



Smithsonian  
*Archives of American Art*

Oral history interview with Boris Deutsch,  
1964 June 1-5

**Contact Information**

Reference Department  
Archives of American Art  
Smithsonian Institution  
Washington, D.C. 20560  
[www.aaa.si.edu/askus](http://www.aaa.si.edu/askus)

# Transcript

## Preface

The following oral history transcript is the result of a tape-recorded interview with Boris Deutsch on June 1-5, 1964. The interview took place in Los Angeles, CA, and was conducted by Betty Hoag for the Archives of American Art, Smithsonian Institution.

## Interview

BETTY HOAG: Mr. Deutsch, I'm so happy to have an interview with you because you were so active during the Project period. You were a very fine artist then and have been ever since then. Thank you for letting me come. Before we start talking about the Project, which is what the Archives wants me to ask you about. At this time I'd like to know a little about your own life. All I know is that you were born on June 4, 1892 in Krasnagorka, Lithuania and that you came to the United States shortly after World War I by way of the Orient. I'd love to know how it all happened.

BORIS DEUTSCH: I came here in 1916. The war was on already.

BETTY HOAG: I see. How did you happen to come? Where was this village?

BORIS DEUTSCH: The village was in Lithuania. I think there might have been perhaps about fifty or seventy-five people in the village. I began to draw when I was a baby practically. Mother would always encourage me and thought whatever I did was just wonderful. When I made a few drawings she would gather them; and then on a holiday she would take me by the hand, and take all the drawings, and go from house to house practically to show off her child's work. I think that, in itself, instilled a most remarkable reliance or feeling in myself that I was doing the right thing.

BETTY HOAG: Pleasing other people you knew was the right thing?

BORIS DEUTSCH: Yes, and especially mother. She instilled in me a great faith in what I was doing. That particular direction of painting continued throughout my whole life. There was no deviation. (Mr. Deutsch means "motivation")

BETTY HOAG: Mr. Deutsch, had she come from an artist family to be able to appreciate this so much?

BORIS DEUTSCH: They were scholars. None that I know of were artists or anything of that sort. But they were scholars and they were a very learned family.

BETTY HOAG: What a wonderful thing, to give a child a start that way!

BORIS DEUTSCH: Yes. And then we had to move to Rega from the village. Rega on the Baltic Sea. It was quite a modern city, one of the fine cities in Russia under the Russian regime at that time. In Rega several different languages were spoken like German and Russian and Lithuanian and Lappish and Scandinavian. It was a cosmopolitan city and there was a Polytechnical and an art school and a theatre.

BETTY HOAG: Theatre?

BORIS DEUTSCH: Yes and an Opera House.

BETTY HOAG: Oh. How old were you then? About high school age?

BORIS DEUTSCH: I must have been about nine years old.

BETTY HOAG: Oh, younger.

BORIS DEUTSCH: Yes. When we moved from the village I enrolled in the art school when I must have been about ten years old. In the meantime I was always drawing, always with my pencil and always had a pad, always making sketches. I stayed in that class for not more than six months because I had great difficulties. I was not very much liked.

BETTY HOAG: Why?

BORIS DEUTSCH: Because I was too much of an individual. I didn't follow the crowd.

BETTY HOAG: You wouldn't conform.

BORIS DEUTSCH: I wouldn't conform! My first painting was done on a piece of canvas. (It was really not canvas but a sack with two holes: I didn't have enough money to buy canvas) And I was rewarded for that painting by being transferred to the next class. That's the way they did; they didn't have regular ways and means to deal with art students because there weren't very many of them there. The polytechnical ones studied some other things. In the meantime I had my education and then I went to work which I decided to do after I had received this so called award because my teacher was incensed that one of my drawings was not the way he wanted me to draw. He tore off the piece of paper from the easel and threw it in the waste basket and that . . .

BETTY HOAG: You were through with school . . .

BORIS DEUTSCH: . . . ended school. But I kept up my work continuously. Then I start this thing with my mother that I want to go to Germany.

BETTY HOAG: Art school?

BORIS DEUTSCH: To go to start painting. The reason I wanted to go to Germany was because one young man went to Germany to study tailoring and he came back to our village after only a year spent in Germany with a gramophone and nice clothes and a polished stick that he was carrying.

BETTY HOAG: And he impressed the little boy?

BORIS DEUTSCH: Yes. And he spoke part German, part Russian, trying to impress us; and I was very much impressed, being so young. I decided to go. "I, too, will go to Germany, but I am not going to study tailoring. I am going to study painting." Finally mother decided to let me go. I was about 17 at that time. I landed in Berlin. I didn't have very much money.

BETTY HOAG: Did you know German?

BORIS DEUTSCH: I did not know German. I knew a little bit and I had an address that was given to me. See, by that time we lived already in Rega and when mother was ill once, a doctor who came over saw my drawings and paintings on the walls. Mother told him that I was doing this work so he gave me an address to a very famous artist in Berlin. At least mother felt that I had someone to go to. When I got to Berlin I didn't know where to go and so I roamed through the streets for about two or three hours until I saw "rooms for rent," so I entered, I had to pay a few dollars rent, but not very much. I knew how to draw lettering and designing so that it was very easy afterwards for me to get a job in Berlin. But that first afternoon I stayed in my room, and in the evening a lot of boys came over. There must have been about eight or nine boys. Mother had given me a beautiful watch and I had it displayed.

BETTY HOAG: On a fob?

BORIS DEUTSCH: Yes. The boys were sitting around the table with me, and in a while my watch was gone.

BETTY HOAG: Oh . . .

BORIS DEUTSCH: And I went up to the landlady and I told her what happened and she said, "Now boys give him back his watch." I discovered that they were a bunch of thieves ...

BETTY HOAG: For goodness sakes!

BORIS DEUTSCH: Pickpockets, youngsters; professionals, but youngsters.

BETTY HOAG: Professionals! Poor little fellows!

BORIS DEUTSCH: They were my age and all that. The following day I took my little satchel and never went back.

BETTY HOAG: You found a different place to live. Then did you find the teacher for art?

BORIS DEUTSCH: Yeah. He lived in one of the swankiest places in Berlin, but I was very shy and I turned back from his door three times. Finally I made up my mind I was going to knock on the door. I knocked and when he answered I presented by letter to him. He said, "I told him! I wrote in the Russian papers not to send me those phony geniuses!" Where did you work? Where did you work? I looked at the studio where he was working and he was painting one of those ladies of royalty.

BETTY HOAG: He was doing a portrait of a woman?

BORIS DEUTSCH: He was doing a portrait of some young woman who was of the royal family, and I didn't like it. I looked around and looked around. On the walls there were a lot of paintings and there wasn't a thing that I liked.

He said, "You go back, go home and bring me something to look at."

BETTY HOAG: Something that you had painted?

BORIS DEUTSCH: Yeah. I didn't know what to do. I didn't have any material, so I bought some charcoal and paper. Then I stopped at a shop window I saw a plaster of Paris casting business where they cast all kinds of heads and things. So I went in and asked if they would permit me to draw from the cast, which they did. The following day when I brought the picture to show him the drawing, he said, "Is your father a millionaire?" I said, "No, I am not a millionaire." He said, "You go home; you have no business to be an artist."

BETTY HOAG: Why? Was he jealous of your work?

BORIS DEUTSCH: I don't know. I didn't like the place. I said to myself "Who the devil does he think he is?"

BETTY HOAG: The deciding factor was you.

BORIS DEUTSCH: The deciding factor.

BETTY HOAG: You knew.

BORIS DEUTSCH: I didn't like his work. And I had gone to the museum there a few times already. They had three museums, which had very fine Rembrandt paintings. They had three rooms of Rembrandts. You can imagine me seeing Rembrandt and then coming to his studio and looking at the phoney things that he had!

BETTY HOAG: You already knew what really great painting is.

BORIS DEUTSCH: I already knew his taste and what he was. He was never a great painter I found out later. He did some etchings which didn't amount to much. His work was cut and dry and uninteresting and unimaginative. They were mostly society portraits, half-baked things. Then I enrolled in a night class and there I worked for about six months. Oh, by the way, I found myself a job doing ornamental work: I did some drawings of Rococo, Baroque, Renaissance art. They made drawings for the different churches and I had to make those designs which I enjoyed very much. I showed my drawings to a shop where they painted signs. In Europe they used to paint signs with a great number of drawings and figures and all sorts of things. Not geometric, more artistic. And they used to send their work even to South America. I stayed with them for some time.

BETTY HOAG: Several years?

BORIS DEUTSCH: No, no, just perhaps four months; but to me it was a long time. When I made a little money I went to school; when I didn't have any money I would go back to work. I would go everyday to the museum. I was very much impressed with Rembrandt's paintings. I really loved them. You see, I grew up like a weed; I relied upon my own taste. That was instilled in me from babyhood. I knew what I wanted and I never deviated. I recall I often stood in front of that famous painting "The Man with the Golden Helmet." We have seen it here in Los Angeles. (It was shown here oh, it must have been about 15 or 18 years ago) And the guard had an idea that he should watch me.

BETTY HOAG: He didn't like the way you were looking at that painting?

BORIS DEUTSCH: Yes, I thought to myself, "If I had that painting, it would change my life. But how could I have it? It's impossible!" The guard one day came up to me and said "You like that painting don't you?" I said, "I like it very much." He said, "Keep on liking," and he wouldn't move. Of course it was just a fantasy: I couldn't possibly own that painting. I had no way of taking it.

BETTY HOAG: But you could enjoy it, right there?

BORIS DEUTSCH: Yes. And I continued painting and going to school. Finally my mother wanted me to come home and I left Germany after being there two and one half years. To me those years were the highlight of my youth. I enjoyed every bit of every day of it. They had wonderful shows and museums and theaters and operas. Heifetz gave a concert for the first time when I was there.

BETTY HOAG: And you were there?

BORIS DEUTSCH: No, I couldn't be. It was too expensive for me to go. and Caruso, I couldn't go to see either, but I enjoyed myself very much, I had very few friends, very few except for students in the class. For the first time they showed the art of Matisse Van Gogh, Gauguin . . . that whole group in Berlin, Germany ... the modern French paintings. And I did not like them.

BETTY HOAG: You did see them then?

BORIS DEUTSCH: Yeah, I saw them for the first time. I did not like them, I liked some of them. I remember I argued with one of my friends a great deal about them, and I said, "I am too much under the influence of Rembrandt at the present time. I'll give myself time."

BETTY HOAG: Did you see the Blue Rider group too? People like Nolde and any other of the German Expressionists?

BORIS DEUTSCH: Yeah, I saw those. Mainly I was impressed, as a general show, with the French painters; but I was still under the influence of Rembrandt. Also, I liked very much the early Primitives at that time. They had the German Primitives...

BETTY HOAG: People like Brnegee(sp) you mean? Braque(sp)?

BORIS DEUTSCH: No, not those, the very early primitives. I don't even remember their names...

BETTY HOAG: Oh, Cranach(sp)?

BORIS DEUTSCH: No, primitive paintings of perhaps the twelfth century, the thirteenth century.

BETTY HOAG: About how old were you when you went back to Lithuania?

BORIS DEUTSCH: No, I didn't go back to Lithuania. I went back to Rega.

BETTY HOAG: Oh, where your mother was.

BORIS DEUTSCH: Yes. My father and mother. Now, I was drafted into the Army and I was sent to Kiev. Kiev was the capital of the Ukraine in Russia.

BETTY HOAG: Where the Great Gates are?

BORIS DEUTSCH: Yeah. I resented being a soldier. I had nothing to fight for. My life was interrupted. I had plans to do some work and my life was interrupted, but it was something I had to do. I made a very bad soldier, by the way. They discovered that I could paint and draw, so they gave me a special place where I could do artistic work. I did all kinds of things, but I didn't know anything about being a soldier.

BETTY HOAG: Were these things done for the Army or ...?

BORIS DEUTSCH: No, for the officers. Many of the officers lived in Russia, but were really Germans. They went to school and they became officers later on. One was my friend. We had a wonderful time together because he was a fine young man. He would come to the studio and we would talk about all kinds of things. I had it quite easy. But my sergeant was rather a tough guy, and he decided he was going to send me out on some kind of post to guard an ammunition dump during the night. They made me walk with the whole gang of people; I don't know how many soldiers were walking. (I don't even know the terminology of soldiering)

BETTY HOAG: I don't either.

BORIS DEUTSCH: We must have walked about twenty miles until we got to the dump. Finally my hour came up about one or two A.M., when I had to go out and walk around the ammunition dump. I had my rifle by the way, and it was a dark night, very dark, and my mind wasn't around there ...

END OF TAPE

TAPE RECORDED INTERVIEW WITH BORIS DEUTSCH CONTINUED, JUNE 1, 1964

BETTY HOAG: Mr. Deutsch is in the Army in Kiev.

BORIS DEUTSCH: Then while I was going around this ammunition post I heard something; there were some noises somewhere in among the trees, among the leaves. It happened to be on a mountain and there were a lot of trees and shrubbery and all kinds of things; and in the dark I couldn't see anything. I saw just the building which I walked around continuously for two hours. All of a sudden I heard a noise, and I called, "Stop!" and no one did. "Stop!" and it continued. And I took the rifle and shot in the dark. I didn't know whom I shot there, but it stopped. I had to do my duty. So the following morning when we came back to the barracks (it was the summer outside of Kiev), the officer came in and called my name to congratulate me on this heroic deed that I had done.

BETTY HOAG: What had you done?

BORIS DEUTSCH: "What did I do?" "You killed a cow." I was heartbroken that I had to kill a living thing. Of course

I think the fear in me was part of it.

BETTY HOAG: Well, that's what soldiers are for.

BORIS DEUTSCH: Yeah.

BETTY HOAG: You were doing what you were supposed to be doing.

BORIS DEUTSCH: I don't know whether I killed her entirely or whether I wounded her, or whatever it was, but it was a cow. That was my experience in the Army. A very short time later I read in the paper there was going to be activity. We had no papers there in the Army because we were out of town in the barracks, but mother came to see me one day and she brought some newspapers. Also, for some unknown reason, she brought my civilian clothes. We had some friends in the city Kiev. She was very pleased with me: I looked well, and I felt well, and I had no plans because my Army tour was for three years. We both talked about war. Sure enough, one morning we had a command to get up early in the morning. We were given new clothes and ammunition. We were going to be sent to the Caucasus(sp) Mountains. They didn't tell us but I found it out later. The war had already started that afternoon or the day before. I was working in my little studio and I had to make a decision. I knew that I could not kill anything, let alone a human being. Either I kill someone or someone is going to kill me, so why go there in the first place? Then I made up my mind that I was going to go out of the barracks and never come back. I put on my clothes, my Sunday clothes, the best clothes for a soldier to wear to go out to the city. I went into the barracks office. I had a previous note to go to the city and come back. I don't know what you call it.

BETTY HOAG: Oh, permission?

BORIS DEUTSCH: Yes, but I hadn't used it before. There was no one in the office, but I sat down at the table and made myself out a new blank; I copied the signature of the officer, saying I had gone to town for two hours for materials and then would come right back. I had to figure it out and time was going so fast! All the time decisions! It took perhaps a half an hour to get dressed and to go to the office and make the permit and forge his name, then I went straight to the barracks. And a soldier (guard) stopped me and said, "Where are you going?" I said, "I'm going downtown. I'll be back in two hours." "Where is your permission slip?" And he didn't know how to read. He turned it around (upside down). He didn't know how to read! I was out and never came back.

BETTY HOAG: Oh! Where did you go?

BORIS DEUTSCH: I had to go downtown. I was afraid to take the bus. I was afraid of the streetcar. The town must be about two miles away and I had been crawling practically all the distance on my hands and knees through a wheat field. Of course, don't forget, I was young and sturdy and willing to be alive, and the will to live and stay alive is a great thing.

BETTY HOAG: You were going to Kiev?

BORIS DEUTSCH: Yes, I went to Kiev to the friends that we had and they gave me some money the same night. I went out and sent a telegram to my mother to meet me in Vilna, the capital of Lithuania.

BETTY HOAG: And did she?

BORIS DEUTSCH: And mother did. But before she did, something else happened. When I came there to Vilna I didn't know where to go. I had no way of getting to my mother. I didn't have enough money. There was just enough money for the ticket and for a couple of days and I was awfully hungry. I had been riding the whole night and in Vilna I saw someone serving some coffee in a cellar, and I thought that was the best place to go in. In Russia everyone could recognize soldiers because, especially in the summer, we used to have very short hair and we were sunburned, you see; and I was a typical soldier in civilian clothes. I went down there and ordered some coffee, and I saw a young girl of my age and I started talking to her. She saw that I was awfully (very) nervous and finally I told her point blank: "I just deserted the Army," and I asked her to send a telegram to my mother, and she did.

BETTY HOAG: She did!

BORIS DEUTSCH: And she hid me in some friends' house and then I was afraid that they might become involved because war was already on. That was the first World War. The entire battalion was killed in the Caucasus(sp) Mountains, my battalion. Not a single human being was left in a very short time, in a few days. Most of them were frozen to death, and Germans took care of the rest of them. By that time I was already back in Rega where we lived, and mother was hiding me in cellars where I used to fight rats during the night.

BETTY HOAG: Oh!

BORIS DEUTSCH: I couldn't sleep, you know. I was afraid of them too. She used to change me to different places. Finally mother decided we'd go back to Krasnagorka(sp) where I was born and try to get me a passport.

BETTY HOAG: A passport for where?

BORIS DEUTSCH: A passport for me, a new passport.

BETTY HOAG: Oh, just to get out of the country?

BORIS DEUTSCH: Yes. She went there and had discovered that we had in one of the families a young man who had died early (he must have been around 20) and his death had not been declared. With a few dollars she got a passport in his name ...

BETTY HOAG: That you could use?

BORIS DEUTSCH: That I could use. And she came back to Rega from the village Krasnagorka(sp) and I had that passport. I lived in Rega during the War for almost a year. Finally mother decided we had to get out. I still could use the passport, and she decided I should go to Harbin.

BETTY HOAG: Where is that?

BORIS DEUTSCH: Harbin is in China. The Russians had a concession in Harbin. It belonged to China and the concession was for about ninety years. And in Russia they had Russian and Chinese police. She discovered that one of our families had moved out twenty years before, so she gave me their address and I landed there.

BETTY HOAG: Hunting for this family?

BORIS DEUTSCH: It is fantastic, isn't it?

BETTY HOAG: Yes. What part of China is this?

BORIS DEUTSCH: Well, it is not far from Vladivostok and not far from Peiping, on the border of China and Russia.

BETTY HOAG: Oh dear! On the other side of Mongolia?

BORIS DEUTSCH: On the other side of Mongolia, Yes. So, I had to go through Siberia first and all of a sudden I had a feeling that I was being followed.

BETTY HOAG: Were you on a train?

BORIS DEUTSCH: While going on the train. So I got off at a small station and waited for another. By the way, going through Siberia they had only one track for just one train. So if you went one way, you had to wait for another to go back. It took practically two weeks to get there.

BETTY HOAG: It was the same train?

BORIS DEUTSCH: Yes, it was the same train going and coming. And the train was slow, and on the train everybody knows you. In a few days practically everybody knows you. They know your habits, they want to know who you are, and what your are. So I met a young man on the train and finally (he didn't tell me) I knew that he was in my boat. He was running away too.

BETTY HOAG: Ha ha. Did he get off with you?

BORIS DEUTSCH: He got off with me, and not only that; we had to cross the border from Russia into Harbin and the police were there to examine your passport. And he must have had great deal of money because he had a whole gang already waiting for him there, and police too. They accepted him and he said, "Oh, this is my friend."

BETTY HOAG: They accepted you too? Weren't you fortunate!

BORIS DEUTSCH: The accepted me too. It was all paid, you know. He took me across. Then he said, "I'm going to Liaoyuan and then into Japan." We came to Liaoyuan, China, then we were practically free you know. We had left Russia behind already. We had left the Army and Russia behind, and we are now in Liaoyuan in China.

BETTY HOAG: On your way to Japan?

BORIS DEUTSCH: On our way to Japan. We hadn't stayed very long in Liaoyuan when he said, "You will go with me to Tiuehlin." Tiuehling was Japanese and he said, "I have friends there and you will go with me to America."

BETTY HOAG: Who was this person? Do you know?

BORIS DEUTSCH: I had met him on the train. I never found out.

BETTY HOAG: Oh, you don't know?

BORIS DEUTSCH: He was afraid to tell me.

BETTY HOAG: He probably was an important person.

BORIS DEUTSCH: Yeah. He was my age, and I was afraid to tell him who I was too, you see. We were still afraid of each other.

BETTY HOAG: But he had plans to come to America too?

BORIS DEUTSCH: Yes. And so I said "Well I don't have enough money. I have to write my mother to send me some money." Well, he said that he could not wait too long. By the way, Tiuehling was conquered by Japan during the Russian-Japanese War. Once it belonged to Russia. It was a modern little city, beautiful and nice and clean; and it was remarkable to see a clean place. They didn't have any in Russia. It was partly primitive, compared to the big cities it was primitive. The only places that had some inkling of modern civilization were the big cities like Moscow, Petrograd, Rega, Odessa, and so forth and so on. Otherwise it was very primitive.

BETTY HOAG: But Tiuehling was beautiful?

BORIS DEUTSCH: He waited for four weeks and he couldn't wait any longer. He had to go, so I lost him. While I was there, out of the clear sky, a cousin of mine came.

BETTY HOAG: Was he escaping too?

BORIS DEUTSCH: Yes, he escaped because mother told him about me. She gave him some money but he used it up. Ha ha ha

BETTY HOAG: Oh, he used it up? Ha ha ha

BORIS DEUTSCH: Both stranded, both of us. Ha ha ha I said, "Well, the only place to go now is Shanghai." We had a few dollars left. Shanghai is a big city. English people live there.

BETTY HOAG: What you've been telling me makes the question that I was going to ask you look pretty silly: whether or not you were studying painting in the Orient before you came to America? You were just keeping alive apparently!

BORIS DEUTSCH: You're right.

BETTY HOAG: It was very wonderful that you were able to learn English while you were there and earn your way to come to America.

BORIS DEUTSCH: Well I had to. I had to. I had to.

BETTY HOAG: And you did it!

BORIS DEUTSCH: Well, I had to do it. In Shanghai I met an Englishman who had a painting that had to be repaired and I repaired it in a couple of weeks, by then I had practically enough money to come to America. In the meantime I sent my cousin to America with the extra few dollars I had earned. I had found out that my brother who left Russia after I had, had gone to America. It was easy for him to get away because he was younger than I am and he had come to America and had enlisted in the America Army and been to Pearl Harbor.

BETTY HOAG: Oh.

BORIS DEUTSCH: I discovered that he was in the American Army and I took the forty dollars I had earned from repairing the painting and paid for a telegram. But I had no address.

BETTY HOAG: Not knowing where he was.

BORIS DEUTSCH: Only Pearl Harbor in the Army. It cost me forty dollars, that telegram, and I had no answer. I waited for an answer and no answer came for about three or four weeks. Then he wrote me that he didn't have enough money to advance me. Most likely he had spent it playing cards or something like that!

BETTY HOAG: Well, how did you get here?



BORIS DEUTSCH: I did a little more work, artistic work, here and there, and oh yes, when my cousin arrived in America he sent me back the money I had loaned him all right. I had just about enough to come to this country. It was on a Japanese boat and we had a strike on the boat. There were about forty immigrants by that time, and among us I was the only artist. We had a doctor, a couple of lawyers, we had business people, there were many young students, and those who have escaped during (mind you this is already two years after the war) during the war which was already two years past.

BETTY HOAG: They had stayed in the Eastern part of the continent waiting to come to America?

BORIS DEUTSCH: Yes. When I came to America the war was already two years over. But here I must go back and tell what happened before I arrived in Japan. I must go back to Shanghai for a little while: I was arrested in Shanghai by the English police. The reason why I was arrested no one knew. There had been no complaints about me. My cousin was gone and I was left there alone. There was a morphine smoker next door who had a quarrel with the landlady, and for spite he called the police and told them that she was harboring a Russian deserter.

BETTY HOAG: Oh!

BORIS DEUTSCH: So the English policemen took me to the Russian Consulate. I pretended that I didn't speak any Russian and that I knew no other language except German. The officer knew it could not be true because he was of German decent.

BETTY HOAG: He knew yours wasn't good German?

BORIS DEUTSCH: And he was talking German. Two Englishmen were standing on both sides of me and they didn't know what we were talking about. I told him all about it; I was not afraid to tell him about it. That I had deserted the Army. There was no reason for me to fight the Germans. I had studied in Germany. I had a lot of friends in Germany. I have never killed anyone, not even a mosquito practically. And I said that I had nothing to fight for. Mind you, I was speaking to the Russian consulate! Don't forget he was the Russian consulate! He said, "Herr Deutsch, now you go to this place at the harbor this evening and you'll see a boat; and you go out there and tell them who you are, and they will take you on the boat three miles away, and you'll get to Japan. Now, do it tonight because tomorrow I may have to arrest you.

BETTY HOAG: Oh how good of him.

BORIS DEUTSCH: Otherwise he would have to send me back to Vladivostok where I would have been court-martialed and shot. They wouldn't have done anything else! I did exactly what he told me and I landed in Hiroshima . . . where later I painted the atomic painting!

BETTY HOAG: The painting that had so much fame!

BORIS DEUTSCH: Yeah. I stayed there over night. To me it was a new world entirely. Everything was just so beautiful. Those people were . . . I loved those people. They were friendly: if I couldn't speak one language they found someone who spoke another language (to translate). Things of that sort. I stayed in Kobe during a Sunday. I was in Yokohama and Yanasaki and Kobe. I stayed in Japan a short time, then I got on one of those Japanese boats going to America. I think it must have taken us almost ten days to get here.

BETTY HOAG: Where was it coming to? Los Angeles? San Francisco?

BORIS DEUTSCH: We landed in Seattle.

BETTY HOAG: Did you come through Hawaii and see your brother in the Army?

BORIS DEUTSCH: No, I couldn't go there because . . .

BETTY HOAG: You took the northern route, yes.

BORIS DEUTSCH: Yes, we landed in Seattle and we were parted. One group was told to go one way, one group was told to go on the other side.

BETTY HOAG: But you didn't know where you wanted to go at all, did you?

BORIS DEUTSCH: When we landed in Seattle two men came up to us and told us to follow them, and they took us straight into a Seattle prison. I only had one dollar left, and somebody had to be responsible for immigrants so they wouldn't become a burden to the state, you know. Then, for the first time in my life, I had such a wonderful breakfast!

BETTY HOAG: Ha ha Which you received in jail!

BORIS DEUTSCH: Porridge and coffee and bread . . . it was the most wonderful breakfast! I didn't mind staying there at all.

BETTY HOAG: You didn't want to paint your way out of it?

BORIS DEUTSCH: No, no. But, I did.

BETTY HOAG: I'm sure you would.

BORIS DEUTSCH: About two days later we got a newspaper which had a picture of President Wilson, and I ask the warden (I got acquainted with him), "Will you be good enough to get me a piece of chalk?: And he did and I made a large cartoon on the wall of President Wilson, and I was out the following day. The following day I was out, and two days later I got myself a job.

BETTY HOAG: What kind of job was it?

BORIS DEUTSCH: I had a wonderful job in a commercial engraving and commercial arts place.

BETTY HOAG: In Seattle, Washington?

BORIS DEUTSCH: In Seattle, Washington. I could have worked the rest of my life there. They were wonderful people.

BETTY HOAG: How long did you stay?

BORIS DEUTSCH: I stayed there long enough to have my parents come there. And in the meantime I was painting. I started to paint in my spare time and there was one artist (he had a lot of students) who was a wonderful, wonderful artist and a wonderful human being. His name was Taddema. Not the very famous Taddema we know throughout art history but he was related to that family.

BETTY HOAG: Same family name.

BORIS DEUTSCH: Yes. And . . .

BETTY HOAG: Where was he teaching?

BORIS DEUTSCH: In his own home.

BETTY HOAG: Privately.

BORIS DEUTSCH: In his own home. And, I kept on painting at that time. I kept on painting and working. And in the meantime I . . .

BETTY HOAG: You probably met Riva about this time.

BORIS DEUTSCH: No, I met Riva here.

BETTY HOAG: Oh, I see. I didn't mean to jump ahead in your story.

BORIS DEUTSCH: Oh, it doesn't matter. And we stayed in Seattle for about three years.

BETTY HOAG: Your parents with you?

BORIS DEUTSCH: And my parents came over. Mother became very ill and the doctor told me to take her to California. She had some lung trouble. I had a wonderful job in Seattle in 1917 - 18; I was making about 100 dollars per week.

BETTY HOAG: That was amazing for those days.

BORIS DEUTSCH: In those days, yes. I gave up my work and we moved to Los Angeles. We came to Los Angeles, I think in 1920 or so.

BETTY HOAG: You were in Seattle about four years then?

BORIS DEUTSCH: It came to four years, yes.

BETTY HOAG: Did you know where you were coming in Los Angeles? Had you any plans?

BORIS DEUTSCH: No, we did not. No, we just landed in Los Angeles. It was one of those things; again I must say that with reliance upon yourself, everything will work out just fine, just try it, it will work out all right. This, if you have that particular faith in yourself it helps a lot, believe me.

BETTY HOAG: Mr. Deutsch, you and your mother and father came to California. You came right to Los Angeles and there is a very interesting period ahead, but we will go into this at a later time.

BORIS DEUTSCH: Yes.

BETTY HOAG: Meantime we'll jump you forward rather fast to the Projects period, because that's what the Archives are interested in especially. During the period in between you still continued to paint. You worked for Paramount Pictures for a while with Mr. Schulberg . .

BORIS DEUTSCH: No, I worked...pardon me...I worked in the Special Effects Department.

BETTY HOAG: I see. At Paramount

BORIS DEUTSCH: At Paramount. And I made a one-reeler. I directed it, made the sets myself and Riva was in it. The whole thing cost me about seventy-five to one hundred dollars. And Schulberg couldn't see (appreciate) what I did because it was way above him. He felt that ...

BETTY HOAG: Was it an art-film?

BORIS DEUTSCH: An art-film yes. He felt it was too artistic and all that, and that it wouldn't sell any.

BETTY HOAG: Was Riva an actress?

BORIS DEUTSCH: No.

BETTY HOAG: You just had her in the set?

BORIS DEUTSCH: That's right. At that time Joe Sternberg brought Marlene Dietrich over from Europe.

BETTY HOAG: Yes.

BORIS DEUTSCH: He saw my picture and said, "Why don't you send this to New York in the - what was it? It wasn't a club .....

BETTY HOAG: He suggested that you take it to New York to be shown with the leading pictures of the year. Was that it?

BORIS DEUTSCH: Right. And I didn't do it. I went back to my painting.

BETTY HOAG: At this time the Art League down on Spring Street was in existence. Did you go down there?

BORIS DEUTSCH: Yes. I did, and I admired McDonald-Wright very much. He suggested I should come and work there without pay, but I felt I should not accept it because it was the wrong thing to do. I just painted by myself most of the time.

BETTY HOAG: Yes. You had a studio of your own at the time.

BORIS DEUTSCH: Where I painted.

BETTY HOAG: At home?

BORIS DEUTSCH: No, I was doing a little commercial work. Not very much though. I painted mostly. I would work for a while and save up some money and paint. Then when my money ran out I would go to work again. That's the way I kept up my work.

BETTY HOAG: You were doing oils and watercolors?

BORIS DEUTSCH: Every possible medium.

BETTY HOAG: Block prints, lithographs...

BORIS DEUTSCH: Everything, anything. Anything pertaining to the arts.

BETTY HOAG: Any murals at this time?

BORIS DEUTSCH: No. There was nothing of that sort. Finally I joined the group with McDonald-Wright which organized the first show, the first modern exhibition ever held in Los Angeles, on the 6th floor of a commercial building downtown. I'm sorry I didn't have time to look for that catalogue today. There was McDonald-Wright, myself, and there was a boy from Germany who had come here to Los Angeles. There were about seven of us. By the way, the name Wright called it was "The Art Students' League."

BETTY HOAG: The school, yes. You weren't painting down in any of the Lyceum studios which were next door at that time?

BORIS DEUTSCH: No.

BETTY HOAG: Some of the artists were.

BORIS DEUTSCH: Oh yes. Of course I knew Ben Berlin. We used to get together quite often. But they were in a different group entirely. Sadakichi Hartman was with them.

BETTY HOAG: Oh.

BORIS DEUTSCH: And I discovered that they had little drinking parties -

BETTY HOAG: They were a very Bohemian group?

BORIS DEUTSCH: Very Bohemian, and I thought I didn't have much time for that. So I just separated myself completely very quickly.

BETTY HOAG: Wasn't John Decker within this group?

BORIS DEUTSCH: John Decker and ...

BETTY HOAG: And Ejnar Hansen?

BORIS DEUTSCH: Hansen was there, and Ben Berlin ...

BETTY HOAG: John Barrymore?

BORIS DEUTSCH: Yes, Barrymore I met later.

BETTY HOAG: He was in the group?

BORIS DEUTSCH: Yes.

BETTY HOAG: Val Costello and ...

BORIS DEUTSCH: Costello, yes.

BETTY HOAG: Don Totten were in the exhibit?

BORIS DEUTSCH: Yes. It was a very refreshing exhibition. I remember that I had a couple of things there. But I had a tendency (I was so modest) to feel that whatever I did should be better than it was, so that I used to keep paintings for a little while then destroy them.

BETTY HOAG: Oh.

BORIS DEUTSCH: Paint over them. Things of that sort. Most of my earlier work was destroyed.

BETTY HOAG: Oh, what a shame!

BORIS DEUTSCH: Until I met Riva.

BETTY HOAG: She wouldn't let me, and I was very glad she wouldn't let me, because I had some earlier things that I think very much of today because they are a part of me at that particular period.

BETTY HOAG: Mr. Deutsch, do remember when that show was? Was it before 1926 do you think?

BORIS DEUTSCH: Yes. Before 1926.

BETTY HOAG: The first one-man show I have for you is before 1926?

BORIS DEUTSCH: Yes. I don't recall exactly, but before that. I have that catalogue; I will have to find it for you.

BETTY HOAG: The first show I have for you is at the University of California.

BORIS DEUTSCH: There I was invited by Anita Delano. Whether she was an Assistant Professor of Art or a Professor I don't know. A very modest, young, wonderful woman. She came to Boyle Heights and I took her up to my attic, and there she saw my work for the first time. She invited me to show at the University. That was a very delightful thing; not only delightful, but very refreshing, to have others see my painting for the first time.

BETTY HOAG: This was your first one-man show in America then?

BORIS DEUTSCH: Yes. In drawings. And then I had the Museum drawing show.

BETTY HOAG: In Los Angeles?

BORIS DEUTSCH: The Los Angeles County Museum. Then I showed three or four times at UCLA.

BETTY HOAG: Then shortly after, in 1929, you showed in San Francisco and again at the California Academy and at Mills College.

BORIS DEUTSCH: Yes.

BETTY HOAG: There is no point in even going into the long list of exhibits because you had so many from then on. Your work was shown just all over the country.

BORIS DEUTSCH: I got my first prize for a head of Riva in San Diego Museum. (1930, I believe)

BETTY HOAG: Oh?

BORIS DEUTSCH: It was a little painting and ...

BETTY HOAG: How right that it should have been of her! I should tell the tape that Riva was Mrs. Deutsch. When did you marry her?

BORIS DEUTSCH: In 1924 I believe it was.

BETTY HOAG: And she has a very, very beautiful head which appears in almost all of his paintings, such as the murals which I saw today in the Los Angeles Post Office Annex Building. I recognized her in several of them in the garb of a riveter, I believe, in one?

BORIS DEUTSCH: Yes.

BETTY HOAG: And a teacher ...

BORIS DEUTSCH: Yes.

BETTY HOAG: And many different ones. She was a lovely person. The Project work you started on about what time? You were active on that mural in the thirties?

BORIS DEUTSCH: Are you referring to the Government Project?

BETTY HOAG: Yes.

BORIS DEUTSCH: I was in New York that time. I had my first showing in New York at the Jacques Seligmann Galleries (in 1933). I had prepared for that show for several years. Finally we got there I had Mr. O'toole working at that time with the Seligmann Galleries and he actually got the old man to walk up six flights of stairs to see my paintings. By the time he walked up the poor guy was so worn out he didn't want to have anything to do with it! Well, I showed my paintings; there were about forty of them. And that day was the coldest day in thirteen years. (They had a Cezanne show there before; I was right after Cezanne, and I didn't sell even a single drawing) No one saw the show!

BETTY HOAG: Awww... an in auspicious beginning wasn't it? That was in the thirties probably.

BORIS DEUTSCH: It was good to see the show on the walls anyway.

BETTY HOAG: This was when? About 1930?

BORIS DEUTSCH: In the '30s yes, yes. Then shortly after that, through friends, I got this position with the

Government. It was called the Resettlement Administration. It was under the supervision of Dr. Rexford G. Tugwell, the first brain under Roosevelt. There were three of us, in fact there were more. Quite a few artists were out in the field, so-called. "In the field" meant staying out for weeks, sometimes months, and doing some work there. But in my studio in Washington D.C., there were Ben Shahn, myself, and a Swedish boy (I forgot his last name, but Oleo was his first name).

BETTY HOAG: Oleo?

BORIS DEUTSCH: Yeah. "Olee" or "Oleo". And Jackson Pollock.

BETTY HOAG: He was a very young man then?

BORIS DEUTSCH: He was quite a young man. We were all young people at that time.

BETTY HOAG: Jackson Pollock had been out here before at Manual Arts High School. Did you know that?

BORIS DEUTSCH: No, I didn't.

BETTY HOAG: I wondered if you'd known him here.

BORIS DEUTSCH: His work looked very much like his teacher.

BETTY HOAG: I don't know who his teacher was.

BORIS DEUTSCH: Jackson Pollock's work at this time looked like Thomas Hart Benton, with whom he had studied, I don't know for how long; but the strangest part is that when he had to make a drawing of something he would take up a drawing board and take modeling clay, and make a relief of the drawing that he wanted to do, and then make a drawing from that.

BETTY HOAG: Why how mad!

BORIS DEUTSCH: I mean it's the other way around. It's a curious way of doing things.

BETTY HOAG: Had he learned that from Benton?

BORIS DEUTSCH: Apparently. Ah...well...

BETTY HOAG: Were all three of you doing murals on this project?

BORIS DEUTSCH: No, no it wasn't actually murals. We would go out in the field and travel into different states and make sketches, and then come back to Washington and work them over. Either that or paint those things. And all this work belonged to the Government.

BETTY HOAG: I see.

BORIS DEUTSCH: Ben Shahn would go out in the field and bring back hundreds and hundreds of photographs and make some of his drawings from the photographs.

BETTY HOAG: You were taking photographs also?

BORIS DEUTSCH: I never used photographs, I would take photographs, but I never used them for my work.

BETTY HOAG: For the end project, you mean?

BORIS DEUTSCH: I would make sketches and then come back to Washington and either paint them or make compositions. After awhile I got commissions to paint some of the officials in Washington.

BETTY HOAG: I know you did one of Tugwell.

BORIS DEUTSCH: I painted Tugwell and I even made him pose for me. I remember it was an Easter Sunday. I had to go down to his office and I was rushing. I was driving the car and I passed (went through) a red signal. I was quite overwhelmed that I should do a thing like that, and I came to the office and said, "Dr. Tugwell, I just passed a red signal." And he said, "By all means go and arrest yourself."

BETTY HOAG: Ha ha

BORIS DEUTSCH: He said, "What do you want me to do, work on Easter Sunday?" I said, "Well, you'll have to do it. I want to complete that painting." I had already spent a whole week on the

painting, but after I had worked for an hour suddenly there came an idea to my mind: "I don't like it" I had a big 3-4 inch brush in my pocket, and I used it to paint the whole thing out. And I thought that man was going to ...

BETTY HOAG: Poor Tugwell! Ha ha

BORIS DEUTSCH: ... fall through the floor. I had to explain myself. I said, "Dr. Tugwell, I've been fighting it. I don't like it. There is something different which has to be painted." "What do you want me to do?" he asked. I said, "Let's get started all over again."

BETTY HOAG: He had to pose for it all over again!

BORIS DEUTSCH: And he posed for me all over again, and in about forty-five minutes I painted his portrait. I was very, very pleased with it.

BETTY HOAG: I've seen it; it was beautiful.

BORIS DEUTSCH: It isn't that one, no. It's one in which he is holding a book. I'll find it for you. And that was painted afterwards, after I had spent two weeks before. He understood it very well: He said, "I write, of course, and it happens in my writing, the same thing."

BETTY HOAG: The feeling must be spontaneous.

BORIS DEUTSCH: I thought the first one of him was good. But that isn't enough, I mean the artist has to feel that way.

BETTY HOAG: I notice that you did Henry Wallace.

BORIS DEUTSCH: Yes, Wallace I painted. He was a very remarkable person. (The first time I saw him I was very much impressed, he was dictating two letters at the same time.)

BETTY HOAG: Oh no! Different subjects?

BORIS DEUTSCH: Different subjects. I was very much impressed.

BETTY HOAG: And also sitting for you?

BORIS DEUTSCH: Yes, between times. I enjoyed very much painting him. Then there were about three or four more people I painted.

BETTY HOAG: Do you remember who they were now?

BORIS DEUTSCH: Falkie, a young woman who worked there who was a secretary and later became his wife, was a very remarkable young girl.

BETTY HOAG: Mrs. Henry Wallace.

BORIS DEUTSCH: No, it was Dr. Tugwell's.

BETTY HOAG: Oh, Dr. Tugwell's.

BORIS DEUTSCH: He married her later.

BETTY HOAG: Did you do a portrait of her?

BORIS DEUTSCH: Oh her, yes. Oh, she was a beautiful person. I'll have to find it and show it to you. The Project was one of these great things that happen once perhaps in the century. It never happened anything like that in our modern times, to be employed by the Government and still be given the complete freedom ...

BETTY HOAG: For your subject?

BORIS DEUTSCH: ... for my subject.

BETTY HOAG: And medium?

BORIS DEUTSCH: Medium, anything. It was unbelievable. Then Olee, the boy from Sweden, told me there was nothing new about that. He's said, "We've done it for the last forty years. We've recorded anything and everything that happened in art history by the artist."

BETTY HOAG: What was done with these paintings? Do you remember?

BORIS DEUTSCH: These paintings were placed in different spots. I suppose they are in the Pentagon somewhere.

BETTY HOAG: All Federal Buildings?

BORIS DEUTSCH: All Federal Buildings, yes, and offices.

BETTY HOAG: Wouldn't they make a wonderful show sometime?

BORIS DEUTSCH: They would. Oh, that would be terrific! That would be a terrific showing!

BETTY HOAG: Maybe the Archives could do that.

BORIS DEUTSCH: Oh, that would be wonderful. Because there were some young talents who never came to the studio in Washington but they were always in the field.

BETTY HOAG: Who were sending in work?

BORIS DEUTSCH: Yes, sending in work.

BETTY HOAG: How many men were there on one of the Projects?

BORIS DEUTSCH: I don't remember. They did a tremendous amount of work. I know I did a tremendous amount. I would come in with fifty sketches. I would go away for a month and bring fifty sketches of all kinds of things.

BETTY HOAG: And finish up all of them?

BORIS DEUTSCH: Most of them were finished.

BETTY HOAG: Oh my!

BORIS DEUTSCH: I would pick out things to do sometimes.

BETTY HOAG: That was certainly a fascinating period for you.

BORIS DEUTSCH: I felt it was the epitome, really, the highlight of a great democracy. The Government became interested in the arts and everything was actually real, it was not a dream.

BETTY HOAG: This was in the early thirties.

BORIS DEUTSCH: The early thirties, yes.

BETTY HOAG: And it was before you did your next Government Project work which was the mural in the Los Angeles Post Office Annex.

BORIS DEUTSCH: That was later after, after ...

BETTY HOAG: That was in the forties, ten years later.

BORIS DEUTSCH: The Resettlement Project was actually to resettle certain workers. They built houses for them and gave some a plot of land to grow things. It was to pay off perhaps in fifteen or twenty years. It was so highly criticized that it was dismissed after only a year and a half.

BETTY HOAG: Was this just in Washington?

BORIS DEUTSCH: Well, they were going to elaborate (duplicate) in different parts of the country, but it was criticized and they had to discontinue it.

BETTY HOAG: Was Mr. Neutra's Channel Heights Project one of these about that time, I wonder?

BORIS DEUTSCH: I really don't know. I'm not familiar with that. Tugwell told me he wanted me very badly to paint the President but unfortunately I happened to be here in among the migratory workers between Los Angeles and San Francisco ...

BETTY HOAG: Yes.

BORIS DEUTSCH: With the migratory workers I did a lot of photographs, because photographs were necessary. And during that time the Project was dissolved.



BETTY HOAG: Oh, what a shame.

BORIS DEUTSCH: So I couldn't go back. They wanted me to go back to Washington but I felt I wanted to stay here because it was really Riva's home and my home here. I thought I ought to go back to painting my own way.

BETTY HOAG: Then you stayed in Los Angeles after that?

BORIS DEUTSCH: Yes. I stayed here until Riva and I were married. Then we went to Chicago. Of course it was very stupid of me. We landed in Chicago and Riva didn't know, we only had enough money to live on for about two weeks. So, again I relied upon myself, feeling that "something was going to happen." With a few samples I walked into a big Chicago commercial house (Lord and Thomas, I remember: a big firm. Very large. I think it was Lord and Thomas, I'm not sure. Anyway it was a commercial house. I showed them my work and half an hour later I walked out with a commission for five sketches to be made for clinics. \$100 per sketch! To be delivered next week!

BETTY HOAG: Oh, how great! That took care of you for your two-week trip.

BORIS DEUTSCH: Then I got some work from Marshall Field's, and after that suddenly I found I was going to decorate a hotel on Miami Beach.

BETTY HOAG: Why had you gone to Chicago in the first place?

BORIS DEUTSCH: I don't know. I wanted to go to New York. We didn't have enough money to get there.

BETTY HOAG: Did you go to Miami Beach and decorate the hotel?

BORIS DEUTSCH: Yes. I did the hotel in Miami, did the Floridian Hotel in about two months.

BETTY HOAG: I think this was a protracted honeymoon.

BORIS DEUTSCH: Well, I don't know how you would describe that. Of course Riva never knew where the next dollar was coming from. Neither did I. But somehow it always came.

BETTY HOAG: She doesn't look like she worried about it.

BORIS DEUTSCH: It always came. It was very interesting.

BETTY HOAG: You came back to Los Angeles...

BORIS DEUTSCH: We came back to Los Angeles.

BETTY HOAG: I just wondered if you were active in organizing the first Arts Committee in '41.

BORIS DEUTSCH: No. I was one of the organizers. In the first exhibition in town.

BETTY HOAG: I didn't mean the exhibition, but in getting the Federal Works Project artists together on the first Project.

BORIS DEUTSCH: No, no, I wasn't. No.

BETTY HOAG: You probably came after that had started.

BORIS DEUTSCH: Oh, it was already on.

BETTY HOAG: It had started.

BORIS DEUTSCH: I think McDonald-Wright was on the committee.

BETTY HOAG: Yes. He was very active. He was director of it.

BORIS DEUTSCH: Pretty soon we are back in Los Angeles and ...

BETTY HOAG: Just a moment, at this point we began looking at paintings and decided to continue a discussion of the murals that Mr. Deutsch did for the Project at our next meeting on Friday.

END OF INTERVIEW ON JUNE 1, 1964 WITH BORIS DEUTSCH

TAPE RECORDED INTERVIEW NO. III WITH BORIS DEUTSCH (PART ONE)

JUNE 5, 1964

BETTY HOAG: Mr. Deutsch, we had done before to the time that you were in Chicago and then Florida, then we decided that we should get up to the Projects period, which wasn't too much later. In the meantime something happened to you which I think we should talk about a little on the tape because it was responsible for recognition of California painters by the whole country, I believe. In 1930 you sent in a picture of "Christ's Head" and a picture of your wife (which was also a head) to the Carnegie International Show, and these, along with several other paintings, were rejected. It caused such a fervor in all of the art journals that the critics and people in the whole United States began to realize that we in California had some fine painters like you and some of the other people who hadn't been allowed in the show. I think it made a great difference for our state.

BORIS DEUTSCH: Well Sid Gun was the director at that time at the Carnegie ...

BETTY HOAG: For the jury awards, you mean?

BORIS DEUTSCH: No, of the museum there ...

BETTY HOAG: I see.

BORIS DEUTSCH: ... in Pittsburgh Museum - the Carnegie - and he sent me an invitation after that to enter the next exhibition. I continued to show there for several years, perhaps ten or twelve years.

BETTY HOAG: I think this was a very important contribution that you made inadvertently with your heads that time. You must have started early on your project with the Treasury Commission of the murals in the Terminal Annex.

BORIS DEUTSCH: Well, we were recognized in New York. I don't recall whether I mentioned it to you or not.

BETTY HOAG: We are very eager to hear about it. In 1932 and '33 you were in Washington.

BORIS DEUTSCH: Yes, I ended up as the head of a department. It was called the Resettlement Administration. It did very excellent work under Dr. Tugwell. There were already a few artists working there when I got this appointment. I'm trying to recollect the continuity, or rather beginning, of this project because it was an extremely interesting project. We had a studio, or studios rather, in Washington, and I used to go out in the field doing some sketches for a couple weeks or sometimes even a month, then come back with a great number of sketches, then compose those things into paintings and make new composition. I was one, and I recall Olie (who was a Swedish artist) was there, Ben Shahn was there. I went on with the Resettlement administration for I think it must have been a year and half, almost two years perhaps.

BETTY HOAG: That was a long time.

BORIS DEUTSCH: After that job was completed I went back to painting.

BETTY HOAG: It must have been about 1939 to '40 or '41 that the projects for the WPA were being organized here.

BORIS DEUTSCH: Well, I did work for a short time, did a few things for them.

BETTY HOAG: Before you did the murals? Is that right?

BORIS DEUTSCH: Yes. And then I received awards for the Terminal Annex at the Post Office I had some eight, nine, maybe eleven spaces and I worked on it for maybe a year and a half.

BETTY HOAG: Now this was a Treasury Department commission wasn't it? It wasn't WPA?

BORIS DEUTSCH: No, it was not. It was direct from the United States Government, the Treasury Department. I was told afterwards that some of those sketches were seen on President Roosevelt's desk.

BETTY HOAG: Oh really? They are very beautiful murals. I went down to see them the other day.

BORIS DEUTSCH: Thank you. But there were some changes to be made, but not very much. The color was done in rather an interesting way. I tried to do some research and I found books on mural painting and after reading them I was so confused I just decided to do it my own way. I approached in the very simplest way. Some painters might be interested in knowing because a great number of them had a lot of trouble, the paint fell off and peeled off because in the contract it was stated that you could not paint with oil.

BETTY HOAG: It was? Oh ...

BORIS DEUTSCH: Yes. Because oil on those walls wouldn't last very long.

BORIS DEUTSCH: Was this a plaster base?

BORIS DEUTSCH: Yes, it was. And they wanted a more lasting medium. I could use egg tempera or casein and I was very much afraid of casein because casein has a tendency to be a little thick, to flake off as time goes on. Also it was a tendency to crack, it doesn't crack but it has a tendency to make some trouble later. So I decided to do this the simplest way and that is egg tempera. I used the yoke of an egg and I mixed it into the water.

BETTY HOAG: Eggs were hard to get?

BORIS DEUTSCH: It wasn't very difficult. I used to use only one egg a day because the work was rather slow. I started out to work with a very fine brush and had to get it out around the murals. And I found after many months - well it was done in 1943 or 1942-43 and the color is just the same today as if it were new.

BETTY HOAG: Yes it is. I was very impressed. It's in beautiful condition.

BORIS DEUTSCH: It was the very simplest way. A yoke of an egg, plus a few drops of delmare water. I had two little jars of concentrated dry color, and when I got through with the murals I still had some left!

BETTY HOAG: Heavens!

BORIS DEUTSCH: It was thin, and because of that there was nothing to fall off, nothing to crack. It was just absorbed into the surface and that was all.

BETTY HOAG: The colors themselves are rich and deep. It looks as though it had much paint on it.

BORIS DEUTSCH: An Impressionist painter who was in Los Angeles used casein, and he had great difficulties with it: he didn't apply it properly, and after a year it flaked and fell off.

BETTY HOAG: We should say for the tape that these murals, eleven of them, are in the shape of lunettes. Is that what you call them?

BORIS DEUTSCH: Yes, they are.

BETTY HOAG: And they are up high, above where people could mark, and its good to see them preserved from vandalism because of that.

BORIS DEUTSCH: Yes. But, by the way it wasn't just handed to me on a gold platter.

BETTY HOAG: It wasn't?

BORIS DEUTSCH: No. I had to learn about the eleven states completely. Yes. I was very much surprised when I got this contract.

BETTY HOAG: Did you have to design all eleven of them first? Or just one?

BORIS DEUTSCH: I sketched all eleven plus two large close-ups. Sections were enlarged to give an idea of how the drawings would look after they were enlarged.

BETTY HOAG: I gather that the subject is the Indians of South America and Mexico and North America, and Industry and Science until the present. Is that correct?

BORIS DEUTSCH: Well, it had to do with the so-called "Culture of the Americas."

BETTY HOAG: Did they give you the subject or could you pick it out?

BORIS DEUTSCH: No, I had to do it myself.

BETTY HOAG: I think that the two dancing figures from South America (Brazil I think) and from Mexico would be interesting to study sometime as a contrast between masks and costumes and musical instruments.

BORIS DEUTSCH: They show music and weaving, food preparation and costumes to the present time. And they had a 200 inch telescope. It was an interesting experiment to me, very interesting.

BETTY HOAG: I thought that I would read the names of some of the panels, or what I think they are and if you can add anything interesting to tell us about the time you did them, please interrupt me. Would you like to do that?

BORIS DEUTSCH: I don't know. It's ... I ...

BETTY HOAG: I think the tape would be interested in learning about it.

BORIS DEUTSCH: Have you got those titles for it? (My note pads, Mr. Deutsch means)

BETTY HOAG: Well I have a list of what I guessed the titles are, and I wanted to ask you about them. The first one, which is dated 1941, shows Mexican women making pottery and tacos and little children holding great palm leaves over them in the heat. Was that a Mexican scene?

BORIS DEUTSCH: South America. There is sort of a relationship between one country and another, and it could be of any part of that section of the country.

BETTY HOAG: All Latin people?

BORIS DEUTSCH: Yes. You can go on ...

BETTY HOAG: The next one was done in 1942, and it was obviously South America with people weaving. One of the men was wearing a hat with a great ... it looked like a stuffed bird on it. Do you remember what that thing was?

BORIS DEUTSCH: Yes. They have what's called a Quetzal bird. It's a symbol of their country. I think they even use it for money.

BETTY HOAG: Is this Mexico? Or .. ?

BORIS DEUTSCH: South America.

BETTY HOAG: Then the third one was 1943, and all of the rest of them are in '43, so you did just one panel in each of those years. The next one had some llamas and men with big Peruvian hats.

BORIS DEUTSCH: It was Peru because they were in the high mountains and only llama can exist there, I think. When you see the llama you know it's Peru.

BETTY HOAG: The next one was of Mexican dancers with masks and many feathered head dresses. It was very elaborate. And the one next to it was also Mexicans dancing but you had Mayan and Aztec motifs.

BORIS DEUTSCH: Yes, those things were very interesting.

BETTY HOAG: You must have done a lot of research for some of the architectural background.

BORIS DEUTSCH: Yeah. Those symbolic figures on the Mexican panels actually spell out the year I painted those panels.

BETTY HOAG: Oh ...

BORIS DEUTSCH: 1943.

BETTY HOAG: Oh, for goodness sakes!

BORIS DEUTSCH: I didn't want to copy anything from ... so I got those numerals from the ancient codexes.

BETTY HOAG: I'll go back and look for that. Then the next one going across the front of the building is I think, Father Serra with some beads ... (rosary)

BORIS DEUTSCH: Yes, the father who first came into this country.

BETTY HOAG: ... with the Indian people around him. Then when you turn the corner there is a series down the side corridor of the Post Office, five more murals which all have modern subject. The first one was people coming west by the conestoga wagon drawn by oxen and then Mount Palomar, I believe.

BORIS DEUTSCH: Yeah, it has the two hundred inch telescope. I made a composition of that, using many different types of astronomical instruments, gadgets to measure things and ...

BETTY HOAG: You must have enjoyed that one particularly, since you are interested in astronomy?

BORIS DEUTSCH: Yes. I was very much interested.

BETTY HOAG: And the next one was a physics class in a high school; and telephone operators and the whole system of the telephone company.

BORIS DEUTSCH: Yes, "Communication."

BETTY HOAG: And the last one was obviously "War," with the Army...

BORIS DEUTSCH: No, it was "In the Defense of the America's."

BETTY HOAG: "Defense."

BORIS DEUTSCH: "In the Defense"...military defense. A most curious thing I remember: a mother and a little girl and a little boy were watching me work. I very often would come down just to take a look at the panel. I would come down from the scaffold and look at it. And once when I did the little boy asked me, "When you were my age, when you were little boy, did you want to paint very badly?" I thought it was really remarkable. I said, "Yes, I wanted to paint very badly." And I did want to paint so badly when I was a child. I wanted to work because I have always loved it, and I've never deviated throughout my entire life.

BETTY HOAG: It must have been a special thrill for you to think about your mother taking you around.

BORIS DEUTSCH: Yes, yes. Most likely that boy was going to grow up and be some kind of artist.

BETTY HOAG: Incidentally, these last two lunettes were done in 1944, so that made four whole years that you were working on the panels.

BORIS DEUTSCH: I didn't remember.

BETTY HOAG: Yes, you dated them.

BORIS DEUTSCH: Three years on the front panels.

BETTY HOAG: Probably December of the last year.

BORIS DEUTSCH: It took me a couple years to prepare those things too.

BETTY HOAG: I mentioned when we were talking on the earlier tape that you often used your wife, Riva, in your paintings. In these modern ones. I'm quite sure that I found her as the wife of an astronomer in the Palomar picture; and she was one of the teachers in the Physics class; and I think one of the telephone operators...

BORIS DEUTSCH: She was all over them.

BETTY HOAG: Yes. Did she actually pose for you?

BORIS DEUTSCH: No. Well, sometimes I used to make little sketches of her. I could paint her from memory very easily.

BETTY HOAG: I see. You probably did it unconsciously anyway. You were thinking about her.

BORIS DEUTSCH: To me she was a very wonderful model ...

BETTY HOAG: Did you have any helpers on this?

BORIS DEUTSCH: No. I did not. I did it all by myself. A friend of mine was a professor at the University, an assistant professor of economics, and wanted to try to help. I couldn't refuse her very much, so I told her to come and try something. She gave it up in the first half hour!

BETTY HOAG: Oh, that was hardly an assistant.

BORIS DEUTSCH: No, it was one man's job actually, at that time.

BETTY HOAG: Did you have to send in progress pictures to the government.

BORIS DEUTSCH: Yes. I sent in thirty minute sketches and then the actual size of those sketches. In other words, I made my drawings the same size as the wall and we photographed those things and sent in to them. They had to look at those things and suggest some corrections. I didn't have many corrections.

BETTY HOAG: Were they in the way of color or content?

BORIS DEUTSCH: They were in black and white.

BETTY HOAG: What were their corrections? Were they technical or political? What kind of corrections were they?

BORIS DEUTSCH: For instance, they had an idea they wanted to have one figure at the right when I had the same figure at the left ...

BETTY HOAG: I hope these were artists making corrections.

BORIS DEUTSCH: I don't really know. I don't really know, but they were not very severe. It didn't matter very much.

BETTY HOAG: Balance is so important in your composition.

BORIS DEUTSCH: I didn't mind at all. As I said, it was merely suggested corrections and they did not interfere with the plan at all.

BETTY HOAG: Several people have mentioned the fact that you were a friend of Val Costello, who is dead now. I wondered if he had been in this Project with you at all?

BORIS DEUTSCH: No, no. I recall his work; it was sort of Impressionistic and he did very beautiful things. I think he did quite a number of pastels.

BETTY HOAG: I believe Mr. Stevens has some.

BORIS DEUTSCH: Of course Ben Berlin was in that same group of a few artists at that particular time. I believe him to be the finest American artist of that period. His work had sort of a Cubistic tendency.

END OF TAPE

TAPE RECORDED INTERVIEW WITH BORIS DEUTSCH CONTINUED, JUNE 5, 1964

BETTY HOAG: Getting back again, we were talking about whether you've done any work besides the Government murals at the Post office in the 1940's? You said you'd done some easel painting for the Project too.

BORIS DEUTSCH: I've done some of it but I was asked to teach at the Otis Art Institute, and I was at that school for about six years. I had a wonderful class in advanced painting. There was no commercial art there at all, unlike the other schools and there were wonderful workers. There I realized the great potentialities that this country had and has and will have as time goes on. Even in the field of art, because I have seen the talent here in this country: it is unbelievable. I think it would only flourish in a country where there is a democracy like we have in this country under the free system of government, where no one is dictated to do things he doesn't like. This has proved itself to be correct, because it has flowered out, it has spread out after the terrific, enormous work shop (Federal Art Project) throughout the country. And the public became interested in it too.

BETTY HOAG: Do you think that the Projects had anything to do with public interest?

BORIS DEUTSCH: It was the nucleus of the very essence of our country. It was this, under the Roosevelt administration, which gave the terrific push to the cause of the artists. All the arts: music, drama, painting, so on and so forth.

BETTY HOAG: Mr. Deutsch, did you teach at any of the art centers that the Government had during the project?

BORIS DEUTSCH: No, I did not. No, I was painting for it you see. I was very busy painting. I painted a great deal at that time. Then I became interested in different changes that took place throughout the country, throughout the world. The so-called "modern" tendencies, the extreme tendencies which we have accepted not was nothing new then because they have done it in France first. But it had to get started here sooner or later, and so naturally it came to a point where no matter what had been done was hung up on the walls. Even Pop art, so to speak. Which I thought was a good thing, they had something to say and they expressed themselves.

BETTY HOAG: It also gives the public a chance to express themselves about what they think of it.

BORIS DEUTSCH: Yes.

BETTY HOAG: Do you think that working on murals, the way you did for four years, influenced the way you paint? Working in such a large medium, did it make you turn to larger easel paintings?

BORIS DEUTSCH: No, I really couldn't answer that correctly. I think everything has a bearing on a person's way

of doing things, without our knowing it perhaps. For instance, our way of living. I started exploring different mannerisms (I call it Mannerisms) different ways and means we use to express ourselves, and my work has changed a great deal since that time. But you cannot escape, run away from yourself. No one wants to run away. Art is really a great continuity in a person's life and although you may paint different subject matter, yet the man behind his work is always present. You cannot separate yourself from a particular way of thinking. And no one wants to do that.

BETTY HOAG: It is sort of your externalized spirit isn't it, in a way?

BORIS DEUTSCH: I think that a person (and I know it is so) should look for new avenues, because one becomes actually bound and held back by his past experiences. But you must start to look for newer ways to express yourself you'll have (Of course you've got to have the creative ability and for those who haven't it's just too bad. They will work the same way as they did forty years ago) But you handwriting is always present.

BETTY HOAG: At the very beginning of the tape I mentioned the fact that you'd been called the first Expressionist painter in Los Angeles. In the library yesterday I was reading some old magazines and found one place where it was Arthur Miller who had said this about you, calling you completely expressionistic at the time. The reason we talked so much about your training in Germany was because I was wondering if you had seen the Blue Rider group there, or had been influenced by any of these expressionistic painters at that time. But you think not?

BORIS DEUTSCH: No, I don't. I don't actually. I always studied naturally. I always worked and took in everything I saw. But it was in America where I really started to develop because here I found freedom, and I found this whole world was opened to me. I always was so grateful that I could come, paint without being hindered and disturbed. Oh, perhaps you can classify my early works, as having a tendency toward expressionism. But the influences of Rembrandt in my childhood when I was in Berlin - I was about 17 years old - I think had a terrific impression upon me, because I found in his work the great and simple way of expressing yourself, in a very humble way. Without fancy gymnastics in the art of painting or showing-off things, all sorts of things having to do with art. Some of those artists really don't paint. Very often I've seen some painters take up a certain mannerism for a while and then drop it because they realize it's not their own. I knew a great strapping young man who tried to draw or paint with a shaky hand - really, actually shaking - on purpose.

BETTY HOAG: Really? Why?

BORIS DEUTSCH: All just for a certain mannerism, trying to adopt it, and it just didn't belong to him. Because he wasn't shaky at all. Perhaps it was just a novelty. I saw some of the early French drawings which had a naive approach to art but they were very genuine.

BETTY HOAG: After the Projects, you did a painting for which you became very famous, and it was a horrible thing because it was done after the bomb had been dropped on Hiroshima. Hiroshima was a little village you told us about earlier on the tape, which you had loved so much in Japan when you were on your way from Siberia. That painting, called "What the Atomic Bomb can do to You." You entered it in the national Pepsi Cola contest in 1946 and it won first prize. It certainly is one of the most horrible of paintings. I think it takes its place with "Guernica": it is the same type of painting.

BORIS DEUTSCH: I think I mentioned this before. I stayed over night in Hiroshima and it made such an impression on me. Later on when that bomb was dropped. That picture was shown in a many places in the country but it was a time, that particular era, when I always felt that the painting did not receive the proper attention. It was at a time when we needed so badly to build up our own strength in this country militarily, and therefore (the impact of the painting) was practically side-swiped. I always felt that I would have liked have done something with it. Today, even after all these years - it was then 1946 - I don't think the times have changed: we are seeing the same fear actually; we are permeated with it. We are taught to think that nothing will happen, but underneath we are extremely afraid.

BETTY HOAG: Sort of an ostrich thing, in a sense?

BORIS DEUTSCH: Well, no, we are not ostriches any more, but we are still afraid of the bomb. There is no question about that. When this will end we don't know. I still have the feeling, by the way that it would be a wonderful thing to have it reproduced in posters, something of that sort.

BETTY HOAG: It is an oil painting, isn't it?

BORIS DEUTSCH: Yes it is painted in oil. I even wrote a letter, I recall, to the Pepsi Cola people. I wrote that about ten years ago, asking if they would be interested in something about it. Well, they were only interested in selling colas, Pepsi Colas. The weren't interested in doing anything about it. They turn the competition into beauty contests now.

BETTY HOAG: Maybe Life magazine would be interested. I noticed the new magazine which came out today is offering war posters of both World War I and II which one can buy for his home, suitable for framing. You know, "Uncle Sam Wants You" and "Give to the Red Cross."

BORIS DEUTSCH: Yes.

BETTY HOAG: Maybe this is a revival of interest, Mr. Deutsch. We spoke the other day, too, about some of the portraits you did in Washington when you were there, like these of Tugwell and Henry Wallace. You also have done portraits of many important people in the art colony here in Los Angeles and I think we should call attention to them. One is here on the wall beside me.

BORIS DEUTSCH: Oh, that was a study actually, a drawing of him. I don't know if he was a writer or a poet or both perhaps; I don't know ... I knew him not well enough to say anything against him. I once got a letter from him wondering if I would be interested in making a portrait of him and if so he wouldn't charge me anything for it!

BETTY HOAG: Ha ha

BORIS DEUTSCH: I thought that was rather cute.

BETTY HOAG: The man we are talking about is Sadakichi Hartman.

BORIS DEUTSCH: Sadakichi Hartman. His father was English and his mother was Japanese.

BETTY HOAG: Strange time in history for such a combination!

BORIS DEUTSCH: Yes.

BETTY HOAG: He was sort of the center of the whole Bohemian cult in Los Angeles, of movie people and many artists?

BORIS DEUTSCH: Yes, yes. But, I did not take part in it because I was busy painting.

BETTY HOAG: And this picture you did of him was strictly for yourself?

BORIS DEUTSCH: Yes.

BETTY HOAG: You did one of Merle Armitage who was the man who organized the WPA in Los Angeles.

BORIS DEUTSCH: Yes, yes, that's true and Joe Sternberg.

BETTY HOAG: Oh, did you?

BORIS DEUTSCH: Yes.

BETTY HOAG: He was a director?

BORIS DEUTSCH: Yes, he brought in Marlene Dietrich.

BETTY HOAG: Oh yes.

BORIS DEUTSCH: From Europe and Joe wanted me to paint his portrait. He was at the height of his career at that time, and he would come over twice a week to pose for a couple of hours. I began to dislike the whole business of painting his portrait because he had a tendency to freeze me. He thought it was really wonderful when I started out painting, after only half an hour ...

BETTY HOAG: Before you had painted enough for him to tell whether it was good or not?

BORIS DEUTSCH: Yes, and I worked for perhaps four sittings and I was quite disgusted with his attitude: I just couldn't accept those things because I had a certain idea of how to paint it. So I told him I was not going to paint him anymore. By the way, he thought that \$250 for the portrait was just about right and of course I didn't agree, but I was only a little mad. But I never signed the portrait!

BETTY HOAG: Oh really.

BORIS DEUTSCH: And eight or nine years later he saw me. He came over to my place in Blyle Heights (a certain section here in town, in Los Angeles; a modest little section) and he had difficulties finding the place. When he got in the driveway he damaged his car because the driveway was too narrow. He came over to me in my studio



asking if perhaps I would be willing to sign the painting. I was working on this painting with What Atomic War will do to You, and he looked at that, and he said, "Why must a person paint things like that? Why don't you paint some flowers or something nice?" He felt that this was the wrong thing to do. Mind you, he ...

BETTY HOAG: "Art should be beautiful."

BORIS DEUTSCH: "Art should be beautiful." It depends on what beauty is. And I must say that his poor little painting was left unsigned.

BETTY HOAG: Never signed.

BORIS DEUTSCH: He probably would give anything to have that signed, but it was so far back (so long ago) I really think I did a very fine piece of work.

BETTY HOAG: Where is that portrait now?

BORIS DEUTSCH: Oh, it's in his collection perhaps, perhaps ...

BETTY HOAG: I'm especially interested in the one of Merle Armitage because you did that in 1931.

BORIS DEUTSCH: Yes.

BETTY HOAG: Which was so shortly before he was busy organizing all of the artists here for the WPA, for the Project, and I wondered where that paint is now?

BORIS DEUTSCH: Well, he collected some things.

BETTY HOAG: I hope you have a copy of it that you will let us microfilm for the Archives.

BORIS DEUTSCH: Yes, I think I have.

BETTY HOAG: Have you any other questions of things that we have neglected to talk about?

BORIS DEUTSCH: Well, I'm coming back to this painting, "What the Atomic Bomb Can Do to You." I would like very much to be able to do something with it, because I feel that something should be done. I really do.

BETTY HOAG: Mr. Deutsch, after the Projects were over what did you do?

BORIS DEUTSCH: I went back to my painting naturally. I painted continuously. And then I had a little gallery with art classes. It didn't last very long but it was interesting.

BETTY HOAG: I think it must have been the first gallery on La Cienega Boulevard which has now become the center of Los Angeles Art Galleries. Was the gallery just for showing just your own works?

BORIS DEUTSCH: No!

BETTY HOAG: Or for other peoples' too?

BORIS DEUTSCH: No, I showed other young men's work. There was quite a bit of work connected with it and I had to give it up finally because I needed more time for my painting. Then I continued painting throughout the years. I saw my style in painting gradually ... I wouldn't call it changed. It isn't changed, but I took an interest in new subject matter. I was interested in astronomy all my life and I have been doing some painting that has to do with outer space, in my own way, my own interpretations of interplanetary subject matter.

BETTY HOAG: You certainly have been doing lots of very interesting work.

BORIS DEUTSCH: I would have liked to see more work done but there is only so much one can do and make a living at the same time. The makes it a little difficult!

BETTY HOAG: I certainly have enjoyed talking to you and I appreciate your letting me come back to continue this interview.

BORIS DEUTSCH: The pleasure is all mine. You've been very patient and ...

BETTY HOAG: You have too.

BORIS DEUTSCH: ... very cooperative, and I'm grateful to you.

BETTY HOAG: Thank you very much.

END OF INTERVIEW WITH BORIS DEUTSCH

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