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Oral history interview with Sonia Allen, 1984
September 15

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Transcript

Interview

**Interview with Sonia Allen
Conducted by Ruth Cloudman
September 15, 1984**

Preface

The following oral history transcript is the result of a tape-recorded interview with Sonia Allen on September 15, 1984, in Portland, Oregon. The interview was conducted by Ruth Cloudman as part of the Mark Rothko and His Times Oral History Project for the Archives of American Art, Smithsonian Institution. Funding was provided by the Mark Rothko Foundation.

RUTH CLOUDMAN: How many brothers and sisters did you have?

SONIA ALLEN: I had no sisters and two brothers. [Three brothers.]

RUTH CLOUDMAN: Two brothers. What were their names?

MS. ALLEN: One was Maurice-what ever they call him here-and one is Albert, and he is not alive.

MS. CLOUDMAN: And then Mark.

MS. ALLEN: Of course, Mark.

MS. CLOUDMAN: When did Albert die?

MS. ALLEN: Does anyone know? I have no idea. [Albert Roth died May 5, 1977.]

MS. CLOUDMAN: We can find that out later. You were the eldest of the children. When were you born?

MS. ALLEN: When was I born if I'm 93 or 94 now? [Sonia Rabin Allen, born March 19, 1890, and died March 5, 1985.]

MS. CLOUDMAN: That should give us a clue. Who was the next oldest of you? Was it Moise or Albert or Mark? Mark was the youngest, was he not?

MS. ALLEN: Mark was the youngest. You call him Moise. I say Misch-whatever you call it.

MS. CLOUDMAN: Tell me about your family in Russia as you remember it.

MS. ALLEN: Most of my education was Russian. When I came here, I was already through with college. So that's it.

MS. CLOUDMAN: Was your family a very religious family?

MS. ALLEN: Not necessarily.

MS. CLOUDMAN: Did they go to synagogue and observe Sabbath?

MS. ALLEN: Not Sabbath. We used to observe holidays usually, but otherwise not.

MS. CLOUDMAN: Was your family Kosher?

MS. ALLEN: No.

MS. CLOUDMAN: Was your parents' marriage an arranged one? Was that common in Russia at the time?

MS. ALLEN: No it wasn't. They married very much for love.

MS. CLOUDMAN: Oh, that's nice. How would you describe your father?

MS. ALLEN: Well, I was very fond of him. He was a druggist by profession. And whenever I wanted to read-I always came to my father for anything. He was not a well man, but a well-read man. As far as I am concerned he

was the best.

MS. CLOUDMAN: What was your mother like?

MS. ALLEN: She was a very nice person, too. She came from a large family. Their family lived in Petrograd. I don't even know how my father met her. My father was there and some way or another they met there.

MS. CLOUDMAN: Where was your father's family from?

MS. ALLEN: It was a small country town. My father himself left home early and went to school and got his degree in pharmacy. That's about all I know.

MS. CLOUDMAN: Do you think that your brother Mark was closer to your mother or to your father as a child?

MS. ALLEN: I really don't know. I couldn't tell you. I felt very close to him.

MS. CLOUDMAN: To your brother?

MS. ALLEN: To Mark.

MS. CLOUDMAN: To Mark, yes. Did Mark know his grandparents?

MS. ALLEN: I don't think so.

MS. CLOUDMAN: Had they perhaps died when he was very young?

MS. ALLEN: I don't remember that, really I don't.

MS. CLOUDMAN: Your father was a pharmacist. Was this in Dvinsk in Russia where you lived?

MS. ALLEN: Yes.

MS. CLOUDMAN: Did your family live in a predominantly Jewish section of Dvinsk?

MS. ALLEN: I think it was.

MS. CLOUDMAN: What was Dvinsk like in those days?

MS. ALLEN: Comparatively with other small towns it was not a small town. It had a couple of schools. I think it was pretty good.

MS. CLOUDMAN: You felt it had things to offer you in the way of education and cultural life and so forth.

MS. ALLEN: We had quite a few friends who had the same education as we did. There was a factory and there were three people who worked in the office and we always used to get together. And they used to come to our home for meals and things like that. Those are the people we mixed with.

MS. CLOUDMAN: Yes. Was Dvinsk much affected by the difficulties in Russia at the time?

MS. ALLEN: No. No Jews could live in Dvinsk.

MS. CLOUDMAN: There was not much anti-Semitism in Dvinsk.

MS. ALLEN: Well, that was everywhere, but you didn't feel it as much.

MS. CLOUDMAN: You were comfortable there in other words. Mark once told a story about being struck by the whip of a Cossack in Russia. Do you recall this incident?

MS. ALLEN: No, I do not; but I think it was during the revolution that we were all in the streets and walking and singing and that must have the time he was.

MS. CLOUDMAN: What was the family's social position in Dvinsk?

MS. ALLEN: Well, it was mostly intelligent people.

MS. CLOUDMAN: People of some education and culture. What was Mark's schooling like in Dvinsk?

MS. ALLEN: Oh, in Dvinsk very little, because we came here when he was about nine or ten years old, something like that. So he didn't get any schooling over there. When he came here he went to Saddock School. He wasn't

there very long and he went to Lincoln [High] and he graduated in three years.

MS. CLOUDMAN: And then went on to college. Going back a little ways to when you were in Russia, did all the children receive similar schooling in Russia, you and your brothers?

MS. ALLEN: Yes.

MS. CLOUDMAN: Why did your father leave for America?

MS. ALLEN: He couldn't make a living there and he had a brother here, and his brother sent for him.

MS. CLOUDMAN: This was the brother in Portland [OR]?

MS. ALLEN: Yes.

MS. CLOUDMAN: Is that why he settled in Portland, because his brother was here?

MS. ALLEN: I don't mean a brother; I mean an uncle. [It was a brother of Jacob Rothkowitz, Sonia's father. The Uncle Sam changed his name to Sam Weinstein.]

MS. CLOUDMAN: An uncle, yes.

MS. ALLEN: They were in business there; they were selling clothes.

MS. CLOUDMAN: Did he send for Moise and Albert first?

MS. ALLEN: Yes. Albert and Moise came together, that's right.

MS. CLOUDMAN: How did Mark react when his father and brothers left? Was it hard for him at all?

MS. ALLEN: You mean when they left Russia?

MS. CLOUDMAN: Yes, leaving him behind with you and your mother.

MS. ALLEN: He didn't really react. He was a young boy. I don't think it affected him very much.

MS. CLOUDMAN: Who looked after the family in Dvinsk after your father left for America?

MS. ALLEN: Mother was with us.

MS. CLOUDMAN: Did you have any uncles or cousins or family members who were there to help you out?

MS. ALLEN: I don't think so, really. When we came here, yes. There was one uncle, Sam Weinstein [Jacob Rothkowitz's brother], who helped us a great deal.

MS. CLOUDMAN: Was life harder for the family after your father and brothers left before you were able to join them in America? Do you remember that?

MS. ALLEN: My father went first. Mother and Mark and I were the last ones. And the two boys came here after my father.

MS. CLOUDMAN: Did your father send money to the family while you all were still in Russia before you came to America?

MS. ALLEN: I don't think so.

MS. CLOUDMAN: Was Mark excited about going to America?

MS. ALLEN: I don't know. He was just a youngster then.

MS. CLOUDMAN: What image of America did you have before you arrived?

MS. ALLEN: Not very good. I don't know. I didn't want to go.

MS. CLOUDMAN: You didn't. Were you leaving friends behind and your life behind? Why didn't you want to come?

MS. ALLEN: We had an idea that America is all mercenary, all money and nothing else. And I kind of leaned to the other side.

MS. CLOUDMAN: Do you think Mark had any vision or image of what America was like before he came?

MS. ALLEN: I don't know. I don't think he did.

MS. CLOUDMAN: After your arrival in New York did you, your mother, and Mark go to Portland immediately or did you visit your Weinstein relatives in New Haven?

MS. ALLEN: We just stayed a little while and then we came here.

MS. CLOUDMAN: You stayed for a little while in New Haven with your relatives?

MS. ALLEN: Yes, a very short time.

MS. CLOUDMAN: Where did you live in Portland when you first got here?

MS. ALLEN: Uncle Sam had a place all arranged for us. Most of the reason we came here is in my uncle's business there was a bookkeeper and we used to correspond with him in Russia. It was very much his part that we came here.

MS. CLOUDMAN: Oh, really! And he was not a relative; he was an employee.

MS. ALLEN: He was an employee for my uncle. Of course, we became very good friends.

MS. CLOUDMAN: Do you remember your first address in Portland?

MS. ALLEN: Oh, no. [They laugh.] I can't remember this one.

MS. CLOUDMAN: Was your neighborhood in Portland predominantly a Jewish neighborhood?

MS. ALLEN: I think so.

MS. CLOUDMAN: How did you learn to speak English when you first got here?

MS. ALLEN: I don't know; I couldn't tell you. I read; I did an awful lot of reading. It was my best occupation. I used to read translations from all different authors. Then when I came here, I started to read the originals.

MS. CLOUDMAN: Oh, in English. That must have helped.

MS. ALLEN: That's the way I started to talk, to. I read and I couldn't stand it if anybody mispronounced words as if I knew it so well. [They laugh.]

MS. CLOUDMAN: So did Mark learn English quickly?

MS. ALLEN: Yes, he learned it in school.

MS. CLOUDMAN: So he learned his English in school for the most part?

MS. ALLEN: Yes.

MS. CLOUDMAN: Did he enroll immediately in school when he got here?

MS. ALLEN: I guess so; I don't remember really.

MS. CLOUDMAN: You said that he attended Shaddock School and then Lincoln High School. When he first came to Portland, did he have any special lessons in English? Do you remember?

MS. ALLEN: In English, no, he didn't.

MS. CLOUDMAN: How was life in Portland for your family?

MS. ALLEN: Pretty good. We were not rich by any means, but lived comfortably.

MS. CLOUDMAN: Did Mark receive any religious instruction in Portland?

MS. ALLEN: No. I think in the beginning he went to a school-none of us studied religion. We studied English the first thing.

MS. CLOUDMAN: But religious instruction in the Jewish faith-did he receive any when he was in Portland?

MS. ALLEN: No.

MS. CLOUDMAN: Was he ever bar mitzvahed?

MS. ALLEN: No.

MS. CLOUDMAN: When did your father die?

MS. ALLEN: We came here in 1913 and he died very shortly after. It was 1915, something like that. [Jacob Rothkowitz born 1861 and died 1914.]

MS. CLOUDMAN: Do you know what caused your father's death?

MS. ALLEN: Yes. They weren't sure really. I don't remember really.

MS. CLOUDMAN: How did Mark react to his father's death?

MS. ALLEN: He was a child. I couldn't tell you really.

MS. CLOUDMAN: How did the family support itself after your father died?

MS. ALLEN: The boys went to work and we did the best we could. It was hard.

MS. CLOUDMAN: What kind of work did they do?

MS. ALLEN: The uncle that sent after us had a clothing place and one of them worked there. Mark went to sell papers in the street. In those years the boys, 10 years old and up, used to go out and sell papers on the corners. Mark was a little chubby boy and he used to come home beaten up every time.

MS. CLOUDMAN: Oh, dear. [Laughs.] Did he get in fights with other boys on the street?

MS. ALLEN: They knew he didn't know how to fight; they used to beat him up before he knew it.

MS. CLOUDMAN: After your father died, did your mother ever consider remarrying, do you think?

MS. ALLEN: No.

MS. CLOUDMAN: What was your family's relationship like with your cousins in Portland?

MS. ALLEN: Not too close. They were quite wealthy. We used to see each other-spent the holidays together, but not too close.

MS. CLOUDMAN: Did Mark get along well with his uncle and his cousins?

MS. ALLEN: I don't know.

MS. CLOUDMAN: How old was Mark when he began to work? Was it immediately after your father's death or later?

MS. ALLEN: As I said, he was a youngster of about 10 or 11 years old and he used to sell papers on the corners.

MS. CLOUDMAN: Did Mark ever paint or draw as a child or in high school?

MS. ALLEN: I have no idea. At that time we didn't think anything of it, the family didn't. If he did draw something, we didn't pay any attention to it. We thought he was just playing around; so we really didn't.

MS. CLOUDMAN: Do you know if he ever attended art school in Portland?

MS. ALLEN: Yes, he did, for a little while. He graduated from high school.

MS. CLOUDMAN: But did he attend art school?

MS. ALLEN: Art school? I don't know.

MS. CLOUDMAN: Do you remember if he ever visited the art museum?

MS. ALLEN: Oh, he probably did everywhere, yes.

MS. CLOUDMAN: Was Mark interested in music as a boy?

MS. ALLEN: Yes, he was.

MS. CLOUDMAN: Did he or anyone else in the family play an instrument?

MS. ALLEN: No, we didn't.

MS. CLOUDMAN: So when you say he was interested in music, he just liked to listen to it for the most part?

MS. ALLEN: I did, too.

MS. CLOUDMAN: You did, too! Was Mark interested in drama when he was growing up in Portland?

MS. ALLEN: I don't know.

MS. CLOUDMAN: And you don't know if he ever did any acting in school.

MS. ALLEN: I have no idea. I think he did when he was at Lincoln. They used to have school plays and he joined that.

MS. CLOUDMAN: What was Mark like personally? Was he an outgoing person as a young man?

MS. ALLEN: Yes.

MS. CLOUDMAN: What were his friends like? Did they share similar interests?

MS. ALLEN: His friends [were] at school mostly. If he had other friends, I don't know.

MS. CLOUDMAN: Were politics ever discussed in your family?

MS. ALLEN: Probably. I didn't notice. [Laughs.] I didn't know anything about it.

MS. CLOUDMAN: How would you describe your family's political thinking?

MS. ALLEN: I couldn't really.

MS. CLOUDMAN: Was Mark rebellious as a young boy?

MS. ALLEN: Like all children probably.

MS. CLOUDMAN: Was Mark excited when he got his scholarship to Yale University?

MS. ALLEN: I don't know. He probably was, very much so.

MS. CLOUDMAN: Do you know what he planned to study there in college?

MS. ALLEN: I remember he started in something-he started in history, but eventually gave it up. Eventually he left college and went to New York and starved to death, you know. He made friends there.

MS. CLOUDMAN: When he went off to college, did he have any sort of special goals for his career in mind, do you think?

MS. ALLEN: I knew that he started writing. I really don't know.

MS. CLOUDMAN: He was interested in writing, you remember that.

MS. ALLEN: And he was probably interested in other things, but I don't know.

MS. CLOUDMAN: Did he write letters often from Yale to the family?

MS. ALLEN: No. None of us are very good letter writers. [Laughs.]

MS. CLOUDMAN: Did Mark have any trouble with his studies or social life at Yale that you recall?

MS. ALLEN: I don't know. I don't think so.

MS. CLOUDMAN: Do you know why he left Yale, why he left college?

MS. ALLEN: He didn't think he needed knowledge; he wanted to paint. He didn't think they could teach him very much.

MS. CLOUDMAN: When was the first time he let the family know that he wanted to become an artist?

MS. ALLEN: I don't think he even let us know that he started to paint.

MS. CLOUDMAN: He just did it. [Laughs.] What was the family's response when he started to paint?

MS. ALLEN: We let everyone in our family express themselves as well as they could. He wanted to paint, fine!

MS. CLOUDMAN: Did the family help him at all financially?

MS. ALLEN: We really couldn't.

MS. CLOUDMAN: Did Mark visit Portland often?

MS. ALLEN: I don't remember.

MS. CLOUDMAN: I read that some time in the 1920s that he stayed for a while in Portland and acted with a theater group here in town. Do you remember that at all?

MS. ALLEN: I do not.

MS. CLOUDMAN: Do you remember any of his visits to Portland very well?

MS. ALLEN: He didn't come very often.

MS. CLOUDMAN: When he came, do you remember that he painted at all during his trips?

MS. ALLEN: I don't know.

MS. CLOUDMAN: Do you remember the exhibition he had at the Portland Art Museum in 1933?

MS. ALLEN: Yes, I remember that.

MS. CLOUDMAN: Did the family go to see the exhibition?

MS. ALLEN: I went. The rest of them went, too. I'm sure of that.

MS. CLOUDMAN: What was your response and what was their response?

MS. ALLEN: As far as I was concerned, I was very happy about it.

MS. CLOUDMAN: Why? Because he was getting some recognition?

MS. ALLEN: No. He was doing something he wanted to do!

MS. CLOUDMAN: And you were glad to see him do that, yes. Do you remember reading the reviews in the paper? They were quite favorable to his work. Was the family quite proud of him?

MS. ALLEN: Well, I imagine so.

MS. CLOUDMAN: Do you remember what the paintings looked like that were in that exhibition?

MS. ALLEN: I'll try to think back. Most of his paintings were very abstract.

MS. CLOUDMAN: Do you remember his first wife, Edith?

MS. ALLEN: I don't remember where he met her, but they were married for a while. I think in New York. She was making jewelry. In fact, she wanted him to get into it and sell things, but Mark wasn't that type of a person. So that marriage didn't last very long.

MS. CLOUDMAN: Did you ever meet Edith?

MS. ALLEN: Yes.

MS. CLOUDMAN: Why do you think they divorced? Was it because of his not wanting to work with her?

MS. ALLEN: They just didn't match up! [Laughs.]

MS. CLOUDMAN: Do you remember how Mark was affected by the divorce at all?

MS. ALLEN: I do not. I don't think very much.

MS. CLOUDMAN: Do you know why Mark changed his name to Rothko from Rothkowitz?

MS. ALLEN: Well, it was easier. Rothkowitz is a long name. That's the only reason. I don't think there was any other reason for that. Like my brother Albert who was named Bert used R-O-T-H-that's all.

MS. CLOUDMAN: So the family didn't object when he changed his name?

MS. ALLEN: No, why should they?

MS. CLOUDMAN: What was the family's response when he married his second wife, Mel?

MS. ALLEN: Mel was a fine person. We all liked her very much.

MS. CLOUDMAN: Did you or any other members of the family attend the wedding?

MS. ALLEN: I can't remember. I don't even know how he married Mel. I think I don't remember. They were married; I know that.

MS. CLOUDMAN: But you did not attend the wedding.

MS. ALLEN: I don't think so.

MS. CLOUDMAN: Was the family at all concerned that Mel was not Jewish?

MS. ALLEN: That never bothered us.

MS. CLOUDMAN: When did your mother die?

MS. ALLEN: I don't remember the year. Milton, do you remember? Not very long ago. [Kate Rothkowitz, born 1870 and died 1948.]

MS. CLOUDMAN: Do you know what caused her death?

MS. ALLEN: Yes. Her heart was very bad all the time.

MS. CLOUDMAN: Was her death sudden?

MS. ALLEN: No, it wasn't sudden.

MS. CLOUDMAN: She had been ill for some time. Did Mark return for the funeral?

MS. ALLEN: I don't remember that. I don't remember where he was.

MS. CLOUDMAN: Do you know how he was affected by his mother's death?

MS. ALLEN: No, I do not.

MS. CLOUDMAN: Did you see much of Mark after your mother had died

MS. ALLEN: I don't remember whether he remained in Portland. I really don't.

MS. CLOUDMAN: Did you visit him often in New York?

MS. ALLEN: I'm trying to think. I don't think so. [Sonia visited Mark in the East about every two to three years.]

MS. CLOUDMAN: How did the family feel about his paintings? Did you like his paintings?

MS. ALLEN: The family doesn't know that much about that. That was abstract painting, you know. I personally liked it, as well as I like anything in literature and everything else-that kind.

MS. CLOUDMAN: If the family didn't really understand his paintings, was he upset at all? Did it bother him?

MS. ALLEN: I don't think so. They loved him; that was enough.

MS. CLOUDMAN: Did he give his works to anyone in the family? [Water color paintings to M. J. Roth (brother), Beatrice Reinhardt (niece), and Kenneth Rabin (nephew). Milton A. Rabin (nephew) was given a small four inch by six inch unsigned oil.]

MS. ALLEN: Yes, I think each one of us has one painting. I don't keep it here. My sons have it.

MS. CLOUDMAN: What are they like? What are the subjects?

MS. ALLEN: Mine is scenery outside.

MS. CLOUDMAN: Is it one that he painted in Portland

MS. ALLEN: Probably.

MS. CLOUDMAN: How did Mark change over the years.

MS. ALLEN: I don't know.

MS. CLOUDMAN: Do your family members have photo albums and letters from Mark?

MS. ALLEN: Not many, no. I'll tell you. He had so many so-called friends and those friends really ruined him. They declared him mentally "nuts." So finally his daughter came and took care of it all. She sued them all; and some of them really paid, even with a jail sentence. Now she and his son are taking care of everything.

MS. CLOUDMAN: Kate and Christopher.

MS. ALLEN: Yes.

END OF INTERVIEW

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