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Oral history interview with Maurice Roth,
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Transcript

Preface

The following oral history transcript is the result of a tape-recorded interview with Maurice Roth on September 15, 1984. The interview was conducted by Ruth Cloudman as part of the Mark Rothko and His Times oral history project for the Archives of American Art, Smithsonian Institution. Funding was provided by the Mark Rothko Foundation.

The reader should bear in mind that he or she is reading a transcript of spoken, rather than written, prose.

Interview

[Annotations and changes made by immediate family members]

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

MAURICE ROTH: There were three brothers. If I'm wrong, correct me.

MS. CLOUDMAN: And their names?

MR. ROTH: I was the oldest brother, Maurice. And then the second is Albert and Mark is the third.

MS. CLOUDMAN: Then your sister, Sonia. [Sonia Rabin Allen B. 19 March 1890; D. 5 March 1985]

MR. ROTH: That's right.

MS. CLOUDMAN: Do you remember when each of you were born?

MR. ROTH: About me, I was born in 1892, November second.

MS. CLOUDMAN: And what was the span in time between the births of each of the children?

MR. ROTH: I'm three years younger than my sister, and Albert, I think, was three years difference, too, approximately. Let's say it that way. [Albert Roth B. approx 1894; D. 5 May 1977]

MS. CLOUDMAN: And then Mark was how much different in time?

MR. ROTH: Mark was quite a bit younger. I'm not quite sure. I think between him and my sister there was fifteen years difference. I'm not sure; I just don't remember too clearly. I really don't remember how much younger he was than I am. He died when he was sixty-six, I believe.

MS. CLOUDMAN: You and Sonia are the only ones still living?

MR. ROTH: The only two.

MS. CLOUDMAN: When did Albert die?

MR. ROTH: About five or six years ago.

MS. CLOUDMAN: What was your family life like in Russia?

MR. ROTH: Very tranquil. If there is anything good in us, it comes from my parents who raised a very nice, tranquil family. I'm always proud of that.

MS. CLOUDMAN: Yes. What were your parents like?

MR. ROTH: My father was a quiet dreamer. He'd dream a lot. My mother was the woman behind him. There is always a woman behind a man. He was very, very wonderful as far as we were concerned. Whatever we had we owe to him.

MS. CLOUDMAN: What was his occupation in Russia?

MR. ROTH: He was a pharmacist. Since 1878 I believe; I have his papers.

MS. CLOUDMAN: Oh, good. Was your family a very religious family?

MR. ROTH: No. We were a very liberal family.

MS. CLOUDMAN: Did you go to synagogue and observe Sabbath in Russia?

MR. ROTH: Not much. In the first place, being a pharmacist he had to work petty near seven or eight hours a day each week. And being long hours-we were a liberal family. Let's put it that way. More agnostics than fundamentalists.

MS. CLOUDMAN: Was your family a Kosher family?

MR. ROTH: It seems to me when I was a youngster at home mother kept a Kosher family. But after we moved here and the children grew up and got married, we were not Kosher. As I said, we were a liberal family and not a Kosher family. I don't know how to tell you that. You can word it any way you want.

MS. CLOUDMAN: Was your parents' marriage an arranged marriage?

MR. ROTH: No. My father met my mother through my mother's sister.

MS. CLOUDMAN: You mean he met your mother through her sister, is that correct?

MR. ROTH: Yes.

MS. CLOUDMAN: Was your brother Mark closer to his mother or to his father, do you think?

MR. ROTH: I think he had more Father's characteristics than Mother's.

MS. CLOUDMAN: In what way? What characteristics?

MR. ROTH: I think he was more determined. Father was quite a bit a dreamer and idealist.

MS. CLOUDMAN: So he was more like your mother, is that what you're saying?

MR. ROTH: In one way he was a dreamer and at the same time he was materialistic as well.

MS. CLOUDMAN: Did Mark know his grandparents in Russia?

MR. ROTH: No.

MS. CLOUDMAN: Had they died before he was born or what?

MR. ROTH: I'll tell you, in Russia two hundred miles away was like a hundred miles here. They lived a couple hundred miles [away]. I never got to see them; my sister saw them, but I didn't and neither did he.

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

MR. ROTH: I would say yes. Of course, in Russia they were divided in pairs-where the Jews were allowed to live or where not allowed to live.

MS. CLOUDMAN: What was Dvinsk like?

MR. ROTH: According to this country, a large city over there-a hundred and fifty thousand people was a lot of people. And the army was stationed out there and they were the elite of the state and we were the other half.

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

MR. ROTH: Not physically, but we had many scares. We had to all of a sudden run home and close the windows and shutters and be on the look-out all the time. For instance, we had to go to school in the morning and we were always scared stiff of going. So someone took us over there. Anti-Semitism was strong because there were so many Jewish people there.

MS. CLOUDMAN: Were you afraid of being attacked by anti-Semitic groups?

MR. ROTH: I was a youngster. Don't forget I was probably about fifteen years old when I left, so we didn't realize how bad it was; but at the same time it was bad enough.

MS. CLOUDMAN: Mark once told a story about being struck by the whip of a Cossack. Do you remember this incident?

MR. ROTH: Well, I don't know. All of a sudden Cossacks would come in and raid the city. Whether he was struck or not, I don't know. He was a youngster. Don't forget, he was that much younger. But we all lived in fear.

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

MR. ROTH: Well, the Jewish people were a highly intelligent kind. After all, we all went through school and we did what we could.

MS. CLOUDMAN: What kind of schooling did the children receive?

MR. ROTH: Sonia went to the university [University of Warsaw]. She went first to gymnasia which is high school. She was sixteen years old when she graduated high school, and then we had the aunt living in Warsaw and she went there and got her dental degree, and after that she opened an office in our home.

MS. CLOUDMAN: So she practiced dentistry in your home.

MR. ROTH: She practiced on me, too. [Laughter]

MS. CLOUDMAN: And then what kind of schooling did you have?

MR. ROTH: In the beginning, of course, I had Jewish school. You don't have to mention that; you can if you want to. To enter pharmacy you had to get approximately a high school education like algebra and chemistry and history and all that. Then after that I went to a city called Vilna which was also not very far from Dvinsk. There I had to take my exams for pharmacy. The previous was pre-pharmacy. When I came here, I took my exam here.

MS. CLOUDMAN: You mean the United States?

MR. ROTH: In the United States. In fact, on one of them Hatfield who was governor then signed it; I've got this signature on my diploma.

MS. CLOUDMAN: Whose signature is this?

MR. ROTH: Hatfield was governor then; now he's a senator.

MS. CLOUDMAN: Did you work in pharmacy here?

MR. ROTH: From then until I left for Portland, I worked in a pharmacy.

MS. CLOUDMAN: Tell me a little more about the schooling? What kind of schooling did Mark have?

MR. ROTH: Mark went through high school.

MS. CLOUDMAN: Well, that's in Portland. But in Dvinsk?

MR. ROTH: Oh, he was a youngster and not old enough-

MS. CLOUDMAN: Did he have religious schooling in Dvinsk?

MR. ROTH: He had a private Jewish teacher for a while, but he didn't stay with it.

MS. CLOUDMAN: What would he have studied with this private Jewish teacher?

MR. ROTH: Hebrew. Because we spoke Russian and nothing else at home.

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

MR. ROTH: Because he went broke and he couldn't make a go of it, and he had a brother here and some more relatives. So he left us over there and he came here, and after he was able to-he had a brother here-why, he sent for the rest of the family. First he brought over Albert, my brother, and me. Later on, Sonia, Mother and Mark.

MS. CLOUDMAN: So it was his brother that brought him to Portland?

MR. ROTH: His brother helped him because money-wise he couldn't make it on his own.

MS. CLOUDMAN: So he sent for you and for Albert first. Do you have any idea how Mark reacted when his father and the two of you boys left for America leaving him behind for a while?

MR. ROTH: Of course, I have an idea; you have an idea how a man feels when he leaves his wife and children over there. It was part of father's sickness.

MS. CLOUDMAN: Your father's illness?

MR. ROTH: Yes, due to lonesomeness and leaving the family and going through an ordeal of being broke and near death. I always somehow had a nice home and never went hungry, I can assure you, but I attribute that to my mother, a very good, wonderful housekeeper and manger.

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

MR. ROTH: Well, partly I believe we were sent to somebody. It wasn't [for] very long; I left about a year after Father had gone. How we got along? We worked. I was getting a salary. It wasn't too much. But we got along somehow. I imagine that folks helped; his brother helped him.

MS. CLOUDMAN: Did you have any uncles or cousins in Russia who helped your family before they were sent for by your father?

MR. ROTH: No.

MS. CLOUDMAN: Was life harder for your family after your father left, do you think?

MR. ROTH: No doubt about it.

MS. CLOUDMAN: And you think your father sent money back to the family.

MR. ROTH: As much as he could. His brother was here and gave him his first job, whatever it was; and the profits came to us.

MS. CLOUDMAN: Do you know if Mark was excited about coming to America?

MR. ROTH: I don't know. First of all, it was the necessity of coming here to get along; and then Sonia and my mother. So how he felt about it I don't know. He was too young to have girlfriends or boy friends.

MS. CLOUDMAN: What was your image of America before you came here?

MR. ROTH: The image of America-everyone comes here looking for gold, I guess.

MS. CLOUDMAN: Streets paved with gold. [Laughter] Do you have any idea of what Mark thought America would be like?

MR. ROTH: He was too young, I have an idea, to form an opinion.

MS. CLOUDMAN: After Sonia, your mother and Mark arrived in New York, did they come to Portland directly or did they go up to see relatives in New Haven?

MR. ROTH: Mark stayed there just a short time. We had relatives in New Haven and Portland.

MS. CLOUDMAN: I was wondering if they left New York directly for Portland or if they stopped off in New Haven.

MR. ROTH: They were going direct to Portland, but stopped off in New Haven because we had an uncle and cousins there.

MS. CLOUDMAN: How long did they stay with them?

MR. ROTH: Not very long. I stayed with them about a couple of weeks.

MS. CLOUDMAN: When you came over?

MR. ROTH: Yes. And so did they. It's just so many years ago I don't remember, but that's it approximately.

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

MR. ROTH: We were all spread out. I lived in Portland with an uncle. Albert had been sent to Seattle to his cousin. By that time the relatives had rented a nice, little home. So they came to a nice home, and we had a big party that night when they came. And we lived there until I started to work and I got seven dollars a week and Albert got four dollars a week. Sonia worked for a dentist for a while. She got-I haven't the vaguest idea, but we got along somehow.

MS. CLOUDMAN: So you lived in a house.

MR. ROTH: We didn't live in luxury, but we lived in a house.

MS. CLOUDMAN: But you had your own house at that point.

MR. ROTH: It was a rented house.

MS. CLOUDMAN: Where was it?

MR. ROTH: Do you know where Fulton is? It's way out south-

MS. CLOUDMAN: Do you by any chance remember the address?

MR. ROTH: No. Kirby Street, I believe.

MS. CLOUDMAN: It was on Kirby Street?

MR. ROTH: I'm almost sure.

MS. CLOUDMAN: Was it a predominantly Jewish neighborhood?

MR. ROTH: No, it was not. The Jewish neighborhood was way out in South Portland. But it was mostly Maccabean Jews-I don't know.

MS. CLOUDMAN: How did you learn English?

MR. ROTH: Here I am. [Laughter] Albert and I tried to study English by ourselves and then we went to night school. How I got it, I don't know. I started a pharmacy and I had to get it! I had a private teacher, too, who taught me.

MS. CLOUDMAN: Oh, you did have private teacher?

MR. ROTH: For a while, to instruct me in the ways of pharmacy here.

MS. CLOUDMAN: Did you have a private teacher for English as well or just for the pharmacy?

MR. ROTH: Just for the pharmacy. I think the English came just by association for me.

MS. CLOUDMAN: Do you know how Mark learned English? Did he have private tutoring?

MR. ROTH: He got that probably when he went to school.

MS. CLOUDMAN: Did he start school immediately [when he got here]?

MR. ROTH: I'm almost sure.

MS. CLOUDMAN: Did he have any special attention in school to help him learn English? It must have been difficult for him to start school.

MR. ROTH: I don't think so. I think it came naturally. For youngsters, association works with youngsters all around him, especially so many Jewish ones and he went to the neighborhood house, and that's where all the Jewish immigrant youngsters and their mothers went.

MS. CLOUDMAN: You called it a "neighborhood house?" What was that?

MR. ROTH: Yes. It's still here. It's where the Jewish people got together and they learned and they had instructors. But how long that lasted I don't know. But that didn't take long and then he went to high school. I have the pictures of the high school where he went and his friends. He had three friends that were with him all the time. In fact in the book it tells you about them. Here's a picture of them.

MS. CLOUDMAN: Yes, the three boys who went to Yale. Where did he attend school in Portland?

MR. ROTH: I think it was Franklin High School.

MS. CLOUDMAN: Well, Sonia thought he went to Shaddock originally and then he went to Lincoln High.

MR. ROTH: It could be. Maybe. I don't know.

MS. CLOUDMAN: Did he receive any kind of religious instruction in Portland?

MR. ROTH: I don't think so. The entire family was not religiously inclined; we were brought up in the Jewish way, yes, but not in the religious way.

MS. CLOUDMAN: Was he ever bar mitzvahed?

MR. ROTH: I don't think so. I was the only one bar mitzvahed and I got a dollar; someone stole it from me the next day. [Laughter]

MS. CLOUDMAN: So at this neighborhood house that you were talking about there was not religious instruction. It was just teaching in English and [other] instructions.

MR. ROTH: And association with other youngsters. And that's as far as my memory goes.

MS. CLOUDMAN: What was life like for the family in Portland?

MR. ROTH: In the beginning it was a hard life. Father died when he was fifty-one. Our income was minimal, you might say, but we got along very nicely.

MS. CLOUDMAN: When did your father die?

MR. ROTH: I don't remember that far [back]. He was fifty-one when he died. I don't remember the year.

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

MR. ROTH: I think it was cancer. At that time we didn't find out exactly, but I think it was a cancer because he had stomach trouble all his life anyhow.

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

MR. ROTH: They weren't together too long. How he reacted to his father's death I don't remember. We were all around his bed when he died. We watched him die.

MS. CLOUDMAN: How did the family support itself after your father's death?

MR. ROTH: At that time I was already a registered pharmacist here.

MS. CLOUDMAN: So you were already working?

MR. ROTH: I was registered and working here and I had to take my exams here before I could go into pharmacy. So I was getting seven dollars a week and I think that Albert was getting four, and when Sonia lived here, she had the dental office. I don't remember what she made. Anyhow we scraped together the money to live nicely, not luxuriously, but to eat.

MS. CLOUDMAN: Now Mark was just a boy at this time. Did he go out and do some kind of work to earn some money after his father's death?

MR. ROTH: Selling papers, and he didn't like it and he got beat up many times.

MS. CLOUDMAN: Who beat him up?

MR. ROTH: Well, at that time each immigrant boy was selling papers and each one operated a corner for themselves downtown. This corner belongs to you and this corner belongs to me; and if you get in somebody else's corner, you got beat up.

MS. CLOUDMAN: Oh, I see how that works. [Laughter] Did your mother ever consider remarrying after your father's death?

MR. ROTH: No.

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

MR. ROTH: We didn't have any cousins. They were away. They were in a smaller village. We didn't have any.

MS. CLOUDMAN: This is in Portland?

MR. ROTH: Oh, in Portland? The relationship with the cousins?

MS. CLOUDMAN: And uncle.

MR. ROTH: We were the poor people. [Laughs] It was all right. There was no close relationship because after all we were just greenhorns and they had been here for years. By and by we made a lot of friends. Father and mother both were loving people and they had a very nice relationship. Our home was, let's say, a semi-intelligent house.

MS. CLOUDMAN: I'm sure it was more than that. [Laughter]

MR. ROTH: Well, we all loved our parents, father especially because he was very kind man. He was a highly educated man. He was willing to starve and work whatever possible to get his education. He left the little village he was born in and starved to go to school so that he could achieve what he wanted. How he got that desire, how he achieved that, I don't know. His grandfather was some kind of secretary or something. I think Sonia knows more about it than I do. She was closer to him, and she was older.

MS. CLOUDMAN: Where was your father's hometown in Russia?

MR. ROTH: You can't pronounce it. A little city, a small town. I was born there, too, but I was a baby. That was where he spent his first few years.

MS. CLOUDMAN: Where was your mother born? Did you mother come from the same town?

MR. ROTH: No, she was closer to Germany. She was born in-it was a German town at that time. I'm almost sure it belonged to Germany, if I'm not mistaken.

MS. CLOUDMAN: Petrograd?

MR. ROTH: No. Somewhere around the sea over there. I don't remember.

MS. CLOUDMAN: Well, let's get back to Portland. Did Mark ever draw or paint as a child or in high school?

MR. ROTH: No, he didn't. In fact, he came here once and he was drawing for some company. He had to make a drawing of a refrigerator, I think. I don't remember what he was doing; just something to earn a few dollars. That was the extent of what he did in his drawing, like that picture. Most of his working started in New York.

MS. CLOUDMAN: Do you know if he ever attended art school in Portland as a young man? Do you remember if he ever visited the art museum here when he was a child?

MR. ROTH: I don't think so, but I don't know.

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

MR. ROTH: I really don't know that. He was too young and I was too old for him. [Laughter] I was older. How it came to him I don't know. He was very musical. Later on he could sit down at a piano and play just by ear and then [he took] lessons. When it started, I don't know. I don't remember. I was away most of the time working at the pharmacy. I had to work about fifteen hours a day. Later on, when he left Portland, there's gap of time that we don't have the information on. We didn't know. I know that he was starving to death in New York; not starving, but he didn't find it possible in New York to make a living. Then to him it came a painter! It came to him kind of suddenly. He must have gotten the interest in art. I forget the name of the school he went to and the teacher he had-I've forgotten all the names.

MS. CLOUDMAN: When he was growing up in Portland, was he interested in drama or the theater at all?

MR. ROTH: I don't recollect, but he was musically inclined.

MS. CLOUDMAN: Was anyone else in the family musically inclined? Did anyone else play an instrument?

MR. ROTH: I can play with one finger! [Laughter] No, I don't think so. We probably had it in us, but we didn't have any time to go to operas or we didn't have any money to go to operas. We had to walk sometimes miles to go to a show and go up in the balcony.

MS. CLOUDMAN: So you did attend theater and musical events.

MR. ROTH: Yes, and he did. I'm sure he and his friends did.

MS. CLOUDMAN: Was Mark outgoing as a boy?

MR. ROTH: I don't know.

MS. CLOUDMAN: You remember some of his friends, though. You spoke of them before. What were they like??

MR. ROTH: He had the same friends for years here. He had the three friends and the rest I don't think I remember. Whether there were any other boys or girls, I don't know.

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

MR. ROTH: At that time we were interested in, especially being Jewish, political persecution. That was our main concern, survival of the Jew in the first place and besides that we were all of course, liberal. A Jew couldn't help but be liberal. The concern of the Jew came first. But we were all liberal.

[END OF SIDE ONE, Tape 1, Side B]

MR. ROTH: When he was in Russia, my sister told you that the doctor gave up on him when he was a child. There was no use doing anything for him because he was very ill. At that time they didn't know what the lack of calcium meant. We had plaster walls and he ate the plaster off the walls because he craved calcium. And that was the only way he could get it, so we couldn't figure out what it was. They even tried cigarettes on him just to find out what it was. But what it was was a lack of calcium and so he ate the plaster off the walls.

MS. CLOUDMAN: He was just a tiny child at this time?

MR. ROTH: I don't know how old he was-seven or eight.

MS. CLOUDMAN: So later on his health improved?

MR. ROTH: Oh, yes. He became nice and robust after he got over this calcium lack. Mother always saw to it we had a nice wholesome table. Then he became a nice, healthy youngster.

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

MR. ROTH: I don't know. I was too busy working fifteen hours a day and he was too busy with school and whatever he was doing. I couldn't tell you any details about whether he was rebellious or not. He was just a boy!

MS. CLOUDMAN: Was he excited about getting the scholarship to Yale University?

MR. ROTH: I don't remember.

MS. CLOUDMAN: Do you have any idea what he planned to study once he got there?

MR. ROTH: Whatever he planned, it didn't come out and he got annoyed and it just didn't interest him. So somehow he got involved in art. How the transition came I just don't remember and we weren't close enough. But I see it as the period of time that he went to New York. He was far away there and he could bum around here and there, doing one thing and another until he found himself, found what he wanted.

MS. CLOUDMAN: Why do you think he left Yale? Just because he wasn't interested?

MR. ROTH: It just didn't please him; it wasn't what he wanted. He didn't know what he wanted at that time.

MS. CLOUDMAN: Do you remember him writing to the family very often when he was at the University?

MR. ROTH: No.

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

MR. ROTH: There was no first time. He just resigned from school. Then he went to art schools to see what it was all about. There was a famous art school. He went in there and he liked what he saw. I guess it appealed to him. And it came on gradually. Later the WPA [Works Progress Administration] came on. You know what that is?

MS. CLOUDMAN: Yes.

MR. ROTH: And he got about twenty-nine dollars a month or a week. I don't know what he got. It must have been a month. That's how he got along.

MS. CLOUDMAN: What was the family's response to his becoming an artist?

MR. ROTH: No response.

MS. CLOUDMAN: Does that mean they didn't care, they didn't approve?

MR. ROTH: We didn't know how he got the information to do it.

MS. CLOUDMAN: But did they approve or disapprove or did they just take a "wait and see" attitude?

MR. ROTH: Left it up to him.

MS. CLOUDMAN: I see.

MR. ROTH: Because he didn't stay with one thing-he was drifting from one thing to another. So actually we don't know how or when the transition came.

MS. CLOUDMAN: What were some of the other things that he was sort of drifting back and forth between before he settled on art?

MR. ROTH: Making a living, probably.

MS. CLOUDMAN: Did your family help him financially at all when he was trying-

Did mark visit Portland often?

MR. ROTH: Once he hitchhiked from New York to here, he and his wife.

MS. CLOUDMAN: This is Edith, his first wife?

MR. ROTH: Yes.

MS. CLOUDMAN: When was that; do you remember?

MR. ROTH: He was married and then divorced. See, there was a transition period that we hadn't been close enough. I think my sister, Sonia saw him a couple of times alone, but I never did. I think the only time I saw him was when he hitchhiked to Portland.

MS. CLOUDMAN: Did he paint when he was in Portland?

MR. ROTH: The only painting I remember was he was doing the drawing for some company of a refrigerator or something and he was supposed to get money for it. The wife was in the jewelry business. The whole thing is here. She wanted him to help her with the jewelry business but he didn't like it. So that's how their interests split. I understand that's how they split up.

MS. CLOUDMAN: Yes. When he was doing the drawing for the company, was that in Portland, Oregon?

MR. ROTH: Just a short time in Portland, Oregon. I don't think they accepted it very well. There was a famous fellow named Braun and he wrote a book; the name was *The Living World*, [*The Graphic Bible* by Browne]. I think he drew the cover for it. And he was supposed to get paid for it and he sued the fellow for the money and he never got a penny for it. And that's the extent I know of his drawing, his painting. The rest came on gradually. That period is kind of not dark, but I don't know what it was.

MS. CLOUDMAN: Do you remember when he was given the exhibition in 1933 at the Portland Art Museum? They had an exhibit of his work.

MR. ROTH: No, I don't. The first work I saw was in California, Pasadena, I think.

MS. CLOUDMAN: Do you remember when that was?

MR. ROTH: No, I don't.

MS. CLOUDMAN: Where did Mark meet his first wife, Edith?

MR. ROTH: I don't know. They used to get groups together where their finances weren't too great. But they had a nice group. He met her of course, in New York. How it came along I don't know.

MS. CLOUDMAN: Was he much affected by their divorce?

MR. ROTH: After the divorce he felt pretty bad and he came here. We had lunch together and he was staying in our house for a few days. He was quite put out about it. How long that lasted I don't know.

MS. CLOUDMAN: That's another time that he came to Portland. Do you remember him ever having an exhibition in Portland that you went to see?

MR. ROTH: I don't remember any exhibition of his here. The first exhibition I saw was in California. I don't think he had one; I'm not sure.

MS. CLOUDMAN: Why did he change his name to Rothko?

MR. ROTH: I think that was his wife's idea. I haven't the least idea.

MS. CLOUDMAN: Did the family object in any way to his doing that?

MR. ROTH: I don't even know that. [Laughter]

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

MR. ROTH: She was a beautiful woman, a very clever woman. She used to be with a famous publication. I think it was before your time. It was like magazines they have now, scandals, or like *People* magazine. Then the modern art and then Rockefeller built the Rockefeller Institution. We were there for the opening. His wife and his friends that rooked him out of all the money, and we all sat at a nice long table there.

MS. CLOUDMAN: This was at the Museum of Modern Art.

MR. ROTH: Yes, the Museum of Modern Art, Rockefeller Institution.

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

MR. ROTH: I don't think it was too much of a wedding. I have an idea there weren't thousands of people there. It was just probably a quiet, modern wedding.

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

MR. ROTH: I don't know. Of course, I was too young to realize the difference, though. It never bothered us very much because later on we had a young lady visit for forty years and she was Catholic but she was like a child of our own. So what the reaction was that time I haven't the least idea. I don't remember. I'm sure it didn't bother me. It might have bothered my father and mother, but I don't know that it bothered me at all, nor Albert was bothered very much.

MS. CLOUDMAN: When did your mother die?

MR. ROTH: She was in her eighties when she passed away, eighty-three or eighty-five. I haven't the least idea. [Kate Rothkowitz, B. 1890, D. 1948]

MS. CLOUDMAN: What was the cause of her death, do you know?

MR. ROTH: Well, it was a combination of age, number one, and there was no specific sickness that I can name now.

MS. CLOUDMAN: Was her death sudden?

MR. ROTH: No.

MS. CLOUDMAN: Did Mark return for the funeral?

MR. ROTH: I really don't recollect that time. Mother was quite ill for a while there. I was away, I believe. I was married already. We were on a trip back East and we got a call to come home in a hurry. My mother lived with Sonia. So I got a call from Sonia to come home and she didn't last very long after that.

MS. CLOUDMAN: How was Mark affected by his mother's death?

MR. ROTH: I don't even remember. I'm almost sure that he wasn't here when she died.

MS. CLOUDMAN: So you didn't see him around that time.

MR. ROTH: I don't think so.

MS. CLOUDMAN: Did you see much of Mark after your mother's death?

MR. ROTH: Not very much. It's a period of time that we weren't too close. I think that Sonia saw him several times. But I didn't. I didn't see him during that time. Of course, at that time New York was a long ways money-wise and-

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

MR. ROTH: Yes.

MS. CLOUDMAN: How many times; do you remember when they were?

MR. ROTH: Once.

[Mish and Clara Roth and Mark & Mel Rothko drove cross-country from N.Y. to Portland in 1950.]

MS. CLOUDMAN: Do you remember what year or about what time?

MR. ROTH: I don't remember.

MS. CLOUDMAN: It must have been when you went to the Museum of Modern Art to the party.

MR. ROTH: Of course, I went to the funeral there. This fellow who built the chapel paid for my brother's and my trip.

MS. CLOUDMAN: For Mark's funeral.

MR. ROTH: For Mark's funeral.

MS. CLOUDMAN: How did the family feel about Mark's paintings? Did they like them or not like them? Did they understand them?

MR. ROTH: Especially in the beginning we didn't know what it was all about anyhow. Here's one of his paintings. At that time it looked to us like we didn't know what it was. Of course, it wasn't that the world accepted him as well. Still, I like the colors. But what makes it so wonderful, so good, I don't know.

MS. CLOUDMAN: Did it upset him if the family didn't like or understand his paintings?

MR. ROTH: No. At that time there were quite a few articles in the New York papers about his [work]. Some ridiculed it and some called it different names. Later on, after they accepted it; it was all right with us.

MS. CLOUDMAN: Did he give any of his works to anyone in the family?

MR. ROTH: I have one. Right now it's on loan to my son in San Francisco. They have two, I think, my brother and sister.

MS. CLOUDMAN: What do they look like?

[Water color paintings to: 1. M. J. Roth (brother); 2. Beatrice Reinhardt (niece); 3. Kenneth Rabin (nephew); 4. Milton A. Rabin (nephew) and 1 - small 4: x 6: unsigned oil.]

MR. ROTH: He visited Portland. He and his wife hitchhiked from New York. And at that time they came for the purpose of visiting mother. We didn't have any room in our place. They went out to [Council Crest [?]] with canvas or whatever they had; they built themselves a hut there and lived with no facilities of any kind. Later on I think they made them move because there were no facilities of any kind, if I remember right. That was the time of the hitchhiking from New York to Portland.

MS. CLOUDMAN: And so did he do paintings during that trip?

MR. ROTH: The picture that I have is a picture of what they saw from [Council Crest [?] Possible Forest Park]] looking east.

MS. CLOUDMAN: Looking toward the river. Did the family encourage him at all in his work?

MR. ROTH: I don't think they knew what it was all about.

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

MR. ROTH: Physically?

MS. CLOUDMAN: Mentally or emotionally.

MR. ROTH: I don't know. I was no judge. He was very close to the family but he couldn't be any closer due to the distance, as I said. Money came in later after he was recognized. But there were many times when probably he

wasn't doing so well.

MS. CLOUDMAN: Did you and other family members have photo albums and letters from Mark Rothko"

MR. ROTH: We've got quite a few papers. You've probably seen most of them. And I have these pictures here.

MS. CLOUDMAN: The reproductions of his work.

MR. ROTH: The reproductions. We didn't correspond. So whatever correspondence I have is gotten out of the papers.

MS. CLOUDMAN: So that's how you kept up in a certain respect.

MR. ROTH: After she got through with high school-

MS. CLOUDMAN: This is Sonia, your sister?

MR. ROTH: Father was farsighted, you know. Whatever they could they saved. Of course, the Jewish people have a tendency of educating the children. So he saved enough money to foresee the future. And then we had an Aunt in Warsaw and that's where she got her dental degree.

MS. CLOUDMAN: So Sonia went to Warsaw for her dental training.

[Recorder off]

MS. CLOUDMAN: We were asking when Mel and Mark were married.

MR. ROTH: Not before, but after the wedding I think the baby was there. They owned a stone house-what do you call it-in New York? A brownstone.

VOICE: Think back to when Uncle Mark and Mel were first married. You and Auntie Clara were in the East. Did you drive out to Portland, to the West Coast? Because Milton and I saw you in Eugene as you parked the car and the four of you got out of the car. Do you remember that?

MR. ROTH: I think you're dreaming. I wasn't in Eugene at that time.

VOICE: You were on your way to Portland.

MR. ROTH: Maybe; I don't remember that. But at that time we had that accident. [Accident referred to took place on Mt. Hood. Out of context in time.] Anyhow he owned a brownstone house in New York. We stayed with them. We didn't stay very long; we only stayed a few days because they had very small accommodations. In fact they lived above a grocery store and all who came in there could smell the herring. [Laughter] And they lived on the second floor. We stayed with them and then a couple of days later found a place to stay. We came at a time when it was hard to get a place, right after the war in '45. Finally we found a place and Frances was with us. Frances doesn't come into this story. Frances was with us for forty years, the young lady that came [to stay with us] and she became a child of our own, you might say. She was Catholic and we were Jewish, but it was just one family. And we got along so beautifully. After all, who didn't know Frances? She brought up the children.

[END OF INTERVIEW.]

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