



Smithsonian
Archives of American Art

Oral history interview with Billy Wilder, 1995
February 14

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Contact Information

Reference Department
Archives of American Art
Smithsonian Institution
Washington, D.C. 20560
www.aaa.si.edu/askus

Transcript

Preface

The following oral history transcript is the result of a recorded interview with Billy Wilder on February 14, 1995. The interview took place in Beverly Hills and was conducted by Paul Karlstrom for the Archives of American Art, Smithsonian Institution.

In 2019, the full audio was reconciled with the transcript; it replaces the previous version which was published to this website. Paul Karlstrom has reviewed the transcript and has made corrections and emendations. This transcript has been lightly edited for readability by the Archives of American Art. The reader should bear in mind that they are reading a transcript of spoken, rather than written, prose.

Interview

PAUL KARLSTROM: This is the Archives of American Art, Smithsonian Institution a conversation with Billy Wilder at his office in Beverly Hills. The interviewer is Paul Karlstrom, and present, and also instrumental, is Louis Stern [owner of Louis Stern Fine Art in Los Angeles]. We have been chatting for a while already, and Billy has graciously agreed to continue chatting informally for a few moments, a half hour or so. You were talking about your early years, your father and your background. It was in response to my question, simply saying, many people know about your career in film, you're a very famous man in that respect, but what fewer people know about is your abiding and long-time interest in art. You are a collector; you've more recently been involved in making art. This is the type of thing I'm interested in for the archives. I'd be grateful if you would start to tell how it may have started, thinking back, your interest in art.

BILLY WILDER: Well, it started, actually, in Vienna when I was going to the Lycée, a gymnasium high school. And somebody brought a copy of a [Egon] Schiele drawing, rather pornographic for its day. That kind of made the rounds under the desks and they caught one guy and he was expelled, for a spell of about a week or so, until the parents came. I started inquiring about Schiele and he began my undying interest in art. But that was the first time I was ever interested in it. Then I was exposed to the new kind of furniture, the Wiener Werkstätte and I was exposed to [Gustav] Klimt and to [Oskar] Kokoschka. And then I went to Berlin. I was a newspaperman in Vienna at the end of my school years. I did not go to the University of Vienna. My father wanted me to be a lawyer.

PAUL KARLSTROM: Why didn't you go?

BILLY WILDER: Because I was writing on the side and I wanted to become a newspaperman. Of course, with a goal in mind that one day I'm going to be a newspaperman in Berlin because that's where it was at that time, and even today, this was like being a newspaperman in New Orleans and you would like to go to New York. I went to Berlin in 1926 and there I frequented a coffeehouse called the Romanisches Kafehaus. That was a center for writers, actors, painters, and chess players. I got to know some dealers and I got to know a little bit about the atmosphere of German Expressionism. There was [Karl] Schmidt-Rottluff; there was [Ernst Ludwig] Kirchner, Kirchner was not there, Kirchner was in Switzerland at that time. There was [Emil] Nolde, let me think, to be correct.

PAUL KARLSTROM: Franz Marc was dead—

BILLY WILDER: Kirchner was not dead, as I told you, Kirchner was not dead, but there was also—

PAUL KARLSTROM: Otto Mueller?

BILLY WILDER: Mueller? Yes, he could have been there, a guy called Levi or Levee, as you would say, who was very famous at that time. I kind of soaked up whatever I could. Then I remember the first art purchase I made. It was a poster by [Henri de] Toulouse-Lautrec, but an original poster it was not a copy the way they did it later in the 40s and the 50s.

PAUL KARLSTROM: Do you remember which one it was?

BILLY WILDER: I think it was *Babylone d'Allemagne*. It was a German officer on horseback, I think. Then I got a few more, then I started writing among other magazines and newspapers for the *Kreshnik*, the most ambitious publication that was dealing with art.

PAUL KARLSTROM: Were you writing about art?

BILLY WILDER: No, I was not writing about art. I was attracted by it, and I was scared by it, but I did not have

any education to write about it. The *Kreshnik*, that magazine, I think, single-handedly, had a lot to do with the prominence that Picasso began to acquire. He was really discovered by the Germans, really discovered and made worldwide popular. Then— I knew Mrs. Perls; she was the mother of Klaus and Frank Perls. And the father too; he was writing historical books or rather books about Renaissance painters.

PAUL KARLSTROM: Excuse me, they were in Berlin?

BILLY WILDER: They were in Berlin. They had a gallery in Berlin.

There was a big scandal then, also involving a lot of galleries. Fake Van Goghs appeared, already then, in the '20s. That is now middle '20s when Van Gogh became a household word and then they started to fabricate them. Many galleries were involved then. Then, when Hitler came, I had to run. I went to Paris. There, of course, came Paris— the Louvre— the museum, which housed all the great Impressionists.

PAUL KARLSTROM: The L'Orangerie?

BILLY WILDER: Yes, the L'Orangerie. There I became kind of crazy about art. Then—

PAUL KARLSTROM: What year was this?

BILLY WILDER: That was 1933. Hitler came on January 30, 1933, became the Bundeskanzler, the Chancellor, and I stayed out and started to sell all my furniture, which was Mies van der Rohe, already at that time—and Le Corbusier. I had furniture by them, in my apartment.

PAUL KARLSTROM: Where did you find these?

BILLY WILDER: They were brand new! You bought them in stores; they were trying to sell them.

PAUL KARLSTROM: That's incredible!

BILLY WILDER: They were very brand new. The brother of a friend of mine, who was a student at the Bauhaus, he helped me furnish my little apartment. And then when Hitler came I had to sell everything for nothing, almost. Sold my American car and I went to Paris and there, of course, I was very close to the Perls family, and Mrs. Perls kind of took me under her wing, and she showed me the ways, how collections are started, not that I had enough money to buy anything. I bought one thing, I remember, which she showed me, for ten dollars. It was a French debauchee, a Sunday painter, a naïve painter, but it was not Rousseau. It was a *vivant* painting, *L'Shast* [ph] was it, a hut where someone was shooting a rabbit. That was the first thing that I ever owned, the first painting, oil painting that I ever owned, it made me very proud.

But then about a year and a half later, after I arrived in Paris, I sold a story to Columbia in Hollywood, and I was hired to go there and write a script. I couldn't speak any English because in school, in the gymnasium the year, you had to study either Latin or Greek. The third year you had to study a live language, and I had a choice between English and French and, of course, I chose French because [that was] *la langue diplomatique*.

PAUL KARLSTROM: A very wise decision.

BILLY WILDER: Yes, a wise decision. Next time I came back to Berlin, in 1945, at the end of the war, everyone spoke English because of the movies, and because of the army there. It had all changed very much. We were all French and we went to the bar and we had a cognac. Nobody had Scotch yet, whiskey or anything like that.

LOUIS STERN: Billy, you were talking about the Perls. I wanted to ask you a question. Did they go to Paris too?

BILLY WILDER: Yes! They were—They were all refugees.

LOUIS STERN: I thought they went to New York.

BILLY WILDER: No, no, first they went to Paris. Because the newspaper man that I knew, who had but one tool which was the language, they went to Austria, later on, of course, [Austria] begging to be annexed. The other place was the German part of Czechoslovakia, there was Prague and the L'Elegant [quarter], I think it was called. But it was not far enough for me. I felt that this was going to be very evil. The day after I left, I think it was in April, where he [Hitler] came to power in the end of January when [Paul von] Hindenburg appointed him Chancellor of the Realm, as it were. I knew this was not going to last very long, that so-called democratic Germany, the Christian Socialist party, the Democratic party, there were various parties. So they got a hold of a Communist Dutchman by the name of [Marinus] van der Lubbe and they got him at the Reichstag, the Parliament, at night, and started the fire. The Parliament was where all the parties met, and it went up in ashes. They arrested the backward Dutchman, who did not know what the hell happened and all the parties were outlawed except the German National Socialist Party [National Socialist German Worker's Party/Nazi Party], the

party of Hitler and of [Joseph] Goebbels. So, I knew that was the first step, not any other party. There were no more elections, there was nothing. Because the fact was, the election in 1932, before he came into power, the Nazis had lost about 30% in the election so he knew that elections are—, but by this time the epidemic had started, and you saw blonde girls in their flowered dresses, stretching out their hands as far as they could, "Heil Hitler," and I knew that this was the end and that's when I left, the day after the Reichstag fire that was in April 1933 [February 27, 1933].

LOUIS STERN: You left the day after the fire?

BILLY WILDER: Ja.

PAUL KARLSTROM: So it was clear to you that there was no way out.

BILLY WILDER: Absolutely, no way out. When the war started, you know, I was afraid that the Germans were going to survive under that evil regime of Hitler and Goebbels and [Hermann] Goering, and so on and so forth. Now—

PAUL KARLSTROM: You said that you had sold a story.

BILLY WILDER: I sold a story to Columbia [Pictures] in Hollywood; thusly, I got a visitor's visa to go to America for six months. I came here and I wrote the story in German with a translator and then the six months were just about over and they did not pick up the option, which they had.

PAUL KARLSTROM: What was the story?

BILLY WILDER: The story was about a girl from the provinces comes to New York and she wants to be an actress. She is very naïve, and she goes from theatre to theatre. There was one theatre that was boarded up and broken down where a gang of counterfeiterers lived, in that broken down theatre. They were making hundred-dollar bills, and they were sleeping in the pool, and somebody else was sleeping backstage. They had the rain machine and they took a shower with that thing. If I remember correctly, the girl comes and knocks on the door. They now play it like they are theatrical people and now what they are going to do is take the hundred dollar bill that they just had manufactured and they tell her, "All right then, you need some money," a hundred dollars was a lot of money, "why don't you go to the bank, since we have no change, and exchange it for some smaller money." She went and got ten-dollar bills and five-dollar bills, in other words, they used her. They watched her to see whether the guy was going to notice it, and is it going to go past his criticism? So now they give the girl twenty-five dollars, so she could get herself a room. It was a lot of money then. They said to her, "You come tomorrow and we'll start rehearsing." So now they are going to give him more money to exchange and the one guy finds her cute. That was written for Ruby Keeler. Ruby Keeler.

LOUIS STERN: Mrs. Al Jolson's?

BILLY WILDER: Yes, Al Jolson's wife. What happened, now, was that they cannot lie to that girl. That guy says, "Look, we cannot lie to her, let's pretend that we are rehearsing. We're rehearsing what?" Now they hold-up a writer for a script, they manufactured something like a professional thing and they make her believe that she was going to become an actress. I don't know how it came out, but it was a fantasy romance. Well, not to dwell too long—

LOUIS STERN: This they didn't pick up?

BILLY WILDER: They didn't pick it up, because maybe I wrote it badly. They didn't pick it up and I now had to worry about the [visa]. I could extend it once for six months, but then I would have to go.

PAUL KARLSTROM: Let me ask just one question. I'm very curious, you wrote this in Paris?

BILLY WILDER: I wrote that story a long time before Paris.

LOUIS STERN: Okay, you were writing about something in America already in that time in New York.

BILLY WILDER: Yes, sure, I had seen a lot of pictures. I remember in Paris, I saw *Forty-Second Street* thirty times in Paris, every afternoon.

LOUIS STERN: The one with Dick Powell?

BILLY WILDER: Yes, *Forty-Second Street*, the Warren Williams film.

LOUIS STERN: Warren Williams, Ruby Keeler.

BILLY WILDER: Was it Ruby Keeler? That was one of the great musicals of all time. Today you would walk out on a lot of other musicals, *Gold Diggers* and stuff like that shit. But that was a very, very important picture in my life.

PAUL KARLSTROM: So, already, in Germany, you were looking towards American culture?

BILLY WILDER: Absolutely. I needed the depression in America for the theatre to be boarded up. I needed modern music, because it was to be a musical—go to the composer. They steal, they beg. So now we go back to my—. In order to get—to be able to have an immigration visa, you have to be outside the United States and then come in with the immigration visa. By that I mean they had quotas for various nationalities, according to where we're from, how much of this country—Austria, Poland, or Romania or whatever had contributed to the building of America.

LOUIS STERN: It's not changed. It's the same.

BILLY WILDER: It's the same? So the largest quota was the Irish, for the Poles, I don't know. I had to take the chance, I had to leave the country and then come back. You left the country to a place as close [to the] outside of the United States as possible, so I went to Mexicali.

PAUL KARLSTROM: So you were here already—

BILLY WILDER: I was here, in America, about six months but it was almost over, so I decided to go to Mexicali and apply for a visa. Now, I told about it when I got the [Irving G.] Thalberg [Memorial] Award, it was kind of interesting because when you come there, you go right away and check in at a hotel in Calexico, just on the California side. When you go to Mexicali, you leave the United States, they stamp it "Gone." Now I am free to apply for a visa, and when I came to the consul and he looked at that thing and said, "Where are the papers?" I said, "Yes, I know it is a little bit thin, but you have to trust me." He said, "Well, we need a record of the last five years to show that you were not arrested by the police. I need a record that you don't have any—"

LOUIS STERN: Tuberculosis?

BILLY WILDER: Syphilis, or anything. I did not have the other papers that I needed. He said, "Well, I cannot accept this." I said, "Oh my God! Shit!" It was going to be a picture I wrote subsequently with [Charles] Brackett. We wrote it together and [Mitchell] Leisen directed it. It was called *Hold Back the Dawn* with Olivia de Havilland and Charles Boyer as the Romanian pimp, who cannot get in and has to marry Olivia de Havilland and bah, bah, bah. But, I spoke to him and somehow I must have touched something in him because he looked at the papers and he walked around, and I could feel his eyes, he was measuring me. Then he came in and twisted my passport around and he [thumps the desk three times] and says, "What do you do?" and I said, "I am a writer. I am a motion picture writer." So he handed me the passport and shook my hand and he said the final last words, "Write some good ones."

PAUL KARLSTROM: [Laughter.]

BILLY WILDER: And I did! That was my entry. Now I immediately apply for my first papers and then, after five years, you become a citizen, but you have to go to an examination.

PAUL KARLSTROM: Five years?

BILLY WILDER: It takes five years. You get the white paper and then you get the thing—I remember very vividly the examination they had. There are a hundred booths with an examiner and all the people who have applied there must come there for the examination. I was A-1, I was superior because I studied, but next to me was an elderly Jewish lady, and the other inspector was asking her things. The inspector was very sweet, he said, "Why do you want to go to the United States?" And she said, "Because my grandchildren are there and I am all alone." And he said, "Now, now, now, Mrs. Rubenchek calm down. Tell me, how do they do the elections here? There are senators and congressmen." And she says, "Yes, sir." He asked her, "How many congressmen?" And she said, "A lot, a lot." He said, "All right, all right, that's quite true. And senators?" She said, "A little less, a little less." He said, "That's also true." He would ask her things that a child would know, but she was ninety or ninety-five and he finally asked her the following question, he asked her, "Now, Mrs. Rubenchek, this is your final question. Now calm down, you're doing very well, very well you're doing. What does Washington D.C. stand for?" Without hesitation she says, "For Washington dee capital." So he says, "Bravo, bravo, bravo," because he's not going to send her back because the woman only has a few years to live. She said, "I did it! I did it!" crying.

PAUL KARLSTROM: And you witnessed this whole thing?

BILLY WILDER: Yes! They were right next to me, the booth next to me. They would ask me questions, like, how many states were there? 48. Then we had 48. Washington [Alaska] was not a state and Hawaii was not a state. I

loved everything I read. I studied it, and I studied history. I wanted him to go a little deeper into that material, but he did not. But I came back, I remember, in my little car, a Ford 1933 model, and I went to work. I went to work and I learned English. I disassociated myself, much to their disgust, from my German co-patriots and refugees. I said, "Well look, for Christ's sake, they are having their Sunday meetings, their coffee klatsch, they are meeting three times a week and they are talking German, German, German— I must learn English. I had American friends and American girlfriends, and I learned the language. Then came the great day, in about two-and-a-half years, came the great day in my life, at least when I caught myself, that unlike before, where I translated everything from the German into the English, I started thinking in English and I was translating from my English into my German which was much weaker because I did not speak it. I still speak German and I still write German but not colloquial German, old-fashioned German because now it's completely Americanized. Now, fifty years after the war, I can show you headlines in the German papers that are absolutely, absolutely English, pick-up, hold up, stress, words like this, "I've got stressed out. I am very stressed out. Stressed out." It's not German, it's English.

PAUL KARLSTROM: The French hate that!

LOUIS STERN: They're guilty as everyone else.

BILLY WILDER: The beauty of the French is that they hate everybody including themselves.

PAUL KARLSTROM: I hear that about them. I read that actually in an article about the Germans as well. Maybe it's a European characteristic, I don't know.

BILLY WILDER: To hate themselves?

PAUL KARLSTROM: Right, to hate themselves and everybody else.

LOUIS STERN: What is the story about the Austrians and how they feel about Hitler?

BILLY WILDER: How do they feel about Hitler? I don't know.

LOUIS STERN: Trying to convince the world that he was...

BILLY WILDER: Oh, yeah, trying to convince the world that Beethoven was Austrian and Hitler was German. That's an old thing that they live for. Gentlemen, I have something very important because at four o'clock my business lady comes every Tuesday.

PAUL KARLSTROM: Well, this is perfect because we've done one side of this tape, which is thirty minutes.

BILLY WILDER: I completely forgot because it was four-thirty and now it's four o'clock. I have to go.

PAUL KARLSTROM: All right. Well, I hope that we can talk some more.

BILLY WILDER: Sure, sure, whenever you're coming to see—

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