



## Obituaries

### **J. P. O. (Phil) Silberstein**

**1920 – 2016**



Josef Philipp Otto (Phil) Silberstein was Professor of Pure Mathematics at the University of Western Australia from 1966 until his retirement in 1985. He had been recruited to UWA in 1960 as Reader in Pure Mathematics, from his position as Principal Scientific Officer at the Aeronautical Research Laboratory in Melbourne. As an Emeritus Professor of UWA he maintained an active association with the University, especially through UWA music and the UWA Library. Phil died on Sunday 28th February after, in the words of his family, “95 years of sharing love, fun, laughter and knowledge”.

Phil Silberstein was born in Vienna on July 5, 1920, just before the birth of his identical twin brother Peter. Their father Friedrich Silberstein was an experimental pathologist at the university in Vienna, and he had met their mother in Hamburg, where she was matron of a hospital. Unfortunately Phil’s mother died in 1933 from cancer. Phil and Peter and their elder sister, Margarete, left Austria in 1938, first for England where they completed the London Matriculation in three months, and then, aged 18, they emigrated to Australia, arriving in Melbourne in February 1939.

Phil was first employed as a junior laboratory assistant in the Aeronautical Research Laboratories (ARL) within the newly formed Council for Scientific and Industrial Research (CSIR, a forerunner of CSIRO), and studied as an evening student for an Aeronautical Engineering Diploma at “Melbourne Tech”, now RMIT. After completing the theoretical part of the diploma, Phil transferred to the University of Melbourne, again as a part-time student, and completed a BA with honours in Mathematics in 1944. By this stage the ARL was part of the

Department of Supply, and Phil had been working experimentally and theoretically on the “strength of wooden box spars, and the stability of flat and curved plywood panels”. Later he worked on aircraft engine and propeller vibration with Professor E. R. (Russell) Love who had been seconded to the ARL from the University of Melbourne.

In 1947 Phil was awarded a three year CSIR Studentship to Cambridge University in the UK, where he worked under the supervision of functional analyst Frank Smithies on spectral properties of linear operators in Hilbert spaces. He completed his dissertation after returning to the ARL in Melbourne and was awarded a PhD from Cambridge in 1952. In 1954 he became Principal Scientific Officer at ARL, engaged in experimental and theoretical work in Applied Mathematics, mainly related to elasticity. By the time he was recruited to UWA five years later, he had written a large number of ARL Reports and published several mathematical articles. Phil had been attracted to UWA by Professors A. L. (Larry) Blakers and Harry Levey, and he, in turn, encouraged applied mathematicians John Mahony and David Hurley to come to UWA.

At UWA Phil Silberstein’s interests moved from Applied Mathematics to Pure Mathematics since he believed that modern analytic techniques had a crucial part to play in developing new solution methods and their justification. He built up a strong team in mathematical analysis. Phil had broad interests across the university. He had a sustained involvement with the Convocation of UWA. He was a Foundation Member and former President of the Friends of the UWA Library. He was a long term supporter of the Friends of UWA Music.

Phil is survived by his wife of 62 years Judith, their sons Richard and Rodney and daughter Katharine, their grandchildren, and by Phil’s twin brother Peter. Echoing the words of his family, Phil “was a real contributor to life and enjoyment of all around him. He loved mathematics, music and life in general. He will be sorely missed.”

Cheryl E. Praeger AM, FAA, FAustMS  
The University of Western Australia, 35 Stirling Highway, Crawley, WA 6009.  
Email: [cheryl.praeger@uwa.edu.au](mailto:cheryl.praeger@uwa.edu.au)