



Smithsonian
Archives of American Art

**Oral history interview with Billy Wilder, 1995
February 14**

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Transcript

Preface

The following oral history transcript is the result of a tape-recorded interview with Billy Wilder on February 14, 1995. The interview was conducted at Billy Wilder's office in Beverly Hills, California by Paul Karlstrom for the Archives of American Art, Smithsonian Institution. Also present is Louis Stern. Funded by the Pasadena Art Alliance Transcription Grant

Interview

BW: BILLY WILDER

PK: PAUL J. KARLSTROM

[SESSION 1]

PK: 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, also present 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 that many people know about your career in film, but what fewer people know about is your abiding and long interest in art. You are a collector; you've more recently been involved in making art. I'd be grateful if you would start to tell us how your interest in art started.

BW: It started, actually, in Vienna when I was going to the Lycée, a high school. Somebody brought a copy of a [Egon] Schiele drawing, rather pornographic for its day. That kind of made its rounds under the desks and they caught one guy and he was expelled, for about a week or so, until the parents came. I started inquiring about Schiele and he began my undying interest in art. That was the first time I was ever interested in it. Then I was exposed to the new kind of furniture, the Viennabachsteder [WienerWerkstätte ?] and I was exposed to [Gustav] Klimt and to [Oskar] Kokoschka. After that 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.

PK: Why didn't you go?

BW: 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 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 Fromangshika Cafehouse. 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 German Expressionism. There was [Karl] Schmidt-Rottloff; 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. Kirchner was not dead, as I told you, Kirchner was not dead, but there was . .

PK: Otto Mueller?

BW: 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] Toulouse Lautrec, but an original poster it was not a copy the way they did it later in the 40's and the 50's.

PK: Do you remember which one it was?

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

PK: Were you writing about art?

BW: 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 Krishnik*, 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 popular worldwide. I knew Mrs. Perls; she was the mother of Klaus and Frank Perls. I knew the father too; he was writing historical books or other books about Renaissance painters. They had a gallery in Berlin.

There was a big scandal then, also involving a lot of galleries. Fake Van Gogh's 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 and went to Paris. There, of course, was the Louvre and the museum, which housed all the great Impressionists.

PK: The L'Orangerie?

BW: Yes, it was there I became kind of crazy about art.

PK: What year was this?

BW: It was 1933. Hitler came on January 30, 1933, became Chancellor, and I stayed out and started to sell all my furniture, which was [Ludwig] Mies van der Rohe. I had furniture by them, in my apartment.

PK: Where did you find these?

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

PK: That's incredible!

BW: They were very brand new. The brother of a friend of mine, who was a student at the Bauhaus, 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 took me under her wing, and she showed me 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 Delauney, a Sunday painter, a naïve painter, but it was not Rousseau. It was a vivant painting, *L'Shast* 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 Hollywood, and I was hired by Columbia [Studios] to write a script. I couldn't speak any English because in school, at the

Lycée, the first 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*.

PK: A very wise decision.

BW: 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 U.S. 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.

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

BW: Yes! They were all refugees.

LS: I thought they went to New York.

BW: No, no, first they went to Paris. 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 wasn't 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 accused him in the Reichstag fire. The Reichstag [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 had 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]

LS: You left the day after the fire?

BW: Yes.

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

BW: Absolutely, no way out. When the war started, 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.

PK: You said that you had sold a story.

BW: I sold a story to Columbia [Pictures] in Hollywood; therefore, 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.

PK: What was the story?

BW: 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 counterfeiters lived. 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.

LS: Mrs. Al Jolson's?

BW: 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 the real thing. We're rehearsing what?" Now they hold-up a writer for a script, they manufactured something like a professional thing and they made her believe that she was going to become an actress. I don't know how it came out, but it was a fantasy romance.

LS: This they didn't pick up?

BW: 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.

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

BW: I wrote that story a long time before Paris.

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

BW: Yes, sure, I had seen a lot of pictures. I saw 42nd Street thirty times in Paris, every afternoon.

LS: The one with Dick Powell?

BW: Yes, 42nd Street, the Warren Williams film. 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.

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

BW: 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 composer. They steal, they beg. In order 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 lives here -- Austria, Poland, or Romania or whatever, and had contributed to the building of America. So the largest quota was the Irish, for what reason, 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.

PK: So you were here already.

BW: 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 counsel 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 ..."

LS: Tuberculosis?

BW: 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 turned out to be a picture I wrote subsequently with [Charles] Brackett. We wrote it together and [Mitchell] Leison 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." And I did! That was my entry. Now I immediately apply for papers and then, after five years, you become a citizen, but you have to go to an examination.

PK: Five years?

BW: It takes five years. You get the white paper and then 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 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. What does Washington D.C. stand for?" Without hesitation she says, "For Washington dee capital." So he said, "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!" as she cried.

PK: And you witnessed this whole thing?

BW: 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 '33 Ford

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, and I must learn English. I had American friends and American girlfriends, and I learned the language. Then, 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 is completely Americanized. Now, fifty years after the war, I can show you headlines in the German papers that are 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.

PK: The French hate that!

LS: They're guilty as everyone else.

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

PK: 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.

BW: To hate each other?

PK: Right, to hate themselves and everybody else.

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

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

LS: Trying to convince the world that he was...

BW: 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.

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

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

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

BW: Sure, sure, whenever you're coming to see . . .

END OF INTERVIEW

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