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Oral history interview with Jerome Liebling, 2010 Sept. 17

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Transcript

Preface

The following oral history transcript is the result of a recorded interview with Jerome Liebling on September 17, 2010. The interview took place in Amherst, Massachusetts, and was conducted by Robert Silberman for the Archives of American Art, Smithsonian Institution.

The Archives of American Art has reviewed the transcript and has made corrections and emendations. This transcript has been lightly edited for readability by the Archives of American Art. The reader should bear in mind that they are reading a transcript of spoken, rather than written, prose.

Interview

ROBERT SILBERMAN: This is Robert Silberman interviewing Jerome Liebling at the artist's home in Amherst, Massachusetts on September 17th, 2010 for the Archives of American Art, Smithsonian Institution, card number one. Good morning, Jerry. Maybe we could begin by my asking you when and where were you born.

JEROME LIEBLING: New York City, April 16th, 1924. New York City, of course, has many boroughs. I was born in Manhattan. In fact, I was born in Harlem. At the time, that's where my family lived. And soon moved to Brooklyn.

ROBERT SILBERMAN: Could you describe your childhood and your family background a little?

JEROME LIEBLING: Interesting, in contemplating your arrival and finding a form to talk about my childhood—[phone rings]—in contemplating my childhood, there are certain terms that I think are important and when I had learned about these terms, would help define my childhood. And one term is "immigrant." When did I first hear the word "immigrant" or get to understand what it meant or what it implied? Because I will always consider that I am an American citizen, born in this country and properly affixed with all of the needs of citizenship. But I realized that so much of my early childhood was really tied to defining my parents, and my parents were both immigrants. All of the pictures since that I would see of Ellis Island and all of the stories of Ellis Island and what the immigrant nature of life was, coming to the United States anywhere from, say, 1880 to 1920, I never considered to be directly a part of my life. I knew about it, but I was a step beyond that immigrant experience, and that experience was my parents' experience. But I realize now that I was really more involved with that whole sense of being an immigrant and where I lived in New York and what I did in New York and ideas that worked themselves out from the thought of being immigrant were really part of me as well, as my parents worked out their own life. How far back do you go? Another term, besides "immigrant"—and what I'm saying is that I think I was an immigrant, though a first–generation American. My family life, relatives, discussions, attitudes about life, though my father and mother were transferred, were about 16 or 17 when they came to this country, many of their attitudes had been established in Europe. My mother coming from Poland and from another early term, the shtetl, which was a place beyond the pale, Poland—I don't know the history and the dates—but divided up once Russian, then independent, then Russian again, but far out from the centers of Russian culture. Little towns, special villages where Jews lived, and you'd have to spend a long time discussing the quality of the shtetl and of the life experience that my mother and father started to have, except that they were able to leave. And that would be another whole story of why this migration of millions of Jewish immigrants left Europe, Eastern Europe, and came to the United States, and then what did they do in the United States. So their lives and the development of their lives was really the development of my life and how much I was tied to that, but never realized that that's what was going on. So their development as Americans and that mix of that European culture, which wasn't mine other that in some kind of secondhand manner. I know what we're trying to do is find out how my youth, my growing up might have affected my photography or my art in some way, what specifically happened to me, and did it help define what I do through my photographs? And I think that experience of becoming an American, one, living in New York City as a first-generation, young man was something that determined much of what my pictures reflect today. I realize that, and we're in searching and going and doing. For example, I spoke English, though the family spoke Yiddish. And that was the language in the house. So I was bilingual. I didn't even realize the term. I never, never used when I had to—I went to school at six, and this would be the American school, and I had to learn to write at the same time I was in Hebrew school, which was part of the experience of every young Jewish boy. And I then had to learn to write from left to right for English, but then I also had to learn to write in the opposite fashion, from right to left. What did that experience mean? It must have meant something. [Laughs.] It was there, that duality. And I suppose what eventually happens is that the American ideals become more ingrained and the choices that I make as I get older, early on, goes terribly dependent upon my parents and their ideas and their focus. And I could say of them that they were very hardworking, poor people, and that I never was able to discuss with them, I mean, what their dreams were. I never put a tape recorder down in front of my father and said, "Start, and tell us, how did you get here? How did you get on that ship? What happened when you arrived? What were the choices you made?" He was my father, not somebody who provided me with life experience, though he really did provide me with

certain attitudes. One of which, and a thing for them all the years, is that they had little education. And in order to become American citizens, which they wanted to, they'd have to learn to speak English, if you can imagine all of that, and then eventually take their citizenship. Remember, that's another term that was always talked about in the house, who had received their citizenship. And that was done through going to school, learning English, taking the little test, and finally becoming an American citizen. And I remember, by the time I was seven or eight or nine and being able to read and write, I worked with my mother on her rather limited English writing. So those were formative ideas that were going on. No question of artistry. One wonders, "When did the child, if maybe a ballet dancer, did they show talents, how did the parents help them? What school did they go to at eight or nine? When did they first play the piano?" My parents struggled really financially all the years, and so did the broad variety of the rest of the family. I don't know that I had uncles or aunts or people who had attained success, you know, became professionals. Nobody did until my brother and I went on to college. So that was part of a picture of the beginnings. I was attached to that past, which was the European immigrant, and slowly began to discover America. And this story that I'm telling is everyone's story. I mean, it's in all of the literature and what the people wrote, the writers wrote about and talked about, and it goes on continuously with immigrants. How much do they adhere to a past? When did they break away? When did they absorb the so–called Americanization? What went on? I think another very important presence was the years of my youth, born in 1924, so that some of the first things that I remember, if it's newspapers or names or personalities, would come about the time I was eight or nine and could read at school. And I do remember, now, eight years old, the election of Franklin D. Roosevelt in 1932. I remember that election, yes. And I think the so-called Roosevelt, FDR period, the New Deal period, the period the '30s and what that might mean in the way of culture, progressive ideas, and especially that I lived in New York City which was heavily immigrant still, foreign-language newspapers, was very important. And I would think the cultural milieu that I participated in, just that I lived at that time, was more important than any early discoveries of art. The art was the experience of life. And I think that has continued in the work I do, reflected there, so that a curious event for me—one of my closest friends, Whitey Milrod [ph], owned the candy store. And the candy store in the neighborhood would be the center of activity. That's where you congregated. That's where you hung around. And New York City in 1935, '36, '37 might have had 15 newspapers, if you can imagine that. We could probably itemize that, starting with the *New York Times* and the *Herald Tribune* and many of them, down to the ethnic newspapers and the overt political newspapers, like the *Daily Worker* or the *Socialist Paper*, or things of that sort. And because Whitey owned the candy store, he let me help him with the newspapers which would come daily, but then there would always be returns that you'd have packaged and send back. And so I, earliest time, was involved with the newspapers and magazines and reading them and being with the issues of the day. And for the New Deal, all the labor unrest. And I remember it so clearly, strikes, taking over the plants in Detroit, the autoworkers. And I had great sympathy how it developed. Why I said this was something I concern for me, I don't know, other than the fact that I probably thought I was the underdog, the Jewish person in the United States was part of an outsider. And Roosevelt and his efforts, the New Deal efforts, were of an aid to me, to my family, to everyone. So there was a social consciousness that was developed before I was 10 or 11 or whatever. And I think—recently, there was a new book on the '30s, a guy from City College. I have it here, very interesting as to the cultural establishment of ideas that must have affected me in my youth. And an awareness of political other, I think, more deeply affected the work I chose to do, than museums, because I really don't remember any art notions, what would I be receiving as a kid. Movies from the time I was, what, 10 or so, and that would be the Hollywood films. I remember the schools, the teachers in New York City, and a presentation once of—[inaudible]—*The River*, which whether I understood what was going on or not, it was presented as something special and necessary and government–produced. And streets, the streets themselves, the politics of New York, from radical, socialist and other awareness, if you consider that New York City had a school called The Jefferson School, a big building, an edifice, and it was run by the Communist Party. And then they had another school run by the Socialist Party, called the Rand School. And these were mixtures of experience that occurred. There would be the soapbox speakers on Friday night. You would know people who were heavily involved beyond the Democrat or Republican party. And these were all residues of persons from Europe, who had been immigrants. And I think by the time I was 14, I was a left in my ideas about who the world was and what I chose. I mean, there were certain very negative terms that—the landlords and bosses. There were clichés, but absolutely you never wanted to become a boss, and you never wanted to become a landlord. And one experience that I can't fully explain, but is very germane toward the taking of pictures, my father was a waiter. And he found over the years that the most–lucrative monies would be made on shifts at night, so he worked nights. He would generally go to work about 3:00 and work the supper and then come back by 11:00 or 12:00, it was whenever. I was usually asleep. So I didn't see him. For years, I knew when I woke up in the morning and I went to school, he was sleeping. And I would go off to school, and by the time I came back at 3:00 he was gone. We didn't see each other. And when I consider parental roles today, when parents are on top of their kids—[laughs]—and you take them to every damn thing that occurs, every lecture and sport and whatever, I think that whole immigrant group did their work and worked hard, and the kids did their own thing. It was separate. There was an old joke that if your parents came around when you were playing, it meant somebody died or there was some terrible accident. Anyway, my father was—what's the term to use for him? He was a democrat, and he thought America was the greatest thing. And he was glad he got here, and that everything was going to be all right, even though in 1938 things were pretty tough for him and for us in the family. And we would argue, and I would say, "You know, there are still tough jobs, and not

everybody has it easy." And it seems like a simple kind of argument now that we had between us. And I once said to him, "You know what?"—and I don't know where the idea came to me—"I'm going to show you work that's very difficult and people who are having a hard time." And I decided I would get a little box camera and I would wander through the street and photograph these people that I thought were having a hard time. And that's what I did. There would always be an old–clothes man who would come through the streets, and he'd go in the back alleys, and he'd yell, "Old clothes! Old clothes!" And I'm sure his whole day, starting in the morning, and maybe he'd make three bucks by buying a vest or a pair of pants. There was a man who had an old child's carriage, and he had converted it so that he had little shelves. And he sold penny candy, in front of the school. We'd go to school in the morning, and then we'd always—we'd go home for lunch. And when we returned, we got out at 12, but you only lived a couple of blocks away, and you went home to eat. And if you had a penny, he'd have all the penny candies in these little compartments. Who else? There was a man who used to have a kind of metal, almost like a bureau or a chest, and he sold sweet potatoes, and he just walked through the streets. And at the bottom drawer was charcoal which kept the whole thing warm. There was a guy that came around and sharpened knives. And he carried his little wheel. And I don't have these photographs, but I know that I took the camera, and it must have cost me 80 cents or something to process this role of film, and the bring these pictures to my dad and say, "Well, what about him?" I don't know what my father ever said in response, you know. "Well, at least they're working," or that "they could get a better chance," or "there are other opportunities." But there was that connection to the use of pictures. But I think more so to my experience on the street, and that I drew from the street. The apartments we lived in were limited. Usually there was a bedroom. I don't remember ever having my own room when I consider that my kids, they say, "Oh, let's see, you've got to have a bedroom for Madeleine and a bedroom for Tina and a bedroom and a bedroom and a bedroom." I, my whole life as a child, I slept in the living room on what was then called a studio couch, a pull–out couch, that I shared with my brother. One time we had a little bedroom and we could barely get two beds in. The last one, I was 18, and I was—I went to the army. I still slept in the living room in what was known as an ufshtel betl [ph], which translated is a stand–up bed that you kept in the corner and then folded down. And when I came home from the army at 21, I still slept in the living room. So there are various attitudes in response to the poverty that people take. Either they say, "I'm going to beat it," you know, or "I'm going to be—what makes Sammy run, I'm going to become a millionaire, I'm going to go to Hollywood." For whatever reasons, the paucity, the simpleness remained. You know, I never said, "No, nobody else can have it, and I'm going to take it all." So I think the darkrooms that I had, the attitude toward expansiveness. Even in the teaching later on, when we started a program in Minnesota, we were in a closet. Photography was at the bottom of the list. But I don't know why I felt that I wasn't more deserving of a better shape, that I did need a room, I did need a place of my own, a closet or a bureau or a chest or whatever. So that, I think, must have—must be present in the pictures I take, because I think that was a big stamp on what went on. Further in the childhood was just misfortune. There was my older brother, David, who was about nine years older than I was. David and my brother Stanley, who was seven years older. And the two of them and the family, and then much later, seven years later, my mother decided another child, hoping for a daughter, I think, with a name already selected, Goldie was to be the girl, and the girl turned out to be Jerry. But one of the overriding issues is that my older brother, David, had rheumatic fever. He must have had some ear infection in the '20s. And it affected his heart, and he had a weak heart. And the doctors then knew that he'd never live beyond adolescence. And he was a sickly child all the time. I, as the little kid, what, nine years younger, never sensed what was going on. But he was bedridden and had to have special help. And I think the biggest issue was for my brother, sadly, who was close to David, and my mother tried to keep Stanley under control so that he didn't leave and get so far ahead of David who couldn't play ball or do whatever went on. And David did die at 18 in 1933. I was nine, and I remember a kind of vague shadow. There was the funeral and despair and the shock for my mother, who really never recovered from that loss, and it deeply affected our family relations forever really, because I don't know—I never spoke to my brother, Stanley, about how he accepted or how he felt about David's death. We didn't really talk about it or define it in any way. You know, you could have whole books written now about the death of the brother. But it did affect the family. My mother was quite depressed for many years and hovering over me because she thought I was sickly, and she was going to protect me and this would never happen again. And I think my brother, Stanley, who was important for me as a way out—when David died, he was 18, Stanley was 16, and Stanley went off to college, and at a time when I could have used his support he was trying to find his own way and was away, you know. So does any of this show up, you know, in the pictures or my attitudes? Or when was it was finally able to throw all of that off and say, "You know what? I'm 18 now, and I graduated high school, and my mother and father have to make it on their own, and so do I."

ROBERT SILBERMAN: Jerry, let me ask you to go back and pick up on photography. After you took those first pictures—and your father gave you that camera?

JEROME LIEBLING: He gave me $10 to buy a little, folding camera, yeah. And I don't remember what happened to it. I had no training. It was surprising how little knowledge I had of what was available to me, you know. I could have said "photography." I knew in high school, I loved to draw, and there weren't too many electives, but I did take an elective that allowed me to get involved in a drawing class. And there probably were—New York had the high school music and art. I wasn't even aware of it that I could have that choice probably in the late '30s or

'40s, that I could do that. And I think a lot of it had to do with money. I mean, it's just my mother and father must have lived to the bare bone. My father worked on tips. And as a little kid, when I learned to count—so I'm eight years old—he would come home after work, and his back pocket would be filled with the change. People would leave him 10 cents or whatever. And he would put three dollars in coins. And he would let me count it, you know. So I wish I now knew the cost of an apartment. I lived on—Bensonhurst was a section of Brooklyn that I lived in. And I must have lived on every block. At one time, we moved every single year. And I went back and tried to photograph. You caught one of those photographs, the you said when I'm in uniform. But the reason why they moved is the landlords in the apartment houses, if they had empty apartments, they'd give you what they called a month's concession so that you had to pay the rent for 11 months, but you could live for 12. And maybe it was 35 bucks that you saved. Well, you could hire a moving van for 15 bucks and move from one apartment to the other, which they would paint and it would be clean. And so I lived on 63rd Street, 71st Street, West 10th Street, West 11th Street, 76th Street, 78th Street, just every area, you know. And that's probably why I wasn't in a class. I'm sure there might have—I don't know if there would be a photography class, but there would have been some class that I would have been excited about or met a mentor or somebody. I did read. And my brother Stanley was an avid reader, and we'd go to the library. He would take me to the library regularly. And I read, never as many books as him. He would come home with 10 books and finish them in two days. But never—[inaudible]—books or just the expansiveness that might have occurred. So one of the important—really, if you were to ask about, say, magazines, now, 1935 you have *Life* magazine. Never read *Life* magazine. Never found—just when you consider that the newspaper, *The Daily News*, was two cents and *Life* was a nickel, I think, or a dime. But somehow I didn't find whatever they were giving was something I could use. But the newspaper, of great importance, was P.M., 1940, I think, a very liberal newspaper with the use of photography and a special insert, I think, once a week of documentary photographs. And Weegee began his work there. And I think Ralph Steiner was an important editor, and his wife, Mary Morris. And I think that's when I began to have some awareness, 1940, so I was 16. And then I think there was some mature ideas and thoughts, that I could express ideas. And I think I liked photography. And a friend of my brother's—if you see that scale—

ROBERT SILBERMAN: The scale sitting in the window.

JEROME LIEBLING: —in the window.

ROBERT SILBERMAN: In a case that you have here.

JEROME LIEBLING: He said, "Oh, I hear you're interested in photography." His name was Harold Quart [ph], he became a chemistry professor. He was a very sweet man. So he maybe was nine years older than me. So I was 16, he was in his early 20s. And he brought me a set of trays and chemicals and maybe a little Kodak book [ph], and I went down to the basement and set up a little place and learned to print pictures. I don't know what the hell I photographed, but used negatives and had some desire. And it was then that my brother bought me a *Popular Photography* subscription. Yeah. So I was 17, yeah, and not well trained, you know. I mean, I just barely could process a roll of film, but was interested. And that's where the juice started that I wanted to be a photographer. Whatever it meant, I didn't know, nor the experience of who and what. Not at all. But that's where it began. I didn't do any kind of photography in high school. And I never thought I would go to college, Brooklyn College or the city colleges. So this is 1942. My brother was very bright and went on to Brooklyn College and had graduated. And usually, those colleges then, this would be City College, Hunter, which I think was a women's college back then, and Brooklyn College, which was co-ed, you could apply and they would just cream off the top averages. And that was it, for 200, 100, whatever, and whoever was the brightest. And I think my high school records were mediocre. But just as I had graduated, they became more liberal, and they said, "You know what? We're going to have a double application. We're going to take the high school average of the kid, and we're also giving out a test, because maybe there's been some change. And they could take the test, and then we'll average in the high school average and this test." And I must have gotten 1,000 on the test, which brought everything up. And I went on to Brooklyn College. So that's 1942. And the war is on, and I'm at Brooklyn College, a little bit stifled as I remember because it was a big leap in just intellectual capacity of going from the high school to the college, which I don't know if I understood or managed or did it. But I was enrolled. And I was also aware of the war. And I don't know if I had yet—or maybe I did; I don't know the sequence—if you had to register for conscription when you were 18. But at some moment, I decided that I wanted to enlist in the army. And didn't discuss it with my mother, my brother or anybody. And it was probably one of the most independent decisions that I made. Were there thoughts that I could be a photographer in the army? I really hadn't done much with photography. But they did say, if I enlisted I could go into the signal corps. That would be guaranteed. And from the signal corps, maybe I could take a test or something. And so I think I must have been 18 and a half, and I volunteered and went into the army. And a terrible decision— [laughs]—if we're to talk about that. But just, of course, I was aware of Hitler. Well, long before—maybe we have to back up a little bit. The consciousness in New York City of the Spanish Civil War, 1936—so how old am I in '36? I don't even know.

ROBERT SILBERMAN: Well—

JEROME LIEBLING: '24-'34, so 12, 13. But aware of the Spanish Civil War and aware of the term "Guernica." So

whatever I was reading or my teachers, there already was the question of Hitler and the Jews and what was eventually going to occur. I had no family that I knew of in Europe. But I certainly was aware that I was Jewish, and they were having difficulties. Yeah. And so the so–called anti-fascist attitudes come with the Spanish Civil War, as an awareness of something that was going on, and with maybe some people that I knew in the American brigades, though I couldn't tell you of anybody, and I was just a kid. And then in high school in my last year, 17, 18, there would be other left kids that I knew. I don't remember a club or a young socialist league or anything of that sort that I belonged to. But certainly, the broadest spectrum of political thought was discussed and understood. And you said, "Oh, yeah, that's Joey Jones on 3rd Street, he's one of those." So that was there, but in a wholly other manner than the spectrum of political thought we have now among kids. Yeah. Anyway, I'm in the Army, and what I found and still feel in a very short time was that the army was the least democratic institution ever invented, the most privileged, unfair, despairing place. Most of my experience was at school. And the teachers were educated, there was some that you liked, some you didn't like, but that they had fulfilled and were teachers because they had some knowledge and fairness about who they were and what was going on. And that there was—when you tried to evaluate issues, school was a pretty liberal place where you made a presentation and you could conclude that, well, that's the way it ought to be, and this is the evidence for it. And what I found immediately was that the army was capricious, unfair, bullying, all the way from beginning to end, in all the years that I was there in the army. Quickly, what happened, when I came into the army, you were given a test. And since I could read and write, they sent me to clerk school to become a company clerk—type and papers and writing, things of that sort. So I don't remember, six weeks, seven weeks, something like that, that you did your basic training and a clerkship. And I said, "You know, I'm in the wrong place. I better go to the air force or something like that." And I attempted to transfer. But before I could transfer, I was shipped to the 82nd Airborne Division in North Carolina. They needed a clerk, it was the army, it operated, they punched a button, and clerk—[inaudible]—came up. And I was sent to this airborne division. It was November, and this was April of '43, and they were going overseas. I mean, this was the fastest. And once I was there, there was no—[laughs]—I was just, "Wait a minute, I just got in here!" We're going—I didn't know where we were going. But the division, which is the famous 82nd Airborne, at the time had paratroopers, and you had to be volunteered to be a paratrooper. And they also had glider troopers. They used to fly over in gliders. And I was neither. But I wasn't getting out of this unit. What the hell is going on here? Well, we'll figure it out later. And for my 19th birthday, I was on convoy going to North Africa. And I ended up with a long career of—I went to North Africa. I became a glider trooper because I was there and I wasn't getting out. I went to Sicily. I went to Italy. [Laughs.] I went back —

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JEROME LIEBLING: —to Ireland. I was prepared to go D-Day. And at the last minute, which is usually not discussed, is that, though they came into Normandy, there was also a second entry to France, which was in southern France, and they were to be coordinated with D-Day. But they didn't have enough gliders—[laughs]—so they pulled me out of Normandy, sent me back to Italy. And then a couple—let's see, in June and July, about a month later, I flew into southern France, and then was in—[inaudible]—Battle of the Bulge, and then flew into Germany. And by the time, what, two and a half years of the war, I had been in so many, what would they call them, battle stars, that I had enough points—they gave you points, depending on how long you were overseas and this and that—I was discharged in 1945 before anybody did anything. So that the war was full, never any photography. But we talk about the street and awareness and people and the whole, what, tragedy, the tragedy of death and destruction. And I said—so that must have deeply impressed itself, you know. Plus, my feelings about the military, you know, which is not very supportive. Yeah.

ROBERT SILBERMAN: I'll ask you in a minute about what happened when you got back and went back to school and when you took off.

JEROME LIEBLING: Yes.

ROBERT SILBERMAN: But I just wanted to ask as an aside, since I've never asked you this, when you look at war photography, as someone who experienced war but didn't photograph it, what impresses you? I mean, are there particular war photography or photographs that have impressed you most, stayed in your mind?

JEROME LIEBLING: There are different incidents in the experience of being a soldier. So you can set upon war photography, if you call it military photography, you know, if you say something that we all experience or on TV, and we're watching the marines, it's the most beautiful, one–minute, patriotic sensibility of the uniform and whatever. So that's war or military. How you express—a recent article about who's getting killed in the army today. Yeah. What do I think about that? Then you have death and destruction, you know, and you have machinery, equipment, that attitude. You have medical. There's so many different. Then you have these fucking generals sitting there with all that shit on, you know, their chests, where you and I come like this. You know, you should have 32 years of—[inaudible]—you know, and we could do it. So there's a lot of different things. And over the years, I'm sure—I can't think of—you know, I have a couple of pictures of Matthew Brady. I thought Gene Smith, his photograph in the Pacific, one of the first guys I met in pictures that I saw, that I thought were

heartfelt and despairing. And of course, his own, he got shot up. Yeah. And I haven't seen recent things. Well, maybe I have. Yeah. There's one or two persons, you know, showing all the destruction. It's hard, you know. What are we talking about? We're talking about—even say World War I when you see, well, mostly film, you know, charging, yeah. It would be like anything else, the structure of the film, the picture, what they're talking about in this specific situation, you know. No war.

ROBERT SILBERMAN: Okay, Jerry, you're back from the war. Welcome home. Now what?

JEROME LIEBLING: I'm 21 years old. I knew that I wanted to return to college. My father is 56; my mother is about 54. It's 1946, and it's September. And I—how did I—I was overseas for two and a half years, and an adult. I mean, my mother was vital to my upbringing, for good or bad. She was there. She held onto me, you know. And it's interesting. I never tried to rebel. I did a little bit. You know, certainly, when I went in the army and didn't discuss that with her, she was very pleased with that. Anyway, I'm back, and I've lived abroad for two and a half years and had experiences in every country, with every person and ideas. Now, I don't know where I decided or how or what helped me decide that I wanted to be a muralist, a Mexican muralist. It must have been something from *P.M*., the newspaper *P.M*., that had a story on Mexican muralists and their realism and their connection to the folk. Now, who are the heroes of 1940 and the war and post war? Woody Guthrie, or hootenannies, Pete Seeger, the folk, the Joads, Steinbeck. Now, we know, you know, the image of Henry Fonda and Steinbeck's film, and they were all touching the earth, and they can just feel the earth, and the earth is where it all comes from. We don't have—that's all gone. Now it's, I don't know, stocks and bonds, you know. I don't know which is true or helpful, but I believe in the fact that the good earth, yeah, it came from there. So I—there are many different parts. And I'd have to tell these little stories separately. I did want to become a Mexican muralist. The question would be, how? What relationship did you ever have? You never even painted, you never even did it. Where did you read about it or how did you hear about it? And I went to enroll in a school in San Miguel de Allende. And I went to Chicago, and I spoke to this guy. I still remember his name, Mr. Sterling, who was running the school. And I don't remember who the muralists were. And I was going to go off to Mexico and become a muralist. Alright, leave that there. We've got to go back a long way to another story. And if I'm trying to figure out who affected my relationship with photography, I have to say Moholy–Nagy. Did you ever meet Moholy–Nagy? Never met Moholy–Nagy. Didn't know anything about Moholy–Nagy at all. But we all know who he was. And we know a term called the Bauhaus in Germany, and the many famous artists and architects and the story of the Bauhaus, and of course, of Hitler. The one thing when discussing the Bauhaus, nobody fully puts the pressure and the background of Germany, at that time, and the pressures on the school and on the men and women who taught and served there and went there and what happened to their lives. Anyway, Moholy–Nagy escaped and went to England. And then when he got to England, he was invited to come to Chicago. [Phone rings.] And the thought—there was a—right now I'm going to forget all these names—the Container Corporation of America, and I forget the name of the guy. A very—

ROBERT SILBERMAN: Paul Rand?

JEROME LIEBLING: No, no, no. The head guy—and what they thought they were going to get out of Moholy was practical material, and he's going to train him. And the Container Corporation was one of the biggest at the time. And he was going to bring in all these new ideas and whatever they were selling. But he wasn't alone. He had people from the University of Chicago and others in support of bringing Moholy. And one of the people who was involved, and I don't know how involved, was a man named Harry Gidionse—G-I-D—G-I-D—I-O-N-S-E—I think, Gidionse. He was an economist at the University of Chicago. But he was part of the group that invited Moholy. And so Moholy comes to Chicago, and first, he uses the house of this guy from the Container Corporation to do the new Bauhaus, which doesn't succeed. So where are we now? In '39, '39, somewhere in there, where he is trying. And then they make a second start after the new Bauhaus doesn't come through. And he finally succeeds, Moholy does, in establishing the Chicago Institute of Design. And you can follow what the Institute of Design does and how long Moholy was there. Of course, he dies in '45 or so. But Harry Gidionse, this economist, is hired as the president of Brooklyn College. Who knows? And when he comes to Brooklyn College—I don't have the dates, but it must be early '40s, you know—he decides that they should have an institute of design at the school. And that was a little high school, college. And he hires Serge Chermayeff to start to abolish the art department and establish a design department at Brooklyn College about 1944 or '45. I can't—you get the dates if you really needed the dates. And here's Jerry Liebling, it's 1945. And he knows he's either going to go to Mexico and become a muralist, or he's going to go to Brooklyn College. He's not going back to Brooklyn College. Then my father dies, 57 years old. And it was quite a surprise. But all that we've talked about in big letters now: immigrant, hardworking, cholesterol, smoking—[laughs]—boom! One heart attack and he's gone. And my poor mother, I'm still sleeping in the living room—[laughs]—because they have the bedroom. And I didn't know what the hell to do. I couldn't leave her. She didn't have a penny, I didn't have a penny. And Jesus, how are we going to get on? My brother is married and has kids. He doesn't have—there's not enough money. So I said, "Well, I ain't going to Mexico." If I go back to Brooklyn College, I can get the GI Bill— of course, we could talk about the GI Bill as one of the great, great, great—one more great—American social programs. So what did that give you? Seventy–five dollars a month, I think, because I used my mother as a dependent, and I'd go to Brooklyn College instead of going to Mexico. And I don't know what I'm going to find, but I know I'm not taking any course ever—

defiant—I'm not interested. I'm just going to do what I want. So I go to Brooklyn College, and it's 1946 maybe. And there's no art department, there's a design department. And Moholy died. Chermayeff, who brought all these people in to Brooklyn College, goes to Chicago to take over Moholy's place. But they leave this program, this design program. And I think they had one of the first programs that included photography in the university level. Couldn't find it anywhere in the United States at that time. And I think the year or two previous to this when Chermayeff came in, I think Bernie Sabot, now I'm not completely sure of this lineage, but I think Bernie Sabot took the photography at Brooklyn College and then decided she didn't want to continue and recommended this recently discharged Walter Rosenblum to teach the photography. So I come into this department. Now, you at one time had said, "Well, where did you meet people? Where did you meet who, what, when?" I am about as clean of art knowledge, thought, names as can be. But Walter Rosenblum was teaching photography at Brooklyn College. Milton Brown, who is an art historian, is teaching art history. Ad Reinhardt is teaching urban school of design, one or two—[inaudible]. A guy named Papadaki was a kind of architect. And there was a new chairman, whose name I don't remember. And I meet all these guys. And I'm 22, ex-soldier as well, you know, so I was a little different between the 18-year-old. But I meet Walter Rosenblum this first time. And he is new. I'm one of his first students. And Walter is very cautiously feeling his way because this is the beginnings of some watered–down Bauhaus in America, which started in Germany, whatever it was, comes to Chicago, whatever it got to be in Chicago, then comes to Brooklyn College, whatever it is. So everybody is saying, "Bauhaus, Bauhaus, Bauhaus." Who the hell is it about—you know, forget it. But they had a routine of calling it "design"—one dimensional, two dimensional. And one of the people who was really an important influence for me was in art history, and that was a straight art history, and a man from Holland, older man then, long since dead, name Jan Balet—B-A-L-E-T—whose son was a designer of some consequence. But Jan Balet taught us straight kind of art history with social implication in all of the art, that the art came out of the milieu of society at the time, the needs, the pressures, the push, the pull. I just ate it up. I never, never had delved in any of these ideas. And art history can be 50 different ideas about how it comes and where it goes. But I was very impressed with him. And everything he seemed to tell me, more of my life is cohering, coming together, whether it be in immigrant, whether it be the Army, whether it be the war, or whether it be progressive and how these other artists faced it over the centuries. So he was very good. And then Walter is presenting photography, but he's supposed to present Bauhaus photography. Now, this guy is one of the great social documentary, whatever that means, people. But he knew, hey, this is a new ballgame, and you better do the photographs and the double exposures and the so-and-sos and the so-and-sos. And he tries to do that presentation, but he also slips in a little of his own work. And then he and I become immediately friendly, and his work is presented to me sub-rosa [ph], and I become the most precocious, you know, as if I was shot with a gun. And those four pictures at the Currier of New York and—

ROBERT SILBERMAN: The view from the Manhattan Bridge.

JEROME LIEBLING: Yeah.

ROBERT SILBERMAN: The Union Square monument.

JEROME LIEBLING: Yeah. And the two boys.

ROBERT SILBERMAN: The two—*Butterfly Boy* and the other boy.

JEROME LIEBLING: Yeah. And about 50,000 others. I mean, I'm just popping them off. But I'm also doing a course through the Reinhardt and doing a course with the—now, all of them were having trouble with Bauhaus and what it means and what its implication. Ad Reinhardt would rather have taught a course in ease of painting one, and would have been happy with it. Then the course I took with him—well, like that book. One of these books here.

ROBERT SILBERMAN: Color theory, color designing.

JEROME LIEBLING: Theory, yeah. I took color theory one, color theory two and [parched ?] it around. But I immediately became conversant with these guys. You know, it was like taking you over to the hospital and saying, okay, you're going to perform the appendectomy this afternoon. And by 5:00, you had done six of them. That's really what happened. It was just an explosion. So that what I didn't have as a kid or what I had as a kid or when I had it as a kid—someone said, "You want to be a fireman, you want to be a cop, you want to be a baseball player?" Whew! You know, there's something I want to say. And the formal aspects, I think, in that catalog from Yale when they talk about—I thought they had put it well that Bauhaus, they said, was both fine art and—what's the other end of it? You know, the now, the everyday, you know. And all of New York City became an exciting place, which I was aware of forever, but didn't know what it meant or what it meant in my life. And they said, "You know what? Art, whatever art is, is that everyday thing that can be." The heroism is in the everyday, right then and there, you know? And you don't have to move from there. I don't think I moved from there at all. Another very important, what, support was Bernie Sabot's book called *A Guide to Better Photography*, which I still have a copy of somewhere. And what happened there was just the photographs that she introduced in the

book, certainly—[inaudible]—and a great variety of what she knew and knowledge about herself and changing New York since she started. So I'm doing a class. I'm not going to be a muralist. I'm making those early pictures right away. And I'm very friendly with Walter. We're brothers, I could say that. And I recognize his having to be cautious and not becoming a documentary teacher. And so I have a story I might have told you. Alright. I remember the chairman of the department after Chermayeff leaves is a guy named Wolfe. A very nice guy, but full–design guy, a real abstract guy. I would make photographs on single–weight paper. Of course, Kodak made double weight and single weight, and single weight is 10 cents cheaper, you know, a penny. Same thing, except the God damn paper never flattened out. You couldn't get it to be a nice, smooth thing. So after you printed it, you would back it with dry–mount tissue to an old, crummy picture. So you had the two together. And you would get a smooth print. And usually when I did this, I'd make a print, and said, "Okay, here's the print I want." Then I would find a crappy, unused, maybe an old photograph or an old artsy-fartsy thing I wasn't interested in, and I'd back them. And here was the good one, and this was the crap. So I had produced—maybe it was *Butterfly Boy* or whatever, you know, and had it together. And Walter was so proud, here was his student producing this stuff. And even though it was *Butterfly Boy* and it was a documentary, in the hallway—and Wolfe, "Oh, hi, Jerry and Walter." And Walter said, "Oh, Bob, you've got to see this picture." And Bob took the picture and he just held it for a few seconds while he was talking to us and said, "Oh, we're doing this thing Wednesday, come down Thursday. Where's the—let me look at the picture." And he turned the picture upside down, and he's looking at this back scrap and just goes crazy as if he had seen Michelangelo. And he said, "That's the greatest piece of work I've ever seen in my life." And of course, *Butterfly Boy* is—[inaudible]. Walter and I, what are you going to do? Say, "You jerk, get with it!" We never said a word. And that was the kind of, what, well, careful steps of my absorbing much of the formalism of the Bauhaus, the sense of, how do you put a thing together, or that you do put a thing together, or that there is an awareness of the very structure of shape, form, tone, a whole panoply of terms, you know, that you want. So I'm a good friend of Walter's. As an aside, there's a young woman in the class and some of the classes at Brooklyn College is Naomi Baker. And you know, we're classmates. Little did I know that Naomi and Walter have their own little shtick going on, and she becomes Naomi Rosenblum.

ROBERT SILBERMAN: A great photo story.

JEROME LIEBLING: Yes. So we go back a long, long way and were really most intimate friends.

Now, the photo—

ROBERT SILBERMAN: Can I stop you? Before we just turn to the photo of—[inaudible]—I mean, it is remarkable that, as you noted, several of the photos that you took right away remain in major works.

JEROME LIEBLING: Yeah.

ROBERT SILBERMAN: A couple of questions. One, were you out doing street photography for assignments, but then just on your own all the time?

JEROME LIEBLING: Yeah.

ROBERT SILBERMAN: Second, what kind of back-and-forth was going on with you and Walter over how you're working, what you're showing him? And then third, I mean, were you aware that you had found your approach, your style was there in those pictures? And how did that come out?

JEROME LIEBLING: Yes. I think Walter immediately recognized that I was seeing and producing some important stuff. He knew it. And I must say, he was essential to how I used the material, what I thought, you know, what I did. But apparently, it was all there. He just lifted that little layer and I went off. Now, the one thing that I also and how I got related to it, I can't say, is that I didn't stick to that street so that every single picture is a living [ph] picture, right, in the same manner. I also started doing, I don't know, I was impressed with Weston [ph] and with my little camera did flora and fauna right away, and got tons of—I don't know. And I found I would try anything that had basic sense of structure and what is present. And it didn't have to be an old lady, you know, or kids on the street. So I was moving into anything that struck me.

ROBERT SILBERMAN: And that's continued. I mean, the flora—the floral pictures that are in the exhibit at the Currier, there's the cactus picture, the floral picture we saw last night at your friend's house, that they have leaves, very formal, but very beautiful.

JEROME LIEBLING: Yeah, yeah, yeah. So—

ROBERT SILBERMAN: How did you come to take the wedding pictures that are—that early group of pictures of people at a wedding?

JEROME LIEBLING: Yes. Yes. Well, no, the one—okay, if you're a young man, young person, young woman in 1947, and you want to be a professional photographer, what do you do? Or what do you think you're going to

do? The heavy implications weighted toward anything else. You could open a studio. And it was surprising that within a neighborhood, we would always have a store that was a photographer. Just like you had the candy store and the delicatessen and whatever, you had it. So you could be a photographer, you know. The other thing that everybody knew about was photojournalism. You're going to be a photojournalist. And you had *Look* and *Life* and *Collier's* and *Saturday Evening Post*. And I now remember, besides *P.M*. and the use of photography there or photojournalism, there was magazine—if you haven't seen it, and perhaps you know about it—called *Friday*.

ROBERT SILBERMAN: I've never seen it.

JEROME LIEBLING: A *Life* magazine–type. And I have one copy of it. I couldn't find it for you. Left journalism; and it was, again, photojournalism. And I already knew of Eugene Smith, you know. And did I know of Steichen? Maybe. I probably did because I went to see Steichen in '48 and show him some pictures. I don't know who else. Capa? Well, I certainly knew from *Life*, what's her name, Margaret Bourke-White and even Walker Evans. Now, these are all out of Walter's class. And then Beaumont's 1939 book comes out. So you have the kind of key. You have Beaumont's book, you have Margaret Bourke-White, *Let Us Now Praise Famous Men*, I think. She does whatever—

ROBERT SILBERMAN: That's the Evans-Agee, we have seen their faces.

JEROME LIEBLING: Oh, excuse me. Yeah. You're right. The Evans-Agee I didn't know. But I did know Walker Evans. And there are three or four shows that Nancy Newhall produces at the Museum of Modern Art. The Paul Strand, which is about—which I might not have seen, but there was a small publication of Strand. Then she did Weston in the same format, publication. And then she did Cartier-Bresson. And Cartier-Bresson was breathtaking, I remember. Yeah. So that's all by '47. Alight. The Photo League.

ROBERT SILBERMAN: Footnote and then pause—but footnote back to the wedding pictures.

JEROME LIEBLING: Yes.

ROBERT SILBERMAN: How did you come to take those? Were you doing wedding photography and shooting for yourself?

JEROME LIEBLING: I did whatever I could do to earn a living. And Ruth Schwartz is my neighbor. And Ruth, whom I knew as a kid and we grew up together, she was a couple of years older than me. And she said Phil—I don't remember the husband, the boyfriend—they're getting married. And she said, "Jerry, you're taking the pictures." And I said, "I can't take the pictures. I just, you know, I don't think I even have a flash." "No, no, no." And she and her mother just said, "No, we know you, you're going to Brooklyn College, and you're taking the pictures, and that's what you're going to do." And I had absolutely no idea what you were supposed to do. She said, "You go, and you take flash pictures of everything that happens." Now, I want to use some of those pictures, and those are some of the first pictures. They precede or are mixed in with everything else. I go to this wedding, and this wedding is *Portnoy's Complaint*, you name anybody who was pushing the edge of the Jewish thing. Didn't they have one before *Portnoy*, about the—

ROBERT SILBERMAN: *Goodbye, Columbus*.

JEROME LIEBLING: *Goodbye, Columbus*. And the uncles and the aunts and—I don't know if you ever saw all those pictures. There's one or two that I hadn't put, but I've got them. And I've always—they're Weegee at the wedding, you know.

ROBERT SILBERMAN: [Laughs.]

JEROME LIEBLING: And I've been embarrassed because I wasn't out to do—but I didn't do it. This was the truth. This was on the street of that wedding, you know. And the backstory is that the husband—so this was the father, Ruth's father and mother—hadn't spoken to each other in 40 years. They lived in the same house, they hadn't spoken to each other, ever. And these are my—

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ROBERT SILBERMAN: This is Robert Silberman interviewing Jerome Liebling at the artist's home in Amherst, Massachusetts, on September 17th, 2010, for the Archives of American Art, Smithsonian Institution, and this is card number two. Jerry, we were about to start talking about the Photo League.

JEROME LIEBLING: There is not a definitive volume on the Photo League that I know of. There are scraps, there are pieces, and now a great many of the people who were vital to the League have passed on. And what I'm going to talk about is a little bit of my own discernment about its origins with no verification whatsoever. But we're talking about Morris Dickstein's recent book, *The Cultural History of the Great Depression,* and I think that

even limits where the league started because if you say, "Where does the Great Depression start," what date would you give to it, '32, '33? And in the book there called *Stepping Left*, a wonderful book about the arts, we're in the '20s, and she actually has a notation about a dance performance in 1930. That calendar that she has in the back of the book is marvelous. She starts as early as the late '20s, and in the '30s she says, "There was a dance performance by the following groups and also a presentation by the Photo League." They say, "Who is the—oh, the Film and Photo League, excuse me. The Film and Photo League." So there was a Film and Photo League, which we know about, but there are no names, full names, and a real diagnosis of what they tried to do and what goes on. So I'm going to give you my theory of a little—a little of this. American artists were very much impressed with the Russians and the art activity of the Russian Revolution in the period of the '20s and then further as various left ideas occurred in Germany during the Weimar, and this is highly political art involvement so that in Germany there was a photographic newspaper of the left. And it wasn't just a question of making documentary pictures but actually getting those pictures published, and this newspaper would appear. The pictures would appear. The stories would appear, and it would be the product of the photographers all the way through. Apparently, it was so effective that the Nazis organized their own newspaper of the right as a documentary product, and the idea that the so-called makers of film and photography would then have their own organ to show the work was brought to the United States, and that was the early Film and Photo League—that you would attempt to make films that would be telling the truth of America rather than the commercial work of Hollywood and the news reels. Now, I don't know who was in the Film and Photo League, which would be early '30s, and I don't know what work there was. For a little while, there were some films that were attributed to the Film and Photo League that were distributed. But I don't know where they are now or what they would be. But that was the origins of the Photo League, film makers making films that they thought properly described the issues of the day, and photographers as well. The split then occurs. The film makers go off and then dissipate and don't—there's no further organization in the '30s for the film makers nor who they might have been or what might have become of them. Somebody has to go find it.

ROBERT SILBERMAN: William Alexander has written about that, film on the left, I mean, the splits, the personal splits, Leo Hurwitz, Paul Strand—

JEROME LIEBLING: Ah, the—yes.

ROBERT SILBERMAN: —Native Land, Frontier Films—

JEROME LIEBLING: There are others—

ROBERT SILBERMAN: —so the sort of later history.

JEROME LIEBLING: —earlier than—

ROBERT SILBERMAN: Yes.

JEROME LIEBLING: —earlier than that. Yes. Yeah. But then the Photo League reorganizes with Sid Grossman and others, and by '39 Aaron Siskind and the Photo League does its story on Harlem, the Harlem Document, and there—

ROBERT SILBERMAN: A group project.

JEROME LIEBLING: That's right, the group project, yes, with educational analysis by the artists of their work as it goes on. Whatever the theories of so-called left photography, nobody wrote it down and said, "Oh, here's a polemic that is Photo League ideas," you know, other than the question you would ask me, "What is documentary," other than the idea that it's politically involved, kind of social realism and dealing with issues of the day. As to the quality of the work, how do you—is the balance the aesthetic or the politics? Which is it and how do you get where? These were discussions but not too loud, and again, I say nobody put it down. So you did have a phase of the League from '38 or '39 up until the war, and the best example would be the Harlem Document and some others, and some of the people involved would be Sid, Morris Engel, Aaron Siskind, you know. And if you said, "Well, how do I know if I'm making a Photo League picture," who would decide, what were the elements that a Photo League picture would have to have, you know, there was no manifesto that anybody put down other than social realism, you know. Now, we could probably define social realism more easily than "a good photograph," you see. All right, but whatever is developing in the league ends at the war, and there is no personnel or people or film or whatever, and that first phase and those people involved go off to do whatever happens in the war and not—there's no revival until '46 or so when the people return and you get Walter Rosenblum. Though he's involved earlier, he comes back later and they get Gene Smith and better headquarters, and new issues start to enter, and one is the political and the aesthetic with Walter, through his friendship with Strand to Stieglitz to an art photography, so-called precious photography, and Grossman, who still feels the political image is all that is important and that the photograph is not for the wall and doesn't follow Stieglitz and isn't a gallery object but is an object of simple easy distribution so that its political purpose can be maintained. Now, none of that was ever discussed openly or debated or written about, you know, even during a

period of the league. None of it got very far because about '47 or '48 the league is declared by the attorney general's list as a subversive organization. Now, the social realism or the whole question of subversion or politics or the variety of personalities and their politics in the league was always overt and open, you know, as was Dickstein's *Cultural History of the Great Depression*. It was all there and it's mixed with Elia Kazan and what happens—

ROBERT SILBERMAN: Group theater.

JEROME LIEBLING: —with the group theater. It happens to Stepping Left and all of the people that she discusses. It happens to the United States and its pursuit through the House Un-American Activities Committee, McCarthyism. Broader implications of battles with Russia, not with the Communists, not Russia, but the—what was it called?

ROBERT SILBERMAN: Soviet Union.

JEROME LIEBLING: Soviet Union.

ROBERT SILBERMAN: How soon we forget.

JEROME LIEBLING: Yes—[inaudible]—about the CIA and the CIA's involvement in American art and literature and everything. And there's another big book a woman wrote on the CIA involvement. Alright. If my little quick analysis gives some background, where do I enter? Walter is teaching at Brooklyn College and I'm this wonderful bright young student and friend, and he said, "Jerry, how come you've never been to the Photo League?" And this is that early. This is maybe '47 or '48 when he asks me to come to the league. And I go to a meeting and I'm interested in what they're doing and I bring my photographs, but what are credited to me as my league pictures I've already made for two years at school through Walter and it has nothing to do with the league. And I don't know if I had entered—the league had a school, but Sid Grossman was the only person who was consistently teaching. But, again, there was no curriculum, so whoever they picked up or whatever they could do, or someone had already taken two or three courses and they said, "Oh, we'll make major photography for"—or whatever. You didn't get credit. You didn't do anything, you know. And there were many people who belonged to the league who never took courses. So that—at issue is what is a league photograph. Now, we've got many of these compilations. These were people who joined the Photo League and they took pictures. You know, were they following a script? Sometimes yes, sometimes no. But now everything is accredited as a league picture, you know, in the same manner that you might say art historical papers from the University of Minnesota—but he had 50 billion students, and you could say anyone who took any course, did a paper—and that's representative of the university the same way that there are grandchildren finding pictures of their grandparents and they said, "Oh, he used to go to the Photo League." And so now they're Photo League pictures. But their quality is such—and of the original point is to—what makes the Photo League picture is very broad and undemanding. That's one of the problems I have now, is that things are showing up which are embarrassing, you know. Anyway, I did join the League and very quickly became the membership secretary because I was there and I was interested, and I—and it was one of the important things about the league, is that I met everybody—I mean, Siskind, who was not in the league but hung around—and he was very anti-league at the time. But Gene Smith, Danny Weiner, Luigi—just many, many people who remained consistently friendly from those early times. But through Walter, even, I think, before I officially was in the league, which might be '48, was my meeting with Paul Strand, and Walter had met with Strand and was friendly with Strand, and Strand, when I met him—and it was to show him my work—was a genuine, at least I felt, person of some repute and who had been there. In fact, he had been—[laughs]—so far and had done so much that I never even learned 'till years later. And I'd known immediately, you know, how far back he went and what his relationship with Stieglitz was.

ROBERT SILBERMAN: The last camera work still has gallery show up to '91, yeah.

JEROME LIEBLING: Yes, yeah, you know, just—but he liked me. I mean, I was the young kid and I was—and the work showed promise, you know. There were things I was saying or doing or feeling with the photographs, and I was very impressed and pleased to get to know Paul, and then learned and saw his films as well. And I think it was his work in film that struck me, and I said, "Oh, whatever I'm trying to say there's another step that's even more realistic than the single image and that's film," and I think I want to take that step and learn film making. And there was, at the new school during the war years, a man named Erwin Piscator—Piscatta—Piscatar—you'll get it correct—[laughs]—who had been in Germany and had come to the United States along with so many other of the refugees and he had founded through the new school the Dramatic Workshop, and that was primarily what was going on. And then about 1948 they put together a cockamamie program called The Film Workshop, and if it was hard enough to try and get instruction at a professional level in photography, film—there was nothing. There was one little class taught at CCNY. I don't remember who—*Dreams that Money Can Buy*—what was his name? Yeah. There was one class. But this was a whole program in film that was taught at the Dramatic Workshop. I don't—so you said you recall the Film Workshop, and it included the Lew Jacobs, Leo Hurwitz, Spotty's Wood [ph], a bunch of film makers who had come through the 30s and were peripheral documentary.

So this book, Alexander, that you mentioned probably has other people who taught, and I registered—dropped out of Brooklyn College and took whatever GI Bill I had and took this film program for a year from '48 to '49. And it was during that time that Harvey Arneson [ph] came to Minnesota to form an art department at Minnesota. So now we're taking another step. Minnesota had an art education department. We're talking about when, '45, '46, somewhere in there, and they had multiple art courses taught in the university under different jurisdictions. For example, they always had a drawing course in the School of Architecture and they had hired somebody. They had mortuary science sculpture courses. They had occupational therapy art classes. They had a little art history. And somebody, maybe pushed by the liberalization of the GI Bill about '46 or so, hired a guy from Princeton who had his master's but not a PhD—Harvey Arneson [ph]—to come to the university and start an art department, an official art department. And what he did, or somebody did—he said, "Okay, we'll have art history and we'll have a studio in one program. But every single art course at the university has to be under my jurisdiction in this art department." So he took all the monies for occupational therapy, for mortuary science, for architecture, and he formed an art department out of it, and what he did was use the money. So he fulfilled the needs of occupational therapy but he took some of that money and used it to build up a straight-on art history and studio, and that's when they gave him Jones Hall at that time. And he said, "What's the most contemporary thinking in the teaching of—the training of artists?" The Bauhaus. Everybody is—the Bauhaus. And he said, "All right, let's see. We're going to have Design I. We're going to have Design II. We're going to have this and that. We ought to have photography. And that—and it was—because that's what—[inaudible]—and that's what—[inaudible]—doing and we got to be there. So he went around and said, "Where would you find a photographer trained in the Bauhaus?" And they said, "Oh, at Brooklyn College." So he went to Brooklyn College and he wrote a letter and he said, "Oh, I'm looking for so and so and so or whatever [ph] and Walter said, "Hey Jerry, I saw this letter and somebody out in Minnesota is looking for a photographer to teach photography who has some background as a Bauhaus-trained"—whatever that training was. I was there for two years, you know, and then I was in the film school, and I never got my degree, because I never had time. But nobody in the art department had degrees except the art history people. So you had Walter Quirt, no degree, you know. They were just picking people off the street and that just were outside of the usual academic range. And I wrote a letter and said, "Oh, your guy—and I have some pictures," and I sent my pictures, which were not Bauhaus pictures. They were all my straight documentary pictures. Well, I don't know if they ever found anybody else who supposedly had—because you either had to be from the Institute of Design, an Art Sinsabaugh or somebody who was my age and had graduated at the same time. And that's how I got the job in Minnesota.

ROBERT SILBERMAN: Great. Before we let you move west, let me ask you a couple more questions about New York. Any particularly memorable moments from events or encounters at the Photo League that really—that you still think that was quite a moment for me when this happened?

JEROME LIEBLING: Well, what quickly happened, or maybe since I moved in to Brooklyn College and met Diller or Ad Reinhardt or Milton Brown, whom I liked very much—these were people who were professionally part of the art world in New York City. And I joined them, and I didn't realize that I had joined them and I could talk to them and that they would want to talk to me. And that—when I got to the league through Walter and Strand, I would on occasion meet Nancy Newhall, Beaumont Newhall, Lisette Model, so—Rosalie Gwathmey. Another friendship I had was Arnold Newman for a while, while I was in New York. Those instances and the competitiveness where I could bring out my photographs against anybody, including Avedon and Frank and—who would on occasion come to the league—that was very important and that I did meet just for a moment Ansel Adams or Brett Weston. He came through New York; he'd have to come to the league. It was the only place that—show your work. So there was a difference of being in kindergarten at one point, and then the next time you're up in Congress and you're a senator, and you're doing a talk and, you know. I remember exchanging with Aaron Siskind, who, as they say, though not at the league, came around. He still was friendly and would—he was to go to Chicago to teach. And he had his—he knew he was leaving in September, and I was leaving for Minnesota, and us New Yorkers—we didn't know what—how—Chicago and—

ROBERT SILBERMAN: [Laughs.] Check the Saul Steinberg map [laughs].

JEROME LIEBLING: Yeah. So we would share activity there. And then the filmmaking—I saw every film from the day one. What I mean is every historic, Russian, significant, British short film. And the film that I still think is the greatest was Helen Levitt's *In the Street* and met Helen, and Helen was in the midst of making, or being part of, *The Quiet One*.

ROBERT SILBERMAN: With James Agee doing—on Willow—

JEROME LIEBLING: School, or something, yeah.

ROBERT SILBERMAN: School, yeah.

JEROME LIEBLING: Yes. So, I mean, I remained friends with Helen, you know, till she died two years ago. So it was already a knowledge and an involvement, and a different level of personal experience and feeling about

who I—that I was. And a few years earlier I was just another guy on the street, you know. And—

ROBERT SILBERMAN: How—was your thinking about photography changing then, or you were just very intensely working at it in many different ways?

JEROME LIEBLING: You know, theoretically, you know—and I read Liebling—what is it—*Monuments of*—that Yale —

ROBERT SILBERMAN: The catalog for the exhibit prepared by Yale undergraduates, *Everyday Monuments*.

JEROME LIEBLING: *Everyday Monuments* and then the other pairing that they have. Those are theoretical. Those are penetrating ideas about life that—I said, "No, I just took that picture because I like that guy," or there was something about the structure. I didn't realize what I was touching. And generally, if you read—well, you can even read Stieglitz and what they said about Stieglitz. I think there's more penetrating, insightful writing now than in that past. I mean, there's—take Strand's abstractions, those early things. I mean, it almost took 70 years to get the book out and for us to be able to look at what was going on. Now, this isn't necessarily a fixed form that it takes that long. But whatever I was touching, I think, I thought I knew and some other people knew, but none of it was as defined as it has become now as to what its meaning is, you know.

ROBERT SILBERMAN: Did you have a sense from the start of how you would approach people, take pictures, like the pictures of the little boy or the picture—the pictures of the little boys, the butterfly, and the other young African-American boy, or the Union Square picture? Did you line up the words on the monument and sit and wait 'til the group—I mean, how did you develop your sense of how close do I get, how do I work with people?

JEROME LIEBLING: Yes, all right.

ROBERT SILBERMAN: Was that all—I mean, it must've been happening fast.

JEROME LIEBLING: The people—there's—there is a separate thing. We've talked about the meaning of training and the vision, and then what we haven't mentioned, though you and I both accept it, is what's the driving force. So when we're talking about my childhood, we're talking about the making of metaphor that's already developing, so that for the photographer—I remember Strand always referring to corner-to-corner. When you take the picture, what goes in the picture? Now, we'll forget about the human element, but just design, one, when you put this here it changes, and you put this here—so that the supposition that you can form something more coherently, but that coherence has a purpose, and for me that purpose is my life that we've been discussing. So that was always there, so that absolutely, when I was younger, I was even sharper and I knew definitely that that damn thing is saying what it's saying, and that—there are so many pictures of people—when there's—the show at the Currier has the Bohemian migrant with a hat, a big one.

ROBERT SILBERMAN: Great photograph—

JEROME LIEBLING: Great photo.

ROBERT SILBERMAN: —from Minnesota—

JEROME LIEBLING: From—

ROBERT SILBERMAN: —migrant worker in—outside Le Sueur, the valley of the green giant in the '50s.

JEROME LIEBLING: Yes. And that man—he's benign. I mean, I don't know that man. The one thing we have to say is that none of my pictures of people are informing you about the truth or falsity of the person. They're just symbolic for me, you know. I use them to say something about humanity. Maybe I say something about them, but I don't know. But I have a picture of a young boy wearing a baseball cap, and often the photographer says the subject sort of gives of themselves, whatever the hell that means. And that goes back to daguerreotypists talking about what they can absorb or what they see. But there's some look of gentleness and humaneness that that kid had that this Bohemian guy has as well. So you're jumping around and finding the so-called reason for being that occurs once in a while in the reflections of the human being, you know.

ROBERT SILBERMAN: And in the very large print at the Currier Jerry Liebling is reflected in the subject's eyes—

JEROME LIEBLING: Oh, well, that's true.

ROBERT SILBERMAN: —which is wonderful.

JEROME LIEBLING: But that is—yes. I'm—

ROBERT SILBERMAN: But it's also—I mean, I was fortunate enough to be able to see you working when we went

back up to Red Lake, when you went to Red Lake for the first time in 50 years or so. And obviously the relationship between the photographer and the subject is indicated in the photograph in your sort of low-key, reassuring manner, except, maybe we should say, sometimes for the politicians—that they're exempt from some of the things you've been saying. But the people on the street, the young people—that's sort of almost literally a reflection—

JEROME LIEBLING: Yeah. I don't know about—if we can—if the technique—if we can find a technique. It just is what it is when it occurs. It must be the same for painters. I mean, they're all using a brush and they're going up there and they're putting the thing together.

ROBERT SILBERMAN: Now, Paul Strand, when he did his very early street work, sometimes used fake—

JEROME LIEBLING: Yes, yes.

ROBERT SILBERMAN: —right-angle lenses so he wouldn't have to confront the people.

JEROME LIEBLING: Yes.

ROBERT SILBERMAN: And later when he was photographing he was using large-format cameras—

JEROME LIEBLING: Yes.

ROBERT SILBERMAN: —where the person knew he was there—

JEROME LIEBLING: Yes, yes.

ROBERT SILBERMAN: —and they were posing.

JEROME LIEBLING: Yes.

ROBERT SILBERMAN: You saw him at work?

JEROME LIEBLING: Yes.

ROBERT SILBERMAN: Did you learn anything from watching him at work?

JEROME LIEBLING: I think when I saw Paul work, which was only once or twice, he already had been at it from 1910 through 19—40 years—40 years. He—for me, when I was first taking the pictures, there was a gush of such excitement that I had—you refer, or some people refer, to the sexual experience. You know, it's their first time—you can't get them out of the bedroom, you know. Each picture was so much a part of me. And then, after a while, I took the picture as I would hope a doctor works professionally. He does it and he knows how, and Strand was at the other end than I was. I was just starting and just so pleased that I can get free and do it, you know. And he was very deliberate, yes.

ROBERT SILBERMAN: Did you—when you were doing your street work, did you ever—did you always work alone or did you ever go out with other photographers, like Walter?

JEROME LIEBLING: Well, I used to go out with students all the time.

ROBERT SILBERMAN: Right.

JEROME LIEBLING: Though when you choose the pictures, you'd say—you know, that's a good question because we talked about the Photo League assuming that the group idea was politically correct. That didn't mean it was aesthetically or other. And in the end I think I'd rather be by myself, yeah. So that—I always started with students and we all went out and we all hung around. And even Hampshire—last things I did would be for us to all go out together. Film has more of the group and the cooperation necessary, where you can't fulfill the project without the consultation and the participation of others. There's a couple of people made single films, you know. But now I think I want to be by myself, just me, yeah. So though the group, I think, is an enshrined idea, that doesn't necessarily make for the most effective work.

ROBERT SILBERMAN: Maybe I—as a partial bridge to Minnesota I can ask you a little bit about film. When you first picked up film, when you were still in New York, what was it like for you? I mean, Strand had done films and photographs. Walter had done films in the Army, and photographs. What was it like when you actually started making them? What were you doing and how were you seeing that relationship between your still work and what you could do with film?

JEROME LIEBLING: The class opportunity, the year that I put in at school, was not fulfilling enough to answer

that question, because I never made film. There just wasn't equipment. You had a Bolex and it was very expensive. One of the advantages of still photography is that you could take ten bucks and you can get some work done. And you couldn't do it with film. And the school didn't have much. So there are only one or two opportunities to really get a camera. So all it was—it was very good in the history and viewing—you didn't have to do anything but sit—and wonderful discussions, and a meeting of people who would bring their film—you know, filmmakers who came along. But there wasn't enough in the—in the making of film. And I really didn't get started until I met Allen, who—

ROBERT SILBERMAN: Allen Downs?

JEROME LIEBLING: —Downs, who was not trained at all in either photography or film, but was a very astute and talented guy. And I think I brought to him whatever little I had in the way of what the equipment was, how you started, what you did, you know, how you made the car run. And together we began to gain some of that experience. And the film was—you know, now that I think about it, seeing that big picture must have been something I remembered. Seeing the film image must be something I remembered, and I tried to attach that to the still photographs now that—

ROBERT SILBERMAN: The large images that—

JEROME LIEBLING: They can be, yeah.

ROBERT SILBERMAN: Well, two more questions before we leave New York. We'll come back periodically because you went back to Brighton Beach and the Bronx.

JEROME LIEBLING: Yes, yeah.

ROBERT SILBERMAN: But one is did you show your work at the Photo League, I mean, apart from sort of—

JEROME LIEBLING: Yes.

ROBERT SILBERMAN: —you—did they have exhibits where you—

JEROME LIEBLING: Yes, yes, yes.

ROBERT SILBERMAN: —anywhere else before you left New York? I mean, were there other places where you showed your work?

JEROME LIEBLING: No, no, no.

ROBERT SILBERMAN: What—and the other little footnote question is what happened when you went to the Modern and showed your work to Steichen—

JEROME LIEBLING: Yes, yes.

ROBERT SILBERMAN: —Edward Steichen, who was then curator of—at the—[cross talk]

JEROME LIEBLING: Yes. Who saw my work? Strand saw my work. Walter saw my work. The letter they read from Minor and from—

ROBERT SILBERMAN: Dorothea Lange.

JEROME LIEBLING: Yeah, the—

ROBERT SILBERMAN: That was in—

JEROME LIEBLING: —responses to the pictures.

ROBERT SILBERMAN: That was a little later.

JEROME LIEBLING: I was—as I got to know Strand, I enjoyed the complexity of trying to make more of the print and the paper. I really believed that you could push the paper and make the print better. And I knew I made a print here, and then I—as I developed my own skills I was making better prints. I think that the reference from Dody or Brett in that letter—there's a point where Weston is talking about—must be in his Daybooks.

ROBERT SILBERMAN: This is Brett Weston's father, Edward.

JEROME LIEBLING: Yeah, Edward. He was making a variety of print styles. And then he decides that the cleanest, clearest precision comes in a Kodak black and white, no muddy, straight print, which is what Brett is echoing

there.

ROBERT SILBERMAN: Let me—let me read this, just read it into the record. Both Edward Weston and Paul Strand started as pictorialists, soft, focused look—

JEROME LIEBLING: Yes, yes, yes.

ROBERT SILBERMAN: —and became more modern hard [ph] focus and working with large format—with some darkroom work, but supposedly less. And in the letter Jerry's referring to—1952, Minor White wrote you a letter and quotes first Dorothea Lange, who he'd show in your pictures too, saying—and Dorothea Lange says, "I would like to meet this person. At the moment of exposure everything stands still, everything in the world. All the workings of the subject stop for an instant. I like his work. He has arrived." And then Minor White notes that "she shook her head approvingly." And then Dorothea added, "Here is a good one." And then at the bottom of Minor White's letter, which he sent to you, Jerry—he also says that he showed your work to Dody Warren and Brett Weston, that is, Edward Weston's son, who's also a major actor, and they—

JEROME LIEBLING: And Dody and Brett married.

ROBERT SILBERMAN: Right, later. And was she one of Edward's—I can't remember her background. But in any event they—yes, they got married, but—and Minor White says, "Both found many photographs that they liked. Dody said she likes you better when you photographed and printed in your own way, rather than when printing in the," quote, "yummy," unquote, "way of Strand." And then Minor White added, "I don't always agree." So that letter is dated 22 June, 1952.

JEROME LIEBLING: Yes.

ROBERT SILBERMAN: So they saw your work a little later when you were already in Minnesota—

JEROME LIEBLING: Yeah, yes, yes, yes.

ROBERT SILBERMAN: —but we'll—-and Minor White we'll talk about—

JEROME LIEBLING: Yes, yeah, well—

ROBERT SILBERMAN: —because this is for aperture, but back to the printing style. You're thinking it through before you—

JEROME LIEBLING: Yes, yes.

ROBERT SILBERMAN: —New York under the influence of Strand.

JEROME LIEBLING: Yes. I had very peculiar print procedure, and I don't know where it started. I was very impressed with daguerreotypes, the few that I saw, and I liked the intimacy that you had to use to view daguerreotypes, and their size. So I used to print—I'd take an 8x10 sheet of paper, and I would cut it in half, and then half again, so I had 4x5 pieces of enlarging paper, and I didn't make the enlargements more than 4x5.

ROBERT SILBERMAN: And what format negative are you working from? What camera are you shooting from?

JEROME LIEBLING: I'm working from a two-and-a-quarter negative, and I use the two-and-a-quarter negative and not the 35, which was easier to get than—deal with. But I thought that I got better quality, which you did, from the larger-format negative. So I used the two-and-a-quarter negative and hardly enlarged it, always trying to keep the sharpest, most—what—precise relationship. And that's how big. I could show you boxes of these little 4x5 prints. And that's what I showed to everybody and never quit. If I made an eight by 10 print—it's like making a 4x5-foot print now. And I was—the people at the Photo League said, "This guy's too precious. I mean, we want the pictures to get out there and, you know—or at least be able to see them."

ROBERT SILBERMAN: You're working with a square-format camera.

JEROME LIEBLING: Yes, yes.

ROBERT SILBERMAN: What kind of camera were you using right then?

JEROME LIEBLING: A Super Ikonta B.

ROBERT SILBERMAN: But you're—but you're cropping to a rectangular format in both cases, or sometimes?

JEROME LIEBLING: Well, I didn't crop it. I printed—I printed the whole negative.

ROBERT SILBERMAN: Negative.

JEROME LIEBLING: Yeah. So it was a square—

ROBERT SILBERMAN: On the—on a rectangular sheet.

JEROME LIEBLING: —on a 4x5, yeah, yeah. And then gold tones—and there was a paper in use—Kodak made a paper called Illustrators' Special. And you would read of past papers that Stieglitz used or that Strand used in palladium, and papers that were just not available. But this Illustrators' Special was an interesting paper. And I thought it had—that—I mean, it was almost—I mean, the surface—you could feel the space, and I thought it was delicious. I then, many years later, changed as well to what I thought was a sufficient paper, um, with—

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JEROME LIEBLING: —out the yummy. So I got rid of the yummy, but it took some time, you know. And one thing we have to talk about in coming to Minnesota, which associates many of these things and these pictures—I came—I have the job, I come to Minnesota, and people say, "Oh, you ought to meet this guy who works at the Walker Art Center." And the Walker Art Center is a modest museum in the Twin Cities. It's now a spectacular museum, but at the time it was a modest museum. And this man Walker, T. B. Walker, a big tycoon, had a jade collection that he had purchased over the years in China and gave to the Minneapolis Institute of Art. And they apparently didn't display it well enough, often enough, or whatever, and so he took the jade collection and himself and he said, "I'm going to form my own museum called the Walker Art Center." And that's how it started. I don't know when this rift with the Minneapolis Institute occurred, but when I got there the Walker was kind of miniature modern art. It was—

ROBERT SILBERMAN: Was Harvey Arneson the director at that time?

JEROME LIEBLING: No, no, no.

ROBERT SILBERMAN: No. That was later.

JEROME LIEBLING: No, no, no. I don't know who was director.

ROBERT SILBERMAN: I should know this history exactly—

JEROME LIEBLING: Yeah.

ROBERT SILBERMAN: —but I don't remember the chronology.

JEROME LIEBLING: Yes. And there—it was a modest museum, but it was more modern art than the Minneapolis Institute, which was the Metropolitan of—and they had a house photographer, a young man one year younger than me, named John Szarkowski. And, you know, went to see him and told him I'm a teacher, you know, saying that—he said, "Oh, see the photographs." Well, I had the photographs, and he was floored, really. But he was not a curator. He was not—he was just a—but he was friendly enough with everybody at the Walker, and he immediately brought me in. I forget—God, I wish I remembered the names of the guy who was then acting director or director. And he said, "Well, Jerry, let's have a show tomorrow." And we put—got the prints framed.

ROBERT SILBERMAN: And '49 you exhibited, so the year you arrived.

JEROME LIEBLING: Yeah, yeah. And we—at the Walker Art Center. And, of course, my friendship with Szarkowski commenced at that time.

ROBERT SILBERMAN: And he became—he followed Steichen—

JEROME LIEBLING: Yes.

ROBERT SILBERMAN: —whose response to your photos I still do not know—

JEROME LIEBLING: Oh, that's right. Okay.

ROBERT SILBERMAN: —but he followed Steichen and was—

JEROME LIEBLING: Okay, okay.

ROBERT SILBERMAN: —curator at the Modern. But tell me about what—

JEROME LIEBLING: Steichen—

ROBERT SILBERMAN: —Steichen said, the grand man there, before we go off to the plains.

JEROME LIEBLING: Okay, I have these photographs, and people—"What do you do with them, Jer?" I'll, you know, show them here. "You know, there's—you ever go to Museum of Modern Art?" "Well, I would never ever—you know, what do you mean you go to a museum of modern art? I don't go and see modern art. I have no entree to a museum of modern art. What would they want to do with my pictures?" They said, "No, you just call them up and you tell them who you are and what you do, and they'll let you—you can show your pictures." I said, "Really?" "Yes." And so I call up the Museum of Modern Art and I said, "I'm Jerry Liebling. I'm a friend of Paul Strand, and I have—I'm a photographer. Could I see Mr. Steichen?" And they say, "Oh yeah. What about Thursday at 11:00?" And that's what happened. So I bring my little box, and Museum of Modern Art is not the Museum of Modern Art as it is today. It's the old original building. And he is there, and he is then 65 or so. And again, had I known of his accomplishment—he's somebody I truly admire and just—the energy that he must have had in producing those pictures. They were endless, endless. And the professionalism—I mean, I—there was an exhibit here recently of the Condé Nast collection, and, you know, what it was—it was all the starlets and stars and—but—[laughs]—he knew how to do it.

ROBERT SILBERMAN: He was the top fashion photographer, commercial photographer, of his day.

JEROME LIEBLING: Absolutely. And previous to that, his background in—with Stieglitz and the 291 and—so I come and see him with my little box of pictures. And the thing I still remember—he was a very vigorous guy, and just shaking my hand—strength and vigor. And I must have been a very naïve young guy. But he looked at every picture and paid attention. And he said, "Oh, these—oh yes, yes, yes." And I couldn't imagine now how generous he was because of the work that he had accomplished, along with Stieglitz, and along with Strand, who he didn't talk to, and along with everybody else. And yet he stopped and looked at little Jerry Liebling's pictures, and then took—[laughs]—three of them and said, "Oh, can we have these for the museum?" Well, I was just floored. And he said, "I don't know if I can pay you for them. I think I can get you $5 apiece." And by God, Becky has the receipt.

ROBERT SILBERMAN: That's great.

JEROME LIEBLING: And it says, "To Jerry Liebling, so and so, $5 apiece," $15 for an original—one of those 4x5—and it must have been the *Butterfly Boy*, I think, you know. So, yes, that was—but only embarrassing, as I grew older, and more knowledgeable of who he was. Jesus Christ, if I knew, I would have asked him some real questions, you know? "What happened when J. P. Morgan sat down in there and—you know, and you took"—and the same with Strand, to say to Strand, "Well, when you were in Mexico and you were doing a"—or, "When you went out with O'Keefe and it"—never, never, never said a word.

ROBERT SILBERMAN: Onward to Minnesota. You once said, "Minnesota allowed me to extend the street out to the field and landscape. As they did in New York, my sympathies remain more with the folk who had to struggle to stay even, whose voices were often excluded from the general discourse." So what was it like to move from Brooklyn—[laughs]—to Minneapolis—

JEROME LIEBLING: Well, yeah, there—you know—

ROBERT SILBERMAN: —in 1949?

JEROME LIEBLING: —this—well, I'm hesitant—just reflection, you know, was saying, "Now, what we're after is the art, so-called, the photography, the making of the pictures." And then I discover that I have to talk about what seems to be irrelevant, but it was most germane. For example, when I come to Minnesota, I'm a little boy. I'm 25 years old in this department, and I'm completely unfamiliar with academia and with its—what—range, meaning, the bottom rung, the upper rung, the university, degrees. I now—anybody who says they want to teach at the university has to put in a lot of time before they're allowed and they're accepted. So the—they go to one college. They go to another college. They do their PhD There's a lot of work. They've got years and years and years. And they've been sitting in classrooms and meeting professors and they're knowledgeable, so that when they're finally allowed to teach a class, it's not all new, and they've done it. I had no previous experience at all to the academic structure, to the hierarchy, to the students, the relationships, to curriculum, to syllabi, especially as an artist, you know. You went out and you worked, you know. And Minnesota allowed for some of that. Also, I got married, and in getting married there was—the biggest issue was the question of time. What did you do with your life? And you meet and can describe the lives of a million people of talent, and what happens to their person—how many times they've been married. Why are they divorced? Did they talk to the kids? Didn't they talk to the kids? Do they have enough time? Do they have enough money? Do they have enough space? How do they separate all these—how to they conjoin all of these things? And so I had to develop my skills as a teacher. I had to suddenly participate just to keep my own—what—rights in the department. So you had a new kind of politics developing, which is the University of Minnesota. Then I had my wife and children and my own space. And that was a continuous problem of how you apportion all of that and how you keep it together. And

friends that I knew who often would say, "Well, I'm it. I'm the prima donna. This is what life is about. It's about me. So I get the space, I get the time, and screw the rest of it." The people associated with them either accepted it and did it, or they didn't. And so we know of all the stories of drink and carousing and pain that were present, and was for me as well. Would I have done more work? Was it—married if I didn't have five children? If there wasn't a university—and at first the arts were the lowest denominator, and you had a department with art historians who were trained in the arts of the academy versus the more laissez-faire artists. And then over the years the sharpening and the demands of the artists for the time and space and money in Minnesota—the eventual breakup of the department just for those things, and the—now trained artists are not men and women who were just on their own becoming artists. They have been in the academy for years, and they know how to fit in and how to fight and what to do. In the broader sense most—well, artists are in sad—the—what's their organization?

ROBERT SILBERMAN: College Art Association.

JEROME LIEBLING: College Art Association, and then they began—you would learn—well, how do you get ahead and how do you go from an instructor, which they don't have as a title anymore, to a professor? And so you had to fill out the forms at the end of the year and you had to learn to play the game and you had to learn to have your shows. And all of that took time and was of a new dimension, and you weren't the free and easy artist just doing the work. So that's an aside that came into play.

ROBERT SILBERMAN: And yet you were tremendously productive in Minnesota, both in photography and film.

JEROME LIEBLING: And it looks like maybe—well, I also got a divorce, yes. Whether the—I don't know if that was part of it. But anyway—

ROBERT SILBERMAN: Just on—maybe before we leave the academia pedagogy side for the actual photographs, the founding of SPE, Jerry, the Society for Photographic Education—

JEROME LIEBLING: The founding of the SP—

ROBERT SILBERMAN: —of which you were a founder.

JEROME LIEBLING: —yes—was part of the need for the artists to have an organization that would rival all of the other organizations so that you could have your trips yearly and you could present your papers and you could do—I won't say the games, but you would be equal to—so if you were vice chair of the SPE and you could get a show because you knew the friends at—all of this would be on your vitae at the end of the year. Now, I don't want to make it as crass, but you were playing the game, and the SPE was brought together because the photographers—you had Walter Furst and you had Jerry in Minnesota, and you had Van Daren Coke in Albuquerque and you had somebody else in Portland, and you wanted to help each other and have a lifeline and—Nathan Lyons said hey, let's get together, and that's how you got the SPE.

ROBERT SILBERMAN: Yeah, for MFA or BA, art photographers as opposed to the commercial or photojournalist organizations.

JEROME LIEBLING: Yes, yes, and then slowly unbeknownst to each of us you were—the means of expression, and you weren't photojournalists, and you have all of the photography. And coming along with it the changes that occur in the '60s is the academic photography and the galleries and the galleries learning how to sell this stuff. I think the more practical and necessary would be the photojournalist if we had that means of making a living. So you could go out and you could really do some work. As bad as the stories might be, at least you were following some social purpose in producing new work, yeah.

And, of course, the great entrepreneurial vision of the dealers is just—they're a story in themselves of the categories of vintage, of non-vintage, of—and, of course, to their benefit the preservation of vast amounts of work that we would never know about.

ROBERT SILBERMAN: As in the recent exhibits—

JEROME LIEBLING: Yeah.

ROBERT SILBERMAN: —Howard Greenbaum and Dater [ph] in Chicago of photolink.

ROBERT SILBERMAN: Oh, well, the whole world, the whole world, yeah, of all kinds of photography, sure.

ROBERT SILBERMAN: Well, could you talk a little about the projects you did and how you did it in Minnesota? I mean, you're—

JEROME LIEBLING: Yes.

ROBERT SILBERMAN: —you did an astonishing number of—

JEROME LIEBLING: Yes.

ROBERT SILBERMAN: —projects. Did you think of them—

JEROME LIEBLING: Well—

ROBERT SILBERMAN: —as projects, and how did you select them?

JEROME LIEBLING: No. I want to talk a little bit about another book that I can't find. We pulled out so many. And it was about populism in the Northwest and the Nonpartisan League and the—again, the '30s—less for art than for the social battles against the railroads and the Indians and the day in and day out life forces. And this guy wrote this wonderful book which I would give to everybody, and how come I haven't given it to you over the years since you're the Midwesterner, describing what happened in North Dakota and South Dakota and Minnesota and in Wisconsin and a rich part of the history of the United States in organizing and getting some semblance of fairness and equity in means of production. Now, I just did the pictures in a miscellaneous way. I started off with the—what—workers, grain workers and fields and the grain elevators, because they were right there and I could just get there, and that was different than Brooklyn. There was no downtown. There was no ghettoes, though I found some of them later. That's how it started. Then, of course, South St. Paul, and I think a really unique series that's yet to be analyzed is *The Slaughterhouse*.

ROBERT SILBERMAN: And what—you—what led you to that—try to do that? You tried to get access at a couple—

JEROME LIEBLING: You know—you know, it's the continuation of who does the hard work, like The Old Clothes Man [ph], and had a little thing that we talked about—that I went—the only way I knew the photograph was never to buy a studio and to close myself into a studio. I never needed a studio because I never had a bed to sleep on. I just went out. And the streets which started me and kept me going from the beginning were available in Minnesota. There might've been a town and not a street. And so whenever I could I would go off, and the first thing were the grain elevators. Now—

ROBERT SILBERMAN: Which were right—almost next to the university, across the street almost.

JEROME LIEBLING: Right across—right there. And after I got a bunch of pictures someone said, "Well, what are you going to do with the pictures of the grain workers," and who the hell cared about the grain workers? And I went to the union hall, which was down on Southeast Street somewhere, and I built a little gallery, which was all Photo League ideas about—well, show the pictures to the folk. I didn't go back to the Walker Arts Center. And that's what I did. And then inadvertently or whatever—it's that—oh, it was South St. Paul that's—it's a little like Chicago. And when I went in there, I was just overwhelmed because you could take a tour, and I went through the (pig sticking ?) and the life and death and the screams and—[inaudible]—and I said, "Boy, this is the holocaust of what goes on here. How could you do this? What is it all about?" And I couldn't leave, so I went to the—at that time there were two companies, Swift and Armour's, which don't exist anymore. If they do—I don't know. And they were very, very big, and I tried to chase up and I got letters from Minnesota. He's doing historical blah, blah, blah, and guy from Swift said oh, all right, you come on Thursday, and I'll have a guy take you through the plant. And he did. I mean, I couldn't work. He said—"[inaudible]—we're going here. You got 10 minutes and then we'll go in there. You got five minutes." And then if this was Swift—so I thought, well, I'll got to Armour's. So I went to Armour's, and the guy said oh, you were at Swift's. I said, "How did—how did you know I was at Swift?" Said, "Oh, we've been following you. Who you working for?" They thought I was like a time study industrial cheat, you know, trying to figure out what they do, how they killed—so I said, "Oh, shit. That's the end of that. Can't get started here." And there was a kosher slaughterhouse, you know, about half this block. I forget the guy's name. And I went in and said, "Could I take some pictures," you know? And nobody—they sort of believed that you could take pictures for no purpose. But he didn't care, and I was there for 10 years on and off with my little uniform and my boots and my stuff, and we'd shoot—as I could, as the kids grew, as I came back, as I did more. So '52 to '62 I did those—that whole thing. And so—

ROBERT SILBERMAN: [Inaudible.]

JEROME LIEBLING: —there were two, the grain workers. Suddenly, I was in the slaughterhouse. And these are all at the base level of entrepreneurship. This is where it starts, you know?

ROBERT SILBERMAN: Although the grain—you did photograph the grain exchange where the—

JEROME LIEBLING: Yes, yes.

ROBERT SILBERMAN: —grain is bought and sold, which is in downtown Minneapolis.

JEROME LIEBLING: That's right. That's right, yes, which Allen [ph] used. That was the best part of his book, I mean, his little essay. But then there was a woman that we met in Minnesota, Hellen Mudget [ph], who was—what the hell was her—the extension service, Minnesota Extension—

ROBERT SILBERMAN: Agricultural where they consult with the farmers?

JEROME LIEBLING: And she said, "Oh, did you ever go to Red Lake?" "What's Red Lake?" "It's an Indian reservation." "You mean a real—an Indian reservation?" I mean, it's such naiveté on our parts. "Yeah, it's the largest lake in the country."

ROBERT SILBERMAN: Sovereign nation—

JEROME LIEBLING: Yeah.

ROBERT SILBERMAN: —but before we go to Red Lake, can I ask you two more questions about the slaughterhouses?

JEROME LIEBLING: Yeah.

ROBERT SILBERMAN: One name I don't think we've mentioned, even though we've talked about Paul Strand and Walter Rosenblum a lot, it's Louis Hein.

JEROME LIEBLING: Yes.

ROBERT SILBERMAN: How much—who is famous for taking pictures—

JEROME LIEBLING: Yes, yes.

ROBERT SILBERMAN: —of workers, and we'll maybe go back to him in Massachusetts—

JEROME LIEBLING: Yes.

ROBERT SILBERMAN: —because he worked in some of the mills photographing child labor.

JEROME LIEBLING: Yeah.

ROBERT SILBERMAN: But how much were you aware? Like when you—you've said that you were capturing in part the skill and stoicism of those people on the—on the slaughterhouse floor—

JEROME LIEBLING: Yeah.

ROBERT SILBERMAN: —those workers. But how much were you aware of, say, Hein when you're taking pictures and portraying workers in that heroic way?

JEROME LIEBLING: Yeah.

ROBERT SILBERMAN: I hope I'm not being too art historical about it, but it just struck me—

JEROME LIEBLING: No, no, no, Hein—

ROBERT SILBERMAN: —looking at them because they are such wonderful pictures.

JEROME LIEBLING: —yeah, yeah, Hein was wonderful, his—it's very interesting as an aside, important. Once you produce these things—and then you want to see what seemed to be driving the other person, you know. Suppose if you're a baseball player you want to watch and see how the guy hits and what he does. What you read—you read everything. And you were always curious—you'd say, "Hey, gee, that's an interesting way to—came about that." But Hein seemed earlier, you know, and I was aware, but I was making my own—

ROBERT SILBERMAN: Yeah, and he—I mean, he never could've—those pictures were very different in style—

JEROME LIEBLING: Yes.

ROBERT SILBERMAN: —but he would've been thrown out—

JEROME LIEBLING: Yeah.

ROBERT SILBERMAN: —too except maybe from the kosher—[laughs]—place—

JEROME LIEBLING: Yeah.

ROBERT SILBERMAN: —you know. I also wanted to ask you—because the—about color because the courier exhibit contains a photograph that I'd never seen that's a great photograph—

JEROME LIEBLING: Yes, okay.

ROBERT SILBERMAN: —that is—

JEROME LIEBLING: Color—

JEROME LIEBLING: —in color and the blood is red—[laughs]—you know.

JEROME LIEBLING: Blood, yes.

ROBERT SILBERMAN: It's bloody. It's not the black and white—

JEROME LIEBLING: They're obvious—one of the overall issues—in order to get pictures done, at least when I was doing it, is to buy a roll of black and white. You take it home and put it in your can and process it and dry it, and you had the negatives and you knew at some point you were going to print it. I didn't use 35 millimeter, so I wasn't familiar with Kodachrome, though there was color or—in 120. You had—not Kodachrome. I don't think they ever made that. They made Ektachrome, was another film. And you—and so color in general for me was outside of my kin. There was no way I could develop a process that—I couldn't get any results. And I didn't have a slide projector, and then that's not what I wanted to do. I wanted to show you the pictures. So I never did color of any quality until the '60s when I did a little bit. But see these mannequins from the state fair. That's '60s color, and—but when I got to the slaughterhouse, the color was so much a part of what was going on that I had to try and do it. And so I shot a couple of rolls of Ektachrome, but never thought they equaled the black and white, and I always used the black and white and made the black and white—[inaudible]. And this Ektachrome moving from Minneapolis two or three times—and it was shot in '52—somehow they lingered in a box all these years. And the process or the color or the film—not like the damn movie film, but this damn stuff just held, and it wasn't in a refrigerator. It wasn't anywhere. And when I started printing, I found these things, just a handful of them, and I asked the printer could you do anything with these? He said they don't look too bad. Let me try. And you saw what he did.

ROBERT SILBERMAN: Tremendous.

JEROME LIEBLING: Yeah.

ROBERT SILBERMAN: It sounds odd, but you once said that it—The Slaughterhouses was like a tapestry.

JEROME LIEBLING: Yeah.

ROBERT SILBERMAN: And that picture, horrific as it is with the heads and the blood and—it is woven together like a tapestry.

JEROME LIEBLING: Yeah.

ROBERT SILBERMAN: It's a fantastic image.

JEROME LIEBLING: Yeah.

ROBERT SILBERMAN: Well, thanks for explaining that. Let's—

JEROME LIEBLING: Yeah.

ROBERT SILBERMAN: —go to Red Lake. What happened when you and Allen Downs—

JEROME LIEBLING: Well, you know, we went to—

ROBERT SILBERMAN: —went up to Red Lake.

JEROME LIEBLING: —we went to Red Lake, and, of course, there's a countermovement today against documentary. Maybe it started with Susan Sontag, and she changed her position on a lot of—but where are you going to find your ghetto for the photographer? So somebody comes to you and says, "Oh, I want to show you the pictures I did in Detroit." Get out of here. I don't want to see your pictures in Detroit, you know? I know there's too much of it or it's too easy or it's the Harvard kid going to do his whatever. It's too hard to talk about documentary today, what happens, or the poor or impoverished and the Indian in 1953. I think Allen and I

always were mightily impressed with these people, what they represented. And we wanted all of the pictures to be as heroic as possible. They weren't always, except the one I have at *The Courier of the Woman*.

ROBERT SILBERMAN: Close-up of the woman with the heart earrings.

JEROME LIEBLING: Yeah, yeah.

ROBERT SILBERMAN: Beautiful image.

JEROME LIEBLING: Yeah.

ROBERT SILBERMAN: And what was it like working still, and you—at that time you made a film—

JEROME LIEBLING: Yes, yes, we made a—

ROBERT SILBERMAN: —which is—which is *The Tree is Dead* in 1953.

JEROME LIEBLING: Yeah, that whole experience was difficult. You either had to do one or the other. It was much easier for Allen. We just wanted a film. I tried to do it on the sly. I never went up to photograph. Usually I would be filming. But then I did the photographs in between. If it pulled away from it, I mean, I managed. But after a while I— when I got to Hampshire, filming—

ROBERT SILBERMAN: Filmmaking in Hampshire. What happened there? So—

JEROME LIEBLING: Yeah, yeah, well, when I came to Hampshire, it was at my suggestion that we do both film and photo. They were willing to hire me as a film person. I didn't want that. I wanted to go—either that—I said I would do both. And I somehow out of University of Minnesota and the feebleness of equipment and space came to Hampshire. It was a little broader and easier and better equipment. And the making of a film for Allen and I was one step and jump above making some stills, said, "Oh, we'll go out and we can make a film for $86." By the time I got to Hampshire there was no $86 and the camera was an Aeroflex, which was $12,000, and I was giving it—and I said, "You know what? I got to be in one place." And the film prep, even to do a little something, was getting so expansive and pulling beyond all of what I've talked about of being on the bed in the living room. And I just said, "No more film."

ROBERT SILBERMAN: You and Allen did get a Jerome Foundation grant to—

JEROME LIEBLING: Yes.

ROBERT SILBERMAN: —make another film about Native Americans, the old man where you went out to Montana to the Blackfeet reservation, and you shot a few very wonderful black and white—

JEROME LIEBLING: Yes, yes.

ROBERT SILBERMAN: —still images there also.

JEROME LIEBLING: Yes, yes, yes, file—yes, there, because we went out over two summers. So we were in Montana for a while, and I—and we had a crew so that when Allen would go off and shoot something I just had more time to do the stills, you know. But I realized that they were pushing each other, either did one or the other.

ROBERT SILBERMAN: We should mention one other short, quick film that you made to clarify—[laughs]—a possible misimpression, which is the film from 1960 *Pow Wow*, which is not a Native American film.

JEROME LIEBLING: Yes, yes, no, no.

ROBERT SILBERMAN: How did you and Allen come to make that film—

JEROME LIEBLING: Okay, yes.

ROBERT SILBERMAN: —and how did it get the name *Pow Wow*?

JEROME LIEBLING: Yes, the—you have no idea—I mean, the audacity of our filmmaking—Allen eventually said, "You know what? I'm not a teacher of design anymore," which is why he came to Minnesota, "and I really want to be a filmmaker." And he bought an Aeroflex for himself. He bought a really—a first rate camera. And we never got into sound. Well, now it's all another world. But then he had a film studio that he set up in his attic. And one time I was waiting for my kids, and it was fall and watching the band, and it was raining over a period of three or four days—

ROBERT SILBERMAN: That is the University of Minnesota Marching Band.

JEROME LIEBLING: Minnesota Marching Band, and it was the most hilarious film that I ever saw. And I said, "Allen , do you have the camera? You got to—you got to bring a couple of rolls." This is our old identity of, well, $94 for this one. So he came and he saw what I saw, and we shot this thing and just loved it. And everybody—and we had a conference or something and we had a couple of people coming from New York to this conference, including the reviewer, Bosley Crowther from—

ROBERT SILBERMAN: The *New York Times*.

JEROME LIEBLING: —the *New York Times*. And someone said, "Hey, you got to show that film with the marching band." I said, "Well, we don't have a title." He said, "Well, Allen's got all that, those titles from the—India or whatever." And there was an old title *Pow Wow* from—*Pow Wow* from up in the Red Lake. And he just put it on the film, and Brandon, who was one of the big distributors from New York, happened to see the thing, and Bosley Crowther went crazy over the film. And then we were stuck with it being *Pow Wow*. I mean, with more time we would've found an appropriate title. So Bandon bought it and showed it. They used to have runs of film in New York that would go for six months or something. They'd show one film, and the—Brandon was showing—God, I don't—I don't remember—some—I think *The Three-Penny Opera,* an old—

ROBERT SILBERMAN: The G.W. Pabst version of *The Brecht* [ph].

JEROME LIEBLING: Yeah, and they needed an eight-minute, 10-minute film as an introduction, and that was *Pow Wow*, which—what's his name? The Italian director? Yes.

ROBERT SILBERMAN: Fellini who are you—

JEROME LIEBLING: Not Fellini, the other guy who married Monica Vitti.

ROBERT SILBERMAN: Antonioni.

JEROME LIEBLING: Antonioni wrote and asked us to—I have the letter somewhere wrote down—

ROBERT SILBERMAN: That's great. [Laughs.]

JEROME LIEBLING: Yes. He said, "I've heard of his *Pow Wow*. How can I get to see it?"

ROBERT SILBERMAN: [Laughs.] Perfect.

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ROBERT SILBERMAN: This is Robert Silberman interviewing Jerome Liebling at his home in Amherst, Massachusetts on September 17, 2010 for the Archives of American Art, Smithsonian Institution, card number three. Jerry, we're going to go back from film to photography and back in Minnesota. I wanted to ask you about one of your great series of works, which is the photos you took of politicians and especially the Democratic-Farmer-Labor politicians.

JEROME LIEBLING: Okay, I'm going to—previously we were talking about the pattern that emerged with the pictures from Minnesota, and I talked about the Nonpartisan League and populism that we'd have to explain and my continuous reference to the '30s and the heroes of the '30s. And what seemed to happen without plan and over a period of 20 years—the pictures of Minnesota were always pictures that were close to the bone, that were near the earth. And what I think I wanted Alan Trachtenberg to do was to talk about the populism of that Northwest region and how I had paralleled with my photographs from the inner city pictures that we haven't talked about that but that we both know and that you curated.

ROBERT SILBERMAN: Those are photographs from the Minneapolis Gateway—

JEROME LIEBLING: Yes.

ROBERT SILBERMAN: —which is the skid row area of downtown.

JEROME LIEBLING: Yeah, the skid row area of downtown, farms and farming and the grain elevators. When I said I found the ghetto of South—not South St. Paul, but of West St. Paul—

ROBERT SILBERMAN: West St. Paul.

JEROME LIEBLING: —where the immigrants had come in. And, of course, the Indians and the snatches of Duluth and the Iron Range—these were all obvious pieces of the geography that made up Minneapolis and the rest of

the state. If you come to the state and now someone says, "Oh, Minneapolis is the Guthrie Theater and all of, you know, what would be the night life, you know," or—I don't know where that flow—or whether I was channeling the '30s. I can't really tell you why I made the—I know why I made the selection, because I was interested in the folk and the—I think Allen could've hit more on that aspect where he took me—in his writings was the battle of abstraction that I continued in a different format. And it wasn't the aesthetic, but it was more the political that he missed.

ROBERT SILBERMAN: And we should just mention, if I can interject, we're—you're speaking of Alan Trachtenberg, professor—

JEROME LIEBLING: Yes, a very dear friend.

ROBERT SILBERMAN: —emeritus at Yale—

JEROME LIEBLING: Yes, yes.

ROBERT SILBERMAN: —in American studies and English who you met at Minnesota when he was writing—

JEROME LIEBLING: No, when he was a graduate student.

ROBERT SILBERMAN: Writing. I was going to say writing his dissertation on—

JEROME LIEBLING: Yes, yes.

ROBERT SILBERMAN: —which became a famous book in American studies on Brooklyn Bridge—

JEROME LIEBLING: Yes.

ROBERT SILBERMAN: —and he's continued to write well on photography and many other subjects. But he wrote the essay for a book published by the Minnesota Historical Society Press—

JEROME LIEBLING: Yes, yes.

ROBERT SILBERMAN: —on your Minnesota photographs.

JEROME LIEBLING: Photographs, yes. Now, one of the stories—and I always hinge it to the folk—Minnesota, or aspects of Minnesota, especially in the '30s and '40s, is their generosity, just walking the streets and saying hello to everybody, as I remember. But a friend from Minnesota came to visit. His name was Al Newman. He was a Brooklyn boy and full of snarl, and he says, "Oh, this is where you live." I had just met him when he came to visit somebody else in Minnesota, but since I was from Brooklyn we immediately felt we were connected. "Anyway, well, I'm not staying here. I'm going on to California, and there's nothing here for me." And my friend said, "Oh, you always said you wanted to be a lawyer. You know, they have a big law school here." "Well—[inaudible]." "Why don't you apply?" And he looked at us like crazy—"What do you mean?" And he went up and he was accepted into law school in five seconds, just on whatever high school or college or whatever the hell he did. And Al Newman, our star-ly [ph] friend from Brooklyn, was in the Minnesota Law School. And who was the other—of the many students? Walter Mondale was in his class. And I think when they finally graduated Walter Mondale was number one and Al Newman was number 90 or something like that. But at some point about 1956 Walter Mondale—maybe had graduated or was still in law school—was the director of Orville Freeman, who became a long-time governor of Minnesota.

ROBERT SILBERMAN: And then secretary of agriculture under John Kennedy.

JEROME LIEBLING: The secretary of—John Kennedy. Orville Freeman was running for governor of Minnesota, and Mondale was his manager. And Mondale was looking for a photographer and needed somebody taking pictures, and the campaign was moving speedily along. And he told his friend, Al Newman, who was now his friend because they were both in law school, "Jesus Christ. We're stuck. We need a photographer." And Al Newman said, "You need a—well—"

ROBERT SILBERMAN: He was a minister's son, excuse me, so he might not have said that.

JEROME LIEBLING: Oh, he might've said—okay, I might not have said that.

ROBERT SILBERMAN: We should be fair to the former Vice President Mondale.

JEROME LIEBLING: Yes. So—

ROBERT SILBERMAN: He said, "Gee whiz. We need a photographer."

JEROME LIEBLING: Yeah, "Gee whiz, we need a photographer," to my friend Al Newman. Al Newman said, "Well, you know, this guy teaches these, my old friend Jerry Lehman." Fritz called me and said, "We could take pictures," and I said, "Yeah, I suppose." And that's how it started. I took pictures of that summer's campaign, some still in use.

ROBERT SILBERMAN: The great picture of Orville Freeman—

JEROME LIEBLING: Yeah, all the—

ROBERT SILBERMAN: —standing by the microphone in the small town—

JEROME LIEBLING: In the old town.

ROBERT SILBERMAN: —right in the middle of the street—

JEROME LIEBLING: Yeah, yeah.

ROBERT SILBERMAN: —and one with him in a group of people, still one.

JEROME LIEBLING: Yes, yes, yes. And the pictures were acceptable and the—they were used, and suddenly I started getting calls from other people. This was—and these were all the Democrats, the Democratic-Farmer-Labor Party. And they would say, "Hey, you took the pictures for Orville Freeman. Well, you want to take pictures for me," whomever they might be. And in a year or two I became the DFL photographer, and I photographed everybody who ever came through there, automatically called me. And you had mentioned a Walker Evans story of one for them and one for me. And I was doing this, so I remember Humphrey and—

ROBERT SILBERMAN: Gene McCarthy.

JEROME LIEBLING: —and Gene McCarthy, Harry Truman, one after the other leading up to 1962 when Kennedy came, and I suddenly found that I had an interesting body of work of politicians who one way or another—and we used them in that Minnesota book, yeah—

ROBERT SILBERMAN: And some were in Peter Galassi's—

JEROME LIEBLING: Yes.

ROBERT SILBERMAN: —exhibit of—

JEROME LIEBLING: Yes, yes, that's right.

ROBERT SILBERMAN: —at the Museum of Modern Art.

JEROME LIEBLING: He had a show of—yeah—

ROBERT SILBERMAN: How—

JEROME LIEBLING: —historical and other—yes. So I pursued that even after I left. I just liked the idea and liked what they did and photographed in New York City. Ed Koch—I—in fact, somebody just did a book on Ed Koch. He used some of my photographs. So I did it and I kind of ran out of interest and steam.

ROBERT SILBERMAN: When you were doing it, how did you balance being the official DFL photographer with being—

JEROME LIEBLING: Yes, yes.

ROBERT SILBERMAN: —Jerry Liebling with a—

JEROME LIEBLING: Yes.

ROBERT SILBERMAN: —possibly different perspective?

JEROME LIEBLING: Well, that's where—yeah, there was one for them and one for me, yes. I knew what they needed, a straightforward photograph of whatever they were doing. I mean, there are stories there that—usually a person running for the first time wanted to show that they're a family and that they had a wife and child. And Joe Robbie was a very close friend of Humphreys in Minnesota and a lawyer who ended up owning the Miami Dolphins for some reason. But Joe Robbie had about nine children and would try to—I remember spending a day—[laughs]—trying to figure out how to get all nine children and Joe and his wife in the one photograph, yes.

ROBERT SILBERMAN: Well, we should mention that your family photographs are political photographs because you have a daughter who's now in the State House—

JEROME LIEBLING: Yes, in the State House.

ROBERT SILBERMAN: —and one of your other projects during your Minnesota years was The Face of Minneapolis where you did a kind of omnibus with the journalist Don Morrison.

JEROME LIEBLING: Yes, yes.

ROBERT SILBERMAN: And there's a color photograph of the future politician, I think, in your backyard—

JEROME LIEBLING: That's right, the—yes.

ROBERT SILBERMAN: —with her red hood and red gloves. So—

JEROME LIEBLING: Yes, yes. Now, that came about because Jerry Dillon, who often ran for local office in Minnesota, very dear man, also owned a printing company. And one time he said, "Let's try to put a book together," and we did it. It's a book that I'm not pleased with, but it is—yes, it's still there, *The Face of Minneapolis*.

ROBERT SILBERMAN: But there are some wonderful pictures in it, is—interesting as an attempt to cover everything in a way and to see how you select—

JEROME LIEBLING: Yes, I—luckily, I think I produced them better, better books.

ROBERT SILBERMAN: I didn't mention when we were talking about film that you made a film possibly lost for the Department of Public Welfare on—

JEROME LIEBLING: Yes.

ROBERT SILBERMAN: —childcare, and you made a lovely film, *Eighty-Nine Years*, about—

JEROME LIEBLING: Yeah.

ROBERT SILBERMAN: —an elderly woman. But you also did, during your years in Minnesota, some projects involving state institutions and treatment of the blind—

JEROME LIEBLING: Yes, yes, all—

ROBERT SILBERMAN: —handicapped, disabled, I should say now, retarded and mentally disabled.

JEROME LIEBLING: Didn't often, but on occasion I freelanced. Now, there is associations—I freelanced for a New York newspaper. I think it was called *The Medical*—

ROBERT SILBERMAN: *Blue Books*, or *The Medical World News*.

JEROME LIEBLING: No, no, *Medical World News*. Where'd you find that?

ROBERT SILBERMAN: Possibly in Allen's essay.

JEROME LIEBLING: Okay, this—

ROBERT SILBERMAN: *Minnesota Blue Books*. That's the other—that's something else.

JEROME LIEBLING: Oh, yeah, *The Minnesota Blue Book* was more politicians and the job or the state legislature. But The Medical World News was just what it states, a newspaper for doctors talking about what is going on in the world of medicine, new and old. And Minnesota was a very progressive hospital system, and experimentation, especially with early heart valve and heart procedures and keeping—changing animal or dogs and keeping them alive and whatever was going on. But that brought me close to the hospital and people in the hospital at Minnesota and doctors that I would get to know. And I just—having photographed childbirth and growing—I wanted a series on life and death, and at Minnesota I often saw cadavers and attempted to photograph cadavers and was always forestalled by the doctors or the people who were in charge. And they said it was just too difficult for them to obtain the cadavers in the '60s, that—and I couldn't tell them—I would never use the pictures if I had to have that restriction. Then I didn't want to take them, you know? I didn't know what I was going to take or what I was going to get. But they thought, oh, here somebody would see Uncle Charlie, and it wouldn't do well for the hospital. So though the idea was there, it never gained fruition. And when I came here in '70, my nephew, my brother's son, Mark—Dr. Mark Liebling, wonderful cardiologist—[laughs]—here in Nashua,

Hampshire, was in medical school in Albert Einstein in New York. And he was in his first year they did anatomy or whatever it was, but they were given a cadaver and they worked with the cadaver in various exercises. And one time he said, "Uncle Jerry, you know, I know you're always kind of curious, and I spoke to my doctor, guy, a teacher, whoever, professor, and I told him about you, and he said oh, sure, have him come and whatever he wanted." And that's how I gained access to the cadavers. Various things had happened for Minnesota 20 years later. For one thing, the cadavers were easier to get. In fact, there were so many with longevity and with people living—sorry to say—in homes and without anybody in their family and that when they died there's nobody. And so the medical schools have all the cadavers they need, and the photographers have pushed, and so there are many people who have attempted or used the guy—

ROBERT SILBERMAN: Serrano, Andres Serrano has done it.

JEROME LIEBLING: Oh, he's mild next to what's his name from Albuquerque.

ROBERT SILBERMAN: Joel Peter Witkin.

JEROME LIEBLING: Joel Peter Witkin. But I had a different intent. Mine was about life and not, you know, whatever.

ROBERT SILBERMAN: They are strong, but, I mean, they—you—in that context, they're back to the slaughterhouse in a way and the life—

JEROME LIEBLING: Yes.

ROBERT SILBERMAN: —and death going on there and the—

JEROME LIEBLING: Yes, yes. Yes, and the pain of, oh, what—I may not—as I think whenever I used the cadaver pictures in the books, I mean, we're talking about the endless discussion of death in numbers from wars and catastrophe and tsunamis and whatever and the way we kind of push it aside after the number is mentioned, and it—and it's over. And there's such provocative insinuation in my pictures about what really happens and where do you go and who is there, and is there a soul, and what does this all mean? And I've never used them. I've never tried to exploit those pictures for their meanings.

ROBERT SILBERMAN: They're not sensationalistic, but they're very strong stuff.

JEROME LIEBLING: Yes, yes, yes, yeah. But that's how that came about, through this—

ROBERT SILBERMAN: And it is a contrast to the—I won't say more characteristic, but the classic Jerry Liebling sympathy, empathy of the pictures from The Home for the Blind—

JEROME LIEBLING: Yes, yes.

ROBERT SILBERMAN: —and the people on—along the gateway, the men in the—in the flop houses—

JEROME LIEBLING: Yes, yes.

ROBERT SILBERMAN: —or the other people—

JEROME LIEBLING: Yeah, yeah.

ROBERT SILBERMAN: —in the institutional pictures you took.

JEROME LIEBLING: Yeah.

ROBERT SILBERMAN: Maybe I can ask about two other small bodies of work in relation to this. One is the pictures that pop up periodically of mannequins and ideas of beauty—

JEROME LIEBLING: Yes.

ROBERT SILBERMAN: —because the cadaver pictures are certainly—

JEROME LIEBLING: Yes, yeah.

ROBERT SILBERMAN: —not classic beauty, but they have their own macabre or dark beauty, I suppose, or—[inaudible].

JEROME LIEBLING: Well, you know, in some of the cadavers, some—they're almost portraits where you can't extinguish the life, or when you look at the men and women, they are facing you and you know this is vaporous.

There's nothing there. So they're very mystifying pictures. The mannequins—how I even got—the mannequins have been pursued—who knows—endlessly.

ROBERT SILBERMAN: Yeah, Atget's Shop Window and the surrealists.

JEROME LIEBLING: Yeah, yeah, well, yes—

ROBERT SILBERMAN: —Bellmer and company.

JEROME LIEBLING: —as photographers, but I'm thinking of just the duplication of the human body and form from David to wherever you want to go. And sculpturally these mannequins and the people who make them were, I thought, so beautiful and of—they were of a particular time. This was in the '60s, and there was two or three embodiments. One was Jackie Kennedy and the other was Marlene Dietrich in the faces, in the generalization. And they, you know, were haunting in their own way. And so I photographed there as well. I've since tried to—there was an exhibit of life masks, and there was an American sculptor, 1800—his name is now gone—who did life masks, many famous people. He had developed not a wax—well, whatever material he used that was quick drying, and he was very skilled at getting it on and getting it off. And then he had made bronzes of these things, and they—that was life and death, all—they were marvelous things.

ROBERT SILBERMAN: And you photographed the death masks of the Sacco and Vanzetti.

JEROME LIEBLING: Yes, yes. Well, that was—you know, the great Massachusetts development of the '20s with the radicals coming—Italian-Americans coming to Massachusetts, living in Massachusetts, and they were the kind of Muslims of their day. That was supposed to be the most outside radicals who didn't want any government at all. Anyway, it's a story well told, and photographing in the north end—when I first asked about things pursuing in Massachusetts—I mean, locally it was the farms and farming, but then other aspects of the history of—and I think of the Strand book with Nancy Newhall, Time in New England, where Strand rarely came into the city. I was sort of surprised by how little—the conflict was a very esoteric conflict that he talked about, and then the quotes and the writing that she found. But if you go—north end of Boston—and there's the funeral home of Sacco and Vanzetti, and this trial went on for—not the trial. The trial was whatever length. But then it took about seven or eight years for a final disposition, and they were executed. And what I found was that the library had their ashes, you know? It was in the—what—special collections of the Boston Public Library. So this is a curious kind of history, and what the hell are they doing? And I got in touch with whomever you get in touch with, and guy said, "Oh, yes, we have the ashes, or part of the ashes, and we've sent them to the family." You know, this is 1927. Said, "What the hell do you want to photograph that for?" "Well, I'm just interested, and it concludes"—said, "Well, you know, we have the death masks." And you know who made them? Borglum, the guy who did—

ROBERT SILBERMAN: Mount Rushmore.

JEROME LIEBLING: —Mount Rushmore, was here and lived here, and he did the death masks. And they brought them out, and there they are in plaster, the two—yeah. I didn't know what this—you have to figure out what this means.

ROBERT SILBERMAN: Well, we have arrived in Massachusetts, and your rediscovery—your discovery of history—but I want to go back and ask you about three specific images from Minnesota, or made in Minnesota, that in some way relate to this. We've talked about the DFL pictures and the political pictures. I wanted to ask you about a picture from 1966, which is the picture of the board members of the Allegheny Corporation—

JEROME LIEBLING: Yes, yes.

ROBERT SILBERMAN: —and how that came to be. That's—

JEROME LIEBLING: Yes, yes.

ROBERT SILBERMAN: —*Four Faces* and—

JEROME LIEBLING: Yes. Well, these are interesting—[laughs]—things I suppose I've thought about. I keep talking about the purity of the portrait, you know. You say—I talked about this young boy who—picture that you haven't seen, and then, of course, the one of the migrant worker, and I refer to them as a pure disposition of the human being. God, I suppose when he created whatever he created—he would've wanted it to be this way. But then there's the question of evil or semi-evil or privilege or greed, or sometimes the human being isn't very pleasant, you know, and how far you have to go or where you have to go or what you have to do, or if you say that Adolf Hitler—could you tell, not knowing who this is, just looking at a portrait of Hitler, what you would be able to determine? Could he be a pleasant, benign person, you know? And I'm unsure of some of these categories, and when I go way back to the beginning he said, "There was two people that you had to be careful of, landlords and bosses." And that follows all the way through. So you say, "Can beautiful Marilyn Monroe be the head of General

Motors, and what conflict would there be?" Or, "Could I find that my bosses and landlords are just what I think, sort of troubled folk, you know, when I'm right there in front of them?" And the Allegheny Corporation was one of the largest holding companies in the United States during the '60s, owned, among other things, the Pennsylvania railroad, and who knows what else. And they were holding an annual meeting of the board of directors, which is usually held in New York, I would think. And we all have—we own stock and a thing, and it's at so and so in this state. Well, the Allegheny Corporation that year decided that they would travel outside of New York and have their annual meeting. And they—it's going to be in Minneapolis. So there was the annual meeting of the Allegheny Corporation. I never saw these guys. I didn't know who they were. But they represented my bosses and landlords. And I really—I did them as straight as I did any other. And they—well, you'd have to ask them about their lives and their—how they chose to be what they are. And I don't know if you just show those pictures without identification how people would feel about them. But that's what they were about. And my confused attempt to say is it always benign or does it show something else, and—I don't know. But it's a nice series that—putting them together that—

ROBERT SILBERMAN: Well, it reminds me of Avedon's photograph of the Mission Council in Saigon during the Vietnam War.

JEROME LIEBLING: Oh, well, yeah, yeah.

ROBERT SILBERMAN: And then Franz Hall's paintings of the Board of Syndics, I believe, the sort of board of—in charge of the poor house—

JEROME LIEBLING: Yes, yes.

ROBERT SILBERMAN: —the men and the women's breasts, and those are very powerful paintings.

JEROME LIEBLING: Yes, yes, yeah.

ROBERT SILBERMAN: Let me ask you about one other—I was—which seems completely atypical, even more than the Allegheny Board Corporation, although not atypical in some ways, and that is—we mentioned the DFL and the visiting dignitaries who came through, Kennedy, George Wallace. You photographed Jesse Jackson.

JEROME LIEBLING: Yes.

ROBERT SILBERMAN: In 1958, you photographed Harry Truman at a rally in St. Paul.

JEROME LIEBLING: Oh, yes, yes, yeah.

ROBERT SILBERMAN: 1960 you made a picture of Harry Truman—

JEROME LIEBLING: Yes.

ROBERT SILBERMAN: —against the front page of *The New York Times*—

JEROME LIEBLING: Yes, that's right.

ROBERT SILBERMAN: —from the day of the—

JEROME LIEBLING: That's right.

ROBERT SILBERMAN: —atom bomb blast in 1945.

JEROME LIEBLING: Yes, yes.

ROBERT SILBERMAN: What is the story—

JEROME LIEBLING: Okay.

ROBERT SILBERMAN: —behind making that?

JEROME LIEBLING: All right. First, simply, Harry Truman was no longer president but was a leading Democrat and was brought to Minnesota to help raise funds or rally. I don't know what election. Maybe it was—couldn't have been Humphrey, no. Anyway, he was here, and I photographed him. And there was one photograph I did of him which was nice and bright and cheery of a man, 80s, and it was a picture of Harry Truman. There was a point at which attitudes in photography moved in another direction. It was the beginnings of montage, though there—montage was certainly in—we know Heartfield—

ROBERT SILBERMAN: John Heartfield.

JEROME LIEBLING: —but even previous to Heartfield there's a lot of configurations. But there was an—out of the development of photography and academia students and faculty were trying to use—or even saying that photography is just a means to an end in any way, as you describe Gary Holman's montages and digital—

ROBERT SILBERMAN: Very complex digital work.

JEROME LIEBLING: Yeah, yeah, yeah. And so here I was doing pictures that were straight as can be, and I continue to do that. But I was sort of curious, and it comes about at the same time that I did the Allegheny Corporation where I said I can expand my pictures. There's a straight piece about it. And I think there might've been a period in the '60s where there was further discussion about the bomb and dropping the bomb and its use, and should've been—and maybe there was a woman or a nuclear, sane—

ROBERT SILBERMAN: The group.

JEROME LIEBLING: —group, you know, and I—

ROBERT SILBERMAN: Anti-nuclear, we should say. [Laughs.]

JEROME LIEBLING: Yeah, and there must've been some discussion about Truman. Now, this I might be making up, that he reinforced his adamancy about dropping it, that it was right and it saved lives and it did everything. That was pure and wholesome, I think.

ROBERT SILBERMAN: Do you remember? Is it before or after the Cuban missile crisis? What year was that? This is, I think, '60s. That's—

JEROME LIEBLING: That was 60—

ROBERT SILBERMAN: Is that the next year?

JEROME LIEBLING: Kennedy's alive, so it's got to be '62.

ROBERT SILBERMAN: So it's next—it's a little later, but there were the—

JEROME LIEBLING: No.

ROBERT SILBERMAN: —I mean, Bertrand Russell and others threw a few—

JEROME LIEBLING: Yes, yes.

ROBERT SILBERMAN: —anti-nuclear protesters and—

JEROME LIEBLING: Yes, and for—I don't know how I hit on *The New York Times*' front page to—and I think the front page of that day would be strong in itself—

ROBERT SILBERMAN: Right.

JEROME LIEBLING: —just the description.

ROBERT SILBERMAN: And then you're—we should describe it, that you reversed it so it's white on black and black on white—

JEROME LIEBLING: Yes, yes.

ROBERT SILBERMAN: —but the picture—

JEROME LIEBLING: Yeah.

ROBERT SILBERMAN: —in a small version in the center.

JEROME LIEBLING: Yes. And I think that was the easiest way to handle it because you'd get The *Times* in these—well, what do you call them? You know, little film strips or something—

ROBERT SILBERMAN: On microfilm, right.

JEROME LIEBLING: —microfilm, yeah, and you'd roll it one to the other.

ROBERT SILBERMAN: And that's negative image.

JEROME LIEBLING: Yeah. And I finally got it—

ROBERT SILBERMAN: From—

JEROME LIEBLING: —and it was a son of a bitch to get that thing. And I said, "You know what? Let me do it." I haven't played with too many of those things. You know, a good friend was Bob Heineken. And if you know Heineken's work, I don't think he ever took a picture. He called himself a photographer and he taught photography, and we shared a friendship for a while and were in Europe together, and he was a force in changing or using pictures. It wasn't—the camera didn't matter. You got the picture from wherever you got it. And he had a lot of things. I was sort of curious, and he sent me stuff as he made it. How would I handle something like that? And I think that had a little bit of influence, though he never—he thought he was very political, and—yeah. I haven't used that picture either very much.

ROBERT SILBERMAN: Well, you took—you made and took many others in Minnesota that we're not going to—[inaudible]—

JEROME LIEBLING: Yeah, yeah.

ROBERT SILBERMAN: —discuss in the state fair and many other things, but—

JEROME LIEBLING: Yes, yes.

ROBERT SILBERMAN: —you, know—

JEROME LIEBLING: Yeah, well—yeah, it was a real folk—yeah, there was a woman locally, Judith—oh, she's going to kill me if I—anyway, she was a professor of American studies at the university.

ROBERT SILBERMAN: Judith Martin, and geography and American studies, or no?

JEROME LIEBLING: No. Yeah, any—and she lived in Minnesota, younger than I am, maybe ten, 15 years younger. And when she saw the book, she wrote an article that was published in the SPE Journal, and she said, "Here I lived in Minnesota and I didn't know Minnesota. I lived there all my life, and this guy comes and shows me all—everything that I feel as voracity and earthiness and touches on so many different things that I should've felt"—so I thought—I thought that—

ROBERT SILBERMAN: That's great.

JEROME LIEBLING: —yeah, I said that's good, yeah.

ROBERT SILBERMAN: Well, you came at a—as Alan Trachtenberg pointed out, a very interesting time, and, I mean, certainly not—in many, many ways, city and country and the DFL—

JEROME LIEBLING: Yeah.

ROBERT SILBERMAN: —politicians like Humphrey and Mondale—[laughs]—and Freeman, and you recorded it, and you had through teaching and other activities such an influence on not just the photographic community but so many other people in the state. So it is—[laughs]—an important period in lots of ways and important for Minnesota, important for you, important for people that love photography. And then you moved—[laughs]—and then you moved here to Massachusetts.

JEROME LIEBLING: Yes.

ROBERT SILBERMAN: How did that come about?

JEROME LIEBLING: Well, that is simple and complicated, always. There was a young man named Dick Richard Lyons, PhD candidate that—in the English department. And Dick now must be 75, 77, a good friend of Alan Trachtenberg's, so I think that they're together. And I sort of knew him, or he never took a class with me, and—but, you know, you make these connections and they move on out. You go from one place to the other and you touch somebody. You say oh, yeah, I know Charlie. Oh, my goodness. And you only saw him for 20 minutes one time. Anyway, the local college community has always had these four colleges, Smith, a girls' school in North Hampton, the women's college, Mount Holyoke, women's college, Amherst, which is a major—it's a—Harvard/Yale, but not a university, very important, and the University of Massachusetts. There were people in the Amherst community, academics, go way back before the war, World War II, kept thinking there needs to be some change in education, and always were writing draft papers called The New College or whatever. Certainly, after the impetus of '60s, they were more assured that perhaps Amherst College and the colleges were too insular in their outlook. And then, of course, the bursting forth of college community and attacks at Columbia, Berkeley, even forced the issue of the possibility of a new college in this community. And they got some money,

and they got a couple of people and they got up to $10 million and Ford Foundation, and they wrote a big manifesto and there was a big book about a new college. And they said they're going to do it. That's going to—how new or what. Anyway, that was what occurred. They started a road to a new college. This is supported by all the alternative high schools and train yourself and university without walls and major ideas of no grades and things. And—well, that became Hampshire College down the road. And they took the money and they bought land and they really started from scratch. And this old friend, Richard Lyons, was the dean of this new college in about 1965, and they were slowly trying to recruit ideas, how to teach art, how to teach English, what to do about this, what to do about that if you're starting all over. And they were going to open in 1970 if they got the buildings up and they put it all together. And he called me—I was at Minnesota—and he said, "Hey, Jerry, we're thinking of a film or photo." That's all new. You know, I had done this 20 years earlier at Minnesota, but—and I said, "Oh. What do you want?" He said, "Would you just come out and tell us what you teach and how it affects things and what goes on if you—we did something like this and who we are. So I came to visit for a couple of days and talked to all the people and told them what I did and what I thought and why I think it's important and what went on. That's it, and I went back to Minnesota. And then—I don't know how soon they called again and said we really liked your ideas, and we want to do that in our school, which is going to open up in Hampshire, and you've been here and you see what's going on. And not only did we want to run that program, we want you to run that program, you know? So I said I was just ending a divorce of 20 years, marriage, and things were not in the best of condition. And I was always curious to come back east, you know. I had left New York, made my peace in Minnesota. Where I grew up—I really grew up in Minnesota. There's no doubt about it. I was 45. I had put in 20 years. I was a full professor. I said, well, why not? Let's see what happens. But I didn't have to commit to anything. I asked the dean, McDermott or whomever, "Will you give me a leave of absence?" And he said, "Okay, you know, I'll give you a leave of absence, two years. That's it. You're either up or out, back or not." So I came out—I was very disheveled in starting it up and seeing what was going on. It was like a camp. And certainly, the first year I went back and I talked to McDermott, who's a lovely man. I'm sure he's no longer anywhere near Minnesota. But he said, "Well, you know, I told you I'll give you two years, Jer, if you want to see what's going on." And I took the second year and I said, "You know, I know what's going to happen in the next 20 years." So I go back. I'm 45. And this way he gets shaken up. He gets shaken up. And that's—so I stayed.

ROBERT SILBERMAN: And today there's a building on campus named for you.

JEROME LIEBLING: Yeah, yeah, there's—

ROBERT SILBERMAN: And you—clearly had your effect. You had—

JEROME LIEBLING: Yeah.

ROBERT SILBERMAN: —you said before you weren't as active making films, but you were teaching film and you had the—

JEROME LIEBLING: Teaching film—

ROBERT SILBERMAN: —so-called Hampshire Mafia—[laughs]—

JEROME LIEBLING: —yes.

ROBERT SILBERMAN: —Hampshire Mafia.

JEROME LIEBLING: Yes. What cohered for me out of Allen and my own efforts and efforts in the States was a so-called American underground. And that—you know, Brakhage and Vanderbeek and all of it which has been written about, short films, other films, experiment—anything but a Hollywood narrative film, a purity of film and vision that was very intense and very important and is just kaput, gone, dead, dying. And that's what I taught. That's what I brought. And the students were very good. The equipment was exceptional, and we just—in the same manner that I discovered photography with Walter they discovered film with me. So, you know, we all know of Ken, but—

ROBERT SILBERMAN: Ken Burns?

JEROME LIEBLING: —you know of—

ROBERT SILBERMAN: Kirk Simon, Karen Goodman and Buddy Squires as—

JEROME LIEBLING: —Kirk, yes, yeah, Bobby—Buddy if he's—

ROBERT SILBERMAN: —cinematographer, film maker.

JEROME LIEBLING: —still around and photographers and intensity and the summer workshop and friendships with Ricky Leacock, and we had the summer workshop for 10 years and had everybody here. In film and

photography, you know, we had—I mean, I brought Helen Levitt, talked about Helen Levitt from—brought Helen Levitt, brought Diane Arbus that went home and committed suicide, but not because she came to Hampshire, and everybody who was of significance. And I think what we sort of said was if you're 20 or 21 you're old enough. You can do it. I don't know. I've been away from it for a long time, and film, photography, have become the mainstays, you know, of activity. So everybody is in communication, you know?

ROBERT SILBERMAN: And you went—and film and photography have gone from analog to digital, and you went to color in your photography.

JEROME LIEBLING: Well, yes, yes.

ROBERT SILBERMAN: We mentioned you did a little way back, but—

JEROME LIEBLING: Yes, I had done—I had done some color. There was a student named Jerry Lang [ph] at Minnesota who then went on to Penn State and is now 70. Jerry, in the little graduate program, MFA that we had, brought in color negative Agfa. Somehow he had been to Germany or knew a German import and introduced us all to a means of handling color, more complicated than black and white, but not as complicated and as expensive as it was in the past. And then that—I remember just taking a summer and using this Agfa color in the '60s. And when I came here, there were wonderfully talented young people photographing, and they said, "Oh, you get it started and we'll help you make the prints and whatever," and forced me to do another—I said, "All right." I wouldn't touch black and white for a year or so, and did the color, which I enjoy, even giving it—I feel I have many strong black and white pictures. But I don't know. Well, I'm not shooting anyway, but when I shot, I wanted it in color, just the feel of black and white.

ROBERT SILBERMAN: You switched your eye to adjust and you just went forward.

JEROME LIEBLING: Yeah, yeah, yeah.

ROBERT SILBERMAN: And could you talk about what happened in terms of the projects you took on here when you got here. I mean, you did photograph in the farms and you photographed in the mills, so, you know, you had the worker—

JEROME LIEBLING: The—yes.

ROBERT SILBERMAN: —the urban and rural workers in some way—

JEROME LIEBLING: Well—

ROBERT SILBERMAN: —but then you photographed other things as well that were New England, definitely not Minnesota.

JEROME LIEBLING: Yes, in New England—well, obviously, I live in a very bucolic neighborhood, and so is pretty New England vistas. I mean, any way you point the camera you think you're looking at Yankee Magazine, you know. And I tried now being able to decide, you know. So the farms and farming—I did as much as I could there chasing around animals and farmers and working, touching. But being back east, here I was 25, so I grew up and thought myself to be a New Yorker. Everyone said, "Where are you from?" Oh, I'm from New York. Then the years I spent in Minnesota, 20, and adult years—I wasn't from New York. I was from Minnesota, which I maybe never said, that I'm from Minnesota. So I realized boy, there's something going on there, but I don't know what it was or where am I from. But the—wherever you are, somebody has to do the work, and I was interested in that. But I was also very much interested in finding the New York that I left. I had the four pictures—

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JEROME LIEBLING: —that you saw in the Currier show, and boom! They ended. So I came back as difficult to get to the city, long periods of time, and the East Side wasn't what I remembered it, where I was photographing. The memories I had of New York, the continuity that I saw in the old New York was gone when I came back. New York had vast changes in its neighborhoods and its people, and my relationship to it. And my sister-in-law lived, uh, near Brighton Beach. You know, which is a piece of Brooklyn near Coney Island. And when I would visit her, and walk around the neighborhood, I said, You know, this neighborhood still has a little of that flavor. It's almost—there's a continuity. And curiously, at that time, the United States and the—it was still the Soviet Union were fighting. Well, we'll let you have this if you let us have this. If you let the Jews emigrate from Russia, then you can have this. And the Soviet Union said, Sure, okay. [00:02:02] You want to let Jewish folk emigrate? You can have them. Where are you going to put them? In Brighton Beach. How the hell that happened, I don't know. And there was the flavor of my old neighborhood, further reinforced by new immigrants stumbling their way through Brighton. And I said, I've got to come down here as often—and so from 1970 to 1990, I would be there for a couple of weeks a year, and just took the old portraits of everybody that I was looking for in 1940.

ROBERT SILBERMAN: But in color.

JEROME LIEBLING: But in color.

ROBERT SILBERMAN: The—and the Currier show, the glowing—

JEROME LIEBLING: Yeah.

ROBERT SILBERMAN: —picture of the young girl and then that smashing picture of the woman in the bold print—

JEROME LIEBLING: Yeah.

ROBERT SILBERMAN: —dress picking pe—peaches from the market—

JEROME LIEBLING: Yeah.

ROBERT SILBERMAN: —where the color and the pattern is just overwhelming.

JEROME LIEBLING: So that's—and as a pattern, I've often, when I could—I mean, I'm not photographing now. I'm just too old to hold the camera steady. I would photograph over a long period of time. I've photographed in the slaughterhouse. When I say 10 years, it doesn't mean I was there every—

ROBERT SILBERMAN: Right.

JEROME LIEBLING: —single day. But until I finally said, No more, it was 10 years later. I chased the locally grown farmers for four or five years. [00:04:01] Um, I never—I think, uh, the farmers came out of an exhibition in Boston of Millet.

ROBERT SILBERMAN: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

JEROME LIEBLING: Millet, uh, somehow the Boston folk bought Millet and they probably have more Millets at the Boston museum than they have in France. And I was so impressed with the exhibit, but he was doing something else. But I realized some of the reflection of color, the growing, the things, the people were here. And that, uh, pushed me, uh, to do it.

ROBERT SILBERMAN: And you were, in a way, early on into locally grown by photograph.

JEROME LIEBLING: Yeah, yeah.

ROBERT SILBERMAN: Just like the—I mean that's one of the things about your work, the—Le Sueur [ph] pictures they're—

JEROME LIEBLING: Yes.

ROBERT SILBERMAN: —to see Bohemian and Hispanic migrant workers.

JEROME LIEBLING: Yes. Yes, yes.

ROBERT SILBERMAN: I mean, there have always been people concerned about migrant workers, but it once again, now, seems especially contemporary.

JEROME LIEBLING: Yeah.

ROBERT SILBERMAN: I want to ask you about a couple other New England projects, but I want to go back and ask about one other New York project, which is your return to New York to photograph in the south Bronx.

JEROME LIEBLING: Yes. Um, and I never thought these stories were interesting, but now they seem to be and, uh, early—I'm interested in talking about them. It becomes personal. You want

[Audio Break.]

ROBERT SILBERMAN: Okay.

JEROME LIEBLING: [00:06:00] When my brother died in 1933, my brother Stanley, at 16, as I mentioned, had left the house, went on to college, and met at college Irma Deutsch, his future wife. And Irma was my sister, really. I mean, I didn't know. My brother met this woman, and they were married, and I really loved her, and she opened my life. I mean, my brother and I were sort of cramped from the descriptions I give my parents, and the debt, and things. And Irma was joyous, and wonderful, and unbounding in every way possible. Uh, whatever you said

to my mother, my mother would say, uh, "Do you need to do it?" And Irma would say, "Of course! Come on, Jer, go ahead!" Well, many years later, my brother—and it's their son, Mark, Dr. Mark Liebling of the cadaver photographs. [07:54] My brother and Irma divorced, and Irma marries Herman Badillo who is a young, rising, Puerto Rican politician in New York City, who is an interesting guy—too complicated for our story. Herman almost became mayor of New York, and separately from my acquaintance with politicians in Minnesota, I was acquainted with politicians through Herman who besides running for mayor in about '69 became a congressman in Washington. And I, uh, always photographed for Herman. Herman's district was the south Bronx. And boy, at that time, you couldn't gain entree. Oh you could, sure, go but it wasn't [laughs]—it was a scary place. So whenever I could, if Herman was campaigning, and he campaigned all over New York—that's how I met [Ed] Koch and photographed with Koch through Herman. So I had a cover with Herman and he usually had two guys, hangers, on. [00:10:03] And they would take—if I said I want to go over there, they'd say, "Okay, Jerry. We'll stay over here." And it was a really, uh—the way I was able to get close to some of the things in the south Bronx.

ROBERT SILBERMAN: And there are portraits, and then there are the photographs of the sort of devastation—

JEROME LIEBLING: Yes.

ROBERT SILBERMAN: —of the buildings, the rubble in—

JEROME LIEBLING: It was mostly the devastation. There was one or two of some kids. Yeah. Um, in the period that I, yeah, worked with Herman, and a lot of other pictures of the city because he had a big district that went all over.

ROBERT SILBERMAN: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

JEROME LIEBLING: Yeah.

ROBERT SILBERMAN: And those are—and we should say those are black and white. We should also say that—

JEROME LIEBLING: Yeah, black and white. Yeah.

ROBERT SILBERMAN: —the pictures you took in Minneapolis of the Gateway, the Skid Row area, the—a lot of that was knocked down in urban renewal—

JEROME LIEBLING: Yes.

ROBERT SILBERMAN: —and you took pictures—

JEROME LIEBLING: Yeah.

ROBERT SILBERMAN: —after of the—

JEROME LIEBLING: Yeah.

ROBERT SILBERMAN: —area and you took pictures of the icon of the whole area, the Metropolitan building, when it was being demolished. You did one more return, that is, you went back to Brooklyn and you did some diptychs of your—of your—

JEROME LIEBLING: Yes.

ROBERT SILBERMAN: —neighborhood in Brooklyn. What—

JEROME LIEBLING: Yes.

ROBERT SILBERMAN: —led you to go back and make those?

JEROME LIEBLING: Well you know, I had, uh, a show somewhere. It must have been locally. And, uh, the curator said, "Hey, you got a picture of yourself, Jerry? Uh, yeah let's get a punchy announcement card to send out." [00:12:00] I looked through the old negatives and, uh, I found a picture of my mother and me about five years old, just standing next to her, and it must have been 1928, 1929 I dated from. And it was just charming. And I was surprised at how lively my mother looked, and so well dressed! Sparkling. And there I was, a little pudgy kid, and how everybody seemed to enjoy that card. I had gone to houses and people have it up on their—I said, you know, that's—I only knew it was you, Jer, the minute we saw it. And I began thinking about where are these places now? It's not a new idea in photography. You know, before and after, and all, but this was my own. And it was this card, and that stoop, that I remembered. And I got a couple of older pictures that were reminiscent of something, and I said, you know, I'd like to go back to the old neighborhood and do a before-and-after of that spot if I could. And that's what that was about. [00:13:59] Some of them successful, and that seemed to be the

pull of the before-and-after, even without me. Some very difficult and—transitions too great connect, but enjoyable moments that occurred, uh. They make interesting stories. We got out of the car and were going to photograph the stoop where this original picture was taken, and uh, I had the picture. I had the picture and then tried to figure out what to do. The stoop had changed. They had it completely. And I saw somebody up in the window in the house. It was a private house. And they finally opened the window. It was, "Hi." And they said, "Oh, are you from the city?" [They laugh.] Then, "What do you mean?" "Well, are they going to take the thing?" Or, "Didn't we do this wash?" They thought we were there for something [they laugh] official mission, and it was just, no. We got on well. Yeah.

ROBERT SILBERMAN: That was not the first [laughs] transition too much. That was a revisiting of history in a powerful way. One of the things you've done in—since being in Massachusetts and New England is looked at history, both the literary history—

JEROME LIEBLING: Yes.

ROBERT SILBERMAN: —and then the sort of architectural and other history. I mean—

JEROME LIEBLING: Yes, yes.

ROBERT SILBERMAN: And two of your major projects, which I'd love to have you talk about, one is about specifically the Dickinson's of Amherst, but the other is your explorations in New England literary history.

JEROME LIEBLING: Yes. Yes.

ROBERT SILBERMAN: How did they get started?

JEROME LIEBLING: [00:16:00] Well, um, I do live just a few blocks from Emily Dickinson's house, one of—the main house she lived in. Two, I think, and one is gone. And it's the biggest site, you know, if you go to Amherst. Everyone says, Oh, see Emily Dickinson. So I had the general curiosity that anybody else has about, uh, Emily Dickinson. You know, I never read her poems in depth or—but I knew a little bit of the stories. And, uh, I went to visit the house. Then, it was owned by Amherst College, but not pushed very much as the sacred spot it is now. You know, they—and then I was introduced to a couple. He was a professor at Amherst and they lived in the house. There's a separate apartment around the back of the Dickinson house. And I got to know this fellow quite well. [00:18:02] And, uh, his wife, he would call her a Dickinson scholar. So I was in the house and I was able to go through the house more than most people, on occasion, or I could call on them. And, uh, I think early on, Ken and some of the students made a film on Dickinson. So there was some awareness of Dickinson, and there was the bedroom upstairs. And in the closet of the bedroom, they had her only known garment, the white dress that was hanging in a cleaning bag, a plastic bag, from the cleaner's. And there was all this same stuff that I'd been chasing forever about the past, the present. Are you there, or aren't you there? Are you live; are you dead? Um, and I photographed it, and somebody used it on a magazine cover, I think. Anyway, I got interested and asked if I could photograph on my own, um, and mostly in that bedroom. So that's how it got started. [00:20:00] There was—it was just a project on my own. And there's the cemetery. And I think I thought there was a residue on this particular place, not necessarily any other place. But here's a plot of land right downtown that's Emily's. Here's her house. And when her brother got married sometime in the Civil War, uh, Austin, the father built him a house right next door, and his wife. And that house was still lived in. Now that I started this thing, Austin, the brother, married, had three children, and everybody died off except the middle daughter. She lived through the 20th century and had a companion, guy from New York. Don't know what their relationship was. [00:22:00] But this guy was given the rights to the house and, uh, he married a woman. And so all the Dickinson's are dead. It's now 1980. The guy has died, but the wife is an old woman who appears in the book, still alive, and keeping the brother's house untouched. This is a wild story. And we have to go back a little bit because this is where Emily had lived. This is where the brother had lived. Emily died. The brother had died. The sister had died. This house was sold, and all the furniture and furnishings were brought over here, and this woman is preserving the remnants of the original. They remove quickly. She dies and the house was to be destroyed in the will because the daughter thought nobody could keep it up in the manner of the Dickinson's, or it would become a frat house or something. [00:24:02] And, uh, and then at the last minute, through machinations of—that are in the book [laughs] the house is saved. And Amherst College gets to own both houses, and I become the first photographer into this old haunted house where Gabe, the youngest son, died of cholera 100 years ago, and they closed the door in the room. And I walk in there, and it's a whoosh! You know. So that was the Dickinson's. And it's so strange; that was, for the first time, I really thought there was residue in much of what was going on and what I was trying to photograph in some of the stuff there. And then suddenly, well it's an interesting idea, something to pursue. And for some reason, I was in Concord, which has everybody.

ROBERT SILBERMAN: [Laughs.] All the famous Transcendentalists.

JEROME LIEBLING: Yeah. Yeah. Whoever you want, you know? Um, and I tried to get bits and pieces of Thoreau, though there's nothing of Thoreau other than the gravesite. [00:26:04] I mean, there's the—Walden Pond.

ROBERT SILBERMAN: An amusing picture of the pond.

JEROME LIEBLING: Yeah.

ROBERT SILBERMAN: The bathers and a guy painting [laughs].

JEROME LIEBLING: Yeah, yeah. And, uh, so for a little while, I chased after—and the most interesting of the many, or the most—or the easiest one was Mark Twain, which is not too far. It's only an hour in Hartford. And then Twain, you have, uh, a lot of—I had access to the house. So that's where it went. And then I said, "Well, what am I interested in?" I was interested in Whitman's. That was beyond New England but I went to Jersey and found it, and yeah. We talked about Pittsfield and Melville. Yeah, so there must be 10. Well there are certainly 10 Dickinson pictures.

ROBERT SILBERMAN: Many more?

JEROME LIEBLING: Yeah. Yeah.

ROBERT SILBERMAN: The—I should mention you are on record as saying, Hot damn, that woman is in that dress, upon seeing her dress hanging.

JEROME LIEBLING: Yeah. Yeah, yeah.

ROBERT SILBERMAN: But it strikes me as a project, you said, that sort of all came together, where it drew on all—not just your interest in decay and mortality. It is a spooky place but—and you didn't even mention the sexual hanky-panky part of the story.

JEROME LIEBLING: Yeah. Yeah, yeah.

ROBERT SILBERMAN: But you're photographing architecture, you're photographing architect—artifacts.

JEROME LIEBLING: Yeah.

ROBERT SILBERMAN: The furniture, the paintings on the wall—

JEROME LIEBLING: Yeah.

ROBERT SILBERMAN: —Emily's writing desk, and then graves—

JEROME LIEBLING: Yeah. [00:28:01]

ROBERT SILBERMAN: —gardens, so a lot of your different skills. We haven't touched on your Shaker architectural pictures.

JEROME LIEBLING: Yes, yes. Yeah.

ROBERT SILBERMAN: So, you know, the—

JEROME LIEBLING: Well—

ROBERT SILBERMAN: —there's a lot at work there and a lot of different kinds of photographs.

JEROME LIEBLING: Yeah. I mean, there are residues that are still alive of various places, various things. Um, one thing that, uh, I don't think I did very successfully, but you haven't seen, is in the East Side Tenement Museum. Did you see any of that? No. Well, it's a good story, and we have tape. Don't we? God.

ROBERT SILBERMAN: [Laughs] I'm on tape.

JEROME LIEBLING: If you're a New Yorker, you're doing these early pictures and—you know, I have my mother telling me the immigrant story. My mother lived in a tenement with her father and two brothers, and one girl, 16 years old. And she had to probably do everything. They can't speak English. They can't do anything. Imagine this. They come off the boat. Somebody finds him the apartment. My grandfather is very religious and he's just in the synagogue and Schumacher [ph] whatever. They live on the third floor or fourth floor, and there's one bath, one toilet in the basement in a five-story walkup, and my mother's scared to go down the basement. [00:29:59] And she—as a kid, I remember the story. There's a park across the street and she would go to the park. How long? How many years? How many days? How could you do that? All right? So they kept over the years, if you start with the tenements, they go way back to the Civil War or before that. Uh, and they have the outhouses in the back of the East Side tenements. Then they put it in the basement. Then they finally say, "Okay you have to put a toilet on each floor." And the landlord says, "I can't afford it." Kick everybody out of this

tenement and we'll just use it for storage. We change the nature of the building and we won't call it apartments so we don't have to put the toilets in the proper place. And it's New York. The world goes on, 20th century. They —somebody finds this building that has all these apartments from the time they've kicked out all the people.

ROBERT SILBERMAN: Like the son's room in the Dickinson house, left untouched as a time capsule. [00:32:02]

JEROME LIEBLING: Yeah. And I photographed there, not too well, I must say. I don't know why I messed up. I think I overdid the lighting or something. But one interesting picture, they had piecework, you know, in the room. And they kept—they didn't have a piece of paper to write down how many suits, and coats, and sweaters, or whatever they made. And they wrote it on a wall. It's a lovely picture, if you know what the hell it's about. Yeah. So but then there are a lot of places, there ain't nothing left, or nothing that I could see. It just came and went, you know.

ROBERT SILBERMAN: Well, we've talked about a lot of projects. We've touched on some. One other thing I just wanted to ask about maybe in general, if you want to get specific, you have done some wonderful photographs abroad. I mean, we've been talking Minnesota, New York.

JEROME LIEBLING: Oh, yes.

ROBERT SILBERMAN: Spain, Mexico—

JEROME LIEBLING: Spain. Spain, yeah. Yeah.

ROBERT SILBERMAN: —London, Israel. Sometimes on sabbatical, sometimes—

JEROME LIEBLING: Yeah.

ROBERT SILBERMAN: —when you're there for a while, sometimes briefer, but—

JEROME LIEBLING: Yeah, yeah. Spain was, uh—I liked the three pictures at the Currier very much.

ROBERT SILBERMAN: The hand coming out of the wrap.

JEROME LIEBLING: Well no, that's Mexico.

ROBERT SILBERMAN: That's Mexico. The girl on the—the woman on the street with the young child—

JEROME LIEBLING: The woman on the street and the bike—

ROBERT SILBERMAN: —and the very—

JEROME LIEBLING: —passes behind the—

ROBERT SILBERMAN: —pretty person in the background and—

JEROME LIEBLING: Yeah.

ROBERT SILBERMAN: —Jerry Liebling in the front, but a wonderful picture.

JEROME LIEBLING: Yeah. And that, uh, I mean I had her all set up and, uh, then this bike—

ROBERT SILBERMAN: The bike came—

JEROME LIEBLING: —came right by. [00:34:05] Well, it's an early Gary Alman [ph], you know. It just had this thing slide by. And then the woman in the church—

ROBERT SILBERMAN: Oh, yes, the washerwoman.

JEROME LIEBLING: —I had—the washerwoman.

ROBERT SILBERMAN: On the far—

JEROME LIEBLING: Who, uh, yeah—

ROBERT SILBERMAN: —yeah, great.

JEROME LIEBLING: And that guy in the third one has the very black ivory comes out. He's in the lottery office in the morning.

ROBERT SILBERMAN: Okay, yeah, with the strips—

JEROME LIEBLING: Yeah, yeah.

ROBERT SILBERMAN: —holding the strips for sale.

JEROME LIEBLING: Yeah. And those are all—when I was in Minnesota, as you know, you freeze to death [they laugh] 10 months of the year. I finally, after 10 years, got a sabbatical and I wanted to go abroad. I had a lot kids, a lot of schlepping to do, and I said, "Well southern Spain has pretty good weather in the winter. If we could get there for the winter, it wouldn't be bad and it's in Europe, and it's a different thing." So that's how I got—and it was a wonderful time. I mean, wonderful people worked and did—but I mean, I got to photograph. The kids were in school and yeah, did a lot of—lot of pictures that I thought were strong. And then from there, we went to England and I lived in England and did a little bit, running around all the time.

ROBERT SILBERMAN: And you've—well you should mention [laughs] well I mean you—Mexico and Israel, but we should mention one other state, that is Florida—

JEROME LIEBLING: Yeah.

ROBERT SILBERMAN: —where you did the handball pictures—

JEROME LIEBLING: Yeah, yeah.

ROBERT SILBERMAN: —which are one of your strongest, and the pictures of the women on the street and some other pictures. [00:36:03]

JEROME LIEBLING: Yeah. Yeah, yeah. Well they're a continuation of the same people.

ROBERT SILBERMAN: Yeah. That's New Yorkers in a way, gone down.

JEROME LIEBLING: That's New Yorkers who went to Florida, yeah. Yeah. So there's no, uh, new openings.

ROBERT SILBERMAN: Jerry, your exhibit at the Currier includes some very large prints, beautiful prints, done digitally, not darkroom. And of course, the photo world has changed and one of the big changes is analog to digital, both for making photographs and printing photographs. How has that affected you?

JEROME LIEBLING: Well, it depends upon how long I live.

ROBERT SILBERMAN: [Laughs.]

JEROME LIEBLING: You know, the uh—I think it's all changed. I don't know the direction of what digital is going to do with what we call photography. I'm a cusp [ph] person because I come from one time, watching this change. And I think there are recent books. Ricklet [ph], what's his name?

ROBERT SILBERMAN: Fred Richmond [ph].

JEROME LIEBLING: Fred Richmond has just written a book. I haven't read it, but he's trying to question what has happened, or what will happen, just in the numbers, the gigabytes—

ROBERT SILBERMAN: Right.

JEROME LIEBLING: —the terminology that never existed. [00:38:01] And, uh, I can't tell you what, um, this is going to do. It's not the first time that there's been this massive change. Certainly, if we go back in the history, um, and you say, here Rob and Jerry, the two daguerreotypists in Boston, producing iconic pictures. You needn't really ever change anything, you know. One of, uh, the Supreme Court justices—

ROBERT SILBERMAN: —Lemuel Shaw.

JEROME LIEBLING: Lemuel Shaw. It's a picture for the ages.

ROBERT SILBERMAN: Southworth and Hawes, yeah.

JEROME LIEBLING: Yeah, Southworth and Hawes. Why ever? I mean, I've got a book of Southworth and Hawes. It's inspirational whenever I look at it, you know? So what happened? They went somewhere else. I mean, if I could go one Lemuel Shaw or—no, who's the other one of the senator gripping a—Benjamin Webster. Webster.

ROBERT SILBERMAN: Daniel.

JEROME LIEBLING: Daniel. Daniel Webster. My goodness. With the—they didn't have an exposure meter. They were choking from the damn fumes of the—and that was forever. Now, there's a guy. [00:40:00] It's terrible when I forget the names. A very nice guy, photographer in New York. You should know his name. He did a book on working people in New York. Anyway, he's doing a film on digital and he's interviewing photographers, mostly enthusiasts. I got it, this is it, we're going. This [inaudible] and then someone said, "Well you know, this guy Jerry Liebling." He said, "Oh, he's another old guy." Yeah! Oh, that would be a nice twist. So he came. And he wasn't quite sure what he was looking for. He was looking for the answer. What is going to happen with digital? And will digital—will the process itself be better, smarter, and just make better, smarter pictures? And I sort of said, well I thought it happens to be the person. And if they're better and smarter then maybe they'll be able to handle digital in a better and smarter way. You know, I wasn't too profound. He wasn't too profound either.

ROBERT SILBERMAN: [Laughs.]

JEROME LIEBLING: Uh, you know, but I didn't think you can get smarter pictures. Of course, digital is smart. And again, talked about Southworth and Hawes, and what are you going to do with Lemuel Shaw? Well, I don't know if he knew Lemuel Shaw. And, uh, so I didn't know that anybody—it's changed. I remember first coming to Hampshire and one of the projects we had was the snapshot. [00:42:07] The authenticity of the snapshot, what it presented. And you know, there are these collections of snapshot things. Oh, that's all gone. There's no snapshot. Nobody even, you know, cares about where or how, or what do you do with it. So—and I was teasing this film guy, and I said, "Do you know who's the first digital photographer?" And he said, "Really? Who's the very first?" I said, "The very first, Ben Shahn." And he didn't know what the hell I was referring to. I said, "Oh, he used to take all of his photographs, and then he would paint them, and he made all these changes." He was—before the machine, he was doing it. So, um, I can't think in gigabytes. All I can say is that I happen to like salami sandwiches and they start making salami, I'm in trouble or I've got to forget it and see where the world is going to go. You know? Meanwhile, now there are people who can look at my pictures and be interested. They know there's something going on there. What's going to happen after those aren't made anymore? Just as Southworth and Hawes, what happened? Where the hell did it go? [00:44:05] You know? It ain't there anymore. And there must be some parallel. Well, we know if we were sitting here talking about the automobile and it was 1895, would we guess right? I doubt it. And you can—the only thing I can say is we ain't winning. Digital, it's here. It's going to do it.

ROBERT SILBERMAN: But you, um, by being able to use digital printing for the—

JEROME LIEBLING: Yes. Yes.

ROBERT SILBERMAN: —Currier exhibit.

JEROME LIEBLING: I just did a little, uh, you know, yeah. A little something to keep—to reinforce, you know, my old thing. Yeah. It's like, uh, they're trying to hold on to the fins on the car and put them in this other shape, but I don't know. When you get these quotations of four million pictures a second are transmitted, I don't know what that means, where it goes, and what it does. Do I like a JPEG and I could send you—yeah. It seems interesting. I don't know if it's worth all that tumult, you know? And I do like it. I still read the morning paper, so you can see how far back I am.

ROBERT SILBERMAN: [Laughs.] Me too. [00:46:00]

JEROME LIEBLING: Yeah.

ROBERT SILBERMAN: Maybe on that note, we should close. Thank you very much, Jer.

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