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REBECCA SILBERZAN

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RESIDENCES:

- **AUSTRIA: VIENNA**
- **BRAZIL: SAO PAULO**
- **THE US: NEW YORK CITY**

LEVINE: Today is July 14th, 1996. I'm here in the Lower East Side, on Grand Street, 578 Grand Street, with Mrs. Rebecca Silberzam—

SILBERZAN: Right.

LEVINE: Who came to this country when she was newly married for the first time.

SILBERZAN: Yeah, 19—1928.

LEVINE: She left Europe in 1928, went to Brazil, Sao Paolo, first.

SILBERZAN: Yes, then I came here in 1930.

LEVINE: 1930 she came here to the United States.

SILBERZAN: With a baby.

LEVINE: With her first baby. And her name at that time was Rebecca Sternberg.

SILBERZAN: Right.

LEVINE: So today Mrs. Silberzan is eighty-eight, eighty-eight years old.

SILBERZAN: Yeah. How do you know my age?

LEVINE: Well, I have the questionnaire. So that's how—I have inside information.

SILBERZAN: [Laughs] Okay!

LEVINE: Okay, we're going to start now, and I trust—whatever you can remember, because this is a very interesting story, and we'd love to get as much of it down on tape as possible.

SILBERZAN: It was very interesting for me; it was painful, because I had no help. With a baby, and a strange language, in a strange country. I learned the language in three months. They thought I was born there! I learned it very fast, the language.

LEVINE: Okay, well let's start out—you were twenty-one years old when you came here, so you probably have a lot of memories of Austria, before?

SILBERZAN: Oh, yeah.

LEVINE: Where in Austria were you born?

SILBERZAN: Vienna.

LEVINE: Vienna. Did you live in Vienna the whole time, up until you left?

SILBERZAN: Yes, well yes. You know, I ran away, because—you want to know that? Because a young man came over to me—I was walking with a young man there. He says, I don't know if you understand: “[German]”. I says, “This is something that is too strong for me! I never heard of things like this.” But that's the start of that.

LEVINE: Now what—translate what he said to you.

SILBERZAN: [German]. "If not for Jews, we would have everything." In a sense, the young Germans, the young, you know, they had the poison in them. They gave it out after, you know, because Hitler, it started already, you know. A low start, but it started already with Hitler. You know, they wanted—they didn't know, you know. They thought Hitler will give them life, will give them everything. Which, to the end, he did! He did! And when he said this, I says to my mother, I says, "Mom, let's pack up everything, and let's go where we can go, where we can enter." "What do you think? You're crazy! A young girl, you're born here! My parents born here. And here, you want?" "Yes, I know, because it's going to be very bad. I have a intuition: it's going to be very bad." She says, "No, I'm not going." I have brothers, and my father was in the army then, the Austrian Army, fighting for the country. Look what they did to him! Well, I says to my mother, "I will get married." I was married in January, and that was in June. I says, "You know, I have to run away." And I packed up; I went with my husband. He took me to Sao Paolo, to Rio de Janeiro, Sao Paolo there, to their [unclear] country.

LEVINE: Why did he take you to Sao Paolo?

SILBERZAN: Yes, he told me why, after. I says, "Why did you take me? Why not to America?" I have here brothers, I have family. "Because you're too smart for America."

LEVINE: Why do you think he really took you?

SILBERZAN: He says I'm too smart to go to America. In America, too many smart people, and you will be between them. It's no good. So he left me; he went by himself to America, back to where he came from.

LEVINE: He was born in America?

SILBERZAN: No, he was in the army. He came from the army in 1918, and went to America. This I don't remember, because I was so young then.

LEVINE: But he was living in America before he came back to Austria and married you?

SILBERZAN: Oh yeah, he came to visit his parents, and then my mother—my father had passed away, you know, five months before. So my mother says, "Look, he's a nice fellow, you know, American. Get married!" So I was so stupid, you know. So many years ago, you listened to parents a lot. So I got married, and then you know, he took me to Brazil. I came in there; I was strange. No language, no family, nobody! And I was so young! So, take me to hotel. He says, "You know young lady, you're pregnant." I says, "I don't believe it." I know, I can't believe it, because

I told him I don't want to have children, five years. So he used to tell me, "I'm so much older, I'm thirty years older than you. I can't wait." So I had [unclear]. He left, back to America, and I suffered. I had a neighbor. She used to tell me, "Look, when it will be time to go to the hospital, knock on the door, knock on the wall." But I was so naïve, I felt terrible to knock, in the middle of the night. Usually that comes in the middle of the night. And she called her husband. "[Unclear], come to get a taxi. We have to bring Rebecca to the hospital." The hospitals there are not in the city. No hospital, city. And it took, you know, an hour and a half. And I came to the hospital, I was ready to have the baby. Now I have the baby, and then one day or two days, they send me home. Who was home? Nobody! I was alone, and so young. And here, I was mature, at a very young age. So I says, "I'm not going to get lost." I bought a sewing machine, and I started working in the house where I lived.

LEVINE: What did you sew?

SILBERZAN: I usually [coughs], I usually, you know, liked to make patterns, and ladies' clothes, when I was very young.

LEVINE: Were there any other people from Austria around that you could speak with?

SILBERZAN: Well, there was one young man, my husband's friend. He was [unclear] there. He was very rich. He says to me, "Come on. Why do you go to America with a baby? Your baby will be my baby. I love you. Don't go there." And I was a fool, so many years ago, I was very naïve. I says, "My baby has a father! How can I do that?" And I left there, you know, and I worked very hard to feed the baby, to do things, you know. I had nobody to help me.

LEVINE: Did you write to your mother when you were in Brazil?

SILBERZAN: Before I left my mother, I said to my mother, because she didn't [unclear] because I didn't want to marry him. Very bad, I didn't want to marry that, you know, Sternberg. But, you know, mother says. His mother begged, and my mother—well, so, you know, I says, "Look, I have to buy a machine." I bought, had no, but an old machine, to pay it out. And I worked, little by little. I fed my baby, fed myself, now. But it was very difficult, very hard. Then, he says, you know, after all, I told the people, "The baby has a father." They send, you know, he didn't send me money. My brothers, my uncle sent me money. And I went over there. They bought the lowest near the rear walls, near the wheels, on the boat. I came by boat. Don't forget, it's already here, I came 1930. It's already how many years? Sixty, sixty-three years. So

I had very, very hard life. So you know, but you have to know how to help yourself.

LEVINE: Well, did you correspond with your husband at that time, when he was in America and you were in Brazil?

SILBERZAN: No, I didn't want to write to him. I says, "You go. Don't let me know where you are. I don't want to know where you are, or what you are." But, you know, it's still legal. You have to get a divorce if you don't want it, and so many years ago there was not such a thing as a divorce. So I have to suffer. Well, the baby, you know, was nine months old. And you know, I sold that machine, you know, for more than I paid for it. And I said, "I have to go to America."

LEVINE: Why did you want to go to America?

SILBERZAN: I had brothers here, my own family here! That was the wrong thing for him, that he took me here. But you know, it was done already. I couldn't be different; I couldn't help myself. Only helped myself, I mean, to feed myself, the baby, and everything. Well, I made for the baby all kind of little things. It took two weeks, and I was all two weeks sick on the boat. So there was, you know, the Captain from the boat, you know. That was my luck that she was a gorgeous baby, gorgeous! So you know, when he passed by in his white uniform, she opened her arms: take me. He took her, and I went to the first class. Then we were first class. Now, now I think all classes are the same. I don't know.

LEVINE: You were in steerage, but because the Captain took a liking to your baby, you went up to first?

SILBERZAN: Yeah, sure. She was a gorgeous baby, a gorgeous baby! So I had a little help like that, otherwise, when I came here, you wouldn't believe it! He didn't prepare--one little room. I had to go to one brother for a month, then to the other brother for a month, and [unclear] like this, travel around. I says, "My dear, this is not for me." I can't travel like that. I had to go to work. I looked for a job right away. She was only nine months old; I put her in a day nursery, and I went and looked for a job. And I got a job right away.

LEVINE: What kind of job did you get?

SILBERZAN: You know, operating on the samples. Of course, I knew that.

LEVINE: Women's clothing?

SILBERZAN: Women's dress, yes.

LEVINE: And where did you put—what arrangements was it possible for you to make for your baby, to be taken care of?

SILBERZAN: You mean when I came here?

LEVINE: Yeah, when she was nine months old.

SILBERZAN: Oh, she was in a day nursery. I went in the morning, and I made it my business to come in time to pick her up.

LEVINE: Well who ran the nursery, do you remember?

SILBERZAN: Oh, it was [coughs] on Third Avenue, Fifth Street, Third Avenue, Daughters of Israel. Beautiful, big nursery! Because I had her some place else. When I come from work, I hear my baby crying. You recognize your baby's voice. I ran over there—my baby hugs the wall, and she's afraid to fall. She's standing on the bench, wet from top to bottom. I says, and I told her, I says to her, something, you know. "I can't be your customer." I took the baby, put her there, Daughters of Israel. It's on Third Avenue and Fifth Street. And I lived on Eleventh Street and Avenue B. Imagine, I had to walk so many blocks, carried her. I did it, of course, I loved her. It's not like nowadays, they throw the baby away here, to the city. I wouldn't give her for no money in the world! So, like this.

LEVINE: So were you happy with the Daughters of Israel? Were you happy with the care they gave?

SILBERZAN: There, the Daughters, oh, yes! It was beautiful! Just like, it was like a hotel. When I brought her to there, you know, I had to carry her bed. She was asleep. I put her in that little bed. She didn't know who brought her, only she knew when I came to pick her up. It was a very sad situation, you know. It was very difficult for me, but I worked it through.

LEVINE: Now how many years did you go to work and leave your baby at the Daughter's of Israel? How long?

SILBERZAN: How long I worked?

LEVINE: Was it years?

SILBERZAN: Forty years! I worked forty years. Even with my husband. Then my second husband didn't let me work anymore. My first husband didn't—

he was a cutter, that's all. He worked three months a year. The whole year, three months. How much could you make?

LEVINE: But did you come and see your husband, your first husband, when you came here?

SILBERZAN: Yes!

LEVINE: So what did you find, when you saw your husband then?

SILBERZAN: I found hate! Hate! I didn't like him, hate, because he came. He says, you know, I don't think it—because my brother sent me the money, my uncle sent me some money also, so I had like that. And my daughter. He never liked the child. Of course, he wasn't there when she was born. And I worked all the years. I sewed for him, you know. I made things for him. I washed, I ironed his shirts. You know, years ago, people were so stupid, so ignorant! His shirts, I starched his shirts, pressed. Got [unclear] a little, the collar, when they starch things, it folds up. It was a little fold, a little turn, yeah. He says, "What kind of work is that? What, you can't iron a shirt?"

LEVINE: So what did he do when he wasn't working? For nine months out of the year, what did he do? Where did he go, or what did he do?

SILBERZAN: He was—he sat down sometimes on the couch, and looks out the window. Later on, you know the army has surplus things that has to be fixed. He went to work for fifty cents an hour to sew a button on! You know, [unclear] on Eighth Avenue, the uniforms that they have to be fixed is there on Fifth Avenue and, Fourteenth Street and Fifth Avenue, is the army surplus. So, he sat there for fifty cents an hour! I didn't know. I used to make him nice sandwich, you go to work. A woman makes a sandwich for her husband, for lunch! I made a nice sandwich, and you know, put it in a nice bag, he shouldn't be, you know. Until, I says, "How much you make?" He didn't give me anything! I worked! "What is it? Where do you work?" He didn't tell me where he works. "How much do you make?" He never told me. Then somehow, I found out: he makes fifty cents an hour. Before he worked, you know, they make, for the army, the airplanes, you know, and sheet metal, sheet. And somebody passed by, you know. The metal has paint, you know, very bad for you could get poisoned. So you know, somebody passed by with sheet metal on a dolly. You know what a dolly is, yeah? And cut his hand. He comes home with that. I says, "Come on. You're old enough. And I think, I see you're smart enough to go to a doctor there, you know, to see why the blood is running?" This was colored sheet metal, it's poison. He went the second day. So doctor says, "Look, your whole leg is poisoned." He went to doctor, weeks and weeks and

weeks, and I had to work to support him. Sometimes, you know, I had no time. Sometimes I cooked something, you know. He says, "I ate already." Instead of being nice, and lenient, you know, after all that work. So I see, you know, there's no use. He's a—excuse me, a lemon, nothing. So I says to him, "You know what? Aren't you ashamed? You're intelligent." He was very intelligent. You know, he learned, in Austria the people are very educated. "Aren't you ashamed? You throw away your intelligence, fifty cents an hour?" So I happened, so I worked and gave him every week the money, he should do a little shopping. When I come home, I'm tired already. You know, the baby, I have to run for the baby. I have to make dinner, have to make everything. "How come you haven't got the decency, and do the shopping? When I come home, and have everything." No, he didn't. So I says, "You know what? From now on, the money is my money, not yours." [Laughs] "I will not give you support. I will not give you that you should go shopping. You don't do it anyway." Same time, he didn't like the baby. He didn't! She was a gorgeous baby. He didn't like her! So I had a problem that also. So, you know, time goes, child grows up. She was eight years old when I have another child. Of course, he starts hollering, "Better you bring to the hospital, not to have any more children." I says, how can I have one child, then another, you know? I have to go to work! You don't show any effort to do something. I shouldn't have to feel that way." But he didn't care. He sat down on the couch. One thing he knew: how deep the oceans are, how deep the rivers are. He sat down and wrote everything down, you know. That's all. This is your work? This is not my work. So he says, "What, what do you do? You sit all day in a chair?" There was times I couldn't get up, sitting all day on chair, to work on a machine, to feed the machine fast. He didn't want to know that. So, I suffered thirty-nine years with him.

LEVINE: Thirty-nine. And how did the marriage end then? What happened to end the marriage?

SILBERZAN: Well, I says, you know, "Go away from me! Forget about me!" He says, "In even a hundred years, I will not give you a divorce." So many years ago, you couldn't get remarried without a divorce. Now, there's—but not then. But when I came, I was there on the boat. I was two weeks on the boat, from Sao Paolo, from Santos. The boat was in Santos. From Santos to Ellis Island took two weeks. There was another lady. They didn't go over to the baby. She was older, a little bit older. The baby had smelled—she didn't. I prepared diapers, I prepared things, you know. Nobody likes a dirty baby. A baby smells if she's not clean. So you know, she was so jealous! They took my baby, not hers.

LEVINE: They took your baby for what, for what reason?

SILBERZAN: To play with her, to give me a little time, yes, I should—otherwise had to take the baby down, down, all the way down. I don't know if you were on a boat, you know how it is.

LEVINE: In steerage. Well, what was the name of that boat, that you came from?

SILBERZAN: Yeah, Southern Cross.

LEVINE: Southern Cross. And when that boat came into the New York harbor, do you remember that?

SILBERZAN: Oh, do I remember! They picked [unclear], that's it. They picked people. There's a doctor, nurses. They examined you. If something was wrong with you, they sent you back!

LEVINE: This was on the ship, or this was Ellis Island?

SILBERZAN: On the boat. On the boat before we had to go get off the boat. So everybody would tell you, so many people they sent back, because one has glaucoma, and one has, you know, some other sickness. They sent them back. Not like now. Now, you have AIDS and you have whatnot, you know. They spread the carpets for them out: come, America. Yeah.

LEVINE: What are your impressions of Ellis Island? What do you remember about being there?

SILBERZAN: I'll tell you. Then, I was very bitter. I bitter—my husband, you know, how he acted. Of course, my brother came to pick me up, my oldest brother. I never knew him. You know, when I was born, he was in America already. So you know, and then they ask, natural they ask, your husband? He came over, he says, "Look, does she look like that, so nice? She doesn't look so nice, and she isn't that nice."

LEVINE: He said that?

SILBERZAN: Yes, to the officials that checked everybody. So he says, "Well, she's a nice girl, she's a young girl. Nothing is wrong with her. She's healthy, happy, with the baby." He didn't like when he said that. So I came off the boat, you know. I went with a train to my brother's, not to my house. He didn't prepare one room. It was so cheap! I says, "How come you didn't prepare the room, I should be able to put the baby down, and says, this is your room?" Never.

- LEVINE: This was the brother you didn't know?
- SILBERZAN: Yeah, I went to the brother. I didn't know my brother, you know, when, so many years. He left, and I was either born, or I wasn't born yet.
- LEVINE: So your husband came to Ellis Island and got you, but then you didn't go home with him, you went to your brother's?
- SILBERZAN: I had to go to my brother's! I had to go to my brother.
- LEVINE: How did you get to your brother's? How did you know how to go?
- SILBERZAN: See, my husband was a friend to my oldest brother. And I didn't know. If I would know that, you know—and something funny is, before I married him, I asked my brother here. I says, "How is he? What kind of person is he?" They didn't answer. [Coughs] When he came, I says to my mother, "I don't want to get married, I don't, I don't. I don't want to get married!" Well, you know, mother says yes, so I had to get married. Do you know, believe it or not, when I made my dress, my—
- LEVINE: Wedding dress?
- SILBERZAN: My wedding dress on the top was wet from tears, I cried so much! It was wet from tears! And that was a sign, that was a good sign, you know. Because I cried the whole time. Even 'til I came here.
- LEVINE: Well, tell me about your early life in Austria. Where in Austria—it was Vienna. And you stayed in Vienna that whole time?
- SILBERZAN: No, I went to school out of Vienna, Oberestereich. [PH]
- LEVINE: Say it again?
- SILBERZAN: Oberestereich. It's a little further up from Vienna. The name is Oberestereich. I was born with the language like that, so yes. So you know, and I was very happy there!
- LEVINE: What was school like for you, when you went to school?
- SILBERZAN: Oh, it was wonderful! You had to—there, in Oberestereich, in Vienna, a day after six years old, they send over to an officer to see why didn't you send your child to school?
- LEVINE: Was there any problem between Jewish children and adults, and Gentiles?

SILBERZAN: None at all, no! After, when I grow up a little bit, then they had the sign of Hitler. Then you know, began very sad. Very sad, for no reason at all. My youngest brother had a little boy. They called him to the army; he went. Then you know, the little boy, three years old, he was with his mother. Two soldiers grabbed one little foot, the other the other one. They tore him in half, and the mother was forced to watch how they do to her child, and then they threw him into the fire! Can you—how can you forget that?

LEVINE: This was when you were still in Austria, before you left?

SILBERZAN: No. I left before it happened. I wasn't there when it happened. See, because I told my mother, "Look, he came over and says to me, [German]." I says, "Mom, pack up! I see it's coming. A very bad situation it'll be!" She didn't realize that; I knew it. I was young then. So I says, "Why? I'm going to go! I can't remain!" No. So you know, somebody told me what they did with her? They shot her from the back; they killed her, that's all. And my brothers, he had two gorgeous daughters. A neighbor that he went to school with him, that lived next door to him, went to school with him, he needed sugar, so he came into my brother. He says, "Josef?" Joseph. "Yeah?" "I need sugar. I have to kill you!" He says, "What do you mean, you have to kill me? We are friends, in school!" [Unclear], my brother had two daughters. He came at night, killed him, the two daughters, and his wife, because to get a pound of sugar. Unbelievable! I wasn't there; I didn't see it. I was away, but somebody told me.

LEVINE: What was school like for you? Did you go to school with Jewish children, and Gentiles?

SILBERZAN: No, mixed. Jewish and not Jewish.

LEVINE: And what was school like? How did you--?

SILBERZAN: I loved school. So my professor always—I remember his name.

LEVINE: What?

SILBERZAN: Oberlehrer Hermann. [PH]Hermann. Oh, he loved me so, you know! He was my teacher for music, and then every day. He was crazy about me. He used to say, in German, the girl that sat near me, you know, not a Jewish girl, blonde. Big, husky. My mother had nothing to give us, you know. It was war already. So my mother took a potato, and grated it, and made pancakes from the potato. And that girl had a big loaf of white bread. And she says, "Rebecca, will you give me that

pancake? I'll give you half of my bread." I gave her the pancake; she gave me half of her bread. Because my mother, you know, my father was in the army, with three sons, my three brothers, in the army also. One never came back. And that Germany, that Austria, did to the Jewish people that. But it was wrong, wrong. The people, you know, the young people, they didn't know. I don't know how you say it, you know. They were needed into do it! That's all, yeah.

LEVINE: So, what was your mother's name?

SILBERZAN: Libby.

LEVINE: And her maiden name?

SILBERZAN: Oh, I don't. I'll tell you something, I don't remember. I think Banditt [PH], or, I don't know. I'll tell you, I don't remember.

LEVINE: And how about your father's name?

SILBERZAN: My father's name was Joseph.

LEVINE: Joseph. And did you have grandparents around where you were living?

SILBERZAN: Yes, I had—my grandparents, my father's parents, were dead already. But my mother's parents were still alive. But you know what happened to them? That's all. I have one aunt, a single one. And my mother had twins, and you know, [unclear], she came in and sat on the baby, and killed the baby. You know, people are, you know, I don't know. But it was very sad. But when I went out, from that area, I got a little bit more, I don't know. Not sophisticated, more smarter, to think what to do. Because I went through such a hard, hard life.

LEVINE: Do you remember any good times with your grandparents when you were a little girl?

SILBERZAN: No, no.

LEVINE: What good times can you remember? Growing up in Austria, what made you feel happy?

SILBERZAN: You know what, when I was young, you know, reading. I was reading, reading a lot, you know. And you know, when reading, and planting. I loved to plant a lot of flowers, yes. So, but my grandparents, you know, I don't [unclear] very well. My father's parents, they were dead, but my mother's parents—my mother's mother, when I got married, she says, "I'm not going to your wedding." "Why?" "Because I don't want to."

“Look Ma,” I says to her, “I’m going to make you a dress, a nice dress. I know how to sew.” And of course, I was very young. My mother had no girls before me, you know, only boys, boys. So she didn’t know how to dress me. She was a tall woman, and she gave me her jacket, it was down to her toes, down to the floor! And I used to cry going to school. I says, “I’m not going to put it on.” So I went to school like that, you know. She didn’t give a damn, you know, what I do, you know. So when I was already nine years old, I says, “Oh, I have to do something.” Now I remember! It’s so—you know, funny thing. Many things I don’t; this I remember so well. I bought a piece of material, a dress color, with little white dots. And I made myself a dress. So this [unclear], it was no big deal. But I had to make a sailor collar. I remember, I took paper and made a pattern for the sailor collar, and made myself a blouse. When I was finished, my mother couldn’t get over! “How did you do it? Where did you get?” I didn’t let her see before I finished it. And everybody—nine years old! I had to support myself. That tells you, I grew up to know that I have to support myself.

LEVINE: So in other words, you started making your own clothes--?

SILBERZAN: Not my father. My father was so good to me! He never—when he left the house, never came home empty-handed to me. Only, I remember, he bought me a beautiful little coat, and a hat, and shoes, and patent leather shoes. And every time, when he went out. He made me a doll. He was really, you know, he could do those with his hands, you know, very [unclear]. So you know, make me a doll with hands and legs and everything, you know. He made me ice skates, I should go ice skating like other children go. He was, he was so, you know, so good to me! I never could forget that! Yeah, you never can forget a father so good. And the mother, you know, she was busy with the boys. So, it wasn’t a good time. Since I was—I could say, since I was born, it wasn’t such a good time. I guess, for everybody, like that, because my father was always in the army. He was shot, you know. He came from the army to a hospital in Vienna. My mother was sitting there at hand; he didn’t know for six weeks who was sitting there. Then he came to. He looked like my professor, like a brother. I says to my professor, Herr Hermann, you say it in German, “You look like my father exactly.” When my father came from the hospital, it took a year he came to himself. The government sent him the best cream, and the best of everything, he should come to himself. And believe it or not, after the year they took him again to the war, to the army. And my mother remained with three small children. So you know, I guess I’m too used to it to try for myself, to do for myself. That is not a new thing. When I came here to America, I put—one week I was here, I went to work. And I put a baby in a nursery. One week! When she was two years old, she used to tell me, “Mommy, you know what? I’ll be a very good girl! Take me with

you.” You know, when I sit on the chair and think, my baby, how she feels. But I couldn’t help it. I couldn’t help it, you know. Yes, she used to say, “I’ll be a good girl. Take me with you, don’t leave me here.”

LEVINE: When did life start getting better for you? After you were in this country, and your baby started getting older?

SILBERZAN: Yeah, you know, I’ll tell you something, a funny thing. I was not—you know, I was always used to work. So I don’t know, you know. I was always busy working, working. When I came home, and I had my apartment already. I went to look for an apartment. He didn’t look. He was a boarder by somebody, had a nice room, my husband, a nice room and food and everything. And then I took an apartment; he came. I says, “Who called you?” I says, “There, you have a nice room. Go there, where you have the nice room.” He pushed himself in. But look, I couldn’t help it. I had to work, that’s all. And my child grew up like that, and he didn’t like her.

LEVINE: And then you had a baby eight years later?

SILBERZAN: Eight years later, yes. It was a boy. He wanted a boy, yeah.

LEVINE: What was your husband’s name, your first husband?

SILBERZAN: Morris.

LEVINE: Morris. And your son’s name? Your son, your little boy’s name?

SILBERZAN: My son’s name was Michael.

LEVINE: Michael. And your daughter’s name?

SILBERZAN: Lily. Leah. I don’t know, now she likes the name Leah. But all the years, I called her Lily, yes.

LEVINE: So time went on, and then at some point, what, your husband either died, or did you get a divorce?

SILBERZAN: No, he died. He died. You know, when I came home from work—after all, he was still at home, sitting, and looking out at the air, like this. I says, “What do you see there? What do you see there?” Sitting on the couch, there. The couch, not this, had a hole already from sitting that long in the same place. So he says, “So what do you do?” I says, “I work.” “What do you do, work? This is work?” he used to say. “You sitting on the chair?” “I use a machine.” This was not work to him. You know, that got me so nervous, when he said this. It was so hard for me,

you know. When I got up, I sometimes couldn't sleep, and I was sitting all day long at the machine, and feeding the machine like that. So he said that this is [unclear]. You see, then when he got sick, I really was not interested too much. But you know, still, you know, my children's father. My younger daughter, you know, was an accident. I would never want to have—oh, I'm telling you! But I never told her this. So, she was you know, ten or twelve years old already. She went and got herself a cup of tea. The water was boiling hot, boiling—tea! He gave her from the back, a push, and instead of going into the cup, it went on her hand. I had to rush, you know, to the hospital, they should do something for it. It was blistered up like anything, yeah. You see, he was that kind of a person. And immaculate. When I had the grandchild, he went over to see, like to a grandfather. "Go away, you know. You'll make dirty my pants." He never wanted [unclear].

LEVINE: So was that the final straw? Well, he got sick. Was he sick then?

SILBERZAN: Yes, he got sick. And he went to—I don't know if you know the Souvenir Hospital. It's further down, near the water. It was so windy, so called. And I said, "Couldn't you take a taxi for that?" "No!" He had a doctor, says, "You cannot go home. You have to go to the hospital. Your lungs are full with water." He didn't want to go, but next day he went to the hospital. I had to go with him. After all, on the paper, you're his wife [laughs]. So, you couldn't do different! And they kept him there six months. He was very sick. He had no kidneys. He told me it's from the army, because he was in, you know, they made—their legs, you know, he was in the water too much, you know, there fighting. So he says he was in the army, and he developed this. So you know what they told him? Can't go home. So he went to the hospital, then he went to another hospital. They gave me pills to give him. I came to see him, the pills are under the pillow. That's all I could. So then I took him home. I took him home, you know, the middle of the week. Saturday, I see, you know, he's very sick. I'm going to call the doctor. "No, don't call the doctor!" You know, he stretched out; he was almost dead. Came two doctors to revive him, so sick he was. And he said—you know, he was very stubborn. He used to think whatever he says is set, that's all. It's a good [unclear], that's all. You can't convince him: maybe this is right. No, he didn't take those things. Whatever I say, it's that good, that's all.

LEVINE: So what did he say? What was he convinced of?

SILBERZAN: He didn't want to go to the doctor. The doctor, you know, had to come to him, now. But he got very sick, and they came an ambulance, and they took him to the hospital. And he was there, you know, I don't know, what, six months? Took him home, then I took him back, you

know. And he didn't exist too long. Because he was, his kidneys—the doctor told me it's paper, not kidneys. His kidneys were very bad. So, and this, you know, all those things I have to go through: take him to the doctor, take him home, take him this, give him some medication, there's all those things.

LEVINE: Meanwhile, you were still working?

SILBERZAN: Yes, sure. He'd ask me, you know, "Why do you come so late?" I knew that he had some money. I says, "Why don't you give me a few dollars, I should be able to come earlier? I can't come earlier, because I work [unclear]." "You could come!" I says, "Why don't you give me the money?" He was holding the money; he wouldn't give me the money I should do shopping. No, I was working, so I did my own money. It's, you know, I'll tell you, some people wouldn't believe it, how, you know, went through so many stages! So many stages, and then, you know, he passed away. When I came from my work to him at the hospital, he says, "Why did you come so late?" He wants a cream, ice cream. So I went there. It was on a Sunday; not all stores are open. Years ago they didn't open Sunday. I says, "They were not open." "You're lying. Why don't you go back and maybe another store has ice cream?" And he was sick in the bed, in the hospital! Yes. See, I didn't care what would happen to him. But I didn't want him to die, you know, [unclear]. But you know, I was—when he passed out, I says, "God did a good thing. Now I'll breathe a little bit different."

LEVINE: So, was your life better, then, after that?

SILBERZAN: Yes. I was on my own. Nobody could tell me, "Look, you didn't do good this, you didn't do that." You know, I was very naïve. Well now, years ago, I used to make my own cake, my own bread. I used to make his own underwear. Then I says, you know, "He criticizes me. It takes so long," this and that, you know. So I took [laughs], I took that, you know, how you call it? That round thing that you make the dough flat?

LEVINE: Rolling pin.

SILBERZAN: Roller, yeah. And I says, "Now, I have this in my hand. Either you go away, or if not, I will kill you!" [Unclear] I wouldn't kill him, but you know, I was so aggravated, so nervous! "I'll kill you right now!" Because he—he always said, "Not me. It will be by Hitler." He thought of course he took me, you know, so—yeah. So it was a person with one-sided thinking.

LEVINE: Right.

SILBERZAN: And it was very difficult. You know, Ellis Island, I was there a whole day, you know, with so many people! Now, now, it's nothing, but there, then, in 1930, a lot of people came. So they have no time to—so I was there, you know, almost a day, 'til they picked me up. And then you have to have twenty dollars, to show them that you have twenty dollars. But I didn't have twenty dollars!

LEVINE: What did you do?

SILBERZAN: I says, because I gave—you know, on the boat, the young boy sailors, they saw how I was. I couldn't take the boat; I was sick the whole time. They brought down, you know, nuts and apples to me. So I gave them two dollars, a tip. So I didn't have the twenty dollars anymore! [Laughs] And when I came here, my sisters-in-law, I had two, you know, my brothers. He says, "Now, did she give you the twenty dollars?" The other one says, "Not yet." "You better go over and take the twenty dollars from her." You see, people were so, you know, rough, they were so naïve, so selfish!

LEVINE: So they were going to take your twenty dollars because they thought you had it to get in?

SILBERZAN: I told you I hadn't got twenty dollars, I had only less. So you know, so I gave them how much I had, that's all. But I felt I had to give the boys a tip. They bring down, you know, they see me so sick. I was so—the whole two weeks I was so seasick! Terrible.

LEVINE: Well, when you look back on this, when you look back on the fact that you didn't want to get married, but you did marry this person, because you wanted to leave the country, how do you think about it all now, now that, you know, time's gone by?

SILBERZAN: I'll tell you, now, why didn't I contradict my mother? Because I didn't want to get married? I didn't want, "Ma, you know, I'm not." But I made my own wedding gown—beautiful! I still had it here when I came. So I made her, my daughter, a little dress, you know. So I'll tell you: as the years go on, not that you get smarter, you get, you know, more knowledgeable. From here a little bit, and there a little bit, you get more knowledgeable. You understand more. Then, you know, I was like tied down with something, I don't know. But then, you know, I opened my eyes. Look, I'm not tied down; I'm a human being. I could do something with my hands, my eyes. And I did it. So, I did it. And then, on the boat, you know, I remember the boat, you know, the baby, she couldn't walk yet. She pulled here, there, she wanted to go there, she wanted to go here, you know. Came over a young man, that he was in

Rio de Janeiro. His wife was here, and two daughters were here. So he says, "Senora," he spoke Portuguese: "Look, I'm going to hold the baby. I'm going to hold the baby. You go relax a little bit." I did a little bit. Then his wife and two daughters came to see him. He was so happy! Senora, bonita—well, you know, the child says, "That's a beautiful baby." I says, "It's a beautiful baby, but it's my baby."

LEVINE: [Laughs]

SILBERZAN: I was afraid, you know.

LEVINE: He wanted the baby!

SILBERZAN: Sure. So that was also a state to go through, you know, how people wanted a child.

LEVINE: Do you really think he wanted to take the baby?

SILBERZAN: I don't know, you know. I wasn't afraid. I think, to myself I think he was a nice man. He was, you know, yeah, he wanted to help me. When my little girl was two years old, I used to take her to the grocery to buy something. And the grocery lady had no children. So, and I couldn't spend too much. I made fifteen dollars a week—fifteen! They thought I make a lot of money. But to me, fifteen dollars, I had to pay rent, had to pay everything. It wasn't too much, but I managed. So the lady there, the grocery lady says to my little girl, "Lily, honeybunch, look, I have no children. Come stay with me, I could give you everything your mother can't give you. Your mother only survives what she needs. But stay with me, you'll be my baby." She says, "Oh, no!" She says, "I'm going to stay with my poor Mommy. I'm not going to go with anybody." When I heard that, how smart! You know, she was only two years old. She says, "Oh, no. I'll stay with my poor Mommy, not with you." Yeah.

LEVINE: Well, what are your greatest satisfactions, looking back on your life? What makes you feel satisfied, that you did?

SILBERZAN: I'll tell you, as I look for a time, the past, I did a lot. I did a lot, and I was happy that I was doing it. I was, you know, like then, you know, I made things for poor children, the mother couldn't. I made a lot of things, you know. From [unclear] remnants, I made a beautiful dress. So I made those little dresses. I made, for my daughter, you know, then she was already five years old. I brought from Europe an old coat, a khaki color coat, and when I came here, I had no money to buy material. So I put it on the left side. I ripped it; I ripped the coat, and put the material on the left side. It was beautiful. And I made her a coat, double breasted coat, and a hat, and leggings. I remember this, you know. I went—you know

where Housen [PH] Street is? Down at Housen, there's a little park where she was playing. Comes over a policeman and says, "Little girl, where did your Mommy buy that coat?" It was so gorgeous! She says, "My Mommy didn't buy it; she made it." It was, I'm telling you, I could kiss her from top to bottom! Yeah. "My Mommy didn't buy it." Then I came here with a beautiful velvet dress, black velvet dress. I ripped it apart, [unclear], for the child, and made her a coat with lace collar and cuffs. It was so gorgeous on her. Then she outgrew it, and I gave it to our other girl. She saw it on her, she went, "[Unclear], this is my coat." She pulled it off her! Yeah.

LEVINE: Well, tell me as much as you can remember about the Lower East Side. I mean, when you first came to this country, you were in an around the Lower East Side right from the beginning?

SILBERZAN: I was in Brooklyn first, in Brooklyn. My brothers lived in Brooklyn, yes. Yes. Then, I had, so then I went to look for an apartment. My work was all—I worked on Twenty-Fifth and Fifth Avenue. So it was too far to go to Brooklyn, so I got an apartment, beautiful apartment, one bedroom apartment, on Eleventh, and Avenue A. That was a nice neighborhood then, not now anymore. So myself, I went to look, I got it, you know, and then, you know, I had no money for covering the floor. So the walls were covered with paper. So my husband says, "Take it from the walls, the paper, and put it on the floor." Can you imagine that? So, I said, "This I can't do." It was on the wall; I don't like it on the wall. So I tore it down; I throw it away. So his aunt was so good. She's not alive anymore. She went to the store and bought coverings for the living room. And she brought it over, and she put it down herself. Then she brought me a tea set, and yeah, I didn't have dishes. She brought me a tea set, you know, I should have that, something. So that shows you, there's still some people, women, that have a feeling what you need. That's my aunt, my husband's aunt. She did everything else to I should feel better.

LEVINE: What changes have you seen, just in this neighborhood, on Grand Street?

SILBERZAN: Well, now it's cleaner, nicer. It was very, very—how long are you here? I mean, you were born here?

LEVINE: No, I was here in the sixties. And then I went away, and I came back again.

SILBERZAN: It was so—first of all, the houses were clumped one in another, you know.

LEVINE: Tenements, the tenement houses?

SILBERZAN: Yes.

LEVINE: Yeah.

SILBERZAN: So you didn't have even privacy. They could hear what you say that you talk. And then, you know, it was hard. Not clean at all, not clean. Although the man used to go around and clean the streets, it was dirty. It smelled! Not now, thank God! Now, you know, I have an apartment, for myself. I was, you know, my granddaughter—you saw the pictures, my granddaughter. She lives—she's now [unclear]. You know, when she comes, she lives with me, you know. She eats at my house, and she has dinner, everything. She is, for me, you know, her mother somehow doesn't like her either. Her mother, you know, married her father. She said she didn't like him. I said, "Why did you marry him?" [Unclear] she was five years married until she had that baby. She didn't want it. But see, the baby came, it was a gorgeous baby. The baby was never happy with her. She used to say, you know, "I hate you! I don't like you!" The mother used to say that. That child remembers everything! That child [unclear]. She's gorgeous. The picture doesn't do any justice for her. She's gorgeous! First of all, she's five ten and a half, five eleven, you know, tall. Beautiful!

LEVINE: Well, the tape is just about to run out. Is there anything further that you'd like to say, before we close, about coming to this country, and living your life out here?

SILBERZAN: Well, I'll tell you: I came to this country. I was happy because I had my brothers here, my uncle. They lived on Eighth Street, Eighth and Second Avenue. And you know, my uncle was very good to me, very nice. He's not alive anymore. My uncle used to send me even to Brazil with his money. Nobody else. And you know, things like that. And he used to, when I came, he was so happy! He says, "Why do you need him?" I says, "What shall I do? He's running after me." He wouldn't give me a divorce. So he says, you know, "I have got a nice man for you." But I can't get married. If you're not divorced. Now, the divorce is not so strict. Now, you can get a divorce very fast.

LEVINE: Okay, the tape is just about over. I just want to say, thank you so much. This has been a really interesting interview.

SILBERZAN: I'll tell you!

LEVINE: I really liked talking with you.

EI-766/SILBERZAN

SILBERZAN: I'll tell you, when I was there—

END OF INTERVIEW