



Interview with Sol Libsohn

Under the Auspices of the
Monmouth County Library Headquarters
125 Symmes Drive, Manalapan, N.J.
Flora T. Higgins, Project Coordinator

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Name of Interviewer: Gary Saretzky
Premises of Interview: Mr. Libsohn's home,
Roosevelt, NJ
Birthdate of Subject: February 5, 1914
Deceased: January 21, 2001

Mr. Libsohn: Well, it's kind of interesting to have reached this point.

Mr. Saretzky: You've lived through much of the century and you must have seen a great many interesting things and met many interesting people during your lifetime. Can I ask you where you were born?

Mr. Libsohn: I was born in Harlem, New York City.

Mr. Saretzky: Tell me a little bit about your family.

Mr. Libsohn: They were immigrants from Poland, Russia. Poland belonged to Russia at the time. They were both looking for a new life and I guess I came with it.

Mr. Saretzky: You were born after they arrived here?

Mr. Libsohn: Right.

Mr. Saretzky: And they came together?



Sol Libsohn, Roosevelt New Jersey. Photograph taken by Gary Saretzky, January 28, 2000

Mr. Libsohn: They came together, yes.

Mr. Saretzky: And how long had they been here before you were born?

Mr. Libsohn: Maybe a year or two.

Mr. Saretzky: Did your parents find work when they came to America?

Mr. Libsohn: My father was a leather worker and neither of them were educated in Europe but I always remembered my mother going to school constantly here to try to learn more about the U.S.A. My father knew how to speak English. My mother always spoke with an accent. My father never had an accent, as far as I can remember.

Mr. Saretzky: Do you think he knew English before he came here?

Mr. Libsohn: I doubt it. Neither of them went to school but they always had books in the house. I remember growing up underneath an oak leaf table with lion's feet on it or some kind of either lion's or tiger's paws.

Mr. Saretzky: Was that one of your earliest memories, eating under the table?

Mr. Libsohn: Yes, and there's a very funny story about that. I grew up mainly in the Bronx. My mother had a brother who had gone to Montreal. He invited my mother up there with me but I don't remember that at all. I must have been an infant then.

Mr. Saretzky: He was an older brother?

Mr. Libsohn: An older brother, yes, and he always had some kind of a restaurant. I remember a little bit about living in Brooklyn... on a big street named after a Polish general. I remember it was a snowy day and I was wearing a snowsuit. I still remember the snowsuit, I must have either hated it or liked it because it was warm but it was khaki. It was made out of khaki wool so that means it was right after World War I. There must have been a lot of khaki wool around. We had a wood burning stove in a great big kitchen. At that end of the kitchen was a great big stove and you could buy these little bundles of wood that were tied together for the stove. That's all I remember about that.

Mr. Saretzky: You were too young to remember the war.

Mr. Libsohn: Yes, but I remember talk about Harding and Wilson and whatever. Harding, mainly.

Mr. Saretzky: Did your parents like Harding?

Mr. Libsohn: I don't think they liked him at all. My father liked Debs.

Mr. Saretzky: He liked Eugene Debs, the socialist?

Mr. Libsohn: The socialist, yes. All of that reverberated under this table, while the relatives were playing poker on the weekend. Every couple of weeks they would sort of revolve. You'd go to aunt so and so, or whatever. So you get all the talk of who's doing what in Warsaw, where my father came from. My mother's relatives would not discuss [things] so much. But some of them lived out in Greenpoint which is really far from where we were.

Mr. Saretzky: Is that out on Long Island?

Mr. Libsohn: No, Greenpoint is in Brooklyn, way out. Now it's become an artist's hangout. But Greenpoint used to be a pretty lonely place as I remember it.

Mr. Saretzky: Was your father involved in a union?

Mr. Libsohn: Yes, since he worked on shoes, he was always involved in a shoe workers union. He was a very good leather craftsman. Unionism in those days was not like what you think of it today. In those days you really got your ass kicked if you belonged to any union or even talked about a union. There were all kinds of shenanigans going on. It was not too long after the big Triangle Shirtwaist Company fire on Broadway in 1911 that unionism sparked nationally. That was the fire where the windows and doors were shut and all these people couldn't get out. Debs was a real hero, apparently, to a lot of working people and he badly deserved it because he was one of the uncorruptibles.

Mr. Saretzky: He spent some time in jail for his beliefs, so many people must have really respected him for doing that.

Mr. Libsohn: Yes. And then there was the Sacco and Vanzetti case.

Mr. Saretzky: You were a teenager when that happened. Was that a big thing for the people you knew at that time?

Mr. Libsohn: Oh, yes, it was. It was enormous.

Mr. Saretzky: How old were you when you were able to come out from under and sit at the table and discuss these things?

Mr. Libsohn: We never grew up. Kids never grew up in those days.

Mr. Saretzky: You were always the kid?

Mr. Libsohn: Yes, I had to run away to become a grown up.

Mr. Saretzky: How old were you when you ran away?

Mr. Libsohn: Oh, about seventeen or something like that. I ran away. I went to live in downtown New York.

Mr. Saretzky: Did you tell anybody you were going?

Mr. Libsohn: Not really. I just went.

Mr. Saretzky: Did you know anybody there? Where did you sleep?

Mr. Libsohn: Not really. I got a job and I slept in someone's studio. I had been hanging around artists and stuff.

Mr. Saretzky: You had already gotten interested in art by that time.

Mr. Libsohn: Well, I thought maybe I wanted to be a painter or something. I thought, I can't afford to go to school. So I got a job as a model. Someone had given me a camera when I was kid. When I was growing up, see... we lived in a very peculiar neighborhood. A lot of it was poor and we were one of the poor ones. You know my father was out of a job most of the time because he was a union man. At one time, he was forced to become a leather bookbinder; he didn't like that much. I still have some of his tools around here. He was a very fine craftsman and I really learned a lot without thinking about whether I was learning or not. He tried to get me a job. My uncle was a shoe manufacturer, and like most rich guys, he was very proud of being successful. So my father got me a job there. I wanted to be a shoe designer. I started looking around at what was going on. My uncle used to go to Paris every year to pick up samples. I'd look at the sample and then I would look at the shoes he was manufacturing which were copies of these things. I would say, "There's quite a difference between these two." So my father would say, "Keep quiet." I couldn't keep quiet, so I found myself looking for another line of work. I think that's about where I split and went off. The first time I ever got downtown was to get this job.

Mr. Saretzky: Before that you were in Brooklyn?

Mr. Libsohn: No, in the Bronx. We lived in the Bronx for a long time.

Mr. Saretzky: What was the last grade you went to in school?

Mr. Libsohn: Well, I did two years of college, at City College at night. That meant going four years.

Mr. Saretzky: But that was later on.

Mr. Libsohn: Later on, yes.

Mr. Saretzky: But when you ran off, had you graduated from high school?

Mr. Libsohn: Oh, yes. Norman Cousins was my classmate and we were friends in the school. We were in Roosevelt High School when it first opened on Porter Road. Later he got a job at WBMX. It was a little tiny station with an office way down in the East Bronx. He was the sports guy and he had a slight lisp. He did the announcements, sports announcements down there. We were proud of him for being able to get the job. We sort of worked together on school publications and stuff like that together.

Mr. Saretzky: So he was interested in editorial work that early. Later he was the editor of the Saturday Review. Is he still around?

Mr. Libsohn: No, he's dead. One day I was across the street from the hotel on 43rd Street and I looked up and there was Norman, but his name fell out of my head. So I said, "Hey, " and I stood there. So I told him his name had fallen out of my head. He was so mad at me because he was a big shot by then.

Mr. Saretzky: Let's go back to when you ran away. I'm really fascinated that you just ran away.

Mr. Libsohn: Well I didn't run away. I just told my parents, "Look, I have to be on my own."

Mr. Saretzky: So you went downtown?

Mr. Libsohn: I went downtown and I rented a cot in an artist studio for, I don't know how much, but it was very little.

Mr. Saretzky: Did you have your camera with you?

Mr. Libsohn: Yes. Let me tell you how I got a camera. There was a guy on our block whose father was pretty well off most of the time. See - we lived on a block where there was one tenement. A farmhouse on the corner was being taken apart by the kids. You know, that was the high lot, and then across the street were the low lots where all our bedsprings were. We could play and bounce around. Those were our playground toys. You had to learn to walk on the top of the billboards which were maybe about almost a foot wide. Now if you could walk on those billboards without falling you were okay. You were one of the gang, and stuff like that. And not only that, but World War I had left a hell of a lot of buildings unfinished in the Bronx. You know they all went broke. So what you had were foundations with no windows in them and there were spaces like that wide and the kids used to run around on all the foundations.

Mr. Saretzky: And one of these people on the block gave you the camera?

Mr. Libsohn: No. There were these combinations of families; the people who lived in our apartment house were mostly very poor. There was a guy who used to be a delivery man for John Wanamaker and he was always dressed up. Those delivery wagons were very fancy in those days. So he'd come home from work and that was one family. I think he was non-Jewish. Nobody would say that he wasn't Jewish but we knew that his mother was Jewish. Nobody talked about it much. We talked about it once and then we forgot it. That was one of the families. His name was Marty Friedman. He was very much interested in photography and his father was a big jewelry dealer. Then there was another guy, Max Asch, who was a friend of mine, and his father was an art dealer who had a place on 45th Street, between 5th and 6th Avenues.

Mr. Saretzky: Was he the one who gave you the camera?

Mr. Libsohn: No. You know I didn't even know where 45th Street was or what this place looked like. All I knew was that Max Asch's father's house had always little blondes, nudes, and lamps, and God knows what all the crap that you find in all the middle rich homes. And there were some brownstones around our area. There was a guy who was a junk dealer whose family must be multimillionaires by now. There were all these guys, and there were football heroes from NYU. I don't remember their names, but it was a peculiar mix. And there used to be a race course right around our area, which is not a race course anymore, it's where the "guineas" grew vegetables. The Italian families each had a little vegetable garden until the Sterling Baseball team took over the lot and started a semipro team there. Some of the guys made it to the pros, and we were right near Yankee Stadium and we were right near the Polo Grounds. So we had a real feeling....

Mr. Saretzky: Interesting neighborhood. Let me just bring you back to the camera though.

Mr. Libsohn: All right, so going back to the camera. This guy had all the cameras he could possibly use. He started a darkroom and stuff.

Mr. Saretzky: Which fellow was this?

Mr. Libsohn: Mark Friedman, the jewelery guy, and his father and mother. I think there were rumors that his father had another family somewhere else and whatever; so this is where you grow up with all of the things that your not. . .you know now-a-days, all this is nothing, but in those days, this was all revelation.

Mr. Saretzky: Everybody had a story.

Mr. Libsohn: Right. There was a little old lady who lived up in the house, which was falling apart. She was bringing up geese.

Mr. Saretzky: How old were you when Mr. Friedman gave you the camera?

Mr. Libsohn: He had a camera around that was not functioning and he was about to throw it out. I said, "What's the matter with it?" because I was always a good fixer. He said, "I don't know. I can't fix this thing. I lost the part or something. You can have it," and so I took it. I installed a string inside so I could pull the shutter, and I had a cable release that went like this. It was a folding camera. That was a good camera in those days.

Mr. Saretzky: Did you develop the film yourself or did you take it some place?

Mr. Libsohn: I may have tried to develop a roll at his place, I don't recall. He lived in one of those two family houses on the block. We lived in the apartment building. Then the neighborhood was developed. They built more two family houses and Italian families started moving in.

Mr. Saretzky: So you had this camera. By the time you went downtown, had you done a quite a bit of photography?

Mr. Libsohn: Not really, but I was interested. I just had the camera. I don't know what I was interested in becoming. I liked the idea of being a painter or something.

Mr. Saretzky: What happened after you moved downtown?

Mr. Libsohn: I started modeling and photographing paintings to make a living. I photographed lots of very fine paintings by Philip Evergood.

Mr. Saretzky: You were basically self taught as a photographer?

Mr. Libsohn: Right. And at City College, I met Sid Grossman.

Mr. Saretzky: I'm glad you mentioned him. I was hoping we would get to Sid Grossman at some point because, as is well known, you and Sid Grossman are credited with beginning The Photo League.

Mr. Libsohn: All kinds of people claim that they started The Photo League.

Mr. Saretzky: The only story I know is you and Sid Grossman started the Photo League. It's my understanding that the Photo League started in 1936 when The Film and Photo League separated into two groups. The Film and Photo League had started as the Workers Film and Photo League in 1930. There were hundreds of such groups that had started in Germany in support of the class struggle against capitalism. Did you and Sid join The Film and Photo League before it split into the two groups?

Mr. Libsohn: Yes.

Mr. Saretzky: Do you know what year that was?

Mr. Libsohn: I don't remember.

Mr. Saretzky: It must have been before 1936 when the split took place.

Mr. Libsohn: Right.

Mr. Saretzky: But you and Sid weren't founders of The Film and Photo League?

Mr. Libsohn: No.

Mr. Saretzky: That already was in existence at the point that you joined?

Mr. Libsohn: Yes. And there was Leo Hurwitz and Paul Strand. Strand never really was a joiner. He was associated with Hurwitz.

Mr. Saretzky: In 1935, both Hurwitz and Strand (along with Ralph Steiner), worked as cameramen on *The Plow That Broke the Plains*, the famous documentary film. So when the split occurred of The Film and Photo League, you had already been involved with the League for a year or two at that point?

Mr. Libsohn: Right. Both of us joined together.

Mr. Saretzky: Why did you join?

Mr. Libsohn: We were involved in left-wing stuff in City College of New York. You know there were these strikes and God knows what demonstrations against President Robinson, you remember.

Mr. Saretzky: I don't remember, no, you'd have to tell me about that.

Mr. Libsohn: There was a lot of turmoil around the college. City College was a great school actually. It was as good a college as you could find in the United States, and some of the scholars around it were great, although some were terrible. Mainly, where you got your education was in what we called "the alcoves," which were underneath the great hall which was like a tremendous auditorium. It looked like a cathedral with a beautiful organ in it. That's where I really learned my music appreciation. It was not in a classroom but right there. E. Power Biggs used to practice the organ there. That's the first time I really got to hear Bach. There were classes in music appreciation and I'd be in study hall period there so I'd move a little closer and I learned the forms of sonatas and concertos and God knows what. It was interesting.

Mr. Saretzky: So what were you studying at the college?

Mr. Libsohn: Well, I didn't know. I just wanted a general course. I just wanted to go to college. I just took courses in math. I was good in math, but I lost my interest because the teacher was very dull and crazy. So I skipped classes and we'd sit around and talk. We started a magazine, in which I became one of the guys, a sort of an editor.

Mr. Saretzky: What was the name of it?

Mr. Libsohn: *Naivete*. I think it went through one issue in mimeograph. We worked our tails off publishing this magazine. And it was an interesting little book.

Mr. Saretzky: It was a literary magazine?

Mr. Libsohn: It was both literary and something else. I guess it was unconsciously something like the *New Yorker*, which I had never even read. We got someone to do a wonderful cartoon for us, a cousin of mine, a bit of a genius who later on wound up writing plays for these theater groups in a little Greenwich Village theater on the west side of Washington Square Park.

Mr. Saretzky: Let's go back to The Photo League a little bit. How did you meet Sid Grossman?

Mr. Libsohn: We met at the college in the alcoves. I got involved with this magazine that he was part of. He had a friend who was even more involved and we sat around and we worked at it and so that was our introduction to The Photo League.

Mr. Saretzky: And so when you went to The Photo League, why did you join? Did you need a darkroom?

Mr. Libsohn: Yes, we needed a darkroom and the darkroom was in terrible shape. The interest of filmmakers and still photographers are not really much compatible. They sound compatible but they're not. So Sid and I said, "Well, somehow, this is all screwy. These guys don't seem to want to hang around with us and vice versa, so let's see if we can talk this out." They wanted to move away somewhere, anyway. Most of those guys came out of families with money.

Mr. Saretzky: So they were different from you and had different interests?

Mr. Libsohn: Yes, they had kind of a left-wing point of view.

Mr. Saretzky: But you guys did, too. How were they different?

Mr. Libsohn: They were different in terms of the kind of work they were interested in. Now Sid knew a lot more about photography. He had gotten involved, I don't know how, but he was more of a reader than I was, for one thing. He knew more about poetry than I did, and I learned quite a bit from him. So we broadened our interests and we went around to visit Alfred Stieglitz. Stieglitz was very strange sitting in his back room with his cape on and here's two raggedy guys coming in. You know, wondering what the hell are these guys doing here? I felt very uncomfortable around Stieglitz.

Mr. Saretzky: He was kind of forbidding? He was much older than you, too, for one thing.

Mr. Libsohn: Oh, yes he was.

Mr. Saretzky: He was about as old as you are now.

Mr. Libsohn: Yes, but Strand welcomed us. Even though he could be forbidding, too.

Mr. Saretzky: They were hard to approach?

Mr. Libsohn: Yes. It's funny, you know, Ben Shahn never gave you that attitude, but Walker Evans would.

Mr. Saretzky: You certainly knew all the great figures of photography from this period.

Mr. Libsohn: Yes. One of the things that was happening at the time we were involved, was that there was this movement of photography towards the arts. Not that it hadn't happened before, you know, under Stieglitz. For instance this young fellow that I was working with did bromoil....

Mr. Saretzky: That's an art printing process.

Mr. Libsohn: If I talk to any photographer today about what a bromoil is he wouldn't know.

Mr. Saretzky: Right, because that was for Pictorialism.

Mr. Libsohn: It was a kind of an art of the art of photography.

Mr. Saretzky: Right, very fine printing process.

Mr. Libsohn: Well it's a fine printing process, it's hands on and using oil paints.

Mr. Saretzky: It takes it away from the realism. You were more interested in social realism?

Mr. Libsohn: Right. We were interested in social realism and the value of social realism. In the value of the photograph as a document. In addition, we were very conscious of the history of photography and its usefulness.

Mr. Saretzky: In the 1940 U.S. Camera Annual in which your work, *The Chelsea Document*, was published, you were quoted as saying, "I believe in functional photography because it has the quality of extreme clarity and to the audience a vivid realism. Documentation of a social scene or photo sociological study is one of the functions to which photography is particularly well adapted." Do you still believe that?

Mr. Libsohn: Oh, yes.

Mr. Saretzky: I think this is very consistent with the emphasis at The Photo League in documenting social conditions.

Mr. Libsohn: Right, but I'm not convinced entirely that's where it's all at. In other words, I have another dimension. In fact, I have a poster in here of a show at the New York Public Library, and it's a show that I had gotten underway because... Romana Javitz...

Mr. Saretzky: Romana Javitz. When was this exhibit?

Mr. Libsohn: Oh, maybe two years ago. Romana Javitz is the one who started the picture collections in the New York Public Library. It's her eye, her head, everything about the way she thought about it.

Mr. Saretzky: I'm looking at a picture here. It says, "Subject Matters -- Photography."

Mr. Libsohn: This is what I was trying to think of.

Mr. Saretzky: Not the art side but the subject side. Not so much who's making the picture but what's in the picture.

Mr. Libsohn: That doesn't mean that she didn't know anything about art or didn't produce art. Practically any artist you talk to knows that she was important. That what she said, what she thought, what she put together in her mind was important, and it mattered. Okay now that means that, that word that "subject matters" is a very broad and very deep word. And that's really the way I feel about it. It's not so much that the subject matter has to be exactly right and all of that. There are things in there that everything is important, every word, every information. It's like music, like poetry.

Mr. Saretzky: At the League, with "subject matter" in photography, there seems to be competing points of view between wanting to document social conditions and using photography as an art form.

Mr. Libsohn: Like history. Historians record the same incidents and describe the same incidents and they almost sound the same, but they don't sound the same, and they never agree with each other. Now why is that? But photography has an added point to it. Photography can be as exact a reproduction, in terms of time, in terms of the imagery. I think you've got my point. Photography has that added conviction, let's put it that way. Not that it is always super correct, but it has the added conviction and that is what's important. And every time Romona and I would visit or have lunch or whatever, we'd talk a little bit about that. Because she was just as much interested as I was.

Mr. Saretzky: One of the activities that you got involved with at The Photo League was what was called *The Chelsea Document*. Can you tell me what that was all about?

Mr. Libsohn: Well, that picture I showed you was part of it.

Mr. Saretzky: This was one of several neighborhoods in New York that was documented by the League.

Mr. Libsohn: Well, we tried. One of the problems with being an organizer or part of the inner organs of The Photo League is that you spent most of your time trying to raise money, trying to get people to do things and so on. So there wasn't all that much time to do photography and so forth.

Mr. Saretzky: You did some and your exhibit with Sid Grossman of *The Chelsea Document*, was exhibited in quite a few places in New York

Mr. Libsohn: I don't remember.

Mr. Saretzky: It was exhibited at The League, of course, but also at the Chelsea Tenants League, The Hudson Guild and elsewhere. Now there was another group at The Photo League, the Aaron Siskind group. It was called the Feature Group and documented Harlem. Had you ever considered joining that group?

Mr. Libsohn: No. See Aaron had formed his own group and he represented another point of view.

Mr. Saretzky: How did his point of view differ from your point of view?

Mr. Libsohn: Well, it didn't really, you know it's just that Aaron...see Aaron was one of the guys who had a job.

Mr. Saretzky: He was a teacher.

Mr. Libsohn: And he had a point of view that was more shaped than ours was. Ours was a growing point of view, and his was more... he'd been around longer. He was not as left-wing as some of us were.

Mr. Saretzky: He apparently resisted attempts to get him more politically involved.

Mr. Libsohn: It could be, but I don't remember it being that important. But I'm just giving you my offhand impression. I never resented him for that. I thought, well, okay this guy had been around a lot longer, he knew more people than I knew. He knew more things about photography. He had better cameras and stuff like that, and I'm perfectly willing to learn something from him.

Mr. Saretzky: He was interested in doing documentation in the thirties, as you were. And then he shifted to wanting to do more abstraction, which is what you are doing more now, too, in your painting. I don't know if you want to comment on that but it seems like you kind of moved in the same direction that he did although you did it a little bit later.

Mr. Libsohn: Yes, and not only that, but I think I stay in touch a little bit better, a little more pointedly. For instance [in that picture on the wall], there's a quote, an abstraction of New York. I designed that as a cover for the New Yorker. It's an abstraction, but you know where it's at. It couldn't happen anywhere; it could only happen in New York.

Mr. Saretzky: So it still has a hook in reality, whereas Aaron's work was much more divorced from any particular reference point.

Mr. Libsohn: Now there's a memorial to Esther Bubley. I don't know whether you know her work or not. There's a picture of Esther Bubley in the middle of that. It has to do with my interest in music.

Mr. Saretzky: It's a geometric painting of interlocking shapes of different tones.

Mr. Libsohn: Right, but it has to do with music with a kind of a musical arrangement. It shows my appreciation of jazz. And she was interested in jazz, too.

Mr. Saretzky: I'm interested in the political aspect of The Photo League. How important was it?

Mr. Libsohn: Well, it was very important.

Mr. Saretzky: Tell me a little about how.

Mr. Libsohn: Like when those unions would go out to sea like the Longshoreman's Union and Chelsea Document, that picture I showed you. These guys were just hanging around doing nothing. That was part of Chelsea; there was an emptiness to it. In the morning there was this frantic quality to it.

Mr. Saretzky: So there was this sympathy for the people on the lower end of the socioeconomic spectrum that was motivating some of your work at this point?

Mr. Libsohn: We marched in May Day Parades and stuff like that.

Mr. Saretzky: You mentioned that you didn't hold it against Aaron that he didn't want to be more a part of that, but were there other people at the Photo League that didn't agree with you?

Mr. Libsohn: I don't think Aaron had a complaint in the world against any of us in that sense. If he didn't agree with us, he sure hung around for a hell of a long time.

Mr. Saretzky: Well, how about this fellow Izzy Lerner. Do you remember Isadore Lerner?

Mr. Libsohn: No.

Mr. Saretzky: He was a fellow back in the days of the Film and Photo League, who had gone to Russia and he'd come back and talked about his experiences. He wasn't entirely favorable about the Soviet Union, and apparently he was expelled from the league. Now this probably was before your time.

Mr. Libsohn: Not in my time.

Mr. Saretzky: Had the League become less political by your time?

Mr. Libsohn: It depends on where you get the information from... You know, that information may not be correct.

Mr. Saretzky: That could be, but if true, I guess you weren't around when that occurred. It must have been before you joined.

Mr. Libsohn: Then there was Calomiris.

Mr. Saretzky: Angela Calomiris?

Mr. Libsohn: She was part of the FBI.

Mr. Saretzky: Right, she was the informer who wrote the book, *Red Masquerade*, in part about her undercover experiences while a Photo League member.

Mr. Libsohn: Whatever stories she made up, I don't know what the hell they were.

Mr. Saretzky: She was not a very trustworthy source of information?

Mr. Libsohn: What she did was really make Sid's life hard for him.

Mr. Saretzky: People who are reading this who might not be familiar with that story, so could you just tell me a little bit about what happened there?

Mr. Libsohn: Well, all I know is that she turned up saying that she had been recruited and certainly not by me. She was obviously a lesbian. If you think that homosexuals are not popular now, at that time they were terribly unpopular and we knew she was a homosexual, but we made nothing of it. We tried to make her feel comfortable. So that's all I know about Angela Calomiris. But what she did to Sid was really horrible.

Mr. Saretzky: What did she do?

Mr. Libsohn: Oh, I don't know, she was an admitted FBI informer and she sent in reports about Sid. I don't know what the hell she said, because I've never really sent for those reports.

Mr. Saretzky: So you haven't read them.

Mr. Libsohn: I've never seen them and I don't give a shit. And I wouldn't talk to her if I ever saw her.

Mr. Saretzky: I'm sure you wouldn't because she really shafted you guys. The League continued to exist until the early fifties. Did you stay with it until it closed?

Mr. Libsohn: No. I got into a big argument with Sid over something. Sid was a very tough guy to be around. He was a very, very... he could be very nasty at some point but he was a very wise...

Mr. Saretzky: What was he like? Tell me about him?

Mr. Libsohn: He had a very brilliant mind. You know, his background was really tough, economically. We shared everything. Whenever I had a job, I always shared whatever I had with him and stuff like that. Every so often he could go off on a big tangent of grinding some idea into the ground, you know, including, you

know, just getting nasty. I just decided, "Oh, the hell with this," and walked away from it, that's all.

Mr. Saretzky: Do you remember about when it was that you left?

Mr. Libsohn: No, I don't really but I'll tell it was just after we moved to.... Oh, I had come up with an idea when Senator McCarthy had started going after us, it was obvious that he was going to ...

Mr. Saretzky: This must have been after The League turned up on the Attorney General's list of subversive organizations.

Mr. Libsohn: Sid and I had a meeting and I said, "Look. I'm going to go down and talk to Steichen about this." He had just gotten this job at the Museum of Modern Art so that would give you some idea of what the dates were.

Mr. Saretzky: About 1947, 1948, right around there.

Mr. Libsohn: Steichen saw me and I said, "Look, here's what's happening at The Photo League. We are being called subversive and all of that and if possible we would like to show what we do, if you think the work is important enough." This was a crazy idea because here's this guy that just got this job.

Mr. Saretzky: You didn't want to risk his new job.

Mr. Libsohn: Yes, see that's how naive we were. But he was very nice. He says, "I'll join the Photo League." But he never did.

Mr. Saretzky: Well, the membership actually reached its peak after it went on that list, people joining in support of the League. It got more popular than ever for a short period of time.

Mr. Libsohn: That's what I'm saying. McCarthy was really... So anyway, that's the last I had to do with it. And we had some kind of an argument. I don't know what it was.

Mr. Saretzky: So you weren't there at the end?

Mr. Libsohn: No.

Mr. Saretzky: At that point were you working as a freelance photographer?

Mr. Libsohn: Yes.

Mr. Saretzky: One of the people that you did work for was Roy Stryker for the Standard Oil Project. Roy Stryker was one of the leading figures in photography

in this period. Not as a photographer, but as someone who hired photographers to do documentary work. Roy Stryker had been the director of the photography program at the Farm Security Administration in the 1930s, but at that point I don't believe that you worked for him.

Mr. Libsohn: No.

Mr. Saretzky: You only started working for him after he left the Federal government and went to work for Standard Oil of New Jersey, which is now Exxon. How soon after he went to Standard Oil of New Jersey did you begin doing freelance work for him?

Mr. Libsohn: I think it was in the beginning actually, although not the very beginning.

Mr. Saretzky: It's about the mid 1940s.

Mr. Libsohn: When did he go to work?

Mr. Saretzky: 1943.

Mr. Libsohn: It was just shortly after he had gotten on... he'd gotten underway with Russell Lee, I think.

Mr. Saretzky: Russell Lee was one and Esther Bubley was another person.

Mr. Libsohn: No, Esther Bubley came on after I came on.

Mr. Saretzky: Oh, after you did, okay. There were some other people who worked for him there, including: I guess, Harold Corsini and Gordon Parks.

Mr. Libsohn: Corsini was in the Photo League.

Mr. Saretzky: Right. There was another photographer who's name was Ehrenburg remember him?

Mr. Libsohn: Yes but Mike Ehrenburg never was in the Photo League as far as I was concerned. He and I were in a partnership.

Mr. Saretzky: In the 1941 *U.S. Camera Annual*, it mentions that you were working with Myron Ehrenburg and it said that....

Mr. Libsohn: Right, but not in the Photo league.

Mr. Saretzky: It didn't mention the Photo League, but it said that you were working on the first mystery novel illustrated with original photographs.

Mr. Libsohn: Right. It was by Elliot Paul, who is his brother-in-law.

Mr. Saretzky: Was this book ever published?

Mr. Libsohn: Oh sure.

Mr. Saretzky: Do you remember the name of it?

Mr. Libsohn: Yes. In fact, I might have a copy of it around here somewhere. It might have been *Hugger-Mugger in the Louvre*.

Mr. Saretzky: If you could find it before I leave, I'd like to see it, because the first mystery novel illustrated with photographs is certainly a landmark in the history of photography.

Mr. Libsohn: He also played boogie woogie piano. He was sort of a left-wing guy.

Bess Tremper: One of the books he wrote was called the *Mysteries of the Rue Morgue*.

Mr. Saretzky: We'll look it up later. Let's continue with your freelance activities. Were you able to make a good living doing freelance photography or did you always have to do some other jobs?

Mr. Libsohn: Not really. I worked for *Social Work Magazine*, which was the magazine of the Social Workers Association, and photographed paintings and everything I could lay my hands on. I was making a good enough living, more or less.

Mr. Saretzky: But your income was coming from photography.

Mr. Libsohn: And I had a job, yes, it was more or less coming... modeling, everything.

Mr. Saretzky: So you had some other sources as well.

Mr. Libsohn: Yes. Well one day I got a call I finally got a steady job as a model. I was trying to get associated with Berenice Abbott, but Berenice Abbott was very, very cautious about keeping her own thing to herself. So I wasn't able to do that because she had... see the one big successful thing on WPA was the movie thing, the Writers project, which put out this whole series of guides and they were wonderful. I tried to get a job photographing for the guide. It was kind of tough, but the easiest thing to get was as a model, so I got on as a model. Finally, I just barely got transferred to photography and I don't even remember, who the hell I was working for. I remember doing some pictures somewhere on the East Side.

Sid and I would have loved to have worked for Roy Stryker. At the FSA. As the exhibition chairman at the League, I put on shows including the FSA show. I put on shows of Ansel Adams, stuff that the Museum of Modern Art repeated after us. Edward Weston was wonderful with us. He came down and talked. Well then, we just couldn't afford to go to Washington to apply for a job, so we never made it to see Roy Stryker. But we did get to meet him at the Photo League. He came up. One day I get a call from him saying, "Could you come in and see me?" By then he was working for Standard Oil Company [at their office in New York City]. So I said, "Gee, I wonder what the hell he's doing there." He tells me that he had seen some of my portraits in the social work magazines and you know here I am working for about twenty-five dollars a week or something like that, and would I like to photograph some of the oil workers in the refineries. I'm saying, "Gee, that sounds like a great idea."

Mr. Saretzky: Sure, photos of workers, that's right up your alley.

Mr. Libsohn: He said, "You know, I've got an idea going. Would you like to work for us? We can pay about fifty bucks a day."

Mr. Saretzky: That sounded pretty good.

Mr. Libsohn: That sounded pretty good to me. So I said, "Got to go tell my wife about this and I'll call you." I called him, naturally, and that's how we got to live here.

Mr. Saretzky: That's how you came to Roosevelt?

Mr. Libsohn: Yes, that's how we got to Monmouth County.

Mr. Saretzky: So Roy Stryker got you to Monmouth County.

Mr. Libsohn: Right.

Mr. Saretzky: Because you got a little money from working for Standard Oil?

Mr. Libsohn: Yes, money started rolling in, and not only that, we got raises. In fact, when I got here, I'd always paid for everything with cash so I'd never had any dealings with a bank. I never had a mortgage before. When I came out here,, I didn't even have the brains to look around to see if there were any other houses. I just walked into this one house. I was introduced by one of my former students who apparently got a commission on the sale.

Mr. Saretzky: Why Roosevelt?

Mr. Libsohn: Because I really wanted to come out here to talk to Ben Shahn, who was one of my hero photographers.

Mr. Saretzky: Why did you have such respect for Ben Shahn at that time?

Mr. Libsohn: One of the photographers who I thought was pretty damn wonderful was Ben Shahn. We had exhibited some of his work in the Photo League. And Walker Evans. Walker Evans was a photographer also.

Mr. Saretzky: He was Ben Shahn's roommate.

Mr. Libsohn: Right. He was Ben Shahn's friend. But that's okay. Look, this is all growing up. We were all in the same work.

Mr. Saretzky: Was Ben Shahn such a hero to you that you decided that you were going to go to New Jersey and live in the same town?

Mr. Libsohn: No, I didn't decide that. I came out here to talk to him and I just wanted to see where he lived and why he lived out here. Just out of a matter of sheer curiosity.

Mr. Saretzky: And what did you find? What was your impression of this place?

Mr. Libsohn: Well, when I came out here, I thought, wow, it's not too far from New York. I have two kids; they need to go to school and here we live in a fifth floor walk up in New York. This place has fresh air and a school right in the middle of town. And this guy said, "They're selling these houses for \$6,500." So I said, "Gee, that sounds reasonable. How do you go about doing this?" So we walked in here and there was a kid crawling around on the floor here.

Mr. Saretzky: This house right here that we're in now?

Mr. Libsohn: Yes, this house.

Mr. Saretzky: Oh! So you've been in here since...

Mr. Libsohn: Since 1947.

Mr. Saretzky: 1947! How about that? At that point was Roosevelt already becoming an artist community?

Mr. Libsohn: No, it's never become the artist community. I mean it's always been a pretty damned wonderful combination of Americana and the artists have been very influential. The clothing workers have been very influential. Everybody has been very influential, even the reactionaries. And if the United States really wanted -- and they have declared this a historic monument--if they really knew how essential an historic monument they have here. It's a monument to a democracy of various ideas, various peoples, various everything and a nature preservation idea, and a decent upbringing for your kids idea. It is really... it's a

monument that should be preserved, as well as any monument of FDR, as well as any monument of Abe Lincoln; this is a monument to how democracy can work if it's encouraged.

Mr. Saretzky: When you first came here did you immediately get involved in the community?

Mr. Libsohn: No.

Mr. Saretzky: Were you welcomed by any other people?

Mr. Libsohn: Yes, I became a friend of Ben's.

Mr. Saretzky: And who else did you come to know here?

Mr. Libsohn: All kinds of people; my neighbors.

Mr. Saretzky: How about the Edwin Roskam?

Mr. Libsohn: Edwin Roskam and I met at the Photo League once and I met him...

Mr. Saretzky: Was he already here at that time?

Mr. Libsohn: No, I met him on the job. He was on the Standard Oil project before I was.

Mr. Saretzky: Did he come to Roosevelt afterwards?

Mr. Libsohn: Afterward, much after.

Mr. Saretzky: So were you one reason he came here?

Mr. Libsohn: No, he came here through the Shahns.

Mr. Saretzky: Would you say Ben Shahn was sort of a central figure who things revolved around here or were there other people in Roosevelt when you came here who seemed to be the key people in the community from your point of view?

Mr. Libsohn: There were no real... well, all the key people were the leftovers of the original cooperative. You know there were lots of these Jewish....See we have sent more kids to Ivy League colleges per capita than any other community in the United States, without having the money of what Westchester County has.

Mr. Saretzky: Why would that be?

Mr. Libsohn: Well because there was this atmosphere of how important education is,... things like that. There were people around who really wanted to be millionaires when they grew up and they didn't become millionaires.

Mr. Saretzky: Did you meet a lot of people through your children?

Mr. Libsohn: Oh sure. These doors were never shut and you know anybody would come in and you'd have a cup of coffee and you'd go out and take a ride somewhere. It was great for people like myself who were freelancers. Even when I was working for the Standard Oil company, I was a freelancer. You know, McCarthy penetrated Standard Oil, came up there and said, "Do you know that so and so is left-winger?" I got the idea someone said, "Well, what is this stuff?" So I said, "Look, have them ask me about it. I can tell them where I stand in terms of Standard Oil easily."

Mr. Saretzky: So what happened with that?

Mr. Libsohn: Nothing. I was not working on salary. I was working as a contractor. So the work dropped off. They had an easy way out.

Mr. Saretzky: Did you continue working for Standard Oil after Roy Stryker left in 1950?

Mr. Libsohn: Not really, no.

Mr. Saretzky: So when he left that was it for you.

Mr. Libsohn: I think I did work for them occasionally.

Mr. Saretzky: Who were some of your other clients that you worked for?

Mr. Libsohn: *Fortune, Ladies Home Journal.*

Mr. Saretzky: At *Fortune*, did you get work from Walker Evans who was the picture editor?

Mr. Libsohn: No. I worked for Leo Leoni.

Mr. Saretzky: How about Princeton University? How did you get involved with them?

Mr. Libsohn: I think the same thing. I was doing something with the guy who became the secretary of labor and who had a bookstore in Princeton. I forget his name. A guy who started the college for getting your degree out of your work experience.

Mr. Saretzky: Thomas Edison College.

Mr. Libsohn: Yes, the guy who started Thomas Edison College. He liked my photographs. He got me going and somehow.... I don't know why, but I got going.

Mr. Saretzky: I have a few publications from 1964 and 1965 here from Princeton University and there's some wonderful photographs of African Americans in the Princeton Cooperative School Program and the Summer Studies program. I just wanted to ask you about that.

Mr. Libsohn: That was a wonderful program.

Mr. Saretzky: Is this directly related to your earlier interest in documenting the disadvantaged people in New York? Does that relate to why you photographed African Americans who are trying to move ahead during the Civil Rights era?

Mr. Libsohn: No, it's just that I happened to be at the right place at the right time. I never really utilized my background, so to speak, or used it as a way of getting this work, no. It was the type of work that I liked to do. I just happened to be doing it.

Mr. Saretzky: Were you on the staff at Princeton?

Mr. Libsohn: Yes, I worked with Dr. McCracken. I worked on one of the summer programs and that was a very interesting program.

Mr. Saretzky: What was your role there? What did you do?

Mr. Libsohn: I was one of the art teachers.

Mr. Saretzky: And who were the students? Where did they come from?

Mr. Libsohn: That's the way McCracken worked; he was a professor of education and at one of the Jersey colleges. I don't know how we met... but somehow we met. He was a very interesting guy. He devised a program when we were having all these problems with teenagers and high schools that were falling apart. I had gotten a job working in Trenton High School when they were having the riots. I was teaching photography to some of these kids who were having problems. It was a program that was sponsored by people who knew how to write for grants, and so there I was. I remember we were in the middle of a school that was just seething. I was one of the white guys with about four or five Black guys. I remember we had a white principal at the time who was not very popular and finally they got a Black principal who was even worse than the white one, you know, a real martinet. He just really didn't know how to handle the situation.

For instance, to give you an example: one of the things that I was doing was working with a teacher as a kind of an assistant and we were trying to develop a program of teacher aides. So the teacher, instead of being up in front of the classroom, could be walking around on a one-to-one basis with the youngsters. This teacher I was working with was just absolutely marvelous. Her father had been a superintendent of schools in California somewhere. She really knew how to handle the whole school mechanism. She knew how to teach. She was bright. I remember one time, I was in the class and we had just talked to the youngsters about writing something about themselves and we realized it would be a little tough for them. We went around and told them we'd help them whenever they needed some help if they wanted to discuss, something like that. So at that point this principal walks in, you know the one that I was talking about. He was just strict about everything as anybody could be. But his supervisor, also Black, was much smarter than he was and very, very smart about what he was doing. Anyway, we had just asked the youngsters to think about what they were going to write. He walks in and he sees this kid sitting near the window looking out the window and he said, "You." The kid looks up. He says, "Aren't you supposed to be doing something?" "Yes," he says, "I'm supposed to be thinking." I said, "That's exactly right, we've asked them to think about what they're going to write."

Mr. Saretzky: Now was this a regular class or a photography class?

Mr. Libsohn: It was an English class.

Mr. Saretzky: Did you also teach photography in the summer program?

Mr. Libsohn: Yes. I taught them art and stuff like that. Our program was absolutely flexible. One of the things I did was to take pictures of the kids as if I was covering a story for *Fortune* magazine, and when we showed them to the kids, the kids would say, "I look like I know what I'm doing." This kid all this time had thought he didn't know what he was doing and now this was proof that he knew what he was doing. And it relates to the hug I got. One day I was walking down one of the main streets in Trenton and a great big Black kid comes up to me and I recognize the face. But you know this was kid who was, maybe... you know, I'm not very tall, but he sure was a lot shorter than I was. He grabs me and gives me a big hug and says, "If it wasn't for you guys I would've been in jail." That made me feel so good. So it didn't matter whether I was doing photography or not. I never think of myself as being "a one person thing." I always think I can fix anything.

Mr. Saretzky: Tell me again, where did that program take place?

Mr. Libsohn: In Trenton High.

Mr. Saretzky: Did your involvement there lead to your work in the Princeton cooperative school program?

Mr. Libsohn: Some of the people from there were recruited by McCracken. I think that's how I got involved.

Mr. Saretzky: I also have a copy here of a very interesting publication also from the same period, the mid 1960s, which is called *The Long Road To College: A Summer Of Opportunity*, which has photographs of African Americans who are hoping to go to higher education. This was sponsored by the Rockefeller Foundation. Do you recall if you shot those pictures for the publication or did they use pictures that you had already shot for other purposes?

Mr. Libsohn: I don't know. Some of these pictures are not very familiar.

Mr. Saretzky: Some of them are by you and some of them are by other photographers. You are credited on the title page of the book, so I thought I would ask you about it.

Mr. Libsohn: I don't know; it's been a long time.

Mr. Saretzky: Yes, thirty-five years ago. Your work has been published very frequently in magazines and in books. Which book do you feel or magazine has the best of your work in it? Do you have a favorite publication?

Mr. Libsohn: Yes, I'll show you something I did for Standard Oil Company published just recently and it's pretty nice. I really enjoyed seeing it.

Mr. Saretzky: In general, how does your work get placed so that other people can see it and be affected by it? Isn't it important for photographers to get their work "out there?"

Mr. Libsohn: Yes. Here's a reproduction.

Mr. Saretzky: Okay, what book is this that we have here?

Mr. Libsohn: *Car Culture*.

Mr. Saretzky: Oh, here's a picture by Sol Libsohn. This book is edited by Marlaham Berkenedy, published by Gib Smith in 1998. Sol's picture is on pages fifty-seven and fifty-eight. It shows the back of a Buick, circa 1940. It's got three pennants on it that says Montreal, Rochester, and Sherbrook Exposition, and I guess these are right in between one by Barbara Morgan and one by Marion Post Wolcott and then comes Cartier-Bresson. So you're in very good company there.

Mr. Libsohn: Yes, well, I always seem to be in a very good company.

Mr. Saretzky: Sol, here's another of the many books in which your work has been published: *Out of the Forties* by Nicholas Lemann, which is about what Roy Stryker directed work for Standard Oil. There's a beautiful picture that you took in New Jersey at the oil company where they were doing some construction.

Mr. Libsohn: That was the construction of the cat cracker.

Mr. Saretzky: It's a wonderful picture; it's got this very strong round form of the cat cracker or a piece of the cat cracker being lifted or lowered into place as they were constructing it. It's got a wonderful geometric quality to it. There are also some other examples of your work in this book. Another book with your work included is this monograph, *The Consolidated Freightways Collection*, which was published in 1988. How about a very famous photography book and also exhibit that you were represented in, *The Family of Man*, which was organized by Edward Steichen at the Museum of Modern Art in 1955. Do you recall anything about that?

Mr. Libsohn: Oh, yes. I was very pleased with the idea of them doing the exhibit. I thought it would be an honor to be represented in it. But I discovered... (Laugh)... I just happened to have done a freelance picture of a quilting party or something like that in a *Ladies Home Journal* story. I guess they just needed to have a quilting party in this *Family of Man* and to me it was a rather dull picture. But to them it was important because quilting was one of the things that happened a lot in the USA and I guess they couldn't find any quilting pictures.

Mr. Saretzky: Did you go to see the exhibit?

Mr. Libsohn: Oh, yes.

Mr. Saretzky: Do you recall what happened when you went there?

Mr. Libsohn: Well, not really. But it was really... in those days it was a real landmark exhibit. Later on as I thought about it, it seemed to me, you know, all these second thoughts... as you get older you do a little more thinking about what's what. I would've dwelled a little less on the... what I'm really trying to define in my head is the essentials of documenting. You know what the USA is all about. As I recall it, there was a small exhibit that... you know, Romana collected pictures and photographers gathered around her because she had such a beautiful mind. This little exhibit sort of struck notes a little harder about the essentials of what it meant to be a citizen of the USA.

Mr. Saretzky: More so than *The Family of Man*.

Mr. Libsohn: More so than *The Family of Man*. At the same time Steichen did rely on Romana for many of the pictures for the show, I think. He was a good friend of Romana's and her influence was around. You really can't second guess

things like that. This was a monument, and it should remain that, and it remains that way.

Mr. Saretzky: The book *Family of Man* is still in print after forty-five years. I can't think of another photography book that has been in print for forty-five years. Sold millions of copies. So your quilting picture certainly has been seen by millions of people.

Mr. Libsohn: I certainly have some more important pictures around than that.

Mr. Saretzky: When you think of the photographs that you've made, which ones really stand out in your mind as being your favorites that you've taken?

Mr. Libsohn: I was looking for the one in *Double Take* magazine. Did you have that one here?

Mr. Saretzky: No, but can you describe the picture?

Mr. Libsohn: It's just a straight on portrait, but you know that's the point. What makes a picture important is... because it really recorded... not only an incident, but also a place that somehow relates to the growth of the United States of America in some essential way. I can only describe it by saying take a look at the picture. And it's a very modest picture, as far as I'm concerned, and that's the point. There are many of these pictures around and you could make thousands and thousands of shows of these types of pictures and create history books that are absolutely marvelous... and that's really what's so important. You know art, music, poetry, and real historians that appreciate stuff in that way. Everybody's entitled to their own opinions.

Mr. Saretzky: What would you like me to ask you that we haven't covered so far, that you would like people to know about you or about the twentieth century that you've lived through?

Mr. Libsohn: Well, I enjoyed most of it. I've raised a good family and I've been around people that I enjoyed being around. I've had a good life. I enjoy New York. I enjoy Paris. There's one of my good pictures.

Mr. Saretzky: Okay, we found another. This is a book called *Photo League*. Naomi Rosenblum is the author and it's a little bit unclear who published this book.

Mr. Libsohn: Yes, it is unclear, and, in fact, I don't know how they got that picture.

Mr. Saretzky: It's a strange catalogue. On the back it says "telephonica des telephonica" and it seems to be in Spanish. There's a very nice photograph by

Sol here and it shows a man holding a cigarette on the steps outside of a building in front of an open doorway. There's a lot of very dark tonalities in this picture but there is light that is illuminating his face and his hands.

Mr. Libsohn: I think of it as a little piece of sculpture. As a matter of fact, it was. Because what they were doing was gutting a building for... I think they were building a series of dorms for the Fashion Institute. It was right across from the Fashion Institute. I just noticed this guy standing there and there was something so essential about the guy. It's hard to say why you take a picture. I just know that I need to take it and that's about enough for me. Do I need to describe it? Well there it is. It just seemed important. In terms of who the guy was he was "not the most important person in the world" but he was because there he was. The drawing was so important, the textures, the staging was so important. I'll give you an example of something. The other day we saw....

Mr. Saretzky: (Sol is showing me a framed photograph) Can you describe it?

Mr. Libsohn: I don't know whether this is true or not but here's a picture I took in the street. I've always thought of this guy being an actor. I don't know who the woman is but I never knew who it was. It was just a street picture.

Mr. Saretzky: It's a man and a woman seen in profile and their faces are brightly lit by the sun.

Mr. Libsohn: I've always thought that this was an actor and the other day we saw this play. This was about twenty or twenty-five years after I took this picture, I didn't know who it was and I had a feeling I had seen that guy somewhere before, the main actor in this play. So I examined this thing carefully and, by God, even though he is that much older, the features are pretty much the same.

Mr. Saretzky: Well, I think I agree that he does look like an actor. He has a certain bearing about him and there's something about the lines around his eyes that look like he's spent a lot of time in the floodlights; very distinguished looking man.

Mr. Libsohn: Here's another one of my favorite pictures, of Big Bill Broonzy.

Mr. Saretzky: Big Bill Broonzy was a blues musician.

Mr. Libsohn: He was a guy I knew when I was in the Photo League. Now both Sid and I photographed together. He has some photograph. This is Big Bill singing the blues. Now he is the author of the song, "If You're White, You're Right, If You're Brown Stick Around, If You're Black Get Back, Get Back, Get Back." There's something very beautiful about this guy. I discovered in my collection of records that I have some old jazz records by Washboard Sam. Now

this guy happens to be Washboard Sam's half brother and plays with him on these records.

Mr. Saretzky: It's a very dramatically lit portrait; a close up of Big Bill Broonzy's head and shoulders, and he's got what looks like a very dark sweater on or some kind of a pullover.

Mr. Libsohn: No, it's a jacket.

Mr. Saretzky: Some kind of a jacket but what's really lit up is his face, which has very dramatic lighting. Was this done in a studio at the Photo League?

Mr. Libsohn: No, done in an apartment.

Mr. Saretzky: It's amazing. It's an amazing photograph, very powerful. He's got his eyes closed and he just seems to be filled with emotion as he sings.

Mr. Libsohn: Yes, well, that's what real blues is about.

Mr. Saretzky: Now we're looking at *Double Take* magazine, Spring 1999, and there's an essay by Michael Lesy called, "Evening Snapshot, 1945," with a wonderful photograph by Sol. It shows a group of men indoors; looks like one guy is having a beer. Tell me about this photograph.

Mr. Libsohn: It's a casual photograph, but it's not.

Mr. Saretzky: You mean you set it up?

Mr. Libsohn: No.

Mr. Saretzky: Why were you there?

Mr. Libsohn: It's in a little hotel. I was doing a trucking story and this is where, I was told, the truckers liked to stop. It was in Shartlesville, P.A., which is... I don't know whether the hotel is still there. It may not be any more but it was right on the main road before they built that main road that goes through Shartlesville. I did several photographs there that I think are equally as interesting, but these were the kinds of things that I thought might be interesting to Roy Stryker; however, I couldn't figure out how to fit it in any other way.

Mr. Saretzky: For me this picture has a very cinematic quality. It looks like it's right out of a movie from the 1940s. It's just so real, in terms of just being in the room with these guys and the clock shows on the wall. It's ten after nine at night; they've been at work during the day. They're now having a little bit of relaxation because they've been driving



all day. They are truckers, and now they are stopped for the night, and one guy is sipping at his beer, but they are not talking to each other. They all they seem isolated and kind of alienated.

Mr. Libsohn: It was just the most modest hotel and yet the food there... they had these long tables in there with really good... filling, homemade stuff. It's all touristy now, but at that time it wasn't.

Mr. Saretzky: What strikes me about this picture and also about the one you showed me with the actor and maybe a couple of other ones, is that the people in these pictures are not really interacting with each other. You mentioned one man, when he was standing on the steps, he was like a statue. The people seem a little isolated. Is that something that you are attracted to? The sense of separateness and alienation? Is that part of the way you're seeing the society or is this just a compositional preference in your vision?

Mr. Libsohn: I have no real training in composition. I have a sense of isolating things. I think that's what the artist does or the poet does; the musician does. Now if you listen to jazz, for instance, which is a construction by, maybe two, maybe four, maybe five, sometimes even larger; but most of these guys are so confident. They can build stuff by listening and what they are doing is isolating a piece of music. When I say a piece of music, I mean something important; something that means a lot to each one of these guys. So the artist is really actually an isolator of ideas; whatever these ideas are; whether they're important or not; that's not really important to anybody but himself; and whoever sees whatever; and whoever finds something in these things that's great. If the artist can share it, that's wonderful. So I like it when people find stuff in my pictures that I don't even see, but you know...that's what happens. That's the way it is, that's the way I respond.

Mr. Saretzky: You didn't know any of these people?

Mr. Libsohn: No, not really, but I have other pictures of other people around here. There was something about the atmosphere that really took over. I have a picture of a wonderful little truck and a guy... I used to remember his name.

Mr. Saretzky: Well it's a marvelous photograph. The way this fellow in the center here is isolated against this frame of the doorway. It's almost like a picture within a picture and I just think it's a wonderful image.

Mr. Libsohn: So these are some of the pictures that I enjoy.

Bess Tremper: You remember the conference you were in, in California at the University of Southern California? I don't know where the catalog is.

Mr. Libsohn: They had a big show out there.

Mr. Saretzky: You had a big show at the University of California?

Bess Tremper: Yes, in Santa Barbara.

Mr. Saretzky: I wanted to ask you about your painting because now I understand you're doing much more painting than you are doing photography. Were you doing painting all along or did you turn to painting at some point? How did that happen?

Mr. Libsohn: I don't know, I was just sort of fooling around trying to catch certain things that I had done photographically, too. I had photographed in the city some of these buildings and I feel like doing the same thing again. It's just that somehow I'm not related....

Mr. Saretzky: Are the mechanics of photography harder for you now?

Mr. Libsohn: They are much harder and I can't manipulate certain things the way I used to; although, I think I could learn to. You have to get back into it. I used to add a couple chemicals here and there to jazz up the Blacks or whatever. Painting is just an exploration the way you go out photographing or at least I did. But I noticed, for instance, there were days when I would come up with nothing. Other days, practically every picture I took was something I wanted to save. It's very difficult to formulate what it takes to be an artist or poet or painter; you just have to work out your own ideas and keep moving and experimenting. Not worry about whether it's going to work or not, but worry about whether you're saying something that you want to repeat, that you want to record. But these are the things that I like to have around.

Mr. Saretzky: Well, you have a wonderful home and environment, which is just filled with wonderful images and things that you've made.

Mr. Libsohn: There's an Atget.

Mr. Saretzky: Yes, I see a photograph by the famous Parisian photographer Atget who died in 1927. And there is Ben Shahn's picture of Martin Luther King.

Mr. Libsohn: And one by Bernarda Bryson Shahn. That's a wonderful picture by a friend of mine in Paris, who I thought was a poet and a real human being. And this guy worked in...you would be surprised; he had an apartment that was smaller than this. It was a luxurious apartment. I don't know how he did those things, but he was an architect. He just died recently. Miro was another one of my favorites. There's a Miro lithograph and those are wonderful. This is an original woodcut by Utamaro, a very famous Japanese print maker.

Mr. Saretzky: Well, Sol, thank you very much. I guess we probably ought to stop at this point. I want to thank you for sharing your memories with me. I've really enjoyed this talk very much.

Mr. Libsohn: Well, I enjoyed talking. Whatever value it has.

Mr. Saretzky: I'm sure that people who read your words in the future will really find you most interesting as one of the representatives of the 20th century. I'm very glad that you've been included in this project.

Mr. Libsohn: Thank you.