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*Archives of American Art*

Oral history interview with Godfrey Frankel,  
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# Transcript

## Preface

The following oral history transcript is the result of a tape-recorded interview with Godfrey Frankel on November 29, 1993. The interview was conducted by Merry Foresta for the Archives of American Art, Smithsonian Institution.

## Interview

MERRY FORESTA: Mr. Frankel, give me a brief synopsis of your biography.

GODFREY FRANKEL: Let's see. I guess the logical place to start would be native city, which is Cleveland, Ohio. I went to school there, Cleveland Heights High School, Ohio State University, got my B.A. degree, and started out in advertising. I was lucky enough to get a job on a daily newspaper, selling and creating advertising, in Lorain, Ohio. It's kind of a defunct city now, rather like Gary, Indiana, and a number of other midwestern cities the steel industry has long left, and the city is pretty well damaged.

My early art instincts probably originated with the Cleveland Museum of Art. My good mother was kind enough, foresightful enough to take me down on Saturdays when I was a youngster. This would have been in 1924, '25, along in those years. I always had a sensitivity to art. When I was 14 years old my family bought me a camera and I started in photography, which lasted for about a year. Then I got involved in school work and growing-up issues and really didn't get into photography until my first job, in Lorain, in the advertising field. That was about 1940.

I was unhappy in the field. [he laughs] I liked the idea of working for a newspaper and some of the atmosphere of a small newspaper of 15,000 circulation — you got involved in all departments — but creating advertisements: I guess I wasn't made for commercial work and tried to get out of it. But that was in the beginning '40s, the war was here, and there was a question of being drafted or not. I waited, I wasn't, I decided that I'd better pick up a job but in the same field, particularly when a good friend of mind called from Washington and said she thought she could make some arrangements for me with the Washington Daily News [Scripps-Howard].

MERRY FORESTA: I was wondering if you'd had any experience with photography up until that time. Newspapers really weren't using photography in advertising at that point, were they?

GODFREY FRANKEL: Not much. I can't recall any. We used line-drawing services. I might have done some for accounts but I wasn't interested in that area. I just started, nothing real serious, there were just instincts —

MERRY FORESTA: But you had a camera at that point.

GODFREY FRANKEL: I had a camera at that point. Oh, I recall, with a friend of mine, we'd take trips — I'd come to Cleveland weekends for a date and we'd have a photo-shoot someplace. They were serious, about two weekends a month, maybe we had seven or eight of them. One of them I was picked up as a Japanese spy. [laughter] This was in East Liverpool, one of these little towns on the river, and I was just interested in smokestacks and living part of it. The FSA material. I hadn't seen it at that point, interestingly enough. One Friday night we were just coming into town, we'd just gotten rooms, then we went off to shoot some pictures. We'd noticed a bridge across the Ohio River and it was interesting to see the disappearing lights — you know, the old Hungarian school, actually.

So we thought we'd take it, so we went back. It was misty, and we had tripods on, it was about midnight, we were just starting a timed exposure, and before it was complete we heard a voice, "GOTCHA!" [he laughs] We were startled, we turned around, and here we see two big cops who say, "We've been lookin' for you for a while, get in the wagon." We didn't know what the hell to make of it. Then they proceeded to tell us on the way to jail that they knew we were in the area — two Japanese spies. This was right after Pearl Harbor and everybody was shaky, probably October or November.

So we proceeded to tell them, I work on a newspaper, my friend was a dental school student, we showed them IDs. No, "Of course you guys carry IDs like that." And he threw us in jail for the night. I asked, "Could I make a call?" No, this was against all kinds of laws. So finally by morning they sprung us; I could have sued them. When I got back to the paper on Monday morning I found out it was on a lawyer's tip they'd picked me up.

MERRY FORESTA: How did you learn? Did you belong to camera clubs, or did you —

GODFREY FRANKEL: Didn't really belong to a camera club. Coming into Cleveland on a weekend, meet with

people that were in clubs — the Cleveland Museum was an impetus, but there was no —

MERRY FORESTA: Well, back in Washington —

GODFREY FRANKEL: It was really exciting to get into Washington in the war years and leaving a small city with not very much stimulation, cultural benefits and so forth. And I was single at the time — [laughing] and good dates. So it was quite exciting. The job was somewhat similar in that I was in advertising, a little more hustle to it because big city. But it wasn't long before two or three people were drafted and I was still on a limited classification ready to be drafted and the management of Scripps-Howard came to me and said, "You're a young guy on the staff who can write, so you're the nightclub editor." I sat down. "The nightclub editor?" I said, "I hate nightclubs!" Then he said, "Well, I tell you, there's a \$50 drawing account" — which now is like \$300 — "and you get all your meals and you meet a lot of people and you're going to be it, because it brings in a lot of revenue, because we're Number One in the city in nightclub advertising lineage. So you have to do it, that's all." I said, "Okay."

So what did I do? Took out a book from the library on Josephine Baker and the Parisian scene and tried to romanticize that maybe I can make it an interesting job. It was all right but it got dull after a while. But it was interesting and those were segregation days. I happened to meet the nightclub editor on the Afro-American and he'd invite me to U Street, which was safe then and had fabulous clubs. I really got interested in the thing, I was going to write a book on it.

Those were some of the benefits of it. Then I started looking around the city, a strange city to me then, and I found these alley dwellings, I think there are still one or two left, very small area. This was where poor people and mostly blacks lived. I don't know whether you saw that thing in the Washington Post last year that I'm in, they picked up some of this. I was fascinated with them, Merry. I would find myself down there three or four times a week in the late afternoons when the sun was good before I went out to visit nightclubs. It was perfect, [laughing] I loved the nightclub job then. So I took many, many rolls —

MERRY FORESTA: What kind of camera were you using then?

GODFREY FRANKEL: I was using a Super-Ikonta BX, which is a Zeiss-Tessar lens and it had an exposure metre which wasn't working for a while, but in those days to have a built-in exposure metre was a very big thing. Now you come with an exposure metre, you just sight your subject and you shoot. But it was a 120-size, medium format, which I've come back to [mumbling] It was large enough so I got a good picture and small enough so that it wasn't conspicuous. I walked up and down the alleys and took these pictures, mostly of kids in casual pose, after they got used to me, because they were always curious, who is that guy, but I was able to make a relationship with them.

Part of it psychologically was seeking for a new vocation. I wasn't happy, as I said —

MERRY FORESTA: I was going to ask you if you'd thought first about writing about them as opposed to making photographs of them. Or did you ever think that you would add the two together?

GODFREY FRANKEL: Never did, never did. I never had a plan for this. I just liked to do it, it was an end in itself. I suppose a Freudian might say, [mimicking oracular ones] "Well, you knew in 40 or 50 years these photos would be valuable."

MERRY FORESTA: Was this the work that led you to the Photo League, this kind of work?

GODFREY FRANKEL: Yeah. The Photo League came a few years later. This was '43, '44, and we landed in New York in '46. The federal job had ended. . . . But he wanted to keep it in sequence, until we finished with Washington first. So the important things photographically were the pictures I took in these alley dwellings. Incidentally, it might turn out to be a book; there's a proposal for it and [laughing] I might be seeing you later. I'll know next month.

MERRY FORESTA: About how many finished images do you think you have for the subject?

GODFREY FRANKEL: About 50 or 60. Not as many as I'd like, wish I had about 75, but it would work into a book because I'd use about 15 or 20 other images that have been taken by FSA photographers and some of the people that have been through the area.

MERRY FORESTA: I remember a Marian Palsi photograph from that area too.

GODFREY FRANKEL: Then Marion Wolcott has a few good ones.

MERRY FORESTA: Talk to me then about how you got involved with the Photo League.

GODFREY FRANKEL: There was a period of time. . . . Let's see. Oh, from there I went to another job, oh no, I got a job with the War Relocation Authority, which was responsible for resettling Japanese-Americans at the close of the war effort, who were uprooted after Pearl Harbor. The federal government moved them all out, there was a kind of hysteria at the time, they shouldn't have done it, most of them were American citizens, took away their rights, put them into camps, under QUOTE protective custody UNQUOTE.

So I got involved in that issue, in that agency, and that was good for me. It was close to what I wanted. I finally landed in social work, as you know, but this was on the road. Working with people and their problems. And I managed to take a lot of photos, official photos, showing how people resettled in Ohio, Michigan, New York State and Pennsylvania. We were trying to get them out of these camps and the Japanese-Americans were frightened to go. I took pictures of them in farm situations, in school, a Caucasian kid holding the hand of a Japanese-American kid — the ones that we'd already relocated. And then took the pictures out there to camps, Wyoming and Colorado, and showed them enlargements, movies and all.

While out there I took pictures also of the people. Some of those are among the best in my archives — children playing again and adults in different activities. That was about a year or a year and a half, then I went to New York on another publicity job. While there, still kind of feeling uprooted vocationally, still wasn't in the spot I wanted to be in. I'd just been married, 1945.

Then I found the Photo League. I hadn't heard of it before I don't think. That was in '46. I felt this was a photo club I'd be happy in and I'd get something out of it and maybe make a contribution if I could. I did, as chairman of the Lewis Hine photos, they had part of his archive and they were all messed up, so through the committee I chaired we were able to make some sense out of it so people could find photos if they wanted. I don't know where it is now, I hope it's safe anyway.

MERRY FORESTA: Let me just get the chronology straight: You moved up to New York, is that correct? [Frankel confirms] You moved to New York in '46 and shortly thereafter found yourself at the Photo League. [Frankel confirms] But you were working at the time [Frankel confirms] so you were not a full-time member as some of the others were.

GODFREY FRANKEL: No. Some of them, that's all they did. Part of the time I was unemployed too, as it turned out later I'd applied to the Columbia New York School of Social Work and decided of course to go up for a graduate degree.

MERRY FORESTA: In 1946 it was the later part of the Photo League.

GODFREY FRANKEL: That's right. They started, I think, in the late '20s or early '30s.

MERRY FORESTA: Explain how they were set up by '46 — what did you encounter when you went to their —

GODFREY FRANKEL: Well, I would say the group probably had 100 or 150 members roughly. At meetings we'd have 40 to 60 people. The meetings were a couple of times a month. Wait a moment, I think there was a major meeting once a month, then they had committee meetings in between the monthly meetings, and maybe six or seven different classes going on at one time. Quite active. And there was a camaraderie there that you wouldn't find in, not just photo clubs, but in almost any other clubs. You could identify easily with the next person, if you had similar views and mission in life, and their overriding issue was social issues, social improvement, what can we do with photography to help the world. You felt this in many ways and that they talked about all their projects, and the Harlem documents of Aaron Siskind, as an example.

MERRY FORESTA: Did you work on any projects?

GODFREY FRANKEL: No, I didn't, just my own material.

MERRY FORESTA: Would they have critique sessions?

GODFREY FRANKEL: They would have critique sessions, we'd bring our stuff to meetings — not every meeting but some meetings. Most of the work was done in committees. There might be a special critique committee meeting, "bring your stuff and we're all going to meet" and there would be maybe 15 or 20 people. In the large meetings it would be hard to do that unless you broke up, and they usually didn't. At the larger meetings they had speakers, some of the major players in the field — you know, Ansel Adams, Gene Smith I recall, Morris Engel, Aaron Siskind, Beaumont Newhall and Nancy, just to name a few. It seemed they were all there.

MERRY FORESTA: They would come and give talks?

GODFREY FRANKEL: Oh yeah, or else just come to the meeting.

MERRY FORESTA: Oh really? Even if they weren't official members they would come to the meeting?

GODFREY FRANKEL: Yeah, well, they were official members. I brought down, I can show you later, photo-notes that I kept. A new members listing. It was really the only active movement in photography in New York, maybe in the country, in this area.

MERRY FORESTA: Tell me a little bit about some of the other outlets for photography. Did you go often to the Museum of Modern Art?

GODFREY FRANKEL: Yeah, and that was a major movement certainly. It was the only museum in the country, I think, that was collecting and exhibiting photography. I met Alfred Stieglitz, in '44 I think it was, and he had sent me there, saw my material. Gruff old guy. But he said come back — well, the first time I went up there I didn't have anything with me, I felt it was chutzpah enough [laughing heartily] just to go up and say, "I'm Godfrey Frankel, you want to meet me? Who the hell are you?" He was slouched up on a couch there, he was getting ill. The person who was director of the Philadelphia Museum, who just left, I forget his name, was there.

It was real hard in the beginning getting him interested in what I was telling but after awhile, near an hour, he said, "Bring your pictures back." So I brought them back the next day, fearful that he might forget me, and he liked them and he said to go to the Museum of Modern Art. He cracked, "I don't know what the hell they're doing now but go over there anyway." Better than nothing. I don't know to this day, Merry, if he actually called. It seemed that the Newhalls — they were there then — were ready for me, they didn't say, "Oh, who are you," something like that, anyway they used some of my photos in the New Photographers Show in '44, and I was part of that. Callahan was in it, and Gerry Kepes and a number of others that are known today.

MERRY FORESTA: Was there any conflict at the Photo League between a place like the Museum of Modern Art and some of the other goals some place like the Photo would have been involved in?

GODFREY FRANKEL: No. Well, the very fact that the Newhalls were active members, and active, says something. And a lot of the pictures that the Museum collected were Farm Security-type and documentary, a lot of them were, as against the typical camera club type of photo. So no, there was no conflict and they worked together on some things, sharing machines or something, a projector we can use, I recall things like that.

MERRY FORESTA: Do you remember other specific lectures or topics of people who were at the Photo League?

GODFREY FRANKEL: Gene Smith was there quite a bit between trips. Adams —

MERRY FORESTA: Any lectures in particular?

GODFREY FRANKEL: I can't recall. [tape disconnects, then resumes] Sergei Eisenstein — I'm reading — March 12, he didn't speak, they talked about him and his work. "A great artist leaves his work behind him but a contemplation of Eisenstein's work does little to ease the shock of his death." Then they go on about his films.

MERRY FORESTA: Did they show films there regularly too?

GODFREY FRANKEL: Yeah. The emphasis was on still photographs and on projects, similar to the Harlem project, and also how we can improve a neighborhood. And we would be quite critical showing turned-over garbage cans, disarray in neighborhoods, conditions of tenements there and can we do better. I mean, we'd try to present these projects in store windows and bank windows where we would exhibit them. They did a lot of that, trying to get their material into the community. Rosalie Gwathmey, she was a member, she's identified mostly with the Southwest, isn't she?? So she would have to come in. I don't know how often she came in, maybe at that period in her life she may have been in New York, I don't know.

MERRY FORESTA: At the time you were a member — how long were you a member, by the way?

GODFREY FRANKEL: Till 1950, when I left New York.

MERRY FORESTA: Did you work on any projects that were specific to community or whatever or were you doing more individual kind of images?

GODFREY FRANKEL: I recall helping once in selecting. They also were able to get Lewis Hine [GODFREY FRANKEL said Jacob Reiss but later offered correction] photos but they didn't have enough room for all of the photos they used at hand so I helped them (a committee of two or three) select photos for a certain project. There were things like that that came up often. They had a number of parties — I sound like I'm going to tell all about the parties, [laughing] which I never attended for some dumb reason, we didn't live far away. They were in, the last place I recall they were in the King Albert Hotel, at 12th and University Place, I think. We lived in the Chelsea area, which is a good walk, but they'd have parties there from time to time. I'm sure I missed a lot of fun —

MERRY FORESTA: What members were you closest to?

GODFREY FRANKEL: Well, I liked Morris Engel's material, probably closer to him than anybody but not real chummy. A person by the name of Siskind, not Aaron, Carroll Siskind, was a close friend of mine. Interestingly enough, these things come up many years later: when my photos were handled by Witkin in New York, we were talking about price range and she said, "Well, I'm going to put you in the same price range as Morris Engel. . . ." I thought it was kind of interesting that 40 years later we meet in the same price range. There are interesting coincidences that come up in life later on.

MERRY FORESTA: Did you ever take classes there?

GODFREY FRANKEL: No. I wasn't going for classes —

MERRY FORESTA: Did you use the darkrooms there?

GODFREY FRANKEL: No, I didn't do that either. I had a darkroom in my bathroom (where else!). And then I'd have the enlarger on the refrigerator. I always had to be careful — it was an electric refrigerator — that it wasn't on at the time I was exposing a negative because you'd get a vibration. I always thought that was funny even though it never happened. But those days, you know, you were lucky to have an apartment and a bed. Well, in New York we had a little kitchen, it was about six feet square and the only window was an inside window. It was a 7th floor walk-up and every apartment faced that little area that was about six or seven feet which was an inside channel. So you'd hear everybody, hear them making food, hear them sleeping too, particularly when they were snoring; it would go right up this channel. And one night we heard somebody yell, "Somebody's snoring!" And somebody yelled, "Shut up!!" And somebody else said, "TURN HIM OVER." [hearty laughter] Nothing to do with photography, but. . . .

MERRY FORESTA: Did you find in New York any subject that matched the alleys of Washington?

GODFREY FRANKEL: Yeah. Probably my most important work was done in New York. [interruption] The New York work, it seems, is important; I imagine it's most important. I like other aspects of my work too. I guess I was interested in so many things in New York, mostly the edges of the city — the East Side and West Side. On the Lower East Side I guess I've taken most of my pictures. It happened at a time when I was seeking a vocation. I'd been thinking of going to a graduate school of social work, may have even turned my application in March or April, but school wasn't until the beginning of October. And my wife was working, I'd better mention that, and she'd agree. She was editor on a children's magazine, Young America.

So I would leave when she left in the morning, 8:30 or 9, with about four or five rolls of film. I'd just take the elevated or subway down to the Lower East Side, with my one camera, that's all I had, and shoot pictures in morning light. By 10 o'clock overhead light wasn't so good although I found it was different on the elevated: the elevated cut the light in half, you see, and you had light standing off on both sides of the street — you probably don't remember Third Avenue, the elevated was torn down in '58, I think it was.

But it was dark as hell there, all the time except when the noonday sun would come down and brighten up some of the stores on both sides. So that's when I would run up and down and look for fertile material. From that part it was good. Then I'd get tired around one or two o'clock and get into Ratner's or some place and get some matzo ball soup, [laughing] some bagels or something and rest for an hour. Get out again about three or three-thirty and shoot some more pictures.

So I'd always have three or four rolls every time I went down. And soup them that night, maybe rest the next day, then the following day go out again. I just wandered from 42nd Street all the way down to the Staten Island Ferry at the end of the Island, South Ferry. Up and down the street I just found so much of interest — artifacts, little shields, the Murray Hill area I found had little plaques, something out of the Middle Ages; many houses bore a certain kind of plaque. In the Lower East Side I found a scissors sign, whose characters were all in Yiddish but it was a graphic sign of scissors. I thought it was kind of distinctive and I took several pictures of that. And later on, at some other time, I was looking through a book of photos on Warsaw and I saw that same sign; whether it was in the ghetto there I don't know — anyway it was the same sign. That was kind of thrilling, transplanting cultures.

I walked up and down the street and it was very exciting for me. I showed the pictures to some people, Stieglitz liked them, the Museum of Modern Art liked them, although the pictures of mine that they showed were of children; there were two exhibitions of children, one in '46, one in '48 which was of Japanese-American children. Steichen was at the museum then.

Back to New York: nothing was done with the photos, really, until I got into school and once you're on a career track, I didn't take many pictures, although there was an exhibition at the Museum of the City of New York in '49. They showed about 110 photos, a whole batch of them, and that was good. Then I graduated in '50 and came to Cleveland, back to my home city, on a social work job this time. I took some pictures illustrating program books for the agency, annual reports. But then we were having children in 1950 and 1953 and of course [he laughs]

the pictures were of children. I haven't done anything with those yet but I think I should; a lot of pictures, you can imagine. So that's work to be done. Anyway I've been concentrating on the New York stuff. Should I get into later?

MERRY FORESTA: Yes. You've now come back to Washington, in 1950?

GODFREY FRANKEL: No, in Cleveland from 1950 to '62. The only pictures — well, pictures of the kids and my family are very important — but a series of pictures — I think you saw some — of industrial Cleveland, 1950s, I'm still going to show them to you. I've enlarged some of them to 16x20, so those were, I think, important. Then a few trips overseas —

MERRY FORESTA: But you're working as a social worker at this point.

GODFREY FRANKEL: Working as a social worker at a community center. It wasn't any concerted projects I was working on in photography. Then I came back to Washington, in '62, in the Kennedy years; a lot of good social programs were being started and I got a job with the Office of Aging, gerontology, and other federal jobs that didn't work out. Finally I got into an agency that was involved with drug abuse treatment; that was a good agency and I took some photos there but not the kind that I exhibit. Then finally I taught at the University of Maryland, before I retired.

MERRY FORESTA: Can you tell me a little bit what it was like here in '62? Were there many photographs to be seen?

GODFREY FRANKEL: No. In '62 things were high and dry. I can't recall any galleries in '62. Let's see. I think Kathleen Ewing was the first gallery. Oh, Harry Lund had a very important gallery, in late '60s or early '70s; I think Kathleen opened in the early '70s too. Those were the only two, and the museums were not showing anything. The Library of Congress at that time had the Farm Security photos; I remember I took a number of trips down there to visit. So they were active. Some of the photos were for sale for about 50 cents; now they're about \$12! And that was important because people would go down there — editors, curators would just fill out what they wanted.

It was wonderful. One can't stop saying good things about Farm Security because that was, I think, the single greatest effort in this country in photography — not just the type of photography, they took pictures of communities, as you well know. And just saying, photography isn't pictures of the news with bubbles and balloons and flowers, but it's everything.

MERRY FORESTA: Going back to the Photo League for a second, was the Farm Security photography much discussed there?

GODFREY FRANKEL: Yes, yes.

MERRY FORESTA: Did they like it, not like it —

GODFREY FRANKEL: No, no, they liked it very much.

MERRY FORESTA: They had no quarrel with it.

GODFREY FRANKEL: No, it was their image, they liked it. There were questions about Ansel Adams — this is interesting — and I remember a comment that Cartier-Bresson had made. He said, "The world's on fire" — these are war years — "and this guy's taking pictures of rocks and waterfalls!" Well, Adams defends that by saying you can take a pretty waterfall, a pretty rock. "If I were living in New York," he said, "I might be taking pictures of slums but I was living on the West Coast." Part of that's right and part of it isn't, I'm sure. The interior part of oneself wants to take certain kinds of pictures in response. But I recall that.

MERRY FORESTA: Back to Washington: You're telling me that the most accessible images for you to see really were the Farm Security Administration images you could get from the Library of Congress.

GODFREY FRANKEL: Yes, that was it, there was nothing else. Lund was beginning to show some but Kathleen wasn't. She commented to me a couple of years ago — after I left Middendorf Gallery when I was looking around in another gallery she came up to me and said we should be talking to each other, something like that, and I said, "I guess so." She said, "When we first met many years ago, I wasn't collecting documentary type of photos, the sort of stuff that you do, so I wasn't interested but now I am." So now I'm with Kathleen and with George Hemphill.

MERRY FORESTA: I think this was probably while you were in Cleveland, but did you ever know Esther Bubbly?

GODFREY FRANKEL: No. Of course I know her work but I didn't know her.

MERRY FORESTA: The images she did in Washington during the late 40s, I think it was —

GODFREY FRANKEL: She did images of the alley dwellings.

MERRY FORESTA: Yes.

GODFREY FRANKEL: The last couple of times I went to New York I had her number, I wanted to look her up; I never have. Kathleen Ewing has her material now.

MERRY FORESTA: Getting back to your work, in the '70s when you were teaching, also photographing [Frankel confirms] but starting to show your work, too.

GODFREY FRANKEL: Beginning, yes. The real beginning didn't really come [laughing] until the '80s; very recently. George Hemphill was the one that spotted them first. I'd been to a number of galleries, they just weren't interested; they liked the material but didn't think there was any demand for it, and George was the first one that said, "I want this." So he had three shows there and they all sold very well.

MERRY FORESTA: I think there was a reevaluation of documentary material and Photo League material that obviously made people want to look at your work as well.

GODFREY FRANKEL: Yes. Even this year, up until February and March this year, Vision Gallery in San Francisco had a big show. I don't know if you've seen that gallery — they've got three floors. They gave me the first floor. I was flattered. Walter Rosenblum was in second, somebody else in the third.

MERRY FORESTA: Who were your students at University of Maryland, anybody worth noting?

GODFREY FRANKEL: I didn't teach photography there, I taught social subjects — program management, managerial types of things in a social setting: hospital setting, how to run a hospital efficiently and not step on anybody's toes. Or run any kind of an organization, there's a certain logic and you don't have to go crazy. Some of the titles of the courses give you a clue as to how I directed the course. "Non-Crisis Management": [laughing] you don't have to wait for a crisis, there are a lot of things you can do to avoid the crisis or minimize the crisis. But then crises will occur, but when they do, there's a certain way of managing them. So I would get into things like that.

MERRY FORESTA: Were you ever tempted to use your photography in your teaching or in your own work?

GODFREY FRANKEL: [pause] Yes.

MERRY FORESTA: You must have realized the social science [overlapping voices] —

GODFREY FRANKEL: Yes. In drug abuse treatment

END OF SIDE A

BEGINNING SIDE B

GODFREY FRANKEL: In drug abuse treatment we took some photos and made a film strip and got a lot on do's and don'ts in interviewing in counseling. We had a number of those and sent them out all over the country. So I did some work in that. I was cautious, Merry, because I didn't want to get too much into that for fear of them making me a photographer or getting away from my pursuit, which was as a consultant in the field. I felt I would lose my standing. I felt comfortable in either area.

Then also it becomes nuts and bolts — I'm sure every photographer has had to make a decision on which way they would go. If I had decided back in the '40s, and I did think about it, I'd get magazine jobs from time to time, not too many, but I'd get them; I'd make a lot of money — \$100, \$200 a day, which was a lot of money then, and then not get anything for six weeks. But the jobs you'd get would be nuts and bolts: there's a banquet, take a picture of their eight vice presidents. That's not what I was wanting to do, but at least that would have brought in bread, say. But anyway I didn't go that way, and for the same reason I didn't want to get into photography on some light jobs because it would be nuts and bolts. Although I didn't avoid it when it came up; if I thought there was value in it I would shoot it.

MERRY FORESTA: In the same way, were you able to avoid all the political push-and-pull that was going on at the League during the late '40s when you were there?

GODFREY FRANKEL: I stayed out of it. I'd had my fill of that, I had it in my various jobs. One of my jobs was labor organizer and executive secretary of the Washington Newspaper Guild. I was waiting to be drafted, I wasn't drafted, I thought well, I gotta take a job. That job was open, I was always pro-labor, I took it. It was godawful,

people were pulling from all directions. New Masses, The Daily Worker, Communist groups were pulling on this side, "open up a second front," FDR, and then you had other groups. The other extreme, I guess, would be the Times-Herald unit, which was the farthest right paper in town — at the time there were four papers.

So that was going on and I was in the middle of it. So that wasn't so good. Somebody once came up to me and said, [mimicking portentous tones] "We call you Greg for short, is that right?" I said, "Yeah." "But your official name is Godfrey, isn't it. How come?" I said, "What are you getting at?" "Well, we know a lot of people who are Communists who have two names, see?" [he laughs] I said, "I'm not a Communist." You're prone to stuff like that.

When I — oh, in '62, when I came to Washington, I'd already gotten this job with the Office of Aging, I'd been in the job a month and was called up to the 8th floor of old HEW, now HHS, and came in facing two lights and two guys introducing themselves as working with the personnel office and wanting to interview me about any political activities that I'd engaged in in my lifetime. I said, "Well, I've always been for peace. I'm not going to tell you how I voted but what is this all about?" It turned out that these guys were left over from Senator McCarthy's office, part of the McCarthy flurry at the time.

MERRY FORESTA: This had to do with your association with the Photo League?

GODFREY FRANKEL: Yeah. And they said, "We note that you're a member of two organizations that are on the Attorney General's list. Anybody who was a member of an organization on that list we are interviewing." One of them was the Photo League of New York, the other the Washington Coop Book Shop. I said, "I can tell you about the book shop fast. You get 10 percent off on your books and they're only a block away from where I live, 17th and Eye. I was single at the time, it was a good place to socialize on Saturday afternoons." That's all I knew about the Coop.

"Well, you know that they're Communists." He went at me like that. No, I didn't know, and don't care. "DON'T CARE!" [he laughs] Then the other organization, the Photo League, they said, "You were more involved in that, weren't you. It's on this other list." I explained myself there and they said it would make it easier for me in my job — get this — if I could 'sing' a little bit, if I could tell them about people who were Communists in this organization, the Photo League, because, he said, "We know they're Communists."

I said, "I didn't join them for any political orientation, I joined because I'm interested in their type of photography." That's how that went, it was nasty. Gee, I talked back and I was like a shell; got back to my office two floors below and talked to a colleague and told him what I'd just been through. He said, "Go up and see the personnel director" — I think his name was John O'Brien — "and tell him the whole story. Personnel office doesn't want them there but they have to be there because it's a White House thing." So I went up to O'Brien, he was great, he said, "Just forget about them, I know they're there, I can't help, I'm superseded by an order that they have to be there. Just go back to your job and do it."

MERRY FORESTA: But that was the first and only time — but you were aware of other people being harassed —

GODFREY FRANKEL: Members of the Photo League? [Merry confirms] Oh yeah. Not at that time, see, this was '62, 12 years later. But during that whole time after I left New York and came back to Washington there were things in the paper about the League. Those were the times we were living through. They were awful.

MERRY FORESTA: As a kind of summation, is there anything else you want to mention for the record about your own work, the Photo League, Washington, photography, et cetera?

GODFREY FRANKEL: In summary, eh? Maybe I've summarized as I've gone along.

MERRY FORESTA: If we've left anything out, I don't think so.

GODFREY FRANKEL: Well, just in review of my own life in photography in general, I have found photography a very satisfying pursuit — more than that, it's been a big deal for me. I never thought — always wanted something to happen to my photos, naturally, I've got an ego to protect, but I never thought anything would happen to them; I never gave myself that kind of leverage. The best example, I guess, is what might turn into a book published by Smithsonian. Amy Pastan, acquisitions editor, is presenting it in another couple of weeks, I guess. There was the alley dwellings that I liked doing and going through just as an activity in itself, getting pleasure out of that; it would be nice if something came out of that. It would be nice if something came out of the New York pictures too. Anyway, [laughing] it's been a pleasure.

END OF INTERVIEW

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