

September 2008

# Leo Serian oral history interview by Michael Hirsh, September 5, 2008

Leo Serian (Interviewee)

Michael Hirsh (Interviewer)

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## Scholar Commons Citation

Serian, Leo (Interviewee) and Hirsh, Michael (Interviewer), "Leo Serian oral history interview by Michael Hirsh, September 5, 2008" (2008). *Digital Collection - Holocaust & Genocide Studies Center Oral Histories*. Paper 133.  
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Concentration Camp Liberators Oral History Project  
Oral History Program  
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University of South Florida, Tampa Library

Digital Object Identifier: C65-00125  
Interviewee: Leo Serian (LS)  
Interviewer: Michael Hirsh (MH)  
Interview date: September 5, 2008  
Interview location: Conducted by telephone  
Transcribed by: Kathy Kirkland  
Transcription date: February 2, 2009  
Audit Edit by: Michelle Joy  
Audit Edit date: June 25, 2010 to June 30, 2010  
Final Edit by: Mary Beth Isaacson, MLS  
Final Edit date: August 4, 2010

[Transcriber's note: The Interviewee's personal information has been removed, at the request of the Interviewer. This omission is indicated with ellipses.]

MH: Your name is Leo Serian, S-e-r-i-a-n?

LS: Yes, sir.

MH: ... You were with the 65<sup>th</sup> Infantry Division.

LS: Yeah.

MH: And I know one of the camps I know you got to is called Hersbruck?

LS: The concentration camps?

MH: Yes.

LS: Yeah, that's Hersbruck.

MH: Hersbruck. What's your date of birth?

LS: October 3, 1925.

MH: Can you just tell me, where were you before you went in the army?

LS: Well, I was born and brought up in New York.

MH: Okay, and—

LS: In Sunnyside, New York.

MH: And were you drafted, or did you enlist?

LS: I was drafted—I tried to enlist, but my father wouldn't let me, (laughs) when I was seventeen.

MH: So, what year did you get drafted?

LS: December 27, 1943, I got into the Army.

MH: And then what happens?

LS: Well, and then I had my basic training at Camp Blanding, Florida, for seventeen weeks. And then after that, you know, my memory always fails me when I need to—

MH: That's okay.

LS: Yeah, after that, I think we were supposed to go overseas, but I don't know what happened. We were supposed to go to the Pacific but then plans were changed, and they sent us to Camp Shelby, Mississippi, where I entered the 69<sup>th</sup> Division, and then they left me behind; and in the same camp, they transferred me to the 65<sup>th</sup> Infantry Division. And from there is when I went overseas, with the division, and we went overseas. We were the last division in the war to go overseas.

MH: When did you go over?

LS: January—about January 25 [1945] we arrived in Le Havre, France. Yeah.

MH: So the Bulge is over.

LS: Yeah.

MH: Where do you end up going?

LS: Well, we stayed until March in a recaptured airfield named after a cigarette, Camp Lucky Strike. We were there, and then we went to—in March we arrived at the border of Germany and France and Germany, and that's when we first heard in the distance the sound of cannons, you know. And then shortly afterwards we entered into combat.

MH: What was that experience like for you?

LS: Excuse me?

MH: What was that experience like for you?

LS: Well, you know, all the while we were gung ho, but then as soon as we entered combat, which was unexpected, actually; it was horrifying, because here men that we trained with and that we'd come to love as comrades, we saw them getting killed and wounded all around us, and nothing happened to me. And then see, what happened is we were headed—our company was headed towards a larger force to engage in battle, and then we got word that on the way, there's a small town with a handful of Germans, and to wipe 'em out and then go on your way.

Well, what a surprise we were in for: when we got there to that town, on the road in front of the town, we noticed that there were three American airplanes in a circular fashion. They would come down and machine gun the town, then go around and rocket the town, shoot rockets, and then go around and drop bombs. The three airplanes did that for about forty-five minutes or an hour, and then after they left, we got the order to spread out and

to advance. No sooner than we got the order to advance, we were sprayed with machine gun fire, and that was—we weren't very gung ho at that moment.

MH: What town was that?

LS: I don't know the name of the town; in fact, all the places we went to, I don't remember, except I found out the names of places after the war when I joined the Association and got a lot of history through our books that were written, you know, and twice a year we have a periodical that comes out. I learned the names of the towns through those.

MH: When you went overseas, what did you know about the concentration camps or the Holocaust or anything?

LS: Nothing.

MH: Not a thing.

LS: No. The Red Cross, after the war, counted over 5,000 concentration camps of all sorts. And many Americans died in them, also.

MH: Yes. But the army didn't tell you anything about them?

LS: No.

MH: So, when's the first time you come across one of these; or did you come across any of the death marches first?

LS: Just that one experience. In fact, my company was the only company in the whole division to actually liberate a camp; but there were a few of the units that entered in the camps shortly—almost immediately after they were liberated.

MH: Tell me how you found the camp.

LS: Well, we were headed on our way to join up with other forces one morning, and we noticed several hundred feet in front of us, suddenly two large gates opened wide and we were kind of curious, you know. And two German trucks pulled out and a handful of Germans jumped in those two trucks and fled: because towards the end of the war, many thousands of Germans were either fleeing or surrendering. Well, this handful decided to flee rather than confront us, because we were a couple of hundred men.

MH: Did you go after them?

LS: Well, we were on foot, and they were in trucks. (laughs) We couldn't go after them.

MH: Were you shooting at them?

LS: No, no, because they disappeared before we could even raise our rifles. And then slowly we approached those open gates, we walked in, and the sight before our eyes caused us to freeze, like we were almost in a coma. To our left on the ground were dozens of bodies like twigs that fell off from a tree, and most of them were dead. Some came crawling towards us. Oh, by the way, and to our right—do you know what a pyre is?

MH: Yes.

LS: There was a pyre of human bodies about maybe eight feet high. I'm assuming maybe they were going to—see, they didn't have any furnaces there to burn bodies, so I'm assuming they were going to burn these bodies, just throw gasoline on them. Well, anyway, we saw that pyre of bodies and those bodies laying down on the ground. Some came walking towards, haltingly, again; some came crawling. And we didn't have anything to give to them because we ourselves were half-starved all the time. So—

MH: What goes through your mind when you see that happening?

LS: Excuse me?

MH: What goes through your mind when you're confronted with that?

LS: Well, the cruelty of man to man. You know? It was hard to even think, have thoughts in your head at that time, you know. It was only afterwards that when we came to our senses that we realized this was man's inhumanity to man, you know?

MH: Before you can have essentially a philosophical thought, do you have a physical reaction? I mean like, "Don't touch me," as they're coming towards you, or—?

LS: No.

MH: There's no reaction like that.

LS: No, no. In fact, when they came to us, we were still like in a frozen position. You mean the inmates?

MH: Yeah.

LS: No, our hearts went out to them.

MH: You're carrying rifles?

LS: Excuse me?

MH: You were carrying a rifle?

LS: Yeah, an M1.

MH: An M1. So, where's the M1 when you're standing there? Is it—?

LS: Well, we had them on our shoulders.

MH: So, it's slung on your shoulder with the strap.

LS: Yeah. I put it this way: we stayed there for only a short while until all the forces came to take care of them.

MH: How long were you there?

LS: I don't know, maybe an hour or two at the most. And I put it this way: those poor souls went in through the gates of death, but then they came out through the gates of freedom. That's how I put it.

MH: But you didn't put it that way then.

LS: No, no. I didn't put it—I put this maybe fifty years after the war.

MH: But let's—back to when you're actually there, standing there, what do you do? You were there for an hour and they're coming towards you, and you've got death all around you. So what do you and your buddies do?

LS: Well, we didn't do much except just try to comfort them, you know?

MH: How do you do that?

LS: Huh?

MH: How do you do that?

LS: Well, we only spoke English, and we didn't understand the language that they spoke; and they were a number of other nationalities in the camp besides just Jews. Yeah.

MH: Did the Jews have stars on their uniforms?

LS: I don't remember. Some of them almost were completely nude.

MH: Do you give them cigarettes, do you give them C rations?

LS: We didn't have anything to give to them except the freedom. Like, there were many times for a whole day and even two days, we didn't have any food.

MH: You guys didn't?

LS: Yeah.

MH: Why was that?

LS: Well, because supply just didn't catch up with us. I mean, this was a common experience during the war. In fact, I think one day—I could be mistaken—I thought about three days we didn't have anything to eat and some fellows were eating dead grass, eating the bark off trees, and one guy was chewing on the tongue of a boot.

MH: These are American soldiers?

LS: Yeah.

MH: I've never heard that, that you guys didn't have Cs or Ks or something, or even the D ration candy bar.

LS: In fact, the one time—once in a while the kitchen would catch up with us, you know, to give us a hot meal. But they couldn't always do it because of circumstances, when there's action taking place all the time. So, this one time the kitchen caught up with us, and we were so happy we were going to have a hot meal. And so when we went to the kitchen crew, you know, we were thanking them for coming and they said, "We have to disappoint you." We said, "Why?" They said because the food supplies didn't reach them. We didn't have anything. But we were by a German farm, and there were chickens, so I killed thirteen chickens—when I was told not to do it, but I did it anyway. I killed thirteen chickens and took it to the kitchen crew and told them, "Here, de-feather these and cook it for us."

MH: And did they do it?

LS: Yeah. They were upset because besides my sergeant and the kitchen crew, all had long, even beforehand—because I would do things like that. I like to gather farm animals and have maybe a possibility of killing one or two and having something to eat. But we were always hungry. When I entered the Army, I was 217 lbs. I'm only 5'6" now. And by the time we were in combat, you know, I figure I was down to about 150.

MH: So, (laughs) the Army either starved you or got you in shape; which one you going to pick?

LS: Say that again?

MH: They either starved you or they got you in shape, which one do you want to pick?

LS: I still didn't get—

MH: I said, so the army ever starved you—

LS: Oh, yeah.

MH: Or they got you in great shape

LS: Yeah, that's right. Well, they didn't have a choice, you know. I mean during combat, what can you do?

MH: How do you catch the chickens and kill them?

LS: How do I what?

MH: How did you catch the chickens?

LS: Oh, they were in the barn; in fact, my sergeant told me when we first got there, just for like a temporary lull. He warned me, "Don't touch those chickens." My sergeant was a German who had fled Germany just before Hitler took over, and he was a diehard American soldier, a great soldier. And he warned me, "Don't touch those chickens." He

said, “I promised the German farmer that we wouldn’t touch his chickens.” But after I did that dirty deed—well, I did—there was one rooster and thirteen chickens. After I killed the chickens, I felt sorry for the farmer and left the rooster. So, after—oh hell, when I digress, I lose my trend of thought.

MH: Oh, that’s okay. So, did you leave him at least one hen?

LS: No, I killed the thirteen chickens and just left the rooster. I mean, we were so hungry, I don’t even think those thirteen chickens fed the whole company.

MH: I don’t see how they could.

LS: And the thing about it, at the time that happened, the German farmer left to go somewhere and the sergeant left to go somewhere, and that’s when I decided to go in the barn and get those chickens and hope all the while that the farmer and my sergeant wouldn’t come back. Then it was a few hours by the time all this happened, and they didn’t come back. So, I guess God was watching over me. (laughs)

MH: I suppose. So, let’s go back to the camp again. Did you walk through the camp and go in any of the buildings?

LS: No, it was a very small camp. We didn’t walk around. We just milled about in that immediate area. We just milled about, you know, and tried to comfort the inmates.

MH: Did the inmates try and talk to you?

LS: Oh, yeah, but we didn’t understand them. There may have been some who did understand, but I don’t recall, you know.

MH: Were there men and women?

LS: Just men.

MH: Just men. And could you tell if it was a slave labor camp?

LS: Well, yeah, that's what all concentration camps are.

MH: Well, some of them were just to kill people.

LS: Oh, well, they did slave labor also. They had to dig tunnels. You know what I can do, I can send you—if you give me your address, I can send you my experience and I could give you information how you could get some books from our division. Our historian has compiled nineteen books, over seven thousand pages.

MH: Okay. Well, I mean, I can find the camp; certainly the Holocaust Museum has the records of it. You know, I can get some of that. But if you have your own story written out—?

LS: Oh, yeah, I was interviewed about three years ago by a reporter. And it was in the *Dallas Morning News*.

MH: When did you come back from the war?

LS: Well, being that I didn't have enough points like many of the soldiers did, I had to wait until all of those who had enough points left to go home, when it was our turn. I got home May forty-six [1946].

MH: May of forty-six [1946]. So when you came home, did you get married, or not for a while?

LS: Well, I got engaged to the girl next door, but it didn't work out. But then I found another good girl who happened to be here studying at a Bible college. I would go there every week and play ping-pong with a friend of mine, and I saw this girl there. And then she had to have some practical experience in teaching Sunday school, and she was assigned to a church from the school. And it just so happened I started going to that church and that's when I got to meet her.

MH: And what year did you get married?

LS: Nineteen fifty-three.

MH: Fifty-three [1953].

LS: But then twelve years ago, my wife went to be with the Lord; she—cancer took her.

MH: Do you have children?

LS: I have three.

MH: Three. When did you start telling people about what you had seen at that camp?

LS: You know, when the fiftieth anniversary took place, that's when the whole country took an interest in World War II veterans. And that's going back, let's see, 1965—forty-five [1945] the war ended.

MH: So, it would be 1995.

LS: Yeah. That's when people started taking interest and you know, thanking us for all we did—but for almost fifty years I had heard almost nothing. Except when I immediately came home, most of my relatives were thankful.

MH: When did you start telling people about the concentration camp?

LS: Well, it's like I said—about the fiftieth anniversary, at the end of the war which is also the [anniversary of liberating the] concentration camps, I started telling people. And I always wanted to know the name of the concentration camp. Across the street from me is a retired colonel, and I told him. And he said, "Look, write to the Department of the Army." So, I wrote, and lo and behold, the first letter I get states the name of the camp. "The units of the 65<sup>th</sup> Infantry Division liberated Hersbruck concentration camp."

And then, later on, I was wondering if I could make contact with any of the survivors. And through a friend, I got the address of a survivor and I wrote to him, but he had died; but his son answered me, and his son told me about his father. And he said, "Look, why don't you write to the National Holocaust Museum and they have a tremendous list of survivors." So, I wrote to them, and they said that, "We have 186,000 survivors from all

over the world, and there were twenty-seven survivors from the camp that your company liberated.” I thought, “Oh, great,” and she said, “We have a certain form that you have to abide by if you want your letters to be sent to those survivors.”

So, I wrote a letter and sent it to the Holocaust Museum and they okayed it, and I made twenty-six, twenty-seven more copies and sent those copies to the Holocaust Museum, and they sent one each to those twenty-seven survivors. And I got seventeen replies. Five of them were from foreign countries—one was from, actually, the very town where we liberated, a German who was anti-Nazi, anti-Fascist, who ended up in that camp. And then from Prague, Czechoslovakia; from Verona, Italy; a town in Israel; and La Paz, Bolivia.

MH: And what about from the U.S.?

LS: The other twelve were from the U.S., from California, Connecticut, Florida. But what happened was, when I—oh, when I got a letter from the survivor in Israel, he wrote it in Hebrew. Just one sentence, he wrote. Well, I took it to the nearest synagogue here, and asked them if they would translate it, and I also took some documents that I had, you know, on the concentration camps. And the lady who was in charge said to me, “We’d like it if you could come and give your experience to our tenth grade students.” I said I’d be glad to do it, I’d never done it before; and I said I know another liberator who has a tremendous story to tell: his unit liberated Dachau. So, I contacted him, and the both of us came to that synagogue and we gave our experiences, and we were hailed as heroes.

Well, anyway, when I gave these documents to the lady there, she sent copies to the *Dallas Morning News*, and then I got a call from a reporter. And the reporter said that he got information from this synagogue, and said, “I’d like to come and interview you.” So, I said, “Great!” So it was in April of 2005, and he came and interviewed me, and it was in the *Dallas Morning News* two weeks later. He also contacted one of the survivors in Florida.

MH: Have you ever met one of the survivors in person?

LS: No, I just spoke to one once, this one survivor—or two of them.

MH: What was that like?

LS: Well, they just gave me their experience, you know. This is over fifty years later. They gave me their experiences. And the others were just my letter.

MH: Do you still have a copy of the letter you wrote?

LS: Not the—oh, a copy of the letter that I wrote at first?

MH: Yes.

LS: Yeah.

MH: I'd actually like to get a copy of that, if it's possible. And if there's, you know, a couple of the answers that you got back in the mail that I could get copies of.

LS: Okay, well, you—give me your address.

MH: Do you have e-mail?

LS: No, I don't have one, no.

MH: You know what I'll do? Let me mail you an envelope, because the other thing I'd like—do you have a picture of yourself from World War II?

LS: Yeah. Before going overseas.

MH: That's okay. What I'd like to do is borrow a picture of you from before World War II or from World War II; and then, do you have a picture of yourself—you know, a recent picture?

LS: I haven't had a picture in years taken in several years. I guess you keep busy all the time writing, huh?

MH: I try.

LS: I was hoping I could write a book of my experiences, but I'm far from a writer. I just remember incidents, you know, and write down the incidents. Let's see, Scott, Scott, where are you? It's Jerry Scott ... and his phone is.... I hope he's still around; he's older than I am.

MH: What unit was he in?

LS: Excuse me?

MH: Do you remember what unit he was in?

LS: No, I don't remember.

MH: How'd you meet him?

LS: I guess when they had the fiftieth anniversary, you know.

MH: Well, I'll try calling him.

LS: He was the one who got me—oh, by the way, when the article on me came out in the newspaper, I got many phone calls from morning until evening. One phone call was from a town fifty miles away from here to come and speak to a group of servicemen. But for the past six years, I've had a bad case of vertigo which has sidelined me. I just can't do anything. And then I got another call from the Jewish center here, which really surprised me. They said, "Look, there's a Jewish event that's going to take place in Austin, and there's a busload that's going there, and we want you to come with us," because they read my article in the newspaper. I said, "Well, what do you want me to go with you for? What for?" He said, "Because we want you to speak to the Texas legislature." I almost fainted, I couldn't believe it. I said, "That's like speaking to the Congress of the United States of America." But you know what, to both places I couldn't go, because I was so dizzy. Yeah.

MH: All right. Well, I thank you very much, and I'll send you a letter that has the information about the book, and asks you for the photos and the copies of the letters.

LS: And I want you to know how thankful I am to you, Vietnam veterans. I'll never forget what you guys did.

MH: You're quite welcome. Thank you very much, Leo, I appreciate it.

LS: Your name was what?

MH: Michael Hirsh, H-i-r-s-h.

LS: Michael.

MH: Yes.

LS: Okay, Michael.

MH: Okay, thank you, sir.

LS: Yeah.

MH: Yeah. Bye-bye.

LS: Bye.

***End of interview***