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Oral history interview with Ben-Zion
interview, 1982 August 3-September 21

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Transcript

Preface

The following oral history transcript is the result of a tape-recorded interview with Ben-Zion on August 3, 1982. The interview was conducted at by Barbara Shikler for the Archives of American Art, Smithsonian Institution.

Interview

BARBARA SHIKLER: Mr. Ben-Zion-is it the way you prefer to be addressed? I suppose everyone asks you whether you ever use a first name or what your entire name is.

BEN-ZION: It is obvious that I'm a "mister", so you rarely have to tell it.

MS. SHIKLER: [Laughs.] All right. You were born in the Ukraine in 1897, is that correct?

BEN-ZION: Of the 19th century, three years before the end of the 18th century [sic].

MS. SHIKLER: Of the 19th century, yes-fin de siècle, as they called it then. I read that your father was a cantor. His name was Hirsch Weinman, is that correct?

BEN-ZION: Yes.

MS. SHIKLER: And did you choose not to use his name-the last name?

BEN-ZION: I thought that one name is enough, and to drag around two names was rather too difficult.

MS. SHIKLER: Much less a hyphenated name-

BEN-ZION: Especially as I have a hyphen in my name, Ben-Zion.

MS. SHIKLER: Yes, I understand. Well, I was interested in your education. You apparently had private teachers and you were educated in the yeshiva, is that correct?

BEN-ZION: My education as very varied. My father wanted me to become a rabbi, so he was very interested to see that I should have a thorough Hebrew education-religious education-not for religion's sake, you understand? And that's why he sent me to the best yeshiva, and also he kept some private teachers if I needed something special, to fill in a little.

MS. SHIKLER: And those teachers came to your home?

BEN-ZION: They came to my home, and with some of them, I went to them. That was my education. The rest-whatever I found myself. I was really more relying on the things that I found myself than the thing that was given to me.

MS. SHIKLER: And did you find a lot of encouragement for this kind of interest in your home?

BEN-ZION: Oh yes, it had to be because our home was very interesting. My father was not only a cantor, to sing himself, but he was composing the things that he was singing. And we had a big choir and always the choir was in the house to rehearse. For instance before the holidays you always had new songs for the holidays especially, so the house was very busy; and always the singers were around the house, they were always ready to get together and rehearse.

MS. SHIKLER: Very exciting-very exciting.

BEN-ZION: Yes, very exciting. In those days we had little boys, very young boys, for soprano and alto. Actually there should be four voices-soprano, alto, tenor and bass. We had all those four. The tenor and bass were grown up people. My father always thought it should be a very very good choir. There were 20 people in the choir-even more-and that's why it was very interesting because according to the holidays and according to the occasions the house was a good place. For instance, if the holiday was a happy holiday so it was lots of singing happy things all over the house. If it was a very sad holiday, it was sitting on the floor barefoot and so on and so forth. If we were invited to a wedding, for instance, we brought a lot of cake. And then if there was a funeral we also would stay in the house, always in the house, because we had to rehearse the funeral songs.

MS. SHIKLER: Did you enjoy singing?

BEN-ZION: No.

MS. SHIKLER: You never did?

BEN-ZION: My father didn't want me to become a singer. It was his strong belief that I shouldn't become a singer, because if I would be a singer I would veer away from the purpose that he had for me to become a rabbi. Most of the singers when they grow up go to Vienna to study singing and become opera singers.

MS. SHIKLER: Yes, and get pulled away from the main purpose. How old were you when you realized that you wanted to write and to draw?

BEN-ZION: Pretty early, pretty early. I would think I was about 14 or 15 years old.

MS. SHIKLER: Were you encouraged in your writing and drawing by your father?

BEN-ZION: No, because he was again afraid my attention would be taken away from my studies.

MS. SHIKLER: Well, how did you feel about his plans for you? Did you want to be a rabbi?

BEN-ZION: See, I had grown up in order to know. He was full with his desire and I was full with my desire. And finally, my desire probably

MS. SHIKLER: Won out, as I see. How about your mother, was she encouraging?

BEN-ZION: My mother was a very very very fine person not because she was my mother. Because she comes from a very beautiful place in the Ukraine. Some of the biggest and oldest forests in Europe were so wild and so tall that they had in this forest pre-historical all kinds of things which you don't see in any other forest. For instance here they had the big ox they destroyed him so terribly here in America.

MS. SHIKLER: Are you speaking of trees in the forest or are you speaking of something else?

BEN-ZION: The big ox in the forest that used to be that they destroyed here in America the buffalo, and there they had the things which is also an animal but prehistoric too. It was called a jugar. Do you know the word "jugar"?

MS. SHIKLER: No.

BEN-ZION: Yes, you are probably thinking of them as jubuska-do you know jubuska?

MS. SHIKLER: I do not. It sounds like the vodka that I know.

[Audio break.]

BEN-ZION: I came to New York. I didn't know anybody. But I had, somehow-there was only one Hebrew writer here. You know something about Hebrew literature?

MS. SHIKLER: I wish I did. I don't, although I notice that in this book you mention some of the Hebrew writers of the time. In this preface to your exhibit in the Maritime Museum [Haifa, Israel] in 1975 you indicated that you joined a group of Hebrew poets, "the first on this soil," it says. Are these the people that you met first when you came here? Tell us how you met them.

BEN-ZION: I didn't know any of them. But one man was called Rubin Brinnen-ever heard of Brinnen?

MS. SHIKLER: I wish I had.

BEN-ZION: He was only Hebrew writer here in America which-he actually couldn't live on literature, but he lives on writing Yiddish in the Yiddish paper-The Forward. Then there were four Jewish papers on different levels. So I tried to find Rubin Brinnen. I thought he may be able to suggest something for me to do. But he lived in the Bronx-they told me he lives in the Bronx. So I begin to ask, "How do you go to the Bronx?"

MS. SHIKLER: [Laughs.] That's wonderful. Good for you.

BEN-ZION: Each one I asked, "Where is the Bronx?" [Laughs.] So finally after all day of walking I-

MS. SHIKLER: You found the Bronx. And you found Brinnen.

BEN-ZION: He was very nice. He published then a paper, a monthly. And right away he gave me a job to read-what do you call it?

MS. SHIKLER: To do proofreading? What was the name of the paper? Do you remember?

BEN-ZION: It was a paper that-the ones that make [inaudible] all over the place. [Laughs.] But there were two Hebrew writers. He called them, and we met each other. Right away I was in a different atmosphere. Right away we endeavored to publish a book of our own work, and I got my first drama written in Hebrew in the 1920s. It was printed still in Germany, because Germany was the most advanced place in Europe for printing beautiful books. And they printed a beautiful book.

MS. SHIKLER: Do you have a copy of that?

BEN-ZION: I have one copy.

MS. SHIKLER: It would be nice if that could be looked at or perhaps photographed at some point. Well, that must have been a very exciting thing for you, to be published.

BEN-ZION: It was very exciting to be published. And we even started to think of publishing a second part, but we never reached it. Those few people were Hebrew writers and were as young as I. Understand? Only one or two were older, and they were still studying.

[Tape interrupted by street noises.]

MS. SHIKLER: You did not attend college when you came here?

BEN-ZION: No. I never attended any college.

MS. SHIKLER: Did you study at all when you came here, any kind of study?

BEN-ZION: Nothing. English I didn't study, just picked it up.

MS. SHIKLER: I don't know if I'm skipping an important period, but I see in this biographical sketch, for instance, that when you became aware of what was happening in Nazi Germany to the Jewish people and to the country in general, you stopped writing-you couldn't write.

BEN-ZION: I couldn't write. I just couldn't forge a sentence.

MS. SHIKLER: Well, I have a few questions to ask you around that. Perhaps I'll ask you a bunch of those questions; and you can speak at length, if you wish. First, I think it might be interesting to know how you came to the conclusion, for instance, that drawing and painting were a better mode of expression for you in response to the political situation in Germany. I'm curious, also-it seemed to me, in retrospect, that so few people were aware of what was happening in depth in Nazi Germany. But you seemed to be enough aware of it to have been thrown off your whole direction. Tell me about how you were so knowledgeable about that, and how you felt that painting and drawing could express it best.

BEN-ZION: Very plain. You know this creature the Nazis-Hitler? This guy really became prominent whenever he [inaudible] and shoot all the [inaudible]

And one night I was sitting-and still we had some hope that a second part of the book that we published will come true. I sit and write a little poem-I used to write a lot of poems. Right now I have four books of poetry they published. Right now, in a safe location-so, I was sitting and trying to write a little poem, and suddenly I hear this dirty words of this creature on the radio. Not my radio-on all the radios. I sit, and I was just looking for a word which I wanted. I'm very particular about the word that I want. It must be the right [word] and not just "this" and "this." I was sitting-and somehow I couldn't get the word that I wanted. All kinds of silly words came in my mind. And then, "So what?" I said to myself. "What will happen if I find the word that I want to say?" And I sit and thought-"What will happen?" I ask myself. "Nothing will happen. So what shall I do if nothing will happen. So what for do I say it, all these words?" And just like nothing, I couldn't write. Not only the words, but altogether. I couldn't.

MS. SHIKLER: So you felt, in a sense, that your words were futile, that the effort was futile?

BEN-ZION: Ridiculous-and futile.

MS. SHIKLER: So you were sensitive, then, to the enormity of what was happening, the power of what was happening? And the force of it? How did you translate this-well, apparently you went from a feeling of futility in your initial medium, which was words, to a feeling that you could be effective in drawing and painting. How did it happen that you felt a sense of accomplishment or potential in painting and drawing?

BEN-ZION: I didn't paint then.

MS. SHIKLER: Oh, you did not. How long was it, then, between one-

BEN-ZION: It was at least three, four years till I got through this. Meanwhile, I did very little jobs, except-to wash dishes, and-

MS. SHIKLER: You did that? So it must have been a period of terrible depression for you, to be deprived of that feeling.

BEN-ZION: It was so that I was ashamed even to meet my friends, the Hebrew writers, which were studying and- and I don't do anything. I felt so helpless.

MS. SHIKLER: But, yet, when you write in 1982 about words as symbols, you have apparently re-evaluated some of your earlier feelings; and they obviously-

BEN-ZION: No. I did not-I just couldn't do anything; and I did kind of ridiculous things. Just buy bread, then bread and some milk.

MS. SHIKLER: Terrible period.

BEN-ZION: And I hid myself for-I knew already, many Hebrew people which liked poetry and knew me as a poet already; but I was hiding myself. Even when they published me, even went the writers asked me for dinner I could never go.

MS. SHIKLER: So you became, really, a recluse, almost.

BEN-ZION: Yes. So one day I had an ingrown nail on my foot; and a doctor, one of my Hebrew readers, made a little operation on my nail. It was nothing. But I couldn't work for three weeks. I had to stay in my room purposely for it. But what did they used to call such a room? In those days nearly every family had a boarder.

MS. SHIKLER: So you were boarding in someone's house. Where were you living then?

BEN-ZION: In the Bronx.

MS. SHIKLER: You did find the Bronx. [Laughs.] There you were, then, for three weeks, in your room.

BEN-ZION: I couldn't do anything, couldn't go out. The people from the house saw this and so they used to buy for me food. I couldn't do anything; I couldn't read, couldn't write, so I got myself a book of paper and started to make drawings-what I saw. I lived on top of the house, and I used to go up on the roof. There was chimneys around, so I made drawings of chimneys and [things] on the roof I saw; I made a group of drawings.

MS. SHIKLER: Did you keep them?

BEN-ZION: I sold them.

MS. SHIKLER: You did. That's terrific. How did that happen?

BEN-ZION: That happened the way things do. When I had time, I used to go on the avenue-57th Street, you know-all those galleries used to be-and look at pictures, just look. I used to go into a gallery. The galleries were free. And there was one gallery with one man which was very interesting. His name was J.B. Neumann. What do you know about him?

MS. SHIKLER: He was very instrumental in bringing new work to the attention of the public, a new kind of work.

BEN-ZION: He sold and bought European art, modern art. He was a very nice man. He saw me coming in a few times, usually a Saturday. I thought he was very curious about me. You know why? I was curious. I came to America with a cane; in America they used to wear canes. Young people used to wear canes, nice canes, very fashionable.

MS. SHIKLER: Yes. It was the style is what you're saying.

BEN-ZION: It was the style, yes. And I kept on carrying my cane.

[Audio break.]

MS. SHIKLER: Let us continue, then. You were speaking about Neumann's interest in you. You were going to the galleries on 57th Street.

BEN-ZION: I didn't say that he was interested in me.

MS. SHIKLER: I thought you felt that he was curious, at any rate.

BEN-ZION: He was curious. That's two different things. So I'll tell you why he was curious.

MS. SHIKLER: You were carrying a cane, apparently.

BEN-ZION: I was carrying a cane. Those days, young people here didn't carry canes; even old people did not. So, after coming there a few Saturdays in the afternoons-that was the time when I used to go-he came over to me and said: "I see you coming here from time to time. I see that, when you look at a picture-I can see right away how somebody looks at a picture. And I see that you look at a picture with very, very strong interest. Are you an artist, or are you buying art? I sell very cheap things because I haven't got no money, just like the artists." [Laughs.] "That's why I buy small things in Europe which I like and things here sometimes, so trade people can buy a little art, too."

MS. SHIKLER: Did you buy something from him?

BEN-ZION: No. Then he said, straight: "You say you're not an artist, but you like art." And I said, "Yes." "What for?" "Because I like it." [Laughs.] So he says, "Okay." A few weeks more went away like this and one day he came out and, very abrupt. I'll ask you a question, and tell me the truth. Are you doing some artwork yourself?" So I said, "I don't know if you can call that artwork, but I'm doing a little." "Would you like to show me some?" "I haven't got nothing. I have just small bits of work; I make those small, little drawings. And that's all I have. Like a pad, an artist pad."

MS. SHIKLER: Like an artist pad, did you say?

BEN-ZION: Not artist pad, writing pad.

[End Tape 1, Side A.]

MS. SHIKLER: You were speaking about Neumann's response to your statement that you're doing some drawings, and they were drawings that you said were on a small drawing pad. So, what happened next?

BEN-ZION: What did he say?

MS. SHIKLER: He said, "So let's see them." Right? Is that what he said?

BEN-ZION: He said, "No artist knows if he is an artist." "Then I'm an artist." [Laughs.] "I don't know." He says, "Would you like to bring me some of those little drawings? I'd like to see them. I have here only small drawings. It's easier to buy. So let's see."

MS. SHIKLER: He showed you some small drawings. Do you remember whose drawings he showed you?

BEN-ZION: On the wall? Small French drawings he showed me, and some other American artist-he lives in a fishing village. What's the name: An old man-very old-

MS. SHIKLER: You don't mean Marin, do you, John Marin?

BEN-ZION: No. Anyway, small things-so, next Saturday I brought in my drawings. It's really not big as that is, this paper. You know a writing pad is this big? I had about 10, 15 drawings during those three weeks that I made. He looks around. He looks, and he looks with great attention. I see he puts away one, and then he takes it back. Puts away one, then takes it back. So finally he puts together three drawings and he said, "If they are not too expensive, I would like to have them. How much are they?" So I say, "I don't know." [Laughs.] I say, "It is the first time somebody wants to buy my things. I don't know altogether if they're worth even the paper."

MS. SHIKLER: You must have been quite astonished.

BEN-ZION: Oh, yes. Especially when I saw the [Marie] Laurencin, I remember still. I didn't like her too much. She feels a little like powder puff, and I don't like powder puffs. But it was a very nice story. So, I said, "I don't know. As much as you can pay." So he takes out 15 dollars, and gives me for those three drawings. I say to him, "Not too much?" He says, "No. And you'll find out," he says, "that I am probably cheating you." He had a nice sense of humor. Okay. Each time I came, he asked me to bring more, and buy myself watercolors and make some watercolors. And I did. He bought, from time to time, my watercolors.

MS. SHIKLER: Oh, how interesting. So he really started you off. What an interesting man he was. And how lucky that you-during this period that you were gallerying on Saturdays, who were some of the artists that you liked very much? Who influenced your very earliest growth?

BEN-ZION: John Marin. Then I had artist which became my colleagues. Right away I had a big exhibition which he suggested. The Artists' Gallery-do you remember the Artists' Gallery? I was the first one, an American, to have a show there.

MS. SHIKLER: Yes. I think you were in their very second exhibit. Is that right? You had a one-man show.

BEN-ZION: Yes. Before it was some German. How do you know that?

MS. SHIKLER: Mueller, was it Mueller? No, it wasn't. Well, at any rate-because I've been reading about you. Actually, a bit before that, I believe in 1935, you became involved with Joe Solman and Rothkowitz [Mark Rothko] and the Ten. Here's where I'd like to make a little bit of a sense of time, to establish a sense of the period. At that point, how did you meet Joe Solman? Was it through Neumann? How did you meet those painters?

BEN-ZION: There was a group, a gallery downtown, almost near Twelfth Street somewhere. I have forgotten the-

MS. SHIKLER: You mean the Secession [Gallery Secession, West 12th Street, New York, NY]?

BEN-ZION: Secession. Yes. The Secession was the same thing with me. I came there to see the exhibition, the works of art; and the owner of the Secession then asked me, "Are you an artist?" I told him, "I don't know."

MS. SHIKLER: That was [Robert] Godsoe.

BEN-ZION: Godsoe. Yes. I forgot his name. He used to like to drink a lot. That's when he invited me upstairs, and he gave me a drink, and we became friends. He was a very nice person, Godsoe. Only that he-he lived with another man, a singer, which I didn't like his singing. Do you know the other man?

MS. SHIKLER: I don't know who the other man was. I think Joe Solman also knows about this relationship. He speaks of it, too. So it wasn't Joe Solman who-

BEN-ZION: You know Joe Solman? Do you see him, Joe Solman?

MS. SHIKLER: I haven't seen him recently; but someone else-also in relationship to this period. It was my impression that it was he who introduced you to Godsoe. That's not the truth? That's not the way you remember it; let me put it that way.

BEN-ZION: No. It used to be then I didn't know yet any artists.

MS. SHIKLER: So you went upstairs with Godsoe and had a drink.

BEN-ZION: Yes. And right away he invited me to be a member of the gallery.

MS. SHIKLER: And that's how you met Solman and Rothko?

BEN-ZION: I met all of them, yes. They were there already before me.

MS. SHIKLER: What was the group like? What was your impression of it?

BEN-ZION: It wasn't yet a group. They're thinking about grouping. They didn't know me yet. But as soon as they saw me, they invited me right in.

MS. SHIKLER: They saw your work?

BEN-ZION: No.

MS. SHIKLER: Even before that? So that means, then, you must have had some conversations together in which they perceived your philosophy or sensibilities?

BEN-ZION: I heard that J.B. Neumann suggested me for my first one-man show in the Artists' Gallery. They saw that I could be one of them.

MS. SHIKLER: I see. It was my understanding that the Ten was formed in 1935, and, as I recall, your first one-man show was in 1936. So they had already been formed as a group by the time you met them all. When you got to know them, what was it like? What was it like for you, for instance, who had never really been in company with a group of painters?

BEN-ZION: It was very exciting. I felt very inferior. I didn't know even how to buy materials. You know, when somebody don't know anything about materials, he comes into a material shop-they'll hang on you some things

that they never can use. [Laughs.]

MS. SHIKLER: Yes. Well, were these people encouraging? Were the artists encouraging?

BEN-ZION: Oh, yes. Right away I was a part-all of them-

MS. SHIKLER: They were all kind to you?

BEN-ZION: Yes, all of them. They were entirely different than now. For instance, Rothko especially liked my company, visited me. But when he became famous, with the millions, he became a different person.

MS. SHIKLER: What was your first impression of him in those early years-when you first came among the Ten?

BEN-ZION: I felt very inferior-to everybody. There was one gallery with a woman's show-invited artists to exhibit-and she also invited me to exhibit. That was the very first time I started to exhibit. When Neumann got my things, I didn't know anything yet.

MS. SHIKLER: Did you meet with them often? You had lots of discussions?

BEN-ZION: We had lots of discussions. Before an exhibition we had meetings in different places in the studios. Different studios each artist had. It's all the time, so we were nominated by the group to go to look for a gallery, too. We always were successful in getting galleries.

MS. SHIKLER: I have a list of those galleries. During that period I think there were five galleries. You had two years at two and at-

BEN-ZION: Yes. Montross is one of the oldest galleries.

MS. SHIKLER: That was quite an established gallery at the time that you all had a show there. And then you were two years at Passadoit. And I'm not sure how you pronounce this-Bonestall. And Mercury-and did you also show at the Municipal Art Gallery with them-that was the last one? You don't remember that?

BEN-ZION: This I can't remember.

MS. SHIKLER: You don't remember that? And then Joseph Brummer sent a show of the Ten to Bonaparte-to Paris. So everything was happening?

BEN-ZION: Yes. We had a show in Paris. I had my first-and we had very good press there in Paris.

MS. SHIKLER: I saw that. As a matter of fact, you had a lot of good press-

BEN-ZION: Oh, my press was the best, especially with the special critic here, [Henry] McBride. Have you seen?

MS. SHIKLER: Yes. I've seen some of those reviews. That was very interesting. I saw an Art News review of your painting "Friday Evening," for instance; and they called it (I'll quote) "perhaps the most satisfying canvas in the exhibition." And they said that you had "Matisse-like perspective." [Laughs.] Did you know about "Matisse-like perspective" at that time? Were you responsive to Matisse?

BEN-ZION: Yes. I liked-especially I liked his still lifes. I like still lifes. They didn't get to see yet, really, my still lifes. Those are my specialty, still life.

MS. SHIKLER: I would like to see your still lifes. The one that I was quoting, "Friday Evening"-they said it also, the critics said, that it was "redolent of the character of the house and the people who inhabit it." I wanted to ask you, were the people of that house, was that imagery, drawn from your own background?

BEN-ZION: Yes. From my mother's house. Saturday Evening. Sabbath.

MS. SHIKLER: I'm curious to know-as you grew as a painter, you were always influenced by your history, by your Jewish history, and your family?

BEN-ZION: I was always the same. By everything.

MS. SHIKLER: I'm interested in knowing, for instance-you were involved with this in a sense of familial and racial memory that you kept with you? You kept that alive?

BEN-ZION: The word "racial" I don't know.

MS. SHIKLER: When I say "racial," I mean the Jewish tradition. How did that work for you with your growth as a

painter? Obviously, you must have become interested then in the work of other artists.

BEN-ZION: No. I only did things that I knew. I could never copy anything. I mean, especially if it had to do with a tradition. My tradition, as I told you, in our house, was full of prayers all through the year for different occasions- full of those Hebrew prayers.

MS. SHIKLER: But the form that it took became a more educated form. In other words, you feel that-

BEN-ZION: No. I was never educated as an artist. I never went to an art school, except in Vienna.

MS. SHIKLER: So then you feel that looking at other painters was not an influence?

BEN-ZION: Absolutely not.

MS. SHIKLER: That's interesting. And yet you took your place as a contemporary artist. In other words, the form that you created was consistent with a movement-

BEN-ZION: I was right away in the midst of everything. I was right away in the midst. The first year when I came in touch with artists, I was right in the group, and I gave right away an exhibition here, and exhibition there. Marian Willard gave me an exhibition. Do you know that Marian Willard was also with J. B. Neumann together? And that was for me; he introduced me to her. Then I was with Kurt Valentin, also through Marian Willard.

MS. SHIKLER: But that was later, wasn't it? When was that, that you were with Kurt Valentin? Do you remember what year?

BEN-ZION: That was in the year when he published four of my etchings. You know, we were never the Ten.

MS. SHIKLER: You were the nine who were the Ten, right?

BEN-ZION: Even nine, not. [Laughs.]

MS. SHIKLER: Really? You never did fill in?

BEN-ZION: No. We had a number of people, very strange people, too. I forgot their names.

MS. SHIKLER: You mean the people who were with you from the beginning?

BEN-ZION: Not from the beginning, but they stepped in. They were invited.

MS. SHIKLER: You had people like [Ilya] Bolotowsky and Gottlieb.

BEN-ZION: Bolotowsky was-just lately he died [1984].

MS. SHIKLER: Yes, very recently. You also had Gottlieb and Rothko and Solman.

BEN-ZION: There was one wild beast by the name of [Nahum] Tschacbasov. That's a good name.

MS. SHIKLER: Yes. He was given the heave-ho; he was asked to leave, I gather.

BEN-ZION: Yes. We didn't like him.

MS. SHIKLER: There was a [Louis] Schanker; there was Ben-Zion, [Louis] Harris-

BEN-ZION: Harris died very early. I don't know what happened to him.

MS. SHIKLER: Ben-Zion, Bolotowsky, Gottlieb, Harris, Koufeld-

BEN-ZION: Him, no. He dropped out right away.

MS. SHIKLER: Rothko, Schanker, Solman and Tschacbasov-that was the-and you were all called the Younger Artists. How old were you when you started to paint.

BEN-ZION: 19, 20. No, no. In '36; how old was I in 1936?

MS. SHIKLER: [19]35, actually. You were 38 years old. I'm curious to know whether there was any rivalry between all of you. You got some good notices. How did the other painters feel about that? Very good notices-what was the reaction of the other painters?

BEN-ZION: No. There was no rivalry. I think Tschacbasov was the only one which started this.

MS. SHIKLER: Were you prolific? How much did you work? How much did you begin to produce?

BEN-ZION: This is a thing which I don't know. I always did a lot of work, and I knew that Rothko doesn't do much work. He always was late to deliver when he had an exhibition. To deliver the paintings he always used to work so long till, finally, he had to do it quick. But then I found out when I saw his last show all those paintings were big paintings. I asked myself, "When did he do all those big paintings?"

MS. SHIKLER: You're saying he worked very slowly?

BEN-ZION: Yes. And knowing that he works very slowly-everybody knew-we liked him because of that. We thought, "He's contemplating more." He had the character of an intellectual, but a nice intellectual; intellectual which tries to find out things and doesn't show off. That's very nice. You know, there is the museum of nonobjective artists. Every Monday, Tuesday there when you-things that they're finding, finding, finding. You're finding shit-oh, pardon me. [They laugh.] We called things by their name.

MS. SHIKLER: It's acceptable, very acceptable. It's not the first time it's been done, I assure you. [They laugh.]

BEN-ZION: No, I absolutely don't like this kind of talk; but it forces me, for once, to call those things the right name.

MS. SHIKLER: At that point, when you were all showing, you were all considered to be very modern. The reviews indicated that you were very modern. In fact, it was the birthplace of those things that came later that were called that you take issue with the use of the word abstract. In your writings you've indicated that. What was your feeling at that point about being considered a somewhat revolutionary artist?

BEN-ZION: By the way, I'll give you one of my little books, writer books-about such things-

MS. SHIKLER: Why don't we do that a little bit later when we break up again. It might be interesting now to just sort of work in that period for a few minutes, unless you feel that you want to take a rest. I was interested, for instance-the Artists' Gallery, they spoke about, in their statement-it was a progressive and a very romantic statement, it seemed. Herbert Styx discussed the art market and the fixation on the commercial use of names, et cetera. Herbert Styx of the Artists' Gallery-his statement about the commercialization of art in that day was in all the catalogues of the shows. How did you feel about the worship of the big name artist, even then?

BEN-ZION: I didn't like it. If you have some of my catalogues-no, I never write in any of my catalogues that I have paintings here, I have paintings there, in different places, and who buys my things. You'll never find that.

MS. SHIKLER: No, you didn't. But, in fact, you were developing a patronage; you had people who were buying your work.

BEN-ZION: Still today.

MS. SHIKLER: Still some of the original collectors?

BEN-ZION: Yes. Still today they come almost every year back. They don't take advantage because some artists' work got lower because their current year wasn't so high like the others. It didn't happen to me; those that came back always went according to the-

MS. SHIKLER: So the people who liked your work just liked your work? They weren't involved with the style of, the fashion in painting?

BEN-ZION: No, never.

MS. SHIKLER: How long did you stay with the Artists' Gallery?

BEN-ZION: With the Artists' Gallery it wasn't a matter of staying with them. It wasn't like a private gallery; it belongs to the artists. The people that Styx was-he was a very nice person. When he saw that one artist he wished to know-and [if] for a number of years he's not invited, he used to invite him again. I never needed that. You understand? That's when I had only one exhibition. Then right away Marian Willard took me over.

MS. SHIKLER: So you didn't return?

BEN-ZION: They didn't have any obligations for me. The same thing with Marian Willard; right away Valentin took me over. You see the point? I went from hand to hand.

MS. SHIKLER: So you were with Valentin for how long?

BEN-ZION: Till this day. He published four books like that.

MS. SHIKLER: And then you went to Bertha Schaeffer?

BEN-ZION: While I was with Valentin I did a lot of work. I did a lot of writing, and I did a lot of paintings, you know, for sculpture. She took over some paintings of mine while he did the etchings.

MS. SHIKLER: So Valentin had the etchings and Schaeffer had your paintings. You know, we didn't discuss when you first began to paint in oil. You first began to paint in oil after you became involved with the group?

BEN-ZION: Yes.

MS. SHIKLER: And so they introduced you to the medium?

BEN-ZION: No. I introduced myself to those terrible kinds of thoughts. I had to find out myself. I was ashamed.

MS. SHIKLER: So you experimented?

BEN-ZION: Of course. Another thing, I had an opportunity to catch up a little on this because I got the job then in a camp to teach children art.

MS. SHIKLER: What camp was that?

BEN-ZION: A Jewish camp-Unser Camp [Highland Mills, NY]. It was a very big camp.

MS. SHIKLER: I knew about Tammanent and Kinderwelt [Highland Mills, NY].

BEN-ZION: Tammanent [?] is for grown-ups and Kinderwelt for children. And Unser Camp [is for children]. Those were big camps-three, four hundred children. I was the art director.

MS. SHIKLER: When was that? What year, do you remember? During the '30s?

BEN-ZION: That was '30s, '40s.

MS. SHIKLER: Were there any of your other painting compatriots there with you, or were you there alone?

BEN-ZION: No. There were young people.

MS. SHIKLER: No other of this group who were there? At the camp?

BEN-ZION: Children. And there were cooperation between the theatrical things and the artists. I painted the scenery for them. I painted once the scenery for the Pirates of Penzance.

MS. SHIKLER: Did you? Really? All by yourself?

BEN-ZION: No. I had to assistants, a boy and a girl. They made all the sets, and I would do the art work, just touching up.

MS. SHIKLER: Did you like being there?

BEN-ZION: Yes. I used to dress up-not the slightest bit of paint on on me. Oh, they were full of paint; and I was walking around, like doing nothing.

MS. SHIKLER: Did you like teaching?

BEN-ZION: Actually, I would say I was teaching it here at Iowa. You knew I was there?

MS. SHIKLER: At Iowa? When was that? During that period you went to Iowa University to teach?

BEN-ZION: Yes. They invited me. Also at Omaha University.

MS. SHIKLER: And that was in the '30s?

BEN-ZION: Yes. And also in the '30s was Indiana. I enjoyed very much teaching because I didn't teach anything. In my classes I told them right away, "I can't teach art, because most of the time I'm in the middle of painting and I don't always-they used to come there: "How do you make fingers?" Many times I don't know how to do it neither. So you have to find out yourself. They had to try and find out for themselves. They actually used to come to ask me, "How do you make a foot?" and all those kind of things. I didn't know myself. I could start to draw and

find myself really wanting.

MS. SHIKLER: What do you feel you gave them, then? What do you feel that you gave the students that was important?

BEN-ZION: I gave them one thing that-when they made something ridiculous and not put in the common sense, they have to keep away. Anything that was cute, they had to keep away. That's all. They couldn't show me a drawing which was cute.

MS. SHIKLER: What did you consider cute?

BEN-ZION: Everything that's so beautiful. You know those-

MS. SHIKLER: Something beautiful or pretty you didn't feel was really an aesthetic statement, is that what you're saying?

BEN-ZION: Many times some went away mad at me. A boy which was was afraid, was ashamed. Many times he made a thing and I put it down like that: "Look, this is a nice drawing." Then he got mad at me. "What? How do you draw this here?" It was that he didn't know how to make a finger.

MS. SHIKLER: So what were you responding to in his work? You were not involved with the representation, per se. What did you like?

BEN-ZION: Truth. Some continuity. And also very clumsiness-especially clumsiness. It always told me this person is something.

MS. SHIKLER: Why is that? Could you explain that?

BEN-ZION: Because he doesn't know himself and he tries to-

MS. SHIKLER: What you're saying then, is the struggle is the sign of truth. In other words, answering the question is less important than looking to define it, in a way.

BEN-ZION: Yes. In a painting I'm not out to show you that I know how to do all.

MS. SHIKLER: What do you want to show?

BEN-ZION: Most of the time I don't know how to show it.

MS. SHIKLER: But you have something else you want to say.

BEN-ZION: This is another thing. This is the thing that an artist who is a real artist-it bubbles in him.

MS. SHIKLER: An effervescence?

BEN-ZION: Yes. I can't say I had any struggle when I got into the art world here in America. Right away I got involved with some of the best galleries, and they took me over and-

MS. SHIKLER: Yes. You sound very lucky. Were you making your living through your painting at that time?

BEN-ZION: Oh, yes. In fact, in those days-it was in the papers, too. They mentioned three people which were the bestsellers. It was me, and one from Boston-which I don't like his work.

MS. SHIKLER: From Boston?

BEN-ZION: Yes. A Jewish-

MS. SHIKLER: You didn't mean Ben Shahn, did you? What sort of work did he do?

BEN-ZION: Cute things.

MS. SHIKLER: Is he still popular today?

BEN-ZION: No.

MS. SHIKLER: Well, there's not point to-at any rate, you three were three of the very few artists who made their living from their work. Were you married at that time, Mr. Ben-Zion?

BEN-ZION: No. We started to be married. [Laughs.]

MS. SHIKLER: When did you get married?

BEN-ZION: I don't know what-

MS. SHIKLER: You don't remember the year?

BEN-ZION: No.

MS. SHIKLER: Are we still speaking of the '30s, or are we into the '40s? I don't know; it's hard to be so specific from this distance in time.

BEN-ZION: We're in the '40s.

MS. SHIKLER: Were you ever involved in the WPA projects?

BEN-ZION: Of course. Who wasn't?

MS. SHIKLER: When did you get into that?

BEN-ZION: I got into it because I didn't want to teach grown-ups, but I had beautiful classes of children.

MS. SHIKLER: Oh, you were in the teaching project. Where did you teach?

BEN-ZION: Greenwich House. I had very nice children, and they exhibited a lot of my children's work.

MS. SHIKLER: Did you know that Rothko was teaching at the Center Academy? It was part of the Jewish Center in Brooklyn on Eastern Parkway. During that period-you never discussed that together? It's interesting. He was teaching children and very much liked it-at an institution whose focus was really on Yiddish and Hebrew culture. You never exchanged ideas? When he saw your work, did he not-

BEN-ZION: His Jewishness he never discussed. He somehow kept away from it.

MS. SHIKLER: He kept away from the subject?

BEN-ZION: From me.

MS. SHIKLER: Why is that, do you think?

BEN-ZION: I don't know. Maybe I was obviously too much knowing about the Jewishness, and he got inhibited with me. I don't know.

MS. SHIKLER: I'll ask you more questions directly about him later. Let's just talk a little bit more about your gallery life here in New York. How long were you with Bertha Schaeffer, Mr. Ben-Zion?

BEN-ZION: With Bertha Schaeffer about six or seven years.

MS. SHIKLER: Were you happy in that gallery?

BEN-ZION: Entirely happy, not. She was a good gallery, and she was a good person; but she was an interior decorator, and that was the most important thing to her. If you know the quality of the galleries I was in, with Kurt Valentin and with Marian Willard, then you'll see what-I was with her because she offered me a good living, a very good living. In fact, I was the only one on the Avenue that was paid monthly, if I sold or not.

MS. SHIKLER: You say you were paid regularly even if you didn't sell a picture? Does that mean she kept you on a kind of stipend?

BEN-ZION: Every month I got a check. I was the only one on the Avenue.

MS. SHIKLER: How do you account for that? Why did she do that?

BEN-ZION: She liked my work very much. She felt very good that at the same time Kurt Valentin was printing my etchings. It was a big thing. He didn't print anybody's work so much. Also, Marian Willard still kept on taking some of my things to exhibit, together with her group, which was a very good group. She had the German artist which just came to live in America. You know-the German artist? He was very nice-

MS. SHIKLER: You mean Hoffman?

BEN-ZION: Not Hoffman. Hoffman's not German. The one he makes very beautiful boats.

MS. SHIKLER: You know it's because you're asking me that I can't think about it. [Laughs.] Later when this is over I'll remember or think of who you mean. Perhaps you'll remember later.

BEN-ZION: Anyway, I was right away in the midst of the highest throughout the-

MS. SHIKLER: Was there no conflict between showing at Willard Neumann and Bertha Schaeffer? It was okay that you distributed your work between the two galleries? They didn't mind? There was no conflict there? You didn't feel that she wanted you to give your work only to her?

BEN-ZION: No. She couldn't; she couldn't afford to do that. I was then an artist that any gallery would give me conditions.

MS. SHIKLER: You were doing that well? Terrific. I see also that I made a note that you sold a picture to Joe Hirshhorn in the Palm Beach show. That was apparently the first, was it? The first time?

BEN-ZION: No. Right away he bought nine or 10 pictures. I wasn't one of the ACA Gallery [American Contemporary Artists Gallery, New York, NY] artists.

MS. SHIKLER: When were you with ACA?

BEN-ZION: No, no. I was one of the artists which-I didn't belong to the ACA Gallery. That was when Hirshhorn went there to buy. You know? That was his favorite gallery. I wasn't surprised, and I wasn't especially honored. This gallery had very bad artists.

MS. SHIKLER: The A.C.A. you mean? You didn't like them?

BEN-ZION: Do you?

MS. SHIKLER: Some, perhaps. I'm not sure that I can say yes right off the bat. Who did you think was a bad artist?

BEN-ZION: There were plenty.

MS. SHIKLER: [Laughs.] You don't want to name any names, I guess.

BEN-ZION: No, I don't. It's not necessary.

MS. SHIKLER: Why did you leave the gallery scene in New York?

BEN-ZION: What gallery?

MS. SHIKLER: At some point you stopped exhibiting at galleries.

BEN-ZION: Absolutely. The galleries were always called a certain color, and I didn't like their work. And that was in the time when I left the group, too. I didn't exhibit any more with the group, and I was with the Graham gallery. What was the name of the gallery? There were two names.

MS. SHIKLER: I'm not sure that I know which one you mean, but we can talk about that, too. I hope that you'll give us some more time after this one is over. We can make a list of some of the things you want to remember.

BEN-ZION: What time is it?

MS. SHIKLER: It's now one o'clock.

[Interview Session 2.] [August 5, 1982.]

MS. SHIKLER: We'd been speaking a little bit, before this interview began, on Ben-Zion's two careers, one as a writer-which sandwiched his career as a painter, in effect. We'll talk about that again, next time we come together. I think today what we'll do is use Mr. Ben-Zion as a kind of detective in this puzzle about some of the missing information on Mark Rothko. Perhaps we can start from these questions that are written out, from the oral history project. The first question, which you have, in fact, answered once before, when did you first meet Rothko? We'll repeat ourselves.

BEN-ZION: I met Rothko first when the Godsoe Gallery opened in the Village.

MS. SHIKLER: You mean the Gallery Secession? Godsoe's gallery?

BEN-ZION: Then it became Secession later. I met Rothko in this gallery, where he exhibited already; it was on Eighth Street. There were quite a number of artists there; I had actually met most of them, and most of them were also members in this gallery, except a very few. I met a whole group of artists, suddenly, and that was very pleasant to me, because although I like to be among people-I don't know whether to call it participate, or what-but I like to be among people, especially among artists. Right away, they introduced me, and right away I got an invitation of Godsoe to be a member of the gallery, and right away we started to talk-to secede from the gallery [laughs].

MS. SHIKLER: That was in 1935, or a little before that?

BEN-ZION: Thirty-four. 1935 is when the Artists' Gallery opened on Eighth Street. What's the name? I don't remember.

MS. SHIKLER: Herbert Styx.

BEN-ZION: Styx was with us, and J.B. Neumann was in this gallery, and he spoke to him, "Here's an artist, his first time, he doesn't know anything about art. He's done some stuff; I want to buy some from him." So right away they got in touch with me, and right away, I was the first American artist that was invited to the Artists' Gallery. So I met him-and besides meeting each other in the Godsoe Gallery, we met also privately. We put together ourselves as a group; I mentioned to you the names. We started to talk about putting on shows together, and through boycotting at the Whitney Museum we put on a special at that time, a show. We put on, in another gallery, not far from there, Secession group against the Whitney and we were not supposed to accept in the case of the Whitney.

MS. SHIKLER: What were some of the other things you spoke about with Rothko? Do you remember?

BEN-ZION: This was as a group. We tried to identify ourselves. Why should we be against the Whitney? Why shouldn't we participate in their shows? So we tried to distill this and to see why, actually, we should do that. We came to the conclusion that it was a group of artists which preoccupied the favors of the Whitney Museum, and which, year after year, they were invited-sometimes yes, sometimes not, but usually they are not inviting people like us. We found ourselves different than all the other groups of artists.

MS. SHIKLER: The spirit of your discussions, when all of you agreed, for instance, that you objected to the Whitney's policy-can you remember the spirit of those discussions? Was it an angry spirit?

BEN-ZION: Of course the spirit was angry, because we knew definitely that the head of the Whitney Museum always favored certain groups, year after year after year. I couldn't be really very active, because I just started to be among artists, and Whitney didn't even know about me.

MS. SHIKLER: No, they didn't. But you mentioned before, in the earlier interview, that they accepted you very kindly, and that they were very helpful.

BEN-ZION: Yes, right away. Everybody accepted me kindly; I couldn't believe some artists-always complaining that they didn't accept their art favorably. Well I, from the beginning on, I never was without a gallery. That's a fact.

MS. SHIKLER: It was a very interesting experience. You also mentioned that they were very generous, and they were pleased for you. Did you have any kind of-well, I think you already said you didn't have a separate relationship with Rothko. Did you ever spend any time alone with him, or go gallerying with him?

BEN-ZION: No. Only when we met each other; and we went, sometimes, to drink a cocktail. The usual thing, in talking about things in the arts, some; that's all. I met also his first wife. They invited me, only once, for dinner.

MS. SHIKLER: What was that like? Two things I'd like to ask you about that invitation to dinner. Number one, do you remember where it was that you went?

BEN-ZION: The East Side.

MS. SHIKLER: Do you remember the year-and the address, or at least the street?

BEN-ZION: Not the exact date-it was before '36.

MS. SHIKLER: Where was it that you visited with them on the East Side, do you remember?

BEN-ZION: In his place; he lived very poorly. His wife was a very nice person. I don't know if she did something; she was a jeweler or something.

MS. SHIKLER: Exactly; that's what she did.

BEN-ZION: I didn't know anything about her. But I liked to talk to her, because he wasn't talking too much.

MS. SHIKLER: Who carried most of the conversation on that visit?

BEN-ZION: Most of the conversation, one man carried, and he was never really in the Ten, and that was Barney Newman.

MS. SHIKLER: When was that? Before '36?

BEN-ZION: No, that was later.

MS. SHIKLER: Let's talk about that dinner a little bit.

BEN-ZION: Only I was there, because it was about lunchtime. We were on Seventh Avenue, and he lived right away, not far from there. He said, "Why don't you come?" and I said, "Yes." "Meet my wife," and we had lunch together.

MS. SHIKLER: Does it strike you that it might have been near Tenth Street, or on Tenth Street?

BEN-ZION: Somewhere around there-Eighth or Ninth Street.

MS. SHIKLER: Was it near the elevated trains?

BEN-ZION: No, that wasn't near there. It wasn't Third Avenue; that was already in the Village. That was on Second Avenue, right near Second Avenue.

MS. SHIKLER: The place you went to visit him?

BEN-ZION: Yes.

MS. SHIKLER: Maybe that was the place he had on Sixth Street.

BEN-ZION: I don't know. I knew other artists living on Third Avenue, and oh, boy! There was one man who liked artists, but he was very rich; and when he saw the poor artists, he offered them some apartments in his houses. A whole group of houses, he had.

MS. SHIKLER: Who was that? [Stronsky?]

BEN-ZION: I've forgotten the name. Also in the Village there was one man like that.

MS. SHIKLER: Well, what was Rothko's home, or studio, like, when you went for lunch?

BEN-ZION: That was a nice thing. I liked his place.

MS. SHIKLER: Did he have his work around?

BEN-ZION: Yes.

MS. SHIKLER: Do you remember what kind of paintings-

BEN-ZION: He had some work, yes, but he never had big sized paintings, never.

MS. SHIKLER: I'm going to show you some things-

BEN-ZION: He had mostly the work that he exhibited in the Museum of Modern Art before the big show.

MS. SHIKLER: Did you see anything like this-I'm showing Mr. Ben-Zion #16 in the catalogue-

BEN-ZION: No. I know only that he didn't have any big paintings-not any of the big paintings-when we disbanded.

MS. SHIKLER: Were there any things like this (this is #s 13, 14, 15)?

BEN-ZION: How big were they?

MS. SHIKLER: They were 24 feet by 18 feet-number 13 is a standing nude.

BEN-ZION: All this size, yes.

MS. SHIKLER: But you don't remember specific pictures up on the walls-pictures of subways?

BEN-ZION: No.

MS. SHIKLER: Did he ever talk in those days about Troglodytes? Did he ever tell you that his paintings were of people called Troglodytes?

BEN-ZION: No. I don't know what it means.

MS. SHIKLER: Cave dwellers-that they're kind of a mythological subject. On several occasions he referred to some of his subway paintings-or the people around that time, that he was painting as Troglodytes.

BEN-ZION: Many artists in those days could claim such things. For instance, the English sculptor had marvelous things from the subways, during the war. What was his name?

MS. SHIKLER: But you don't remember Rothko doing subway paintings?

BEN-ZION: No. I don't know, even, what you're talking about.

MS. SHIKLER: Okay. It's not important. Did you see any sculpture around by him?

BEN-ZION: No.

MS. SHIKLER: Carving of any kind, like driftwood?

BEN-ZION: Maybe there was some there, and I didn't notice.

MS. SHIKLER: Did he ever explain, for instance, how he wanted his paintings exhibited? Did he have any ideas about how to exhibit his own work?

BEN-ZION: No. Those days, none of us had the feeling of greatness. Then we started to get the feeling of greatness-like this stupid man Newman. Do you know him?

MS. SHIKLER: I've never met him.

BEN-ZION: You've heard of him?

MS. SHIKLER: Oh, yes. And read many of his statements.

BEN-ZION: He was a teacher, he wasn't an artist. I didn't know him as an artist. Then he became the leader there, of the group.

MS. SHIKLER: That was later?

BEN-ZION: Yes. You know about that? He was a school teacher, and then-I shouldn't say stupid, but he was really stupid.

MS. SHIKLER: Did Rothko talk about the things that he was reading? Did he mention books that he liked?

BEN-ZION: No, he never mentioned books; anyway, we didn't talk about books. We were busy with our own painting.

MS. SHIKLER: Did he ever talk about his own plans for his own work-ideas that he had formulated?

BEN-ZION: No, he didn't have ideas. It just came to him very sudden, all this big avalanches.

MS. SHIKLER: And did he ever discuss famous myths, stories from the past?

BEN-ZION: No.

MS. SHIKLER: He didn't express any interest in the Greeks?

BEN-ZION: No. The only thing-most of the people in the group, probably they didn't like the idea that whenever we had an exhibition, I had the biggest effect. So, many times they had to come to visit and, "Tell me, how do you do that?" One time one of the artists' publications, Art News, came out with it that three artists are the bestsellers.

MS. SHIKLER: You were very lucky. You plunged right into success.

BEN-ZION: Yes. I never had to look for a gallery.

MS. SHIKLER: When was the last time that you saw Rothko? Do you remember that?

BEN-ZION: That's a good idea that you ask; I know exactly when, because something happened while we met that night. We were together; there was an auction sale of artists' work. I had some, he had some. One of my paintings was sold there, too; one of his was not.

MS. SHIKLER: Where was the auction, Mr. Ben-Zion? Do you remember?

BEN-ZION: In a very big gallery. I can't recall exactly.

MS. SHIKLER: Do you remember when that was?

BEN-ZION: It was in the beginning, before-when he got, already, palsy-walsy with this group-this woman that moved to Italy. He was accepted among this group. From there we were going to another exhibition; this was probably in the separate gallery. Because we know each other, so we left together, I think. I felt something different with him. I didn't know-all these things happened while I was still part of the group, but a number of them had separated with Barney Newman and Gottlieb and him, and I think they started with this woman in Italy.

[Audio break.]

MS. SHIKLER: When you mentioned that this was around the time that Rothko took up with that woman in Italy, you were referring to Peggy Guggenheim?

BEN-ZION: Yes. She wanted me, too.

MS. SHIKLER: So what was the story? You had just left the auction, at which Rothko had not sold something, and you had. You were with him; that was the last time you saw him. What happened?

BEN-ZION: He sounded something different, I felt. When we came to the other exhibition, we parted, not even saying goodbye to each other.

MS. SHIKLER: What was it you felt in him?

BEN-ZION: Something happened to him.

MS. SHIKLER: Was it in that moment? Or did you feel it was coming?

BEN-ZION: I felt it coming, too, because he was very much not talking. And I'm not talking much, neither [laughs]. So we both were not talking. Then, it happens that he mentioned something about Italy, and I didn't know what he was talking [about]. He told me, also, about some big show that he was going to have and told him also that I was going to have a big show in the Jewish Museum. Do you know about my shows in the Jewish Museum?

MS. SHIKLER: Certainly.

BEN-ZION: It was a special thing. I would like to be able to bring it to the [inaudible] provide this museum with my work.

MS. SHIKLER: I think we should speak about that when we next go into your story. We should make a note of that; we will. So he spoke of a show that he was going to be having.

BEN-ZION: He was in on my first ones. I had three big shows at the Jewish Museum, did you know that?

MS. SHIKLER: Yes. And this was the first one?

BEN-ZION: This was my second one.

MS. SHIKLER: I see. So then what happened between you?

BEN-ZION: Nothing since then. I saw him in the Village; I saw him with a group, with-what's his name? Barney Newman with the monocle. He was standing and talking, and Professor [Meyer] Schapiro was talking. We used to be very good friends, but then, when this rift started, I asked him, "Nu, what's happened?" He said, "Why do you blame me?" "I don't blame you," I told him, "but you'll see the result." And one of those-the biggest thing

that forced that [inaudible]

MS. SHIKLER: You said that to Schapiro?

BEN-ZION: Yes.

MS. SHIKLER: And Rothko was there when you said that?

BEN-ZION: No.

MS. SHIKLER: So what you're saying, then, is that you felt the rift between Rothko and his new friends, his associates, and yourself and no others of the old group. You felt that rift coming for a while.

BEN-ZION: Yes.

MS. SHIKLER: Did you ever discuss this rift between you-you and Rothko?

BEN-ZION: I discussed it only once, with Schapiro.

MS. SHIKLER: How about with Rothko?

BEN-ZION: No.

MS. SHIKLER: Rothko never articulated his feelings of change, of what was happening?

BEN-ZION: Never.

MS. SHIKLER: But you felt a coldness from him, did you?

BEN-ZION: Yes.

MS. SHIKLER: Or a lack of interest-is that what you're saying?

BEN-ZION: No. I felt it even more distinct, because one day I happened to see Joe Solman; he was one of the group. I passed him, and we saw each other; nothing happened, because this was the other group. As soon as they got in with Guggenheim, they were different people.

MS. SHIKLER: So you feel the change took place around the time they went to Guggenheim?

BEN-ZION: I asked Solman, "What happened with those people?" They almost don't see me." So he said, "What do you do, if they don't see you?" I said, "People who know me, don't see me, they are dead to me."

MS. SHIKLER: So that was the last time.

BEN-ZION: I didn't discuss it again. I know that she carried on with the artists, in Italy, and I didn't like her carrying on.

MS. SHIKLER: What do you mean, her carrying on?

BEN-ZION: All kind of obscene things.

MS. SHIKLER: Oh, yes, there are quite a number of stories about that. Were you aware of those, firsthand?

BEN-ZION: I couldn't be bothered with that.

MS. SHIKLER: How did that happen?

BEN-ZION: It was very interesting. I didn't know what was going on there; I really didn't know what was going on over there. They made such a rift between artists that artists didn't recognize each other.

MS. SHIKLER: Why do you think that happened?

BEN-ZION: I suppose they were lifted up; suddenly they became millionaires-which is a fact.

MS. SHIKLER: But that, of course, didn't happen right away. The millionaire part followed soon after, but initially-

BEN-ZION: From the beginning-and also they had a group of critics-you know who they are-which helped them.

MS. SHIKLER: You're speaking of the critics who gave them a voice.

BEN-ZION: Yes. They are not critics; they are nobodies.

MS. SHIKLER: So you date the rift, then, to the times of Peggy Guggenheim. You also, in a sense, hold her responsible?

BEN-ZION: No. That was her character, and that was the way she liked art. That was art, to her.

MS. SHIKLER: So the last time you saw him, then, was during that period?

BEN-ZION: Yes.

MS. SHIKLER: Before this last period, did he ever make reference to a manuscript that he was writing?

BEN-ZION: No.

MS. SHIKLER: He never spoke about things he was writing. And you didn't see his apartment on Tenth Street, near Third Avenue?

BEN-ZION: No.

MS. SHIKLER: Do you remember any significant way he had of expressing himself? Anything that stands out in your mind?

BEN-ZION: He was very quiet; he didn't talk much. And because of that, people thought different things. A man keeps quiet, he thinks very deep; it just makes them believe in something. Between those two things-

MS. SHIKLER: So you're saying, in a sense, when a man is quiet people assume that he is very deep, or pretending. Now, which do you think that it was with Rothko?

BEN-ZION: With Rothko, it was different than later, because he really didn't talk.

MS. SHIKLER: He really didn't talk at all? People have said that he had a very intellectual, sophisticated turn of mind.

BEN-ZION: Yes. When he got very drunk. When he got very drunk he could be a little-not pleasant. But that's all.

MS. SHIKLER: But that wasn't usually the case?

BEN-ZION: No, that wasn't.

MS. SHIKLER: Did you see him drunk often?

BEN-ZION: No. I didn't see him too often. We saw each other pretty often when we had the group. Every year we had a place to exhibit together. None of us had money to buy drinks [laughs].

MS. SHIKLER: When you went to lunch, what did they serve you, do you remember?

BEN-ZION: I can't recall.

MS. SHIKLER: Was there a lot of furniture around?

BEN-ZION: No.

MS. SHIKLER: Pictures?

BEN-ZION: Pictures, yes.

MS. SHIKLER: Open and showing?

BEN-ZION: Hung up. Every artist used to have them. You know, one artist from Russia, [David] Burliuk-were you ever in his house?

MS. SHIKLER: No.

BEN-ZION: Pictures under the bed, pictures on top of the bed, pictures under the table where they eat. All over.

MS. SHIKLER: Was that true of Rothko too?

BEN-ZION: No, he didn't paint much. One thing which really I wonder about Rothko, which is a hard problem to

understand-and I'll tell you what it is. It's a very important problem. We were together about six or seven years as a group, and we exhibited together. Each one, we decided, should participate-to have one or two paintings for the show but to have it in time, to be able to be ready the show nicely. He was always late, bringing his painting which wasn't yet finished.

MS. SHIKLER: Does that mean, then, that he painted specifically for the exhibit?

BEN-ZION: In those days artists didn't have much paintings. We are the beginners. I remember when I bought a canvas 16 inches by 20 inches-that was my biggest canvas. In those days I never had anything more than the things that were actually exhibited.

MS. SHIKLER: And the same thing held true for Rothko?

BEN-ZION: Probably. I don't know.

MS. SHIKLER: So he was usually painting up to the last minute for the exhibit?

BEN-ZION: Probably. I didn't paint at the last minute; I didn't like it. I liked to be prepared. So I really worked, that it should be in time. I don't know, maybe he liked to work-like a professor, he forgets, and always is late. Now, I have a question, a very important question, which I don't know who will be able to tell me. When I was still in the group, when I got already some money, I could buy materials. And I painted, then, the biggest-I was the biggest painter in the group. Can you imagine? I mean real big. I was the only one, then, that painted big paintings; I started with the biggest paintings. Now, Rothko and his last show at the Guggenheim-

MS. SHIKLER: The retrospective-yes. The last big pictures.

BEN-ZION: All of them the same subject, with the lines. They were one painting. It's one painting, that's all. And how many paintings were there?

MS. SHIKLER: I'm not sure.

BEN-ZION: There were a number of them.

[Audio break.]

MS. SHIKLER: You were asking how many pictures were in the Guggenheim. Say around 200, shall we?

BEN-ZION: The thing, when they took the case to the courts, they talk about 600 or 700.

MS. SHIKLER: Well, the foundation [Mark Rothko Foundation] itself owns over a thousand works, and the estate own approximately that number, I believe.

BEN-ZION: Well, I have a question. Those big canvases-none of them are smaller than that, and they're much bigger, too-how does a painter like Rothko, in such a short time, while this happened, paint so many big paintings?

MS. SHIKLER: Let me ask you about your question, then. I'll turn the question around. Are you suggesting that it was not consistent with his pattern of working before?

BEN-ZION: Absolutely not.

MS. SHIKLER: So you feel that the prolific period was later?

BEN-ZION: Yes. He started to produce specially, because he got in such a position where every painting was money.

MS. SHIKLER: Were you aware of that drive on his part in the early years?

BEN-ZION: No.

MS. SHIKLER: To produce for money?

BEN-ZION: No. Never.

MS. SHIKLER: It has been said, in his relationship with his first wife, which was a very stormy one, one of the reasons for the conflict between them was that she was very angry at his failure-financial failure. She felt that he was a failure as a man, as an artist, because he wasn't producing anything that brought in money, and she wanted him to become a salesman for her jewelry. Did he ever talk about that?

BEN-ZION: I didn't even know about that.

MS. SHIKLER: So the whole preoccupation that you feel surrounded his later efforts to produce for money, was not in evidence in the early years?

BEN-ZION: No. Absolutely not.

MS. SHIKLER: Did he ever complain about being poor?

BEN-ZION: We artists never complain about being poor. At least I-and I had pretty hard times during all those years. I had many times-sometimes weeks-when all I could buy was old bread, which they sold for fifteen cents, and a quart of milk. That was a lot of money for me to be able to do, in those days.

MS. SHIKLER: Did the group borrow money from one another?

BEN-ZION: No. So this is a big question to me. I know, myself, when I paint such a painting, it takes a lot of energy, and a lot of time too. I just can't-[looking at catalogue]. This was very thin paints, too, almost like water. Most of the paintings with the thing in the middle-this was already complicated.

MS. SHIKLER: Mr. Ben-Zion is pointing to numbers 89 and 90. You're saying they're thinly painted.

BEN-ZION: They are very thinly painted.

MS. SHIKLER: Were you aware of a different way of painting in those early years together?

BEN-ZION: This is a special way, all of them the same way. That one person should do dozens-is not easy.

MS. SHIKLER: And the earlier pictures of his-

BEN-ZION: This is a small picture.

MS. SHIKLER: Numbers 18 and 19 in the catalogue.

BEN-ZION: How big is it?

MS. SHIKLER: The self portrait is 32 ¼ inches by 26 inches.

BEN-ZION: A small painting, compared with those big ones.

MS. SHIKLER: Let's take another pause.

[Audio break.]

BEN-ZION: -of the new thing that was going to happen-brood and brood and brood until it came out in full force in the big paintings-all kinds of things. He had a show of the big paintings-all kinds of things. He had a show in the Museum of Modern Art-I think that was his first show there-and most of them were small paintings. Would you find those?

MS. SHIKLER: Sure. I'll pause again.

[Audio break.]

MS. SHIKLER: "Rothko was given his first important one-man museum exhibition by the Museum of Modern Art in 1961." So we look here to see pictures post-1961, and see what sizes they are.

BEN-ZION: Does it give prices too?

MS. SHIKLER: No, they wouldn't give the prices, I don't think, but let's see some sizes. 1960: 25 ½ inches by 19 ½ inches-an oil here was 93 inches by 81 inches-102 inches by 119 inches.

BEN-ZION: That's already big.

MS. SHIKLER: They seem to vary.

BEN-ZION: Still most of them small paintings.

MS. SHIKLER: Several here are over a hundred.

BEN-ZION: When did he have the second show at the Museum of Modern Art?

MS. SHIKLER: I'm not sure offhand-but what did you want to say about that second show?

BEN-ZION: At the second show he had not one small picture, all of them disappeared. When I asked somebody in the Museum, "What happened with the small pictures?" they said, "We don't know." It couldn't be more obvious, that's specially done, not to have any small pictures there.

[End Tape 2, Side B.]

MS. SHIKLER: Mr. Ben-Zion was wondering where the small pictures were in the second Museum of Modern Art exhibit. Apparently he had been working on small pictures as well; they were not being exhibited. What is the point that you wanted to make about the small ones-or the absence of the small ones?

BEN-ZION: He was forgetting about the small ones.

MS. SHIKLER: Did he talk about the size of works? Did he have any opinions about that, during the years you knew him?

BEN-ZION: When we were together, we were glad to have any size.

MS. SHIKLER: So he didn't speak of any need to paint in a particular way?

BEN-ZION: No.

MS. SHIKLER: You know what I wanted to ask you, before we go too much further: Were you aware when the nature of his work changed from realistic paintings to the myth paintings-do you remember any change at all?

BEN-ZION: I don't like when they hang on subjects in painting which look something like-from nature, like Stonehenge, this kind of thing. I'm against that, because the Stonehenge things, which are natural things-they've done different things, and I don't like to put them together on the same-like with the things from nature.

MS. SHIKLER: I understand what you're saying. Do you remember when Rothko's pictures began to look like this-I've got numbers 24 and 25 in the catalogue? Did you ever see him working on things like this? Did you ever see pictures that looked like this?

BEN-ZION: No, because I gave them up.

MS. SHIKLER: Oh. This is in '39 and '40.

BEN-ZION: Look here; all those things that were done after that, I don't know about. You must remember what happened with the Jewish Museum.

MS. SHIKLER: Well, why don't you tell us about that? It's less important what I think happened than what you think happened.

BEN-ZION: I had three one-man shows in the Jewish Museum-big shows. In those days I was one that painted the biggest paintings.

MS. SHIKLER: When was your first show at the Jewish Museum?

BEN-ZION: I have the catalogue; I'll show you.

[Audio break.]

MS. SHIKLER: Mr. Ben-Zion, I'm going to ask you one more question about Rothko before we go on to discuss your experiences with the Jewish Museum. Did you have discussions with Rothko about world affairs? Would you have described him as a pacifist?

BEN-ZION: No, we don't talk about that, although we knew that some of the group members-most of the members of the artists' [group] were either the Communist or-but in the group, although we know that one or two belong to the Communists, we didn't discuss it.

MS. SHIKLER: You didn't discuss world affairs, for instance.

BEN-ZION: No.

MS. SHIKLER: And he never spoke about the Holocaust, or the Jewish situation? Oh, pre-Holocaust, actually-did he speak about the Nazis or Germany?

BEN-ZION: No.

MS. SHIKLER: Okay. In that case, I think what we're going to do is put away the question of Rothko, and come back to your experiences-in this case, particularly with the Jewish Museum. We're going to get back directly to your career. Your first exhibit, as I see from a little brochure here, was May 6, 1948.

BEN-ZION: That was the opening for the Jewish Museum; they honored me with a show.

MS. SHIKLER: So you were the first major exhibit at the Jewish Museum, the inaugural show. That's quite an honor. I was about to ask you how old you were at that time; of course we can figure it out with some arithmetic, but I also see that the little biography they gave you here says you were born in 1898-they made you one year younger. 1897 to '48, so you were fifty-one.

BEN-ZION: How many years is it-between this show and the next show?

MS. SHIKLER: Four years. Your next show was in 1952.

BEN-ZION: That was also a certain occasion, that I was invited to have this show. A very big show. I was then with Kurt Valentin; he published my etchings, and also with Bertha Schaeffer. So many places that I exhibited.

MS. SHIKLER: And your third show was in 1959. Another seven years.

BEN-ZION: How many years?

MS. SHIKLER: From '48 until '59-that's 11 years.

BEN-ZION: Within 11 years I got three big shows. Then the director of this was Dr. Kayser, who really was a very fine person, and knew something about this. But he was intimidated so terribly. They never gave him, even, the actual title of director. The Jewish Museum is run by the Theological Seminary; a rich man had the building, and he gave it to the Jewish Theological, to install there an arts museum, with this man, but they never gave him the title of director.

MS. SHIKLER: Who was that first director?

BEN-ZION: Dr. Kayser. He was a very knowledgeable person. You'll see the way he writes about me; you'll see that he knows something.

MS. SHIKLER: What was his first name?

BEN-ZION: I'll find it. Stepehn Kayser. Those years were very crucial years, again, for me, because that is the time when Kurt Valentin died. He was a very important gallery for me. Meanwhile this director couldn't stand it any longer, the way they intimidated him, and he left for California-and he is there. He says, "Before I stepped into this damn place, I should have rather broken my hands and feet." That's the kind of feeling he had from those times.

MS. SHIKLER: What was the conflict between him and the Seminary?

BEN-ZION: Those are stupid men rabbis which don't know anything about art, don't care anything about art. And they just look for a career, to be able to show, "We have a museum." Meanwhile, one of the supporters of the museum-many rich women-one took over the museum, because she wanted to renovate it, and she wanted to become the director, or something. She became the leader of the museum. Her name I forget. She destroyed the building. It was a beautiful-Fifth Avenue, you know those old buildings. A brother of hers is an architect; he destroyed all those things, took away the face of it. You know who she got into the museum? She started to compete with the Museum of Modern Art, to show that she can put on exhibits. You know what people were put in? [Claes] Oldenburg, you know? You know the kind? Such kind of people. I leave, because after all, I did something for the museum. They took everything that they had of me, all my catalogues they threw out, nothing remains. If you go there, and ask them-

MS. SHIKLER: They threw out all your catalogues?

BEN-ZION: Yes.

MS. SHIKLER: And what happened to your work? Did they own some?

BEN-ZION: They had some regular-just pieces-put it in there-sold it a few times on auction, in the most ridiculous way. They still have some, but it's hard to see them; they put them in the cellar-my best work.

MS. SHIKLER: Did they discuss it with you before it took place?

BEN-ZION: No. They own the things, and nobody can tell them what to do with them.

MS. SHIKLER: What did you do?

BEN-ZION: What can I do? I tried to talk to the people in the museum-the rabbis, the sponsors.

MS. SHIKLER: You spoke to the Board of the Jewish Theological Seminary?

BEN-ZION: Yes.

MS. SHIKLER: You tried to make contact with people on the board.

BEN-ZION: Nobody-

MS. SHIKLER: Nobody responded?

BEN-ZION: Right.

MS. SHIKLER: That must have been a very bad time.

BEN-ZION: Of course.

MS. SHIKLER: And a great shock.

BEN-ZION: Everybody knows me, all over the United States, because many of my exhibitions were sent traveling, and most of the museums know about me. They asked, "Where can I get some information about [Ben-Zion]?" and nobody would answer.

MS. SHIKLER: So they just dumped you.

BEN-ZION: Yes. And that's the end-to get even one catalogue, from three big shows.

MS. SHIKLER: They didn't keep it in any archives or library?

BEN-ZION: No.

MS. SHIKLER: When was that, Mr. Ben-Zion-when they changed over, I mean?

BEN-ZION: Right after [Dr. Kayser] left.

MS. SHIKLER: What did you do then?

BEN-ZION: Then, I didn't know what to do, but I never worried about it-an exhibition. The Graham Gallery took me up for a number of years, and then I didn't want to go out to those itty-bitty things. Ridiculous. I tell everybody, "I had a show." "How was your show?" "Everything sold." Everything I had done before. The person who doesn't see me, he'll never be able to see me. He will never be able to know anything. And I said, "To hell with them."

MS. SHIKLER: This is after you were dumped by the museum?

BEN-ZION: No. The museum not only dumped me, but they had the discourtesy about this. They didn't have the right to do such things.

MS. SHIKLER: So then you went to Graham.

BEN-ZION: Yes. What could I do-sue them or something? But I could do nothing.

MS. SHIKLER: So you showed a little bit at Graham, and then?

BEN-ZION: And then I gave up altogether. I said, "I don't need this any more." My people, the people who used to collect my work, still were buying.

MS. SHIKLER: Your collectors remained with you, even after-and you continued to paint?

BEN-ZION: Yes. Paint and do sculpture.

MS. SHIKLER: When did you begin to do sculpture?

BEN-ZION: About 10 years ago, 12 years ago. My garden is full of sculpture.

MS. SHIKLER: What is your favorite medium?

BEN-ZION: Iron. I love iron. All those things are iron.

MS. SHIKLER: Yes; they're very beautiful. I heard a very nice story about how you became interested in iron working. Would you explain that? Tell us the story.

BEN-ZION: I was standing near a window. It was in springtime-bit central heating on. I was watching a big truck from an iron worker with an acetylene torch, cutting pieces of iron and fixing something. I was very much interested by the way he cut the pieces of iron-like cheese. He cut, and then made it cold in water, and then he could but pieced clean. Well, I thought, "If it can cut that easily," because I already loved iron. I took a piece of iron, I went down to the street, and I said to the man that was working there, "Listen, I don't want to take much time from you. If it's very much expensive, I'll pay you what you want. But cut me this piece of iron, according to where I want." He cut this piece of iron-exactly, he cut. I asked him, "How much is it?" He says, "Nothing." So, "No, I want to pay you; because if I don't pay you, I will not be able to ask you again." So he says, "Okay, give me fifty cents." I gave him fifty cents.

MS. SHIKLER: Have you got the piece here-your first piece?

BEN-ZION: Yes. Here [shows piece].

[Audio break.]

MS. SHIKLER: Mr. Ben-Zion's first piece of iron work is a figure standing with upraised hands, a flat piece of metal. What did you have in mind when you made this figure?

BEN-ZION: I adored so many prophets. You know, my etchings-it's in the thousands. While he was there, downstairs, I made a drawing, and that's the way I started. Then I later found out that all those new sculptors-they didn't even touch their materials; did you know that? They order a piece of material, according to the size, no matter what; they don't even do anything, somebody cuts it for them.

MS. SHIKLER: You're saying that the contemporary sculptors who work in metal don't do their own work.

BEN-ZION: But I do.

MS. SHIKLER: You enjoy it. How much do you work on your sculpture? What's your output in sculpture?

BEN-ZION: I never [measure] the time-I don't know, even, the word "output."

MS. SHIKLER: Did you go through a period of intense concentration on the iron work, where you did nothing else?

BEN-ZION: No. This I never had. I'm doing all things, from time to time. Sometimes at the same time.

MS. SHIKLER: So while you were working on your iron work, you were also still doing etching?

BEN-ZION: Etching and painting. This painting I did just three years ago.

MS. SHIKLER: This is a very beautiful thing. It's as though you've made essential some of the things you were dealing with for years. You simplified greatly in this.

BEN-ZION: All my paintings. Then I painted 55 canyons.

MS. SHIKLER: Did you paint those from nature?

BEN-ZION: Yes-but I never paint from nature-from memory. Six years, in all the canyons possible. There are a lot of canyons in the West.

MS. SHIKLER: When did you do that?

BEN-ZION: That was about 10 years ago.

MS. SHIKLER: For how long did you travel?

BEN-ZION: We traveled six years.

MS. SHIKLER: Did you make drawings?

BEN-ZION: Made not one drawing. Then when I came home I started to paint. And I painted 55 or 56. Those are some of them.

MS. SHIKLER: That's a highway. The big picture that we spoke of earlier-what is the name of it?

BEN-ZION: You should know it.

MS. SHIKLER: You tell me.

BEN-ZION: King Solomon and Queen of Sheba. She was a Negro.

MS. SHIKLER: It's a picture of Sheba on the right and Solomon on the left, and their hands are joined.

BEN-ZION: I don't know if they are joined.

MS. SHIKLER: She's holding his wrist.

BEN-ZION: Some way of getting in touch.

MS. SHIKLER: When did you paint Solomon and Sheba?

BEN-ZION: This was four years ago.

MS. SHIKLER: You were telling me a very nice story, off tape, about how you decided to return to your writing, and what happened when you went to Israel to find your old friends. I wish you would tell it again, for the tape.

BEN-ZION: It's hard to tell it. One day.

MS. SHIKLER: How often do you go to Israel?

BEN-ZION: Not very often. I had an opportunity to go, because I had about three big shows in the Maritime Museum [in Haifa]. Then I had three big shows of my etchings in the Jerusalem Museum. And then I had some other shows.

MS. SHIKLER: If you could stop for a moment in your life, at this point, and review it-review your work, review the direction you took and the experiences you had-what would you say stood out in your mind as the most informative and formative experiences?

BEN-ZION: Lots of things were most informative. The least informative may become the most informative, and the most informative is nothing. That we see in Israel; you see the way American art is developing. They never develop naturally, by themselves, but [through sharing] information. "Information please."

MS. SHIKLER: We spoke about that the other day, after the taping, and you felt that without the-tell me. You should add to this, and not let it be my voice; but you mentioned that you felt that without the language of the critics, the art itself would not have survived. We're speaking of the art of the abstractionists [Abstract Expressionists], the New York School. That's what I mean.

BEN-ZION: This is only because of the talking. Then the talking stopped, and the things that were written already, just thrown out to the garbage. Nothing will remain. That's what will happen.

MS. SHIKLER: How do you feel about what the critics have discussed about your work? Do you feel that they've been insightful?

BEN-ZION: I don't know. I thought that if they really looked at the thing-I appreciate it. But I don't know how somebody looks at it-even without seeing him, even with just a punk who himself wanted to be an artist and couldn't. Most of the critics used to be like that. Or somebody that was really looking. The man from-he's a very nice Irishman.

MS. SHIKLER: Are you speaking about the early critic, [Henry] McBride?

BEN-ZION: Yes. He knew. He understood.

MS. SHIKLER: He understood your work.

BEN-ZION: Not only my work. If you understand one work, you have a chance to understand any other work.

MS. SHIKLER: Mr. Ben-Zion, how would you compare your experiences exhibiting in Israel to your experiences here in the United States?

BEN-ZION: My experience exhibiting in Israel is work that I gave; it will be there, it will remain there.

MS. SHIKLER: Critical and audience response to your work?

BEN-ZION: I am not worried about those facts, because when I take a piece of paper, or I stand before the easel, even if I do do something, it can't come something that is not right. It can't. They say that an artist loses-he paints too much. He can't paint too much, that's what we can see here-the way he painted. Rothko. But if he's really an artist, and he really paints, the way from the beginning on he started to paint, then the only way that food art can come out. Now, America is entirely incapacitated to do such things, because all the things I see are created in such a way, they have nothing to do with the real-the real creation.

MS. SHIKLER: You feel that the development of art as we know it today-on "the scene," so-called-is not truly creative?

BEN-ZION: No, not creative. Absolutely.

MS. SHIKLER: What do you feel it is?

BEN-ZION: I'm not the one to say; I'm not responsible for it.

MS. SHIKLER: But what do you think of it?

BEN-ZION: I don't think anything about it.

MS. SHIKLER: You think it's not a creative effort. Do you think it's the result of the language that was used to describe it, the things that were written?

BEN-ZION: Yes. I told you. Very bad language. Very irresponsible language. Makes you feel that you don't understand. A man like this stupid man Newman-[laughs] Why am I so mad at him? I never spoke to him.

MS. SHIKLER: Tell me why you're so mad at him.

BEN-ZION: Because the way he talks about art, and the way he writes about art. He made some abstract etchings; have you seen it?

MS. SHIKLER: Yes. I've seen them.

BEN-ZION: You understand anything there? And the names that he gives those etchings? What is that? What is that? Blown-up balloons. Blown-up balloons. His chance to talk.

MS. SHIKLER: Do you see any change in the art field today, with the return to figuratism?

BEN-ZION: They don't give you any chance. No chance. No chance. If it will be realism, it will be the most horrible realism. If it will be abstract, it will be the most shaky abstract.

MS. SHIKLER: I think we'll pause now-until the next tape. In the next tape, I hope you will speak about some of your writings, insofar as you have discussed abstraction and symbol, and the misuse of those.

BEN-ZION: You see that.

MS. SHIKLER: And then get to the return to writing, and the changes you've experienced in how you write and what you write. We'll talk about that next time-is that agreeable to you?

BEN-ZION: Should I give away my secrets?

MS. SHIKLER: Yes.

BEN-ZION: All right.

MS. SHIKLER: You should. I think we'll all be richer for it, if you do. And your writings, of course, explain much of what you feel, but it would be interesting to know.

[Interview Session 3.] [September 21, 1982.]

MS. SHIKLER: Good morning. It's nice to be back with you. It occurs to me that the last few discussions that we've had-we haven't really discussed some of your work methods which I think would be very nice to have from you. For instance, perhaps you could tell us something about your choices of subject, some of the ideas that start a concept going that create a picture for you. What starts you off? If you could tell us that, I think that

might be of interest.

BEN-ZION: About this there's a lot to say, but you mustn't say too much. People like to brag a lot how they work. There were times where there was non-objectives. Almost everybody they gave an interview to from the Art News, the monthly, how he does things. They give you information about what they didn't do. Ridiculous. Everyone who just started to work and became important, then famous this way. So they made up all kind of things. But I must tell you that there is much about my way of doing things because I did not go to an art school. The only time I went to an art school was in Vienna during the First World War when we ran away from Poland, and I tried to go to an art school there. But because in Vienna they were very anti-Semitic and I couldn't stand the behavior of the teacher and the students, the way they segregated themselves from any kind-do you know any German?

MS. SHIKLER: A little bit.

BEN-ZION: I was a Jew from the East, and they hated those Jews from the East in Vienna. So I went only there a few weeks, and I saw it's not for me. I wasn't left alone to do whatever I like and how I like. It was very, very-all of those teachers would come over to the student, and the student [would] ask them, "How did you do that?" And he'd make a little thing, and they'd follow this, and he'd show them how to do it. Well, I used to teach quite a number of universities. There was Ohio University [Athens, OH]. I was teaching in Omaha, Nebraska.

MS. SHIKLER: When was that?

BEN-ZION: That was right after the second war.

MS. SHIKLER: You were teaching art-painting?

BEN-ZION: I was teaching painting, yes. And I told my students when they came to me and told me, "How do you make a hand? How do you make a nose?" I would always say, "I don't know." It depends on what you're doing. Every mouth and every hand is different. Not just because they have five fingers, and not just because there is two lips in the mouth. So you have to find out according to the character of the person, how he is built. Everybody is built differently. Also, he has all the parts that the other has. I was not helpful in teaching how to do that. Most of the things I was helpful with was how not to do it. And it is something I saw that my instruction, it was absolutely ridiculous. So I told them, "You learn it yourself. You have to just look, to see."

MS. SHIKLER: Do you feel that teaching made any difference in your understanding of your own work? Did it help you, teaching students?

BEN-ZION: No. It depends entirely all the time; and I didn't know myself what I started, so I didn't know anything. I had to find out everything.

MS. SHIKLER: Do you feel that you learned from the experience of teaching?

BEN-ZION: From the experience of teaching, yes, I could have learned something. But the students-most of the students in Iowa go for a purpose. The purpose is to become teachers and to pass examinations and to get a good mark. So, how could I learn from such a thing?

MS. SHIKLER: Well, learn from your own expression of your own ideas. Sometimes we learn from hearing ourselves think out loud, become aware of your own feelings of something.

BEN-ZION: Yes, that's true. But it was done too much now. I was also in one class with a teacher that was supposed to be important teacher there who was teaching. I was sitting in back hearing how he inspires the students. "Okay," he used to say, "now let's see, you are inspired now. What can you do? You want to do something, no?" And he told them, "You have all kind materials, and those materials help you to do what you want to do." So now he started teaching them how to do. I could never do such a thing. I cannot do it, cannot try such thing. How to you don't know. It wouldn't help you even if you have a dozen books that gives you everything: how to do our face, how to do our hand. It wouldn't help you.

MS. SHIKLER: What would help?

BEN-ZION: [It would] help just to look yourself and not to do more than you see. Most of the people they observe. They drew more than they see, and that's where the "chic" starts. Because when you do more than you see, you say a lie. It's not your eye, not your eye. You have to be patient and wait until you see, that's all. And that's why I can't help you in this direction.

MS. SHIKLER: In your own work, in the course of your painting life, your sculpting life, can you describe the process which brings you to that beginning place? What brings you to the place where you say, "I'm going to paint this," or "I'm going to work with this piece of iron. I'm going to produce."

BEN-ZION: It depends who it is. It depends if it is an artist on his own-

MS. SHIKLER: No, you. What brings you to it? You, Ben-Zion.

BEN-ZION: So, that's what they always say, "The artist shouldn't worry what to do." The world is full of things. You're surrounded with things, all the time, and each thing is like an open book that you can read. The artist must get near to it and read it. They always say, "The world is an open book. Everything in the world is open. Nothing is hidden. But the thing of the artist is to find it."

MS. SHIKLER: But how about you? What starts you off on a picture? You have up there a Solomon and Bathsheba. We talked about that last time I was here. What brings you to the decision to start a picture like that, a painting?

BEN-ZION: I'll tell you what exactly. There's a very good story in it, too, interesting story. I painted a lot of biblical things. Probably you know about that. I had three exhibitions of biblical things in the Jewish Museum along, besides other places. So, what made me paint those things? I absolutely don't know myself. Neither do I know how Bathsheba looked, and I was not interested. Actually it's a painting that looks like her. I painted a lot of paintings of great personages in the Bible. Why did I paint them? Why? I painted a Plain of Beggam, and I painted King Solomon. From the highest developed of this and a recognized kind of person, and the lowest of lowdown. Why did I paint both of them from time to time? Because both interested me. The poor man interested me, how he can live in this world with so much danger. So you see the danger of the poor man, and you'll see it [in] how he behaves. That's the way I would paint a poor man. I wouldn't try to make just an image of this man. I try to get into his way of life. The same thing I would do with King Solomon. I would try to see how he spends the day in his beautiful surroundings. All the dresses and all those kinds of-but one day I became revolutionary. I said, "Look here. I paint those very high-falutin' types." Kings, I painted. I painted other important personages. Why did I paint them? I painted certain personages while hating them. For instance, I hated [inaudible] because of his life, you know, and all his background. I should also have painted King Solomon in such a way because in the history of the King Solomon you find out that he was not a great man, that he had so many wives. No, I try to take it actually the way it-we lived in the biggest luxury, and he had a very bad character, too, the way he exploited the people. Every time the Jews-do you know the Hebrew history through the Hebrew books?

MS. SHIKLER: I know more or less about that. General history-never enough.

BEN-ZION: But not enough. I know. Because everything is in the book. So why do we admire these stories? We know that he did very bad things for the people. He put on the people all the expenses, the most big expenses in life. Each month one of the tribes-there were 12 tribes-and each month was put on another tribe to help him with all those expenses, to get all those expenses. They had to. That was the rule. And also from his sons, the way he was built up. It showed that his character was not one of the best characters. But, nevertheless, in the front he's considered a wise man, one of the wisest. And he was rich. But how was he rich? He took away from people. So I said, "Instead of painting King Solomon a beautiful man, a very smart man, very nicely dressed in his robes and all." He was actually a tyrant. Although everybody admired him, and everybody actually didn't like his way of life; but, nevertheless they still did it. That means they were wrong. So I said one day, "I'm going to paint King Solomon less as a wise man, less as a more beautiful person, and not as this. I'll paint him as a tyrant." No. That's where I got my defeat. I painted him-look, it's a beautiful painting, isn't it?

MS. SHIKLER: Yes, it is. Very much.

BEN-ZION: He's dressed in gold in this. And the Queen of Sheba brought gold, too, and all kinds of things. So I did a terrible thing. Instead to paint him as a person which I don't like, I just painted him as a beautiful picture, together with the Queen of Sheba. I considered this a big failure.

MS. SHIKLER: You considered it a failure because you had not shown what was the reality of his behavior?

BEN-ZION: Yes, his reality. The same thing with

MS. SHIKLER: Why did you show him as a humble man, with his eyes cast down? Why did you do that when you already knew-

BEN-ZION: I was influenced by, not my own knowing, but by tradition. You understand?

MS. SHIKLER: I understand that you were conscious of the traditional approach to Solomon, but why did you choose to go along with it?

BEN-ZION: Because I didn't try to influence myself, knowing all the terrible things that's been done. I didn't want to make an issue of it. Actually, I painted him as the people saw him. You understand? That was my mistake, for myself. For myself, I considered it a bad picture of Solomon. But for the people-everybody loves this painting-

such beautiful colors. No. I kept on searching. Why did I do that? How could I do that? I searched and I searched, and I found that it's not only my fault. It was the fault of the influence of the nationalistic which worked on me. And other painters painted like me, and others. If I would have painted him like a low character-I would learn not by my knowing, also not by my seeing, because I could not see him as a bad man. He's dressed so nicely. And I found out I did the same mistake with other people who were absolutely bad people, like Peter the Great. Tyrants, tyrants. I found out that in order to paint those people, I must paint them the way they are actually. And the way they are, they're dressed beautifully. He didn't have any choice, according to his status. There was a time artists painted a status person, you understand? And to paint 10 paintings of tyrants and all of them are bad. I knew one thing and I painted another. Do you see the point? And that's where I find out things. So I stopped. I had a list so long. Lists at least 30, 40 of the biggest tyrants in the world. And who did it to me to make me conscious? I have a friend who is in the city museum on Fifth Avenue, you know, the big museum?

MS. SHIKLER: Which museum? You mean the Metropolitan [Museum of Art]?

BEN-ZION: The Metropolitan, yes. He died very young. The man from the Near Eastern division. Crawford. You know who-

MS. SHIKLER: I think so.

BEN-ZION: He visited me, and we used to go out together. He was a beautiful person, and he knew a lot. One day when I was still working on that group of tyrants, he asked me, "What are you painting now?" "Ah," I say, "I am painting terrible things." "What do you mean, terrible things?" "I paint tyrants, the worse things. The scourge of the earth since the beginning of the world. But, somehow, whatever I did with them, they came out beautiful people." "Oh," he says, "if you paint tyrants, you don't need to worry what to paint. You have plenty of things to paint." [Laughs.] He was a smart man, too. When he told me that, I right away stopped this.

MS. SHIKLER: Did you stop painting the tyrants, or did you change your way-

BEN-ZION: No, you can't change those kind of things.

MS. SHIKLER: When was that, do you remember?

BEN-ZION: That was about 10 years ago.

MS. SHIKLER: What do you think is the reason that, even while knowing that these people were not admirable, you were drawn to a kind of decorative definition of them?

BEN-ZION: Yes, the artist in me.

MS. SHIKLER: The artist wanted to. That's interesting. Approximately how many tyrant pictures had you painted by that time?

BEN-ZION: About 25. First of all, I wanted to destroy them. This painting was the first one I wanted to destroy.

MS. SHIKLER: I'm glad you didn't.

BEN-ZION: But I saw so many people-I could have sold it 10 times. Everybody likes this picture. So I thought, "It must not be anything too bad-King Solomon." A king and a queen. They were nice people-after all.

MS. SHIKLER: After all. That sort of leads me into a question that I think is very interesting: Do you think that the person who looks at your painting gets the same thing out of it that you put into it?

BEN-ZION: He has to, he has to. If he has a certain sense which is looking for a thing, he has to. No matter how poor this man is, he has it.

MS. SHIKLER: So then, this Solomon and Sheba, for instance, or your tyrant pictures-you have two minds about him, your character. You disapprove of what he has done, but you are attracted to the surface of his life. And as a result-

BEN-ZION: Most of the time, that happens.

MS. SHIKLER: Do you think the viewer, then, sees this picture the way you know it? In other words, do you think the viewer gets that duality when he looks at it?

BEN-ZION: The viewer, no. The viewer sees only a beautiful picture, a beautiful painting. And I'll sell it because, actually, do I know this is really of King Solomon I made; or is it really the way it is?

MS. SHIKLER: So it's more of Ben-Zion than it is of King Solomon.

BEN-ZION: Of course, of course.

MS. SHIKLER: What do you generally work on? Do you always work on canvas?

BEN-ZION: I work on anything-on paper, on canvas, especially on wood, I like.

MS. SHIKLER: You paint on wood, do you? What kind of wood do you-

BEN-ZION: The reason for that-when I started to paint, I didn't have money to buy a canvas. One man had an apartment on Broadway-big apartments were there. They have a man on the door and they have tremendous rooms. But this man, somehow, believed in me, in my work. It was a time when people were very hard with money. They couldn't get rid of an expensive apartment. They were left unused.

MS. SHIKLER: Are you talking about during the Depression?

BEN-ZION: Yes, during the Depression. Most of the big apartments on Broadway were empty.

MS. SHIKLER: On the other hand, just let me try to place this properly in time. You first began painting in the '30s. So you are saying that this took place in that decade of the 1930s?

BEN-ZION: Yes. So there were many empty apartments, the best apartments. Seven, eight rooms, big rooms, with all carpeting and a private elevator and all that. And this man said, "If you paint two pictures of me and my wife, I'll give you an apartment for a year, for those paintings." It was then really when I was very poor. Then I really start to get into it. And this doctor was a friend of J.B. Neumann which also was the first one to buy some of my drawings of chimneys. I didn't know how to paint a portrait. I never painted a-especially from a special person you see. But I was so broke that I said, "I'll try. I'll try." I was afraid it would be a big fiasco. This man went to Neumann and he suggested to him maybe he should buy a picture from me, but he didn't expect it would be to paint two portraits. So he asks Neumann, "What do you think? Should I give him the apartment free for the two pictures which he's going to paint? Do you think they will be good pictures?" "No matter what they are, if they look like them or not, they will be good pictures." So he let me. But I suffered a lot. Because you know how the apartments are there-private entrances? The people that work for them had to go to the back. I had a tremendous apartment and so they came drawing there, too. They came to stay. [Laughs] But this man made a rule: you are not allowed to let in anybody else to sublet this place. If not, I can put you out. But they didn't want to believe. They kept on coming, and they wanted to stay. Finally, the man which ran the special elevator come in, and he doesn't want to let them up. He sends any of my friends to the back hall, to take the back one.

MS. SHIKLER: The service elevator?

BEN-ZION: Yes, the service elevator. So I had a lot of trouble from that. But the year passed through, I made the two pictures.

MS. SHIKLER: And you stayed there for a year, did you?

BEN-ZION: Yes, I stayed there all year.

MS. SHIKLER: Do you remember the name of the man who commissioned you?

BEN-ZION: No, I forgot all-he didn't become my friend. He was a friend, a good friend, of Neumann.

MS. SHIKLER: You were going to talk about painting on wood. Did it come out of that experience? What happened?

BEN-ZION: Yes, that came out of that-you know those big apartments there? They have tremendous closets. The closets are cloth. They put on the closets marvelous big closets. They put fancy cloth even on the closets.

MS. SHIKLER: You mean they line the shelves?

BEN-ZION: Yes. And I got marvelous shelves to paint on.

MS. SHIKLER: You mean you took the paper off the shelves, and you used those shelves for panels to paint on?

BEN-ZION: Yes. And that's why I have a lot of-and I sold a lot of them, painting on those things.

MS. SHIKLER: That's very ingenious of you.

BEN-ZION: No, this was a long time [ago]. And there wasn't a place I took, even the cheapest place, that was left

with-

MS. SHIKLER: With shelves? [They laugh.]

BEN-ZION: First I started to buy fruit boxes; they were very good. But the fruit boxes were very narrow. You know what I'm talking about?

MS. SHIKLER: You mean the crates that food was packed in?

BEN-ZION: Yes. Bad wood. In time they stopped using wood altogether. You couldn't get now wooden boxes. Poor artist-no poor artist can get away with painting on wood now.

MS. SHIKLER: Did you use something to seal the wood? How did you paint on it?

BEN-ZION: Straight on wood. I'll show you.

MS. SHIKLER: Oil?

BEN-ZION: Yes.

[Audio break.]

MS. SHIKLER: Let's put this here. Mr. Ben-Zion has brought to show us a wooden panel of a painting of four green apples and a white tall cup used as a vase with little blue field flowers in it, is that correct?

BEN-ZION: Forget-me-nots.

MS. SHIKLER: And you have painted the orange foreground and a kind of a taupe color background. The picture itself is painted directly on the wood using oil. What's your medium?

BEN-ZION: I don't use oil altogether. I use only pure oil.

MS. SHIKLER: What do you use, oil and turpentine together? Just turpentine, or oil and turpentine?

BEN-ZION: No oil altogether. Just turpentine. All pure color, straight from the tube. [If] I want it a little looser, I just use a little turpentine.

MS. SHIKLER: Have you see your pictures many years later? Do they hold up? Does the paint crack?

BEN-ZION: Perfect.

MS. SHIKLER: And do you paint on canvas in the same way, just a little turpentine and nothing else? Pure colors?

BEN-ZION: Yes.

MS. SHIKLER: What kinds of colors do you use? Do you grind them yourself or do you buy them?

BEN-ZION: No. No artist needs to grind them, because, anyway, how much do you pay, they're not good colors.

MS. SHIKLER: Do you have one company that you prefer buying from? Do you buy specifically from one company?

BEN-ZION: European colors, sometimes, but I don't use the most expensive colors. It depends where you buy them. They really don't do justice to the colors, the way they grind them.

MS. SHIKLER: You mean even the most expensive colors, you're saying, are not worth it?

BEN-ZION: Not worth it.

MS. SHIKLER: Have you seen a change in the quality of oil paint over the years?

BEN-ZION: Yes.

MS. SHIKLER: You have? You think it used to be better?

BEN-ZION: Not very much. The change of quality when you used to add oil to them. But when you use them pure, they don't change so much. This I painted at least 34 years ago.

MS. SHIKLER: Really? Well, that looks very fresh.

BEN-ZION: Yes, all my things. I'll show you another one.

MS. SHIKLER: Ben-Zion has brought out two more paintings that he has done, one of which was done about 20 years ago and still looks very fresh, painted on wood. That's a still life of oranges and a cloth. The other is a tall panel of a Jew praying with the tallit. Mr. Ben-Zion, do you do drawings first for your paintings or your sculpture?

BEN-ZION: I do a lot of drawings for themselves, but not for painting. I paint straight.

MS. SHIKLER: You draw on the panel itself, either?

BEN-ZION: No, never. You'll never find a piece of pencil on any of those things.

MS. SHIKLER: When you work, you apparently work spontaneously, but you do start with some kind of an idea in your head of what you're going to do.

BEN-ZION: Of course.

MS. SHIKLER: What's the most important thing to you when you start a work? What is the thing that you feel is most important for you to go after when you're painting?

BEN-ZION: I want the spaces, to get the spaces the right way. That's all.

MS. SHIKLER: And do you rework a canvas, do you rework a picture that often?

BEN-ZION: No. Sometimes, but I always go straight through the thing.

MS. SHIKLER: How long, generally, do you work on a painting?

BEN-ZION: Depends how big, how small.

MS. SHIKLER: Well, let's say that still life of oranges.

BEN-ZION: This probably was on the table, those three apples, and it was-I never set up a thing. Usually I always have things on my table, the way they are naturally. I never set up a thing. Those forget-me-nots are always very beautiful when I have them on the table, especially they're such a marvelous green. So I thought, "That's the way they are, that's all."

MS. SHIKLER: And you took a couple of days?

BEN-ZION: No. Took a few hours. Sometimes even yet less.

MS. SHIKLER: So then you always work wet into wet? You don't wait until it's dry and glaze it ever?

BEN-ZION: Oh, no.

MS. SHIKLER: Because now look at that painting of the oranges that you have there-that looks as though you scumbled over a dry highlights of those oranges over kind of a lean wash of-

BEN-ZION: It depends how I thought-it depends in the light that was there in the room. I never look for the northern light. I don't need it. Any light there is-I adjust my own light, you understand? I create my own light.

MS. SHIKLER: Do you use electric light?

BEN-ZION: Yes, the plain light. I never wait for the northern lights.

MS. SHIKLER: Who are the artists you admire today? I know who you don't like, but let's talk now about who you do like, if we could.

BEN-ZION: Of course, Rembrandt. From the moderns, I like very much Matisse. And from the Americans I used to like Max Weber, and one which I-I forgot his name. He used to paint many fishermen, many fishermen.

[End Tape 3. Side A.]

BEN-ZION: I used to like very much Milton Avery; but since he started to paint the very big canvases, influenced by those who were influenced by him-Rothko and others. I don't believe him. You know what I mean by I don't believe him? You see, with me it's the matter of an artist: do I believe in what he says, what he saw; or I don't believe in what he saw. I always go by did he draw what he saw, or did he neglect the eye and fix things. And that's why I don't like his big canvases, which are very bad.

MS. SHIKLER: Is there anybody painting today that you like?

BEN-ZION: Today there are no such thing like painters. Painters, there are no painters. I don't know anybody, no.

MS. SHIKLER: Do you go to galleries here in New York?

BEN-ZION: No. There is nowhere to go. In those galleries that show those modern painters [which] are sold entirely, they call those gallery member like horse stables, no?

MS. SHIKLER: They say "the stable of artists," yes.

BEN-ZION: Any gallery that has a stable of artists, I don't like to go to see all the horses in it.

MS. SHIKLER: In your social life, what artists or writers or musicians do you see? Do you have friends who are in the arts?

BEN-ZION: Writers, some Hebrew writers.

MS. SHIKLER: Would you like to name some of those artists?

BEN-ZION: They wouldn't know their names.

MS. SHIKLER: Through you they will know their names if you name them, if you'd like to.

BEN-ZION: They will only be names that they may like. I'm very sorry that most of them don't live anymore. It's very hard now.

MS. SHIKLER: Well, those people who have been part of your circle in the past and are part of it now, so you can-

BEN-ZION: Death took away quite a number of them, all of them, gone.

MS. SHIKLER: Who were some of your friends?

BEN-ZION: Carl Shark, you know Carl Shark?

MS. SHIKLER: Just name them; it doesn't matter if I know them.

BEN-ZION: Carl Shark and-very few of those that are alive. I forgot the man that used to paint fishermen. [Homer?]

MS. SHIKLER: We'll have to work on that later. I don't know who you mean offhand.

BEN-ZION: Now I see very little people, because I am very busy with my literary work now. They published a lot. In the last two and a half years they published 14 books.

MS. SHIKLER: That's a lot of books.

BEN-ZION: And they keep on going. So I'm very-writing is a very-especially to a man like me that didn't write for so many years and likes to catch up.

MS. SHIKLER: What stimulates an idea for a book, for your writing? What starts you off?

BEN-ZION: This I don't know myself. Many times I didn't know even that I wrote it; I got into it so casually. It develops so casually that suddenly there it is.

MS. SHIKLER: And you are published almost exclusively in Israel, is that correct?

BEN-ZION: Yes. I gave you one book in English. Now there's another book being printed in English, too; and I will give you one.

MS. SHIKLER: I'd like that very much.

BEN-ZION: Did you read this book?

MS. SHIKLER: Oh, yes, I've been reading-some of your comments I thought were very interesting, and I wanted to ask you a question on this. You know, you speak about art and crime in that book. I was wondering as I read your work: your paintings were removed from the Jewish Museum in a move that was supposed to make the museum more responsive to the fashion of art at that time. Do you regard that as a kind of censorship of the

independent artist? In other words, we have a free country; and everybody can paint as he chooses. At the same time, in the interest of fashion-it seems to me-things happen to the artist in which he is either encouraged or discouraged to produce. What's your feeling about that in terms of what happened to you at the museum?

BEN-ZION: Things that happened to me at the museum is not because they have anything that I wanted to do, or they do something special. A rich woman came in which had a brother, an architect-you know about it?

MS. SHIKLER: Yes, you told us about it on the last tape.

BEN-ZION: And she made him-she paid money, and she made him legal.

MS. SHIKLER: Let me interrupt you, simply because we already have that story from you. You have talked about the last time that we were together, and I wanted to ask you whether that experience in any way influenced your painting.

BEN-ZION: No such stupid, ridiculous experiences in that damned place-they did terrible things there. They had all these things there, you know, holy things. And I came down there, and I saw many things standing around.

MS. SHIKLER: You talk about in your book-you seem to deal with a variety of subjects that have to deal with what you feel is decadence in this country to rival the Romans. Tell us a little bit about why that happens, how that happens, and do you perceive-what's your role in that kind of an environment? Could you show here again if you were invited to exhibit?

BEN-ZION: I wouldn't, I wouldn't show there. Absolutely not. Under their conditions the way they are, no. Actually, this rich woman which had a brother that's a building-rebuilds the museum-her mission was to show the Museum of Modern Art that they can do also the things. So they took in Rauschenberg and such kinds of people which have nothing to do with art, and so on and so forth, and did all kind of ridiculous things. So, of course, I stopped. If anybody invited me, I would refuse to. And since then-so, they did such shameless things to my work. They made an exhibition of some works. They had my paintings-which people donated-and they sold them cheaply to all kinds of nobodies without my knowledge. Then, anything that was in this museum that what mine, they sold, they scrubbed out that nothing-if anybody, if any institution writes to them about my exhibitions, they would like some written things or some printed things, some catalogues or-not one catalogue did they left. Everything they threw out.

MS. SHIKLER: What happened to you at Graham Gallery? When you went to Graham afterwards, why did you not continue with Graham? What happened there?

BEN-ZION: I went to Graham, not after the Museum. I went later, when Kurt Valentin died. They took over my things from Kurt Valentin. They were very nice to me, they were very nice; but they were together with-what's the name? There were two: Graham and the name of the other partner. I think he died, and they changed entirely to the nonobjective.

MS. SHIKLER: Do you plan have any other exhibits in this country? Would you like to?

BEN-ZION: If I get a nice place, I would like to have especially an exhibition of my iron work, only when I had the last exhibition at the Jewish Museum, I had also some iron pieces. And they wrote out those things. But a real show of the iron work alone, I never had and I would like to have that.

MS. SHIKLER: It would be nice to have that seen because the work is interesting. I wanted to get back again to your writings. Who do you like to read? What writers do you enjoy?

BEN-ZION: Any writer which I can get in the language that I understand. I like to read.

MS. SHIKLER: Do you have a favorite writer?

BEN-ZION: No, I have no favorite. In early days I had favorites-but now-the people that are getting now the big prize-how do you call the big prize, literary prize-from the North? The Nobel Prize, yes. These that get the Nobel Prize are people which I don't believe in.

MS. SHIKLER: So for you there is a big credibility gap, as they say, in the arts altogether today.

BEN-ZION: Yes, of course. It is still just like in the painting world. They're no artists now, nobody that's special artist now. Even these things they put up now, the show of Milton Avery-I used to like Milton Avery very much. I wouldn't go to see it. It is scrubbing out thing because she sold a lot, and I wish her all the best. Why shouldn't she? But there is not a strip of anything that she didn't throw on the market because it sells. It fetches a price in the horse market. I stopped selling my work when I saw that I don't get the right price the way I should get according to the dealers the way that I used to get. So, I sell to people which come to me the way old time and

pay the way I set according to the times. I'm not out to become a millionaire. And besides, I would have to pay the-[laughs.] Thank God I don't have to sell. Even if I don't sell.

MS. SHIKLER: Why is that? Why do you not have to sell?

BEN-ZION: Because I sell enough. I don't want to pay to the President most of the money in income tax.

MS. SHIKLER: Do you exist solely on the income from your work?

BEN-ZION: Entirely. All the time.

MS. SHIKLER: From the very beginning of the time that you began to paint? Even with the chimneys?

BEN-ZION: Yes.

MS. SHIKLER: I know you got 15 dollars for those things, I remember. And it was from that moment on that you began to support yourself from your work?

BEN-ZION: No. I used to give Hebrew lessons.

MS. SHIKLER: To whom?

BEN-ZION: Children. Or sometimes grownups when they wanted to get acquainted with Hebrew literature. But that was a short time. I really was very lucky. I got right away in the beginning the best galleries. Marion Willard-you know. And then I got the Graham Gallery.

MS. SHIKLER: You were with Bertha Schaeffer, too, were you not?

BEN-ZION: With Bertha Schaeffer. That's when I had two galleries.

MS. SHIKLER: What are your plans now?

BEN-ZION: In old times, I was not able to make plans. If you're not sure what you're making because the times were very bad-I had to look for a place to wash dishes in a restaurant in the countryside. But then they asked me to [inaudible]. It was nice. Right away I had the best galleries in the city.

MS. SHIKLER: What do you plan now?

BEN-ZION: My planning is, since I didn't have yet an exhibition of my iron-I could have exhibitions any time I want in my museum. You know I have a museum in Israel which has most of my things? But I want to have in America a show of my iron work. If you like, I will show you my garden. But it must be a good place. And, also, to publish a big book about my iron work. My other work is plenty published. Here you have, for instance-here are all my publications. Those are the etchings. Four of them Kurt Valentin published. Now if you'd like to see some of my iron work. Those are the new books that they published in Israel.

MS. SHIKLER: You say that you have 15 books-14 books-and a 15th is coming out now.

BEN-ZION: Three more in January.

MS. SHIKLER: So you plan to keep writing. For the most part you write, it seems to me, about the current problems facing the individual in today's society.

BEN-ZION: Two kinds. In Hebrew, I write of the creative writing, like drama and short stories; but in English I write essays on the problems that touch art and those things around it. In the book, it has to do with art.

MS. SHIKLER: Yes, indeed. I did see that.

BEN-ZION: About art and all the bad things what's going on.

MS. SHIKLER: The next thing we should be hearing from you is that you're going to have an exhibit of your iron work.

BEN-ZION: I don't know; I never go. But some people maybe they [know] about me. I would like to have it. But that book on my iron work will be out soon. MS. SHIKLER: Is somebody doing that now?

BEN-ZION: Probably. I can't really be sure, but I feel that something is coming. I never go out for things.

MS. SHIKLER: People come to you?

BEN-ZION: Always people came to me, that's it. Won't you come down and see-

MS. SHIKLER: Yes, I'd like to. Then let's stop here, and I'll go and look at your work.

[END OF INTERVIEW.]

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