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UN- Yale Oral History Project

Soren Christian Sommerfelt

James Sutterlin, Interviewer

October 7, 1997

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YALE-UN ORAL HISTORY

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Washington, D.C.

This is an interview with former Ambassador Soren Christian Sommerfelt who was, earlier, assistant to Trygve Lie. The interview was made in Washington, DC on October 7th, 1997.

James Sutterlin (JS): Ambassador Sommerfelt, I am very pleased that you are willing to participate in this United Nations Oral History project that is undertaken by Yale University. If I might, I would like to ask you, first of all, to describe your early association with the United Nations. I believe you came from Norway. How did you get to the United Nations and what was your status there?

Soren Sommerfelt (SS): I spent World War II in London, I arrived as a refugee from my occupied Norway in 1941 in London where, as you know, the government in exile together with the King were then working. The Foreign Minister, when I arrived, was Trygve Lie. After about a year, he asked me if I wanted to be his personal secretary. I was a young guy about twenty-five, twenty-six, but I did sit in a very central situation there and also because of my status as a personal secretary, which is something more in the English language than it is in the Norwegian, I got very much acquainted with for instance the personal secretary of Anthony Eden, then British Foreign Secretary. So I

could do a little, on my level, to ease the task of Mr. Trygve Lie. We also played tennis together so we became rather close. We were so close that his wife Hjordis was the godmother of our only daughter when I got married after the war. When the war was over in Europe and the occupation of Norway was over and Trygve Lie had been elected the first Secretary-General of the United Nations, he came back to Oslo to prepare for his and his family's departure to New York. He asked me if I would like to join him in the Secretariat. Of course I jumped on that. My first and very important task was to look after the Lie family furniture when it was shipped across from Göteborg in Sweden to New York.

When I arrived in New York, in April '46, the Hotel Waldorf Astoria was being run by the Boomer couple and Mrs. Boomer was as Norwegian as she could be. She had been born on the mountain farm right below the highest peak in Norway and there was nothing she wouldn't do to help her countryman, Trygve Lie.

One of those things with which she helped was to give us some very reasonable rates for some rooms there and I was put up at the Waldorf Astoria which was quite a change from formerly occupied and still suffering Norway. I shared a room with Brian Urquhart who was, at that point, was one of Trygve Lie's private secretaries, or personal assistants. At that time, his task was mainly to look after the Secretary-General's program and dinners and lunches and that sort of thing. But of course Brian spent his entire life in the United Nations, and as you know, he reached his peak there and became Sir. But at that time, he and I were on the same level and we had a very nice time together.

The headquarters of the United Nations were at Hunter College up in the Bronx, originally a girls' college. It had been requisitioned by the U.S. Marines during the war and had now been taken over by the United Nations. But it was, indeed, a school. There were no offices; just the old classrooms. Trygve Lie, when I arrived, decided that I should concentrate on the human rights problems. Mrs. Roosevelt was the Chairperson of the Human Rights Commission that was under the Economic and Social Council. When we were at Hunter College the Social Department which served ECOSOC consisted a handful of people including the Deputy Secretary-General in Social Affairs who was a wonderful French professor called André Laugier from the Sorbonne. We were all placed in the same classroom.

JS: Could I interrupt just to ask – did you support the Human Rights Commission then as a Secretariat or . . .

SS: Then, I found out, that the UN and the Human Rights Commission had a very pressing problem on their hands, namely what to do with all the refugees and displaced persons which were now in the Western Occupation Zones of Germany and Austria. UNRRA, which is short for United Nations' Relief and Rehabilitation Administration and which had been established during World War II had the responsibility for the camps. But it was not a United Nations organization, of course, because it was established much before the UN existed. But the member countries had decided that it should fold up. In the camps, at that time, in Germany and Austria, UNRRA had the responsibility for some 1

million people of which about 750,000 were in three occupied Western zones of Germany. When Trygve Lie found out about this, that you might say all of a sudden the United Nations might have the responsibility of 1 million people, he said to me, "Soren, please, go and make a report on how this transfer is going to take place." The decision had been taken already that the IRO, the International Refugee Organization should be established, but that was all; it was sort of a decision in principle taken by the General Assembly. So I first of all went down to see the then head of UNRRA who was Fiorello LaGuardia, the famous Mayor of New York. We sat down in his office in Washington and those were the days before we had air conditioning and it was a sweltering hot day – in late June I think it was. I said, "Well, how can the United Nations take over this operation since Trygve Lie has told me that the United Nations was not made to work in the field." (Think of Bosnia today.) LaGuardia couldn't agree more. He said that, "we are operating on very good terms with the military because we are entirely in their hands since they take care of food distribution, and also look out for black market operations in the camps and that sort of thing."

I felt that the main problem for me going to Germany in 1946 was what kind of clothes I should wear – what kind of outfit I should have. Because the place was teeming with three and four-star generals, so I knew that as soon as I turned up in a military uniform I would just disappear. So, I insisted upon traveling around in civilians. That was a very wise decision because they thought that I was some sort of an incognito prince. I was even called "Your Highness" on the train from Berlin to Hamburg by the German conductor. Anyway, I flew off, first to Geneva and then up to Berlin and to Hamburg –

and it was quite a shocking experience of course. At that time, Germany was still in ruins. It was said that there were about 3 million people living in Berlin. Where they lived – I don't know. The streets were empty. You didn't see anybody around.

JS: This was in 1947?

SS: 1946. One year after the victory. Even the few trams that were running in Berlin weren't crowded. Then I started traveling around a little. I arrived in the American sector and I was put up by the UNRRA Representative in Berlin who lived in a wonderful house on the Wannsee which had belonged to Herr Funk who had pinched it from two Jewish bankers. I mean I didn't feel very much like being in an occupied country, at that time, I must say. Nothing cost anything and they didn't have money, of course. They had cigarettes.

JS: I was there in 1946.

SS: You were? So you know how the situation was. I went to see a refugee camp, in Berlin, with some 5600 inhabitants. It was very well run but had a tremendous pressure from Jews who came from the East. By the way, we are now talking about 1 million people in all, of whom 700,000 were in the three Western Zones. Not all of them were Jews. There were 300,000 Poles, about 175,000 from the Baltic countries, only some 120,000 Jews. Those Jews were the strongest and the fittest who had been able to survive the horrors of the concentration camps. I got to Belsen. The military had torn down the gas

chambers by then but the chimneys were still there. The survivors were living in the former SS barracks and could look out through the windows at the ruins. The camp was filled with Poles and Jews--mostly from Poland--and it was a horrible, horrible experience.

But then I came back in '47, only one year later, and you could see the change that had taken place. Those who had survived until the liberation of 1945 were some 40,000. But some 13,000 of them could not be saved and just died there. In '47 you could see how much stronger the survivors had become, how much more fit they had become. The occupation authority had a new problem because pogroms that started again in the Ukraine, Russia, Poland and so there was a new wave of Jewish refugees coming in. In addition to that, there were many who came to try to find their fathers and mothers who had waved good-bye to them when they were carried away in the boxcars, – to see if they were still alive. So now there was a pressure from outside, to get into Belsen. Indeed a paradox.

JS: Which was run by then by the IRO.

SS: Not yet. It was still run by UNRRA. I was traveling around with an UNRRA representative. Of course, they were all under military control. Belsen was in the British zone, so they were all British officers. The headquarters in the American Zone, at that time, was Stuttgart. In the French Zone it was Baden. Baden which was more or less unscathed; it was rather beautiful. So when people talk about Germany in ruins, it was

not entirely true. I mean, the towns were in ruins but as soon as you got out into the country you met people, particularly Germans, who didn't look as if they had been through a war at all. They were very well dressed and very well fed and, there, hardly any destruction had taken place. There were huge parts of Germany that were really sort of untouched by anything.

This is the background for IRO taking over the UNRRA operation. I came back to New York in September '46 and delivered my report and the General Assembly decided to establish the IRO. Then we had to write the constitution for the IRO, the International Refugee Organization. It was decided to put together a preparatory committee because the condition for establishing the IRO was that one first had to have 15 countries as members. Also, to secure money for the first year's budget which was fixed at 150 million U.S. dollars. There were two meetings of this preparatory committee, one in Geneva, in the early winter of '47 and the second in Lausanne in the summer of '47. That was the last one. I was there as an observer. In the meantime I had gotten married so I had the good combination of a honeymoon and a wonderful summer in Lausanne, when unfortunately, the telephone rang one day and it was Ralph Bunche who was in Geneva with the Palestine Commission. He asked me to take the train to Geneva -- he wanted to talk to me. The Palestine Commission had decided to establish a sub-committee to travel around in the displaced persons camps. Since I had been in Germany the summer before, he figured out that I should be the secretary for the sub-committee. But the Palestine Committee, itself, wanted to hear my opinion about whether they should send this sub-committee. Of course, I was extremely careful not to voice a definite opinion. But they

asked me what I felt as far as the pressure of Zionism in the camps was concerned. I had to say that it was very strong and very well organized. I described to them how I remember when I was in that DP camp in Berlin in '46, there were placards on the wall and one of them had on one half a poor Jew facing the skyscrapers of New York and looking extremely miserable while the other half consisted of a very happy Jew walking up a sunny beach in Palestine.

Anyway, they decided to send the sub-committee, not only to Germany but also to Austria. In Vienna, we had a new wave of Romanian Jews who had been chased out and who had been let through the Hungarian border. Hungary, of course, was entirely occupied by Soviet troops. On the Hungarian-Austrian border, they had been really cleaned of everything they had taken with them as far as valuables were concerned. They were completely destitute when they arrived in Vienna. The conditions were terrible. They were piled up one or two in one schools. Sanitary conditions were awful. I think those people only had one thought — to get away. Whether it was to New York or to Palestine — they couldn't care less as long as they could get away. On the other hand, I do understand those people particularly in the German camps who were set on going to Palestine. I was given the task by the sub-committee to go out in the camps and find people whom they wanted to ask the following question: If you get a United States visa tomorrow, would you go to the United States or would you insist upon going to Palestine? So I picked a pregnant woman in her eighth month, and a very shaky, old gentleman and asked this question. They both wanted to go to Palestine. The woman said that if she could not have her child in Palestine she didn't want to have the child. Of

course, these were, as I said, the survivors of the fittest who had gained strength over the last year. I remember I asked one, "Are you a Jew? You look as if you might have come from a mountain valley in Norway." He said, "I didn't know I was a Jew until Hitler found out that I had a Jewish grandmother. So they plunked the star on my back." They had one idea in their head, to not stay in Europe, because a new invasion might come in a few years, and their children might suffer exactly what they had suffered. So they wanted to get away and to establish a new country based on some sort of a socialistic ideology.

JS: Why was the Commission interested in this – why was the Commission interested in where the Jews wanted to go?

SS: Because they wanted to find out the kind of pressure which existed as to the establishment of the Jewish State of Israel. They wanted to know to what extent this was really a voluntary decision or if it was something that the Zionist organization, in these camps, forced upon them. These people whom I met and talked with in the camps in Germany and Austria constituted the cadre that created today's Israel.

JS: When then did the UN actually take over the IRO, when did that occur?

SS: IRO took over from UNRRA. They should have taken over 1st July '46 but they didn't take it over until 1st July '47. That transfer went very well indeed. The IRO continued to exist, I think, until 1953 as a specialized agency of the UN.

JS: Following your mission with the sub-committee, what did you do then?

SS: Then I went back to New York and was given the rather difficult task to formulate the definition of a displaced person, based on my experience from the visits to the camps. Of course, today, the refugee and displaced person problem is global. At that time, it was concentrated in Europe. But the definition is still under discussion.

JS: That fell within the purview of ECOSOC?

SS: Yes, in ECOSOC, under the Human Rights Commission, which was chaired by Mrs. Roosevelt.

JS: Did you know that she personally took an interest in this?

SS: Oh, greatly, she was very courageous. Then you had, of course, the Soviets who were entirely against – for them it was easy. They said, “Well, these people can be repatriated where they came from.” The Baltic refugees – we had quite a few Baltic refugee camps – they hated the Russians. Of course, there was no question of anything like that taking place. There was a strong pressure on the non-Jewish Poles to go back to their country. But, there were quite a few “London Poles” who had fought with the Allies during the war and infiltrated into the UNRRA settlements – they said, “No, you must not go.” But, the great majority of the Poles, the prisoners of war and forced labor, they went back to

Poland, although the conditions in Poland, at that time, were much worse than in West Germany.

JS: Mrs. Roosevelt's presence was felt in . . .

SS: Very much so. I can tell you a story, but that deals a little with how the Secretariat was run, at that time. You know, we had no immediate translation, no simultaneous translation. Vyshinski was the Soviet representative in the Human Rights Commission. He had decided, one day, that now he was ready to go -- to lash out against refugees and displaced persons. So he started off in Russian and he loved his own voice and all the others knew that this was going to last a couple of hours so they just left the room to come back when the interpreter was interpreting what Vyshinski had said. Mrs. Roosevelt was in the chair and I was sitting next to her. The subject was refugees, and I was the secretary of the Commission. On my left was Monsieur Kamenker. He was Jewish, from Russia and had become a naturalized Frenchman. He and his family, there were about six members, were in fact running the United Nations. If they went on strike, the whole establishment would come to a stand still. They had quite a strong bargaining position as far as salary was concerned. He had a tiny piece of paper, on which he wrote some hieroglyphs and signs while Vyshinski was talking. When Vyshinski had finished, after a couple of hours, and Kamenker started translating, he not only translated what he had said, I presume, since Vyshinski didn't protest. Because he spoke English, he understood English. He was Vyshinski -- his manner, his voice, everything -- what an actor! The whole Commission was sitting there, spell-bound. That was when Vyshinski

said, "Send them all back. The Balts are all war criminals. They should remain the rest of their lives in camps." I had seen, myself, in Oslo, in the summer of '45, how the liberated Russian prisoners of war were sent back to the Soviet Union. There was an agreement between the United Kingdom and the Soviet Union at that time that all prisoners of war should be sent back to their home country. Quite a few were sent via Sweden. I saw those poor fellows sitting in their trains. Little by little we got the news about what had happened to them when they got back to the Soviet Union. They didn't go back home, they went to camps in Siberia, where many disappeared. In Soviet eyes it was "treason" to be taken prisoner.

JS: In the United Nations, at that point then, this refugee question was really closely tied to the question of human rights, already.

SS: Yes, it was, in a way, because it was a human rights problem. It was absolutely natural that it was put into the ECOSOC, and the social department of the Secretariat where the rest of the human rights problems were dealt with.

JS: At this point, when you were concerned there with Mrs. Roosevelt, had the Universal Declaration already been drafted?

SS: It was being drafted.

JS: It was being drafted, at that point.

SS: But, I did not take an active part in that. I was concentrating on the IRO and the establishment of that specialized agency.

JS: You know, in historical terms, this drafting of the Universal Declaration is a rather seminal event. How aware were you or were others in the Secretariat, at that point, of the importance of what the Human Rights Commission was doing?

SS: What the other members of the Secretariat thought, I don't know. But, of course, I came in from the sidelines, so to speak, into the actual discussion of the problems. I remember – I was at that time thirty years old – I said to myself, “ I don't intend to spend the rest of my life as an international servant.” That's why I jumped on the idea of being sent out in the field – to Europe – to tackle a practical problem that needed a quick solution. I envisioned that the discussion about the human rights could go on for years and years.

JS: Which is true.

SS: Yes. I wouldn't be there.

JS: Can we talk a little bit about how the Secretariat did run in those days? You knew Trygve Lie very well. What kind of a man was he? What kind of a leader was he, of this new organization?

SS: I was very fortunate then and also later in my life to be “present at the creation.” Dean Acheson once wrote a book with that title, and I found it fascinating to be present at the creation of the United Nations. Trygve Lie already had experience because he had established a Foreign Service as Norwegian Foreign Minister in the government-in-exile in London during the war, and which he had to build up from absolutely nothing to take care of Norwegian interests spread over the whole globe. He had acquired a lot of international experience during those London years. He was a very close friend of the British Foreign Secretary Anthony Eden and was very much liked by the British and also by the American representatives in London, diplomats and top military people because of his practical approach. You know, the Norwegian government was the first to wave the Atlantic banner – we were the ones who wrote a big article in the London Times, I think it was in 1941, – about our being a seafaring nation, and that in our eyes the sea doesn’t divide, it unites. We wanted the Atlantic alliance to continue to exist after the victory – which of course, led up to NATO. Lie was a lawyer, and came from a rather poor background. He had worked his way up through the legal apparatus of the labor unions. He was Minister of Supply in Norway in April 1940, when the Germans arrived. He was the one who got through the decision to requisition the entire Norwegian merchant fleet in 1940, so that it could be in the service of the Allies, while Quisling tried to order the ships back to Norway, with no result. Our merchant fleet played quite a role during World War II. Thus 40 per cent of all the oil and gas that was needed for the second front were shipped on Norwegian tankers. Our contribution to World War II was considerable, considering that at that time we were only two and a half million people. Anyway, Lie had these contacts and he had this experience and it’s not true that he sort of came out of

the blue in Church House, when he was elected Secretary-General. He was definitely in the milieu. I guess his main competitor was Henri Spaak, the Belgian Foreign Minister. They were very much alike actually, as persons, very much alike. The Soviets thought that it would be easier to deal with Mr. Lie than with Mr. Spaak. So, in that sense, he became a compromise candidate both West and East could agree upon.

Then he came to New York and there was nothing and he had to use all his pragmatism. We started off in Hunter College, which was a school I described to you, the classrooms and all that. There they had the Security Council discussing the Persian (Iranian) question – Mr. Mossadeq, the Persian Prime Minister was not an easy fellow but he was a very good negotiator. You know the case: the Persians wanted the Russians to leave Persia's soil. They hadn't done that. Mossadeq even went so far as to fall ill and went to the hospital. I remember Trygve Lie had to go to the hospital and sit by his bedside and negotiate with him.

At that time, it was the very beginning of the television. There was no air conditioning: the scene was the gym hall at Hunter College. Sweat was pouring down the faces because of the Security Council members sitting under the glaring lights from the cameras. It was a very strenuous operation. I just describe this – how primitive everything was.

Then we came to Lake Success where two-thirds of those working in the building were preparing for war because the Sperry plant during World War II had been very active in making precision parts for bomber planes. And they continued doing this while the third-

third was engaged by the United Nations to make peace. I remember I had a cubicle and no light except – like here – artificial light. It didn't have a window. We had no idea what it was like outside. Only a very small group around the Secretary-General had offices with windows. Anyway, we were full of enthusiasm and we were all idealists and were going to build this new world.

Of course, Trygve Lie had an enormous amount of things to perform. But he had one idea in his head: "We must make the permanent headquarters in New York." He fought like a tiger for that because he said, "We must not share the fate of the League of Nations sitting in Geneva." Geneva is a lovely place. I was there for eight years, as Ambassador, I loved it but the League certainly didn't prevent World War II. As a comparison, I have been told that the first important meeting in the League of Nations took place fifteen months after the League was established. The guy who was running that organization – he had plenty of time to prepare himself. Trygve Lie was thrown into it. It has been described as a task where you had to build the ship at the same time as you sailed it. That is exactly what the situation was. Then they had the McCarthy problem. Of course it was a terrible position for Mr. Lie, because he couldn't get what he wanted out of the Americans without being very realistic about the situation in Congress. He managed to get the permanent headquarters built by getting Rockefeller to donate the site. He got an interest-free loan out of the Congress and five years after the United Nations was established in San Francisco, there was a permanent headquarters, smack in the middle of Manhattan. It was not a bad job.

- JS: Do you think that his compromise, really, on the question of American Communists in the Secretariat was partly motivated by his sense that he had to get the support of the Congress?
- SS: Of course that played a great role in his thinking. But, that he, as such, gave in ever to McCarthyists – that I refuse to believe. We had Feller who committed suicide as a very well known example. It was not Trygve Lie's fault that he jumped out that window. They were very close and Trygve Lie was very, very fond of Feller. That I can vouch for.
- JS: Yes, that is one of the mysteries because he was not actually on the list, as far as I know. I believe that Trygve Lie suggests in his book that Feller was simply exhausted.
- SS: I think that may be right and that he got depressed by this McCarthy thing. Trygve Lie had a difficult task in establishing the Secretariat because he literally didn't have time. He had a Deputy Secretary-General, he was from the United States but he was not very helpful.
- JS: He was the administrative man, right.
- SS: Yes. I found him rather lazy, to be quite frank. Because it was quite a task. You know, there was this group of young guys sitting in the personnel division and all these applications coming in and then the pressure from the others – we need this man, we need a person here, we need a person there. Get me one. I remember also, one thing. They

didn't dare to say no--not that it diminished the quality of the Norwegian quota in the Secretariat--but these guys didn't dare to say no to any Norwegian applicant because the Secretary-General was Norwegian. So that quota was filled very quickly. When I went back into the Norwegian Foreign Service in '48, Trygve Lie said to me, "I will miss you, but we won't miss you. We have this pressure, we have too many Norwegians in the Secretariat." That's just an example.

JS: That's interesting. Because, the usual impression is that there were too many Americans because the recruitment had to be done quickly.

SS: This is so, of course because there were a lot of American applications. These guys in the personnel division, they didn't have a clue and they didn't have any directions whom to say yes to, whom to say no to. The applicants were idealists, and they were pushing their interests saying, we'll take any job and so forth. Of course, there were quite a few people -- I won't conceal that -- who never should have been hired.

JS: But, among the close advisors to Trygve Lie, in this period, there were only two Americans, Cordier and Ralph Bunche.

SS: Yes. Then there was Protitch and we had Hoo, the Chinese.

JS: Hoo was Chinese, yes.

SS: Ghesdal was Norwegian, he was information. Jackson was from Australia. He was very smart, colorful.

JS: Yes, I wanted to ask about that. When did he first come in contact with Trygve Lie? Do you know? How did that happen?

SS: I don't know how it happened. Well, I guess Australia said, "Take him. We want a man up in the hierarchy of the United Nations." My feeling was that he was not too easy to handle.

JS: Remained true.

SS: Then, of course, we did get a division in the Social Department for refugees and displaced persons only. My boss was Sir Raphael Cilento, who also was an Australian. He was a second generation Italian. He was a very interesting fellow, a doctor by profession, very clever. There were many types in that Secretariat. There is no doubt about that. I remember we had some terrible staff meetings with complaints about the expenses of living in New York and the miserable salaries. How the poor young girls might be forced into prostitution in order to survive.

JS: That's interesting, because had the principle already been established that the Secretariat staff would be paid at the level of the highest national civil service, which at that time was the U.S. Civil Service? That had already been established, hadn't it?

SS: I think so.

JS: So they presumably were being paid the same thing as Americans.

SS: I was a bachelor so I did not care too much about how much I made. I remember that I rented a small room with a family in Great Neck, when we moved to Lake Success. My hardship was limited.

JS: But, the morale, despite that, was high?

SS: I would say so, yes. Definitely.

JS: And there was a spirit of idealism?

SS: Absolutely.

JS: And there was a belief in this new organization.

SS: Absolutely.

JS: Going back to Trygve Lie, could he reach down – did he have that quality of leadership so that the new staff looked up to him – or not?

SS: Yes. I think they did. The trouble was that he had too much to do. So, perhaps it was just a question of how much time he could spend time on staff problems. He had left that part to Mr. Hudson, who was his deputy Secretary-General and he was very disappointed with Mr. Hudson. I remember he complained to me, from time to time. The times Lie turned up – I think it was Committee Five meetings and the staff meetings -- he did a very good job because he had experience. Since he had been a labor union lawyer originally he knew exactly what to say in these questions about salaries. But, he couldn't, of course, take care of each person's problems.

JS: Tell me a little bit about your impression of Brian Urquhart in those days, when you were first sharing a room with him. Was he recognized, at that point, as someone who was quite brilliant.

SS: It was a little too early to say, I would think. He had a good war record. I remember he was the only one I had ever met who had jumped out of an airplane without his parachute opening and survived. He fell down in a haystack. He was an idealist. I liked him, he had a lot of humor. I don't know – there was also a problem, of course, with the relationship, at that time, to the national governments. You know, the non-partisan international civil service wasn't too well established. I don't know whether it is today, either, but it certainly wasn't at that time. Particularly staff recruited from major powers. The Secretary-General, Trygve Lie, had always to think – what do they send back to their former masters? I'm just speculating now. But in the Palestine question, for instance,

Great Britain was the mandatory power until late in '47, when they gave the mandate up to the United Nations. Although the British Foreign Secretary, Ernest Bevin, and Trygve Lie were pals on paper, – they were both Labour. Bevin was not too keen on the situation in the Middle East and the establishment of Israel. So perhaps there was some lack of confidence on Lie's part vis-à-vis Brian. At the same time, you had to realize that Brian Urquhart was then a very young fellow. The same age as I – I think he was even a year or two younger. His task in the Secretariat was not policy making.

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SS: There was a television program made by a British TV channel on the occasion of the 50th anniversary of the UN--he said that Brian was a job advisor.

JS: Yes, and what you say I had heard before also. Actually, Brian, at that point, was not in a very close position to the Secretary-General. That came later.

SS: That came with Hammarskjöld.

JS: And even there, he was not among the closest advisors.

SS: No. But then he got involved in the African problems.

JS: What about the other advisors? Did you have any impression of them in particular?
Cordier?

SS: Cordier was marvelous. He was calm and he was a very hard worker. He was a – what are those in Pennsylvania?

JS: A Quaker.

SS: A Quaker. He was a delightful man, very serious and very wise.

JS: He was very close to Lie?

SS: Very close to Lie because he was an expert in pulling chestnuts out of the fire.

JS: Ralph Bunche, you say that he was the one that called you, so to speak, to undertake the refugee task. How important was he, at that point? I think he was the Secretary of the Palestine Commission.

SS: He was the Permanent Secretary of the Palestine Commission and he was the first black who had been given a high task like that. I got the best impression of him when we had that first meeting at a restaurant called Bavaria in Geneva. The caricatures of all the League of Nations types were on the walls. I found him very impressive, very calm, very

wise. Of course, it turned out that he had that what is so important to have for a negotiator. He had an indefatigable amount of patience. He was a very patient man. He deserved his Nobel Peace Prize.

JS: As a young man, you were observing all of this but you said, a few minutes ago, that you were rather anxious to get into a job where there was less talk and more action. What was your overall impression of this new organization that was being formed, how did you see it?

SS: The United Nations? First of all, when I left the United Nations Secretariat I still was convinced that it was needed and if we didn't have it we would have World War III. There were so many impatient friends of mine – particularly Americans – saying “What is all this talk?” Well, I said, “It is much better to talk and bicker than to have a war.” Of course it was very depressing to see how quickly the wartime alliance between the Soviet Union and the United States and Great Britain and France – how quickly it split. Already in Berlin, in '46, there were two worlds, in spite of the fact that there was a four-power commission which was supposed to be running Berlin. There were three West sectors and there was one Soviet sector and you couldn't get into the darn thing.

JS: At the United Nations at that point, one of the . . .

SS: May I say something? Just this problem that I was dealing with was very depressing. I mean that the refugees and displaced persons could cause such a split between the former

allies – you would have thought that fighting the same war we would have had one enemy and that was Germany. But no, all of a sudden, the Soviets came up and said “These refugees and displaced persons, they have no rights to claim anything, they can just go back to where they came from.”

JS: This new United Nations was not immune to this breakup between the East and West. You already felt the influence in the United Nations.

SS: Yes, I did. But maybe I felt it a little harder than anyone else because I had been to Germany and had seen it with my own eyes, you know, the split. Of course, I had left by the time the Korean War came, which made it so obvious.

JS: At that point, were there many Russians in the Secretariat that you knew?

SS: Yes, there were quite a few. Gromyko was the Soviet Ambassador, wasn't he?

JS: In Washington, right.

SS: No, in New York.

JS: He had both for a while.

SS: I know that Trygve Lie had a certain affinity to him. They got along fairly well. But I also remember when Trygve Lie became very upset about the split in the Korean question. I had left the Secretariat and was in Copenhagen with the Norwegian Embassy and he went to Moscow, at that time, with his ten points trying to save the situation. He came back empty handed. He was very upset. I met him at Kastrup airport when he came back from Moscow. He had fallen ill there and he wasn't quite sure whether it was his fault that he had been ill. He was taken to a hospital and had leeches put on him. You know, blood leeches. He wasn't very happy about that.

JS: That was in Moscow, where they put leeches on him? Now, that's a story I had never heard.

SS: I don't think many people heard it. Anyway, he was depressed because he got the thumbs down in Moscow about his ten points. That was the beginning of the end. He really stood up for the United Nations Charter in Korea. I happened to be in New York when Vyshinski ridiculed the Secretary-General "on his white horse in front of his troops."

JS: Earlier than that, of course, he had trouble with the Americans, especially on the question of Israel or Palestine when the United States suddenly changed its position and favored a trusteeship for Palestine rather than a partition. Did you ever hear Lie talk about this or of his disillusionment with Washington?

SS: You know, he was Norwegian and there was a strong feeling inside the Norwegian Delegation to the UN General Assembly along the same lines. That didn't make him happy either.

JS: Oh, really. I see.

SS: He thought it wasn't practical. I think again it came back to the fact that the United Nations wasn't made to operate in the field. If they got Palestine as a trusteeship – then it would have turned right into a field operation. Wouldn't it?

JS: He was the first one, actually, to propose what we now think of as “peace-keeping troops,” because he proposed that there should be military troops sent to Palestine, in fact, to repel the Egyptian aggression. Again, did you ever hear him talk about this?

SS: It was after my time.

JS: Because he seems to have been a man of – well, you mentioned the McCarthy business and clearly on the questions of preserving the United Nations from the fate that had befallen the League of Nations, he was very strong that the United Nations couldn't give in to aggression. But, on this question of American communists and the demands of the McCarthy group in Congress, the impression is that he was not so strong that, in fact, he made compromises that were not necessary. How do you see that as part of his character?

SS: Well, he was a pragmatist. But, once he quoted Fridtjof Nansen to me. You know who that is? His motto was “Reach for the stars but keep your feet on the ground.” I think that was very much Trygve Lie. Since he was fighting so hard to keep the United Nations in New York, and since he needed the support of the Congress in order to get that interest-free loan to build the headquarters and he was so involved with the Rockefeller family, he was so involved with the New York mayor. Of course, these day-to-day problems had to have a certain influence on his evaluation of where he stood as the Secretary-General of the United Nations. But, as I said, when it came to the point, he took the consequence. Korea.

JS: Yes, exactly. In Korea and he had tried to earlier in the Middle East. What else of your early experience would you want to put on the record here? What comes back to you? These bits of color are very interesting, very important, I mean. Are there other aspects of the way you worked at Hunter with the sweat running off the peoples faces – things like that? Was there a lot like that or did conditions improve when you got to Lake Success? I think there was a housing shortage in New York, at the time, and you said that people had enough trouble finding places to live.

SS: Yes, they had, of course. But, the ones who complained, typical in a way, were the French. When you think of conditions in France at that time! You had to think twice before you could take all these complaints seriously. I mean, there was a shortage – but the Americans had the same shortage. I had a room, as I said, I stayed with a family in Great Neck. I loved every moment of it, because I had a feeling that I was building

something. I thought it was fun to sit there and sweat in the classroom in Hunter College because it was how things were being created. Later on, I remember, I came back to what I called my council, ECOSOC. It must have been about five years after I left. Then they were already installed in Manhattan, of course. I came into that room, I looked at the agenda, I listened to the speeches – exactly the same. The only thing that had changed were the faces. So that's why I was so happy being there at the very beginning.

JS: And not later. I want to go back to the IRO for just a minute. The United Nations, as you say, was taking over a new task here. Again, one that perhaps it was not terribly well prepared for. Did you have confidence that the United Nations could, in fact, take over the work of UNRRA. That it could do it effectively and did you feel that it went fairly smoothly – the transition.

SS: It went surprisingly smoothly. I remember when I came to Berlin, in '46. I was this thirty-year-old civilian and I went to the C-in-C of the American sector, General Clay – a wonderful man, lived a very long time. His British counterpart was General Robertson.

JS: It was General Clay, Lucius Clay.

SS: General Clay, Lucius Clay. Well, Lucius Clay, perhaps, was a little more polite when he saw this guy coming in and saying, “Well, the United Nations have decided that they are going to establish an organization which is going to take over from UNRRA.” “The United Nations will never be able to do it. We have the responsibility and we are seeing

that supplies are coming into these camps and we are seeing that there is not too much brawl going on and keeping order and discipline.” Robertson said exactly the same thing but a little more crudely. He said, “I couldn’t care less about what is being decided in New York.” They were sitting there as kings, you know. Their Minister of Defense was miles away. They didn’t have to submit anything to their government. They looked upon, I think, the United Nations with the greatest suspicion. I was the first United Nations representative in Germany. I traveled on a United Nations passport. I rather wisely also brought my Norwegian diplomatic passport along because no one had ever seen the United Nations passport before, neither the Swiss nor any of the military authorities. But, the IRO obtained their confidence, and there were many people working with the UNRRA who went over to IRO.

JS: Who was the first head of the IRO?

SS: I don’t remember.

JS: I simply don’t know either. But, yes, the United Nations had had no role whatsoever in Germany. I imagine you were a strange animal when you got there.

SS: It went extremely smoothly. 150 million dollars we were supposed to have in the first year plus 4.8 million dollars for the administration. In those days 150 million dollars was quite a lot of money. That was to run the camps and everything.

JS: That was provided by the General Assembly?

SS: That was provided by the members of the IRO, not by the General Assembly. The IRO couldn't be established until there were at least fifteen member states. That was why they had the preparatory committee – two meetings. Then they collected the contributions from the fifteen and they got enough money. But it never could have worked without the contributions from the voluntary agencies. Like, for instance, the Jewish AJDC, the Joint Distribution Committee. I think they had an annual budget of 150 million dollars at that time. Incredible. Also, the Catholics, the Catholic refugee voluntary agencies and the Protestants.

JS: They worked with the IRO?

SS: They worked with the IRO. They contributed and their sources were channeled through the IRO. The money was channeled through the IRO.

JS: Those are the questions I have.

SS: On the Palestine problem. We were not too certain that it was a viable solution to establish Israel. Already, of course, a lot of people lived in Palestine. At that time, it was a desert. We might be creating another – an economic – ghetto there. But I think that none of us could imagine the economic support that Israel managed to obtain – both from voluntary agencies and from governments to make that venture work. I wouldn't

call myself a pro-Zionist, at that time, because I felt that these poor people who had gone through all these horrible things – if they were now going to be pushed to enter a new misery there in the desert – a new ghetto down there in the Middle East. They didn't deserve it. There were so many countries that were willing to accept them, at that time. The Balts managed, as you know. They went to Canada and all over the place.

JS: Trygve Lie seemed to have been very committed though to the concept of . . .

SS: After a while, not in the beginning. But he felt that as soon as Truman decided he would back it, then it would happen and “we must see to it that the United Nations is as active as possible in the actual establishment.”

JS: The United States did not have a very strong ambassador at that point. Warren Austin was the Ambassador of the United States. He was a nice man but . . .

SS: Lie didn't get the best people to start with. But I think he got along very well with Dean Acheson when it came to that.

JS: First it was Marshall.

SS: And Marshall. He was very fond of Marshall. He thought he was terrific.

JS: Is there any other point you want to make?

SS: No, I think I have exhausted my little role as I remember it.

UN- Yale Oral History Project
Soren Christian Sommerfelt
James Sutterlin, Interviewer
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