name to Silten. And my parents thought, and I think rightfully saw I think, as Silberstein I would have never gotten a job in the Airline business, not in those days, today it's different. But my parents made that decision, they said, they wanted to change the name and first they thought they will take my mother's maiden name the Laqueur name, but that was hard to pronounce, (*laughing*) so that became Silton.

R *And just a backtrack for a minute, you mentioned your grand parents, where they still alive when your parents moved to Yugoslavia?*

PS My mother's father died in 1927, my father's father died in 1931, I believe. His mother lived in Königsberg, when we left, and she died two years later. By that time she could live in a house, I mean, there was no, I think, if she had lived a view more years, it would have been terrible for her, but at that time she could live there. And my mother's mother left Germany after my uncle, my mother's brother, left for Turkey and became ... he was a pathologist and he was teaching pathology at the university in Istanbul. And he got his mother to join him in Istanbul. And they came to the States in 1949, lived in West Virginia, my grandmother lived till she was 100.

R *And your parents, what were their life like, when they came to Austen, and what became of them?*

PS They started a boarding house for students. We had saved a little money from the different jobs in Italy, so we had a little money and they started this boarding house. And my father worked in a liquor

⁷ See <http://www.annapizzuti.it/database/ricerca.php?a=show&sid=4228>.

store, but they managed. And Austen was at that time a very small town. It was a little hot in the summer, but they managed.

R *And when did they die both of them?*

PS Father died in 1958, January, in Austen, he developed pancreatic cancer, and my mother... at that time we were living in Dallas. The company KLM had sent me to Dallas, as local district manager. When they asked me, if I wanted to move to Texas I said, "Yes, my parents live down there, so I'd love to go to Texas." (*laughing*) Then mother moved to Dallas for a while, and when we moved to New York, she also came to New York. She lived on West End Avenue, 95th or 96th street, but then she decided her friends were in Austen and she went back to Austen. She said, she couldn't make any friends in New York, it was obviously not easy. But she enjoyed, she actually liked it, she went to the Met very often.

R *And did you become an American citizen?*

PS Lore became a citizen in 1951 I think, I think after three years in the States. I know we were citizens when we campaigned for Adlai Stevenson⁸. In 1952 we were knocking the doors in Queens, giving our literature for Adlai Stevenson.

R *And you have children of your own, can you talk a little about them?*

PS We have two children, Andy was born in 1954 and our daughter Nicole was born in 1957. Andy was born here in New York, Nicole was born in Dallas. (68'20") (...)

R (72'02") *And to your children, did you talk to your children about your experiences during the war?*

PS They know what were done. I mean they never showed any real interest in details. I mean, they listened to our Spielberg Tapes and they read our, my mother's diary, you know, my mother's story and so they know what was going on. To the grandchildren it's different. Yes, they know where we came from, they know what happened, but no, they are not really ... And I think that's standard, I think. I think, very few grandchildren really... really think.

R *So when you look back over all this experience, what do you feel about how you survived and...?*

PS Listen, we are retired in Westchester County, having a fairly nice home. The life has been good to us. And if it hadn't been for the Italians, it wouldn't be. I mean not that Italians did this to..., out of any kind of, for humanitarian reasons. But whatever they did, saved us.

R *I know from some of the things that you have written⁹ that there was some kind of gathering to commemorate Ferramonti, is that correct, that you were involved in? Wasn't there something in the article you wrote, talking about commemorating Ferramonti?*

PS No not...

R *I had understood that there was some sort of a concert to remember.*

PS No.

R *I guess, I misunderstood that.*

PS I mean, I'm in touch with this doctor in Perugia, who... His family comes from a little village outside Ferramonti. And he got very, very interested in this, and I have been in touch with Mario (Rende) for two, three years now. And he knows our whole story, and he's been trying to find my sister's grave, but it doesn't exist any more, that grave has disappeared. Apparently they... (*pause*) I don't know what the community did, whether after a number of years... But he found no trace. He did find the police report, reporting my sister's, my sister's death. I got a copy of that. And as a matter of fact, through Mario I got in touch with the Rome group. The Rome group came to me and said, "we've been asked by the doctor in Perugia to get in touch, would you be working with us?"

⁸ Candidate of the Democratic Party in the 1952 presidential elections https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Adlai_Stevenson_II.

⁹ Silberstein, Peter, *Il Kibbutz Ferramonti*, in: *La Repubblica* 24 gennaio 2010, p. 20 s.

R *What's his full name?*

PS Mario Rende, he's been very, very interested in the whole thing, about the camp and he send me several books¹⁰ about the ... Because he was a local boy at that time, he was interested in find out what the people, who were there, were thinking about it.

R *Is there anything else you would like to add to this story that we didn't cover?*

PS No, as I a said, I always have a soft spot in my heart for the Italians, for obvious reasons. We've been back to Italy several times.

R *Have you gone back to the places, where...?*

PS No, I've never been back to Ferramonti, no. I've seen pictures of what it looks like now. I don't have the photos, but somebody sent me some photos, I got them in the computer. I'm sure, I mean, when you google Ferramonti, you find a lot of information in there, there are a lot of stories about Ferramonti.

R *And have you gone back to your childhood home in either the former Yugoslavia or in Germany?*

PS We've been invited both to Berlin and Hamburg. Hamburg, because I'm born there, Berlin because we lived there. So they had programmes, where they invited former citizens to come back and spend a week there. They wined and dined us and made us feel good. I mean, they did a very, very nice job, I must say. In Hamburg I went to my grandfather's grave to the cemetery, which is still there. No, they did a good job. Dubrovnik we've been back, I think, twenty-six times during the last fifty years. Last time was last year. We didn't want to travel alone any more, so our son took us and we spent ten days in Dubrovnik. Same Hotel, almost the same room every year. (*laughing*) But that's been.... I consider that my hometown, I mean that's Dubrovnik.

R *And have you been involved with any groups of survivors here at all?*

PS No, there is a view, as I said, there is a view Ferramonti people that I'm occasionally in touch, but ... (*pause*). Somebody visited us here, when was it? About, in December, I think, somebody on Long Island, who happened to be in Ferramonti at the same time. But he was a young boy. He was younger than I, so I don't remember him, but when he mentioned his father and showed me the pictures, I said, "Oh *ja*, I remember him. But we didn't... you know we had a pleasant afternoon, but it didn't... No, there is nobody left.

R *If I might ask, a question I would like to ask at the end of the interview, is, if you were to give a message to young people going forward, what would that be?*

PS Oh.... Live and let live! (*pause*) Try to minimize differences! (*pause*) You know, it's some things that divide us, politics divides us, religion divides people. When you see what's going on in the name of religion in the world, you know that the Moslems killing Christians, or vice versa. Or yesterday on the news in Belfast the Protestants have a parade and the Catholics are upset about it, that's ... (*pause*)

R *What plans do you have for yourself for your future?*

Lori Silberstein To try to still live.

PS Stay healthy and don't wake up one morning.

Lori Silberstein Together. (*laughing*)

PS Preferably, preferably together.

R And to what do you attribute your long life and health at this point?

PS She is taking good care of me. (*laughing*) I don't know. First, I think, we didn't do anything that might have hurt our health. We don't smoke, hardly ever drink, I never did drink much. We didn't do any foolish adventures. Now we work out and swim five days a week. (*pause*)

¹⁰ Rende, Mario, 2009, Ferramonti di Tarsia, Milano: Mursia

R *Ok, I want to thank you so much for the time and for this interview.*

PS I just wonder what our Italians are going to do with this. Because this is much more of an interest to, you know, to... I mean this is pretty much very similar to what I told the Spielberg people. It's very much, well, it's obvious I mean. What else....

Lori Silberstein That's our story.

PS Yes. And every story is different. Everyone is a totally different. Her story is totally different.

R *Well, thank you so much.*

Lori Silberstein I mean, I was on the list to be deported. And I was notified by a police man.

PS Yeah that was where in Annecy, yes?

Lori Silberstein In Annecy, yes.