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Oral history interview with Alan Fink, 1997 Jan. 22 and Jan. 29

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Transcript

Preface

The following oral history transcript is the result of a tape-recorded interview with Alan Fink on January 23 and 29, 1997. The interview took place in Boston, MA, and was conducted by Robert F. Brown for the Archives of American Art, Smithsonian Institution.

The reader should bear in mind that he or she is reading a transcript of spoken, rather than written, prose. This is a rough transcription that may include typographical errors.

Interview

ROBERT F. BROWN: This is an interview on January 23, 1997 with Alan Fink at his AlphaGallery at 14 Newbury Street in Boston, and Robert Brown, the interviewer.

Alan, I thought we might just do this somewhat roughly in a biographical fashion, at least to begin with.

ALAN FINK: Okay.

MR. BROWN: You're a Chicagoan. You were born there and -

MR. FINK: Right. I was born in Chicago, went to school in the city, and also the University of Illinois in Urbana.

MR. BROWN: And you were born in Chicago in the '20s?

MR. FINK: Nineteen twenty-five.

MR. BROWN: Had your family been there a while? Were they in business, or were they professionals, or -

MR. FINK: Well, they were - actually, they were - I'm the first generation born in this country. Both parents came from Europe. And my grandmother was also living in Chicago, my maternal grandmother, and she is from Russia and lived there also.

MR. BROWN: What about Chicago? What are some of your earliest memories of the place? Because you would have been in the Depression by the time you were getting to be a boy.

MR. FINK: I really - I was - well, the Depression, I was probably 5, 6 years old, I guess, when the Depression started. And somehow or other, it didn't - I don't have any vivid memories of the Depression. We were definitely middle or lower middle class, but I never experienced deprivation or stood in bread lines or saw - or my parents stood in bread lines.

MR. BROWN: Yeah. Yeah.

MR. FINK: So I don't recall being the - in fact, I know about the Depression only in hindsight, not from actually living through it.

MR. BROWN: Yeah. Well, did you live right in the city?

MR. FINK: Yeah. Right in the city.

MR. BROWN: Was it an attractive place to you as a kid, do you think?

MR. FINK: I think as a kid, you know, you accept what is your environment when you're a kid. I didn't compare it to others. It wasn't until I would say high school that I would start comparing the way I lived as opposed to the way other people lived, whether we were better off.

MR. BROWN: Yeah. Yeah.

MR. FINK: But in the early - if you're talking about early on, we lived with my grandmother and her - my aunts and uncles. It was a very large - it was a large family living all together. And it was - you know, it was a good family, and I don't recall that we were deprived or wanting. I mean, we were not rich and - but we made out.

MR. BROWN: Were you - do you have brothers and sisters?

MR. FINK: I have one - a sister who's no longer alive, a younger sister, but she died in the late - when she was in her late 30s of lupus, which is, strangely enough, the same illness my wife has. And it's unusual because it's not

a common illness. And to have it strike twice in the same family is unusual.

MR. BROWN: I'm sorry. Yeah. When you were in high school and all, did you have a pretty good idea of what you wanted to do? Or what did you do by way of course work and all that sort of thing?

MR. FINK: Well, I took just a general education. I took a college track. They didn't call it that in those days. But it never occurred to me or to my family, where education was very important, that I wouldn't go on. It was a natural thing. It was a natural as going from, say, grade school to high school as it was to go from high school to college. It was -

MR. BROWN: Was it very important to you?

MR. FINK: It was natural. You never thought of not doing it. I mean, it just - you always went to - you just went to college. That was what you did. And, I mean, it was as sort of taken for granted that would happen as is going to, you know, high school.

MR. BROWN: And in high school, what kind of courses do you recall you particularly -

MR. FINK: Well, high school, you don't have a - in those days, you didn't have a choice. You took - you didn't have - there were no choices. You just took what you were supposed to. You took math and reading, and you took economics, and I can't - all the courses - art, things like that.

MR. BROWN: You had art?

MR. FINK: Well, you had every - yeah. Schools had art classes.

MR. BROWN: Was that something you particularly liked?

MR. FINK: I enjoyed it. I enjoyed it, yeah. And actually, what I thought I might be, which is a very common thing for a lot of Jewish boys of my generation, would be to be a doctor. And I always thought I'd be a doctor. I don't know why, I just thought that would be - I think many of my friends turned out to be doctors.

But I recall once - my father was an avid golfer. I mean, he was a fanatic. And I would caddy for him. He would wake me up early on Sunday morning, like 5:00, 6:00 in the morning and we'd go - I hated it, but I'd wind up on the golf course at 7:00 with my father. And one day he was picked up by a man, a friend of his, to play golf and I went along to caddy. The man, it turned out, was an accountant, and he had a big, fat Buick or something like this. So it was very - the kind of thing that was very impressive.

And my father said to me after meeting this man and after playing golf that day, "That's what you should be, is an accountant. Look at this man. He's very successful. You can always earn a living being an accountant." And "always earning a living" was a phrase I heard all the time. You've got, you know, the necessity of earning a living.

So when I got to college -

MR. BROWN: And was it natural that you'd just go to the state university?

MR. FINK: I went to - I went -

MR. BROWN: Or was it pretty selective?

MR. FINK: I went first of all to a city college. Chicago had three - yeah, I think three city colleges. They were two-year colleges. The one I went to was Wright Junior College, and it was a very good school.

MR. BROWN: Wright?

MR. FINK: Wright. As a matter of fact, some of the faculty were also on the faculty of the University of Chicago. And so it was really a fairly good school. But the building itself was a high school kind of building. It wasn't a campus, college kind of environment.

MR. BROWN: And it was a public college?

MR. FINK: Yeah. Yes, I remember it cost like $40 or $50 to go to it. So I went there for a year and a half before transferring to the University of Illinois in Urbana.

MR. BROWN: What kind of curriculum would you have had at Wright?

MR. FINK: Again, the options were limited. I remember studying math a lot, and I liked it. And I had a very good

math teacher who thought I should be a mathematician. I had a chemistry teacher who thought I should be a chemist. I fooled them all.

MR. BROWN: You must have considerable aptitude.

MR. FINK: No. I was able to do science and math fairly well. But then - I was studying everything. I mean, I was taking as much as I could because I did okay in school so I took as much as I was allowed to take in terms of course hours. But at one point, I had to make a decision about my major. I think it was after the first two years of college. I had to then focus more on what was going to be my major. And I remembered what my father said about an accountant. And to me, at that time I was very immature, I think, socially and emotionally, I think. And for me, school was school. Whatever courses you took, it was just another course that you did or you did not do well in. And I didn't have any kind of a program in mind - you know, I'm going to take this and then I'm going to take that. I was just taking everything I could.

Then I got to be - I had a choice then when it came to naming a major. And I remembered what my father told me about this accountant. I didn't even know what accounting was. And it was a nice day, and this whole thing was - I took it very lightly. And so he said, "What course are you going to taking?" "I think I'll be an accountant." She said, "That's a business course." I said, "Yeah, okay." So I became a business - an accounting major.

MR. BROWN: This was your advisor down at Urbana?

MR. FINK: There was no advisor. They just asked you.

MR. BROWN: Yeah.

MR. FINK: And you said - you could say - I want to be in pre-med. I could go into - you know, into accounting and business administration. And I chose accounting for - and I didn't - so I took accounting, but I also continued to take everything else I was going to take. I took as many courses in economics and in literature and philosophy as I did in business. And I took more than they allowed you to, but I was able to pass all these courses. And so they let me do it.

MR. BROWN: You took a heavier load than [inaudible]?

MR. FINK: Yeah. I took a heavier load in order -

MR. BROWN: You were pretty studious, then, were you? Or industrious?

MR. FINK: I don't know if any more than usual. I think I was able to test well. I mean, I sort of knew how to answer questions on tests. And that doesn't mean I actually learned anything, but I was able to pass tests reasonably well.

MR. BROWN: Was social life pretty intense? That was a pretty big university, wasn't it?

MR. FINK: Yeah, very big, but - and I think it was one of the largest, if not the largest, fraternity and sorority campuses. I think they had like 75 sororities and 50 fraternities. Very big. I didn't belong to any of them. I worked for them, you know, in the kitchen, and I earned my meals that way.

MR. BROWN: Well, was there much of a social gap between people from the city or people whose parents were immigrants?

MR. FINK: Well, it was more - it wasn't so much - no, no. I mean, my parents, if you met my parents, you would not have even thought they were immigrants. When my mother came over, she was 2 or 3 years old, and she was, you know, very American. So was my father.

MR. BROWN: Sure. But down at the university -

MR. FINK: At the university, I think there was a big social gap between the sorority and fraternity students and then the rest of us. That was the social gap. It had nothing to do with being an immigrant or anything of that sort, but it had to do with whether you were in a fraternity or not.

MR. BROWN: But at that time, the matter of having to work, say, and worked in those fraternities, say, in the kitchens and all, that didn't bother you particularly?

MR. FINK: No.

MR. BROWN: It was a way to make a certain amount of money and -

MR. FINK: I didn't make any money. I just - you worked for your meals. And so I ate very well. I ate probably better than the fraternity people did. It didn't bother me at all. I didn't consider it, you know, demeaning or anything like that.

MR. BROWN: Yeah. Well, how did accounting suit you? This was your -

MR. FINK: Well, like I say, I did accounting, and it was another university course along with all the other courses I was taking. And I did it. I did okay because I was fairly - you know, it was a very low level of math that you needed for that, mostly adding and subtracting. And so I did okay. And I graduated from the University of Illinois with a degree in accountancy, I guess you would call it, or business administration.

MR. BROWN: And that was in, what, 1946?

MR. FINK: Something like - somewhere around there, yeah. I think so. Or let's see. Around that, yeah. I'd say about '46.

MR. BROWN: In a way, that was a good time to graduate, wasn't it? Because the postwar economy was -

MR. FINK: Yeah. I had no trouble getting a job.

MR. BROWN: Yeah. And in fact, you got a job with a prestigious -

MR. FINK: A public accounting firm -

MR. BROWN: - accounting firm?

MR. FINK: - in Chicago named David Himmelblau. He was -

MR. BROWN: Himmelblau?

MR. FINK: Himmelblau. He had written textbooks on accounting and was head of the accounting department at Northwestern University in Evanston. And almost all of the employees - I would say they had 30, 40 employees - almost all of them were graduates of Northwestern. I was the lone University of Illinois person there. And I worked there two and a half years, something like that, until I - and then I realized really accounting was no longer just another course in school. It was now checking invoices for accuracy and doing a lot of menial tasks, checking the correct - that columns of figures were added correctly, and things of that sort.

MR. BROWN: And was that then a heavy responsibility, too?

MR. FINK: Well, you were generally supervised by more senior partners at my stage of the game, although I did have some responsibility in certain accounts, certain clients, with certain clients. But they had some awfully big clients that we were just - you know, that we just did - you know, a little cog in the wheel kind of thing. But anyway, I realized it wasn't for me.

MR. BROWN: It began to pall on you?

MR. FINK: Yeah. I knew it wasn't for me. And then I think it was 1949 - yeah, it was definitely 1949 that I decided - I had previously, with another friend of mine who is now a psychoanalyst in Los Angeles - we had traveled together as kids. We'd gone to New Orleans, hitchhiked to New Orleans and back with the idea of going to South America on a banana boat. We never made it beyond New Orleans, but we did that sort of thing.

MR. BROWN: This is when? Even in college years, or -

MR. FINK: I would have been about - yeah, that was in college years, in between semesters.

MR. BROWN: So you did have a spirit of adventure?

MR. FINK: Yeah. We hitchhiked and traveled around. And it turned out that he was - he had just finished - in 1949, he had just finished his internship at one of the Chicago hospitals, and he had a period of time before starting a residency. And we decided we'd go - going to Europe was always on our minds, and so we decided this was a good time to go to Europe. So I gave up my job at the accounting firm, and we were joined by a third friend.

MR. BROWN: You really had no responsibilities. I mean, did your family mind that you were going to drop this? Your father -

MR. FINK: No. I was really - no. My parents had a lot of faith in me and just pretty much let me do what I wanted

to. I had never done anything too crazy, so - you know, I was at that time a young adult anyway. I was -

MR. BROWN: And I think you told me you left about -

MR. FINK: I was like 26 years old or something.

MR. BROWN: You left about September of '49.

MR. FINK: September of '49 with these two other friends.

MR. BROWN: And what was your goal?

MR. FINK: We didn't have a goal. I mean, not a specific goal. Our goal was to go to Europe and see what it was like and to spend as much time there as possible and just be there and see what - you know, see what happened. And what happened is I met Barbara. [Laughs.]

MR. BROWN: Yeah. [Laughs.] So, yeah, you told me that the one friend was in training where he was nearly ready to be a full-fledged psychiatrist, and the other had some ostensible reason - I think you mentioned rent control -

MR. FINK: That's right. He had a small grant - he got a small grant from I think it was the University of Chicago - I'm not absolutely sure about that - to study the French rent control laws. But -

MR. BROWN: He was doing an academic study of some sort?

MR. FINK: Yeah. And I don't think he took it too seriously.

MR. BROWN: And you went to Paris?

MR. FINK: Paris was of course - that was the magnet then.

MR. BROWN: Was that the one - the place -

MR. FINK: And we had all read, you know, The Last Time I Saw Paris and all that, all the books about young Americans, expatriates in Paris like Hemingway and all that stuff. We had read all of that stuff. And so Paris was our immediate goal. And from there, we had - we would just see what happened. And of course, the doctor had actual work to do in Paris. He worked at -

MR. BROWN: Who?

MR. FINK: Fairmont [phonetic]. He had actual work to do in Paris at a hospital. He worked at the hospital called Sault Petier, which was I think a psychiatric hospital, especially dealing with elderly people. And he actually, you know, worked there daily. And I met Barbara very early on in a restaurant.

MR. BROWN: Just by chance?

MR. FINK: Just by chance. She was traveling with Luise Vosgerchian, who's a musician. I don't know if you know her name. She was - she became head of Harvard music department here, the only non-degreed person ever to be a full professor at Harvard because she was so gifted as a musician that they gave her all these academic credits without her actually having formally earned them.

MR. BROWN: And she was a musician?

MR. FINK: A pianist. She's still living here in - she lives in Watertown now and has two children.

MR. BROWN: Your life - I mean, this was just part of your casual life. You were [inaudible].

MR. FINK: Yeah. It was an inexpensive restaurant that was right near the hotel. Barbara stayed in a hotel also near that restaurant. And we just met casually. We saw each other in the restaurant weeks before we spoke to each other because as Americans, the last thing we wanted to do was to meet other Americans. But we finally one busy day had to sit at the same table because it was crowded, and one thing led to another. We started going to concerts and galleries and cathedrals together.

MR. BROWN: Was she mainly painting there, or was she just traveling with this friend?

MR. FINK: No. She had a two-year traveling fellowship from the Boston Museum School.

MR. BROWN: Oh, sure. One of the Paige traveling fellowships?

MR. FINK: I think it was - yeah. She had the one called Whitten, I think, Albert Whitten. But it's the same kind of thing as the Paige.

MR. BROWN: And you began going with her to galleries and museums?

MR. FINK: Right.

MR. BROWN: Had you been doing a bit of that on your own?

MR. FINK: Yes. Yes. More concerts than museums. More concerts than galleries. But I was going to concerts and museums. I started going more to galleries and cathedrals with Barbara because she had - besides the Boston Museum School, she had a degree in art history from Wellesley College. And so she - you know, she was an art historian as well as a painter.

MR. BROWN: Did you like the cathedrals? Did you like -

MR. FINK: Oh, the whole thing was wonderful. It was a great - the whole thing was a revelation.

MR. BROWN: And life was pretty cheap there, wasn't it?

MR. FINK: Very.

MR. BROWN: You could live -

MR. FINK: Unbelievably cheap. I had a round-trip boat ticket and $700, and I stayed in Europe for two years on 700 bucks. And I never worked. I didn't earn any money while I was there. But one could live cheaply there. And then we lived in southern France. We had other - we had sort of like almost a commune, although it wasn't called that in those days, where other Americans, other Fulbright - some of our Fulbright scholars that we met in Paris, all came down to this villa we would rent. It would be, you know, $6 a month shared several ways.

MR. BROWN: Barbara could paint there.

MR. FINK: Oh, yeah. She never - she painted - wherever she was, she was painting.

MR. BROWN: And you tried painting?

MR. FINK: Yes, I did.

MR. BROWN: At about that time?

MR. FINK: Well, yes, because we were in southern France, and we met other American painters and everybody was painting. So I said, well, if everybody's painting, I think I'll paint, too. And I enjoyed it very much, what I did, but it was not - I was not meant to be a painter.

MR. BROWN: You were pretty impressed by Barbara's work from the beginning?

MR. FINK: Very. Very.

MR. BROWN: What sort of things was she doing?

MR. FINK: Well, the first thing I remember seeing of hers was a portrait that she did of this Luise Vosgerchian, who she was traveling with, a sensational portrait. It still exists here, and it was very, very impressive. I knew she was a painter and I didn't think that - I said, well, a lot of people paint. But I didn't realize how good she was until I actually saw it because she was just working on that painting in her hotel room when I saw it. So she did mostly - she was doing mostly figure - portraits then.

MR. BROWN: Well, there was another artist from Boston, Ralph Coburn, who I gathered [inaudible].

MR. FINK: Right. And he's the reason we went to a particular town in southern France, because he was there.

MR. BROWN: He was there?

MR. FINK: Ralph Coburn had a French uncle that lived outside of Paris. And when it got cold and damp in Paris, Ralph had asked his uncle where he could go in the south of France that would be pleasant and inexpensive and not touristy. And his uncle recommended this town called Sanary. It's between Toulon -

MR. BROWN: How do you spell it?

MR. FINK: S-a-n-a-r-y. Sanary-sur-Mer, if you want the complete name. And so Ralph was there, and Barbara knew Ralph from the Boston area. They were quite good friends here before either of them went to Europe. And so Barbara and all these - and Luise and all these friends, we all thought about getting kind of damp and cold in France. So in December of that year, in '49 - because Barbara being a painter could pick up her easel and go wherever she wanted; Luise was studying with Nadia Boulanger, so she had to stay there. And the doctor was also - had to stay, my friend at the hospital. But the other friend who was doing the research on the French rent control system, he was free to move around as easily as I was.

So the three of us decided to go to Sanary where Ralph was because that's the town - because Barbara had been in touch with him. So that's how we happened to get there, because we knew somebody there. It was a small fishing - a very small fishing village then. I don't know what it's like -

MR. BROWN: Near Toulouse, you said?

MR. FINK: Toulon.

MR. BROWN: Toulon?

MR. FINK: It's right near Toulon. And you know where Bandol, where the town of Bandol - the town of Bandol is the next town over.

MR. BROWN: Well, you spent some months there, I think you said, on a couple of occasions. And you mentioned that - well, other friends of Barbara's, other artist friends, were there.

MR. FINK: Would come - Ellsworth Kelly, for example, came and visited us.

MR. BROWN: Was he there also on a fellowship at that time?

MR. FINK: I don't think so.

MR. BROWN: Something like that?

MR. FINK: I don't know. I think he was just there. He was in Paris, but he came to visit. He was a good friend of Ralph's. And Barbara was his classmate at the Museum School. So he came down and visited. Other people would come and go.

MR. BROWN: What was Ralph like? Was he a congenial host, or did he -

MR. FINK: Well, he wasn't our host. We didn't live with - I mean, we lived separately. But he was - he was a little wary at first, but he warmed up very quickly. And he became a very close friend, and still is.

MR. BROWN: And Kelly, what was he like? Was he fairly outgoing or not?

MR. FINK: Yeah. Yes, he was friendly. I mean, he was only there - and I visited him later in Paris since I'd met him sort of - where he was living at the - I think it was the Hôtel du Bourgogne on Ile Saint-Louis. And I saw him there when he had a room full of works, many of which I just recently saw at the -

MR. BROWN: Oh, at the Guggenheim Museum?

MR. FINK: - at the Guggenheim, some of those very early works. I remember some of them in his hotel room.

MR. BROWN: Yeah. Did you like such work as that, that he was doing?

MR. FINK: Yeah.

MR. BROWN: And you also, though, liked Barbara's first work.

MR. FINK: Yeah. I mean, I was just open. I mean, I had no preconceived ideas. I hadn't studied art. And so all of this was art to me.

MR. BROWN: Yeah. Exactly. This town had - you said that before World War II, some rather important German artists and so forth had also been there.

MR. FINK: Well, mostly writers. Writers.

MR. BROWN: Writers?

MR. FINK: Writers, yeah. I think the writer Feuchtwanger -

MR. BROWN: Lion.

MR. FINK: - yeah, lived there. Mahler's widow was there.

MR. BROWN: Uh-huh [affirmative].

MR. FINK: I don't know if Thomas Mann might have been there or not. But it was that group of Germans that had stayed in actually the same villa that we stayed in.

MR. BROWN: Uh-huh [affirmative].

MR. FINK: The Villa Valmer, it was called.

MR. BROWN: Valmer. Were you able to get fairly close to some of the townspeople or did you -

MR. FINK: Oh, yes. Oh, yeah. Well, this Villa Valmer where we stayed, we were on the second floor of - it was really a two-family villa, and some French - a French couple lived on the first floor. René and Betty LeGaugh [phonetic]. And they were our neighbors. We became very friendly. And we knew a lot of the town folks. And we would - unlike Paris, where we met people - we were very friendly with some of the French people in the neighborhood because we all ate in the same restaurant every day; everybody had their own napkins and - you know, you had a little pigeonhole where you pulled your napkins out. But nobody -

MR. BROWN: In Paris?

MR. FINK: - in Paris invited you into their home, except one carpenter did because he lived in the back room of his shop. But in the small town in southern France, social life was centered around the home so we were invited into homes frequently. And we had people - we would also have people over. We'd cook for them.

MR. BROWN: And young Americans were welcome at that time?

MR. FINK: OH, yeah.

MR. BROWN: I mean, the French harbored no -

MR. FINK: Americans could do no wrong. It was shortly after the Second World War, and the Marshall Plan had been working. So Americans were very welcome every - I remember going through Italian customs. Are you Americans? They didn't even stop us. They said, "Just go." They didn't even look at it.

MR. BROWN: [Laughs.].

MR. FINK: And Spain was a different matter, but -

MR. BROWN: Well, you went to Spain with your psychiatrist friend, you said?

MR. FINK: Yeah. You have a lot of information already .

MR. BROWN: Well, what was different about Spain at that time? This is -

MR. FINK: Well, it was still the Franco regime, and so you had what I called the pirates. It was very controlled, and you were supposed to fill out all kinds of documents about when you enter, and keep track of all your money you spent and how you changed it and how you spent it, and then all these documents had to be, you know, turned in when you left the country. We didn't do any of that. We just didn't do anything like that.

MR. BROWN: You were able to, yeah, ignore it?

MR. FINK: Ignored the whole thing. They didn't stop us when we left the country.

MR. BROWN: What were the high points of that visit to Spain?

MR. FINK: The Prado Museum was - I spent two weeks, every day, all day, in the Prado Museum.

MR. BROWN: Jeez.

MR. FINK: Two or three weeks, maybe, because that's what I did in Madrid. Except at night, you know, we'd go out and have dinner. Well, we ate - we had [inaudible]. We didn't eat in restaurants there except - it was a very peculiar thing. You ate - the Spanish system was that you had breakfast at sort of the normal time, and then lunch, your midday dinner was like at 2:00 or something in the afternoon, and then again at 9:00 or 10:00 at night. So in between, you'd eat. Between 2:00 and 10:00, you would eat. There were restaurants that were very

popular, but for light eating, not major meals.

But aside from that - and we visited the University of Madrid and saw - you know, checked that out. But mostly I spent all day every day in the Prado.

MR. BROWN: Well, that's extraordinary, isn't that? Here's someone with no art training. You're certainly [inaudible].

MR. FINK: Oh, by this point - by this point I had been doing nothing but looking at art by the time I went to Spain. I had been in Italy.

MR. BROWN: Oh, you had already been [inaudible]?

MR. FINK: I had been to Italy, and I had gone to Siena and Florence, all with Barbara. So I had - and of course, in Paris we were always at the Louvre and all the museums [inaudible] in Paris. And in southern France, we even went - we went to Avignon and saw the wonderful Gothic church there, the cloister. Sainte Trophime is what it's called. And then I was reading and actually painting. So by the time I got to Spain, I had done a lot of reading. I had done a lot of looking. And so the Prado was a great experience for me.

And at that time, there were hardly any people in the Prado because the United States did not have - we didn't recognize Spain at that time. So whatever consular affairs you had to see to, you'd go to the Swiss consulate, which took care of American affairs at that time. So I mean, the Prado, they weren't even geared for tourists yet because - I mean, you could buy a couple of picture postcards, but it wasn't like the other museums in France or Italy where you could get an abundance of reproductions and materials on their collections. You couldn't - there was not much at that Prado at that time. Oh, and the guards knew me. I was - in some of these larger galleries, I was alone. It was amazing.

I even went up to the print and drawing department, and I asked them, "Do you have any Goya drawings?" They said, "Do we have Goya drawings." They sat me at a long sort of library table and they brought out boxes and boxes of Goya drawings. They wouldn't let me touch them, but they - you know, I sat there and I said, "Okay," and they would turn it over. And I sat there and saw all these Goya drawings. And it was just a fabulous experience.

MR. BROWN: Were you sketching sometimes, like in the painting galleries?

MR. FINK: No. No, I wasn't. I did a little bit of that, a little bit of that, actually, sketching little objects. And I did more of that, actually, in Sweden at their national gallery because in the Prado there was so much to look at, I didn't stop to make sketches of things so much.

MR. BROWN: What do you recall, apart from Goya, were particularly memorable to you at the Prado?

MR. FINK: Well, the Goya paintings, those late black paintings are outstanding. Their Italian collection was fabulous. They had a room of Titians I still remember. And there was a great Bellini painting and a great - who's the other Viennese painter? Titian -

MR. BROWN: Tintoretto?

MR. FINK: No. Giorgione. They had great Giorgione paintings, I remember. And then of course they had these rooms of Velásquez. I remember I was - I spent a lot of time in there. They also had corridors and corridors of Rubens, which are very, very - because he was an ambassador, I guess, to Spain. And so they had tons and tons of Rubens, which at that time I did not spend too much time looking at. They didn't appeal to me as much as other things. And also, there were so many of them and they were very - they were in like a corridor kind of thing and they were badly lit. I guess they didn't bother putting on the lights or something like that.

MR. BROWN: But your impression was it wasn't particularly geared to the large numbers of -

MR. FINK: To the tourists.

MR. BROWN: Well, tourists?

MR. FINK: Yeah. I mean, there were people that - there were people there. There were some English people, some German people you'd meet. There were very few Americans.

MR. BROWN: You were there for, I guess, several weeks in Spain?

MR. FINK: I was in Madrid for two or three weeks. Then we took a boat to Majorca just for kicks. That was a vacation kind of thing. That wasn't looking at anything except being there.

MR. BROWN: What did you know about it?

MR. FINK: That it was there, and it was - and that Chopin and George Sand had been there. [Laughs.]

MR. BROWN: I see. [Laughs.]

MR. FINK: And that was also a very large folk dance festival about to take place on Majorca that we heard about, so we thought we'd check that. You know, it was just something that we wanted to see. It wasn't - we didn't need a hell of a lot of - we didn't need - we weren't accounting to anybody, so we didn't need lots of reasons.

MR. BROWN: Right. And you could take off on pretty short notice.

MR. FINK: Oh, yeah. On a couple of hours' notice. And when we came back, we came back from Majorca to -

MR. BROWN: I believe you went to Barcelona, didn't you?

MR. FINK: Barcelona, and we stayed in Barcelona a couple days. And -

MR. BROWN: Did you like that, or were you pretty -

MR. FINK: Yeah, very much. I remember especially the Catalonian Museum. That was - it was in an old - what had been a royal palace. It was a great museum. And of course we saw Gaudis. The image I remember mostly from Barcelona, however, was near the port area where we were living, we went down - we were sort of on a main street. And then we came to an intersection. We turned this corner, and suddenly it was like inside of a Goya black painting. There was these - it seemed like hundreds, but there probably weren't - but it seemed like all these women, all dressed in black, trying to sell us bread. They were holding up pieces of bread like this [demonstrating]. And it was a surreal - it was a strange experience.

MR. BROWN: Wow.

MR. FINK: Because there was enormous poverty in Spain at the time. You saw a lot of blindness from, you know, poor diets. And when you'd travel on the roads, you'd see people literally living in caves. And you'd get a tourist pamphlet saying that these caves are really quite nice. [Laughs.] The people living there are very comfortable, you know.

MR. BROWN: The tourist pamphlet said that?

MR. FINK: Yeah. [Laughs.] Of course, they knew you would see them if you were traveling by car.

MR. BROWN: You had a car?

MR. FINK: Well, we met a young woman at the border between France and Spain who had a Simca. And she was alone. And so we met her at the border, and we all were having trouble getting in. You know, you needed special visas to enter. So after we finally all got through, she said, "Why don't" - we were in car. Do you really want to hear this? It's very complicated.

MR. BROWN: No. Go ahead.

MR. FINK: [Laughs.] Well, my friend the doctor - look, I'll call him Richard, which is his name. Okay? Richard had met an American in Paris who lives in Hawaii. He was on a vacation or something like that. He had a car and a Swiss girlfriend. And they decided to go to Spain. And I went - and then - so Dick said, we're going to Spain. Do you want to come with us? And they drove through - they came from Paris and they drove through Sanary to pick me up. That's how - so we were in this car going to Spain.

And that's when we met this other woman who I can't remember her first name, but her last name is Goldblatt because her parents owned - there's a Goldblatt department store in Chicago. That's why I remember the name. And she wasn't related to that family, and she came from Monroe, New York. And I can't remember her first name.

But anyway, it wasn't a good idea for a single woman to travel alone in Spain in those times. So she said, "Why doesn't somebody" - you know, we were all - there were the four of us in this one car and she was alone in her car. And she said, "Why doesn't somebody drive with me and I'll, you know, just tag along with you?" So we did have a - we did have cars up until Madrid, where Dick and I left everybody. And then this woman who had the - this Goldblatt woman, we met again in Madrid after several days. And she just wanted to hang around. She didn't like being alone.

MR. BROWN: Sure.

MR. FINK: So she said, "Can I just go wherever you're going?" And we said, "We're going to go to Majorca." She said, "Okay. I'll go to Majorca." [Laughs.] And we had a very funny experience on the ferry with her car. You know -

MR. BROWN: You took the car to Majorca, then?

MR. FINK: It was her car. Yeah. That's why we were going into the interior.

MR. BROWN: Yeah. Was that quite a striking place, Majorca?

MR. FINK: Wonderful. Yeah, I loved it. It was very beautiful, and it was the one time I really indulged myself in terms of creature comforts. We stayed in a hotel that was right on the beach. It was in a little town called Puerto de Soller. And it was like a dollar a day for three lovely meals, a room with hot and cold running water in it, which was unusual. It cost a buck. Service compris. [Laughs.] So that's why you were able to live so cheaply. And in Madrid, for example, the pension, which was very centrally located, you know, walking distance to the Prado, it wasn't fancy but it was perfectly okay. I mean, the bathroom was down the corridor, but you had - you know, you had a sink in your room. That was 75 cents a day for three meals plus the room. And two of the meals were large meals. I mean, not the breakfast, but the afternoon and evening meals were full course meals, you know.

MR. BROWN: Wow.

MR. FINK: Not great, but okay.

MR. BROWN: Were you doing any writing or keeping any notes of any of this?

MR. FINK: No.

MR. BROWN: You must have -

MR. FINK: I wrote letters.

MR. BROWN: You must have thought - this was a fairly extraordinary experience, wasn't it?

MR. FINK: I didn't - you know, it sounds like it now. I didn't - I wasn't thinking about it as being that extraordinary at the time. I mean, I was enjoying myself, having a great time and learning an awful lot. But I didn't think, jeez, this is so unusual that I have to record it. I didn't - that didn't occur to me.

MR. BROWN: Did you then go back to Sanary or to -

MR. FINK: Yeah. Well, after leaving Spain, we took the - there's a very famous train that goes from Barcelona to Paris. It's got a name, like the Orient Express has a name, but it's not.

MR. BROWN: Yeah.

MR. FINK: And we took that. And then when I got to Paris, I went to American Express, which was the clearinghouse for letters. There was a bunch of letters from Barbara that said - she said she was sick and that she was - her parents had come over from, you know, Newton and were spending the summer. Her father is Swedish, and he wanted to go to Sweden and visit the family sites and relatives. And then the plan was to go from the east - from the west to the east coast of Sweden, and then there's a Swedish - I think a Swedish company called Liniabuss [phonetic], which you take a bus from Stockholm all the way down to Italy, like to around Lake Como.

MR. BROWN: Uh-huh [affirmative].

MR. FINK: And they were planning to do that. But Barbara was sick, and I had - the bunch of letters were waiting for me from her at American Express in Paris.

MR. BROWN: And she was in Sweden with her family, and you were in Paris?

MR. FINK: She was in Sweden and sick. So my friend Dick, Richard, he was - we were planning to go to England. In Majorca, we had met an English couple; we were staying at the same hotel, and he was also a doctor, and Dick was a doctor. So if you're ever in London or around there, you know, come visit us, that sort of thing. And we did, and Dick stayed with them. And he had to go back to - his internship was over, or his - so he was going back from England back to the United States. And I took a fourth class boat from England to Sweden to visit - see Barbara in the - she was in the hospital in a small town called - Vänersborg, I think it was called. Vänersborg, yeah, that's right. V-a-n -

MR. BROWN: So you went to see her in hospital. Was she quite gravely ill?

MR. FINK: But in London, I spent a week or - I don't know, four or five days, a week, again only in museums. At this point I was very motivated in terms of -

MR. BROWN: You would just stand in front of paintings that captivated you and -

MR. FINK: Yeah. I would look at everything. Well, especially if I was struck by something, I would just look at that longer than something else. But I didn't have a plan. I was just - I just - I spent time in the National Gallery and the Tate. I went back to London years later and did it more thoroughly. But I was - after four or five days, I decided I'd better go see - that's when I went to see Barb. I took this boat steerage class, which it was a Swedish boat; it was actually perfectly nice. And I went to Sweden and went to visit Barbara in the hospital, and stayed with her in the hospital - I mean, I didn't stay in the hospital; I stayed in that small town, and I visited her every day at the hospital.

MR. BROWN: Did you meet her parents?

MR. FINK: Her parents were there. Right. And her parents, they had this schedule, so they left this small town and went on to Stockholm and other places where he wanted to visit his relatives. So Barbara was alone in the hospital after a day or two. I was there a day or two with the parents, and then the parents left, and then I stayed another week or so until Barbara was released from the hospital. And then we visited some other relatives in a smaller town. This was a small town, but we went to an even smaller town and met some more of her relatives. And then she took the - then we took a train from - across Sweden to Stockholm.

Now, when I was in Sanary when Barbara was not there - because Barbara went to meet her parents -

MR. BROWN: Yeah.

MR. FINK: When I was - just before going to Spain, and when Barbara went to -

MR. BROWN: She went up there to -

MR. FINK: She went to England to meet her parents, who were coming, you know, from this country. I met a Swedish man named Eskil Almgren [phonetic], and he and I became very good - I only met him there for two or three days. He was on vacation. He had been there a while, but we hadn't met until it was like two or three days before he had to go back. But we spent all those days together and became very close friends. And he lived in Stockholm, and gave me his address in Stockholm and said, if you're ever in Stockholm, to look him up.

Well, I was never - I had no plans to go to Stockholm. I wanted to go to - I knew I wanted to go to Spain and Italy and all those places like that. But Sweden was not on my itinerary. But there I wound up one Sunday afternoon in Stockholm.

MR. BROWN: And you looked -

MR. FINK: You know, Barbara met - went off with her parents, and I was alone in Stockholm. And I just went to this address, and he was there. He greeted me like a long-lost brother. It was just marvelous. And it turns out that afternoon his wife - and he had a small boy, who was maybe 6 years old, 7 years old - they were going to Denmark for their annual vacation. And he gave me the keys to this - he had a very nice apartment right in the middle of Stockholm.

MR. BROWN: What was he? Was he in the arts as well?

MR. FINK: Well, he turns out - he played piano very well. He was a poet. And he - but he earned his living working for the city planning department in Stockholm. He would decide what statues could go in what parks, or if they could go there, that sort of thing, in the artistics planning, not in street paving or anything like that.

MR. BROWN: Yeah.

MR. FINK: And he was a poet. And an interesting story, an aside story, but you asked me what he is. Several years later back in Boston, we were at a party, I remember, on Carver Street. And this woman who gave the party had a - had some Swedish friends who were in an exchange program at Harvard in literature. And one young man who was there, who was a Swedish man, and he was also at Harvard and in literature. And we talked, and I said, I had been to Sweden. In fact, I knew a man who worked in the city planning department and he also wrote poetry. I had books of his poetry, but they were in Swedish so I couldn't read them.

MR. BROWN: You weren't able yet to read Swedish?

MR. FINK: No. I can't to this day. Anyway, so it's like, oh, you know, if you meet somebody, and you're in Paris and you're from New York, and you say, oh, I know somebody from New York. [Laughs.] It was, you know, sort of that kind of ridiculous kind of thing.

MR. BROWN: Sur.

MR. FINK: But anyway, for lack of anything, I said, "Oh, I know a poet in Stockholm." And he says, "What's his name?" I says, "It's Eskil Almgren." The guy almost flipped. He said he had written his masters degree on this guy. He said he's one of the most eminent Swedish poets.

MR. BROWN: Wow.

MR. FINK: I didn't - I had no idea. And he was a very modest man, so I had no way of judging this.

MR. BROWN: Hmm.

MR. FINK: But he did - before he left with his family for Denmark, he called up friends of his, writers - they were all writers and artists - that this American is in my apartment, and look him up and, you know, see that he has a good time, and that sort of thing. And so I had - I was immediately thrust into the most fascinating group of people in Stockholm. I had a fantastic time.

And it turned out that he had - that this Eskil Almgren, when he was in Denmark, started having tooth troubles. And they had, you know, socialized medicine in Sweden, so he had to come back to Sweden to have his teeth seen. Therefore - and he had to stay. So I got to know him very, very well. In the meantime, before he got back, some of the women he had introduced me to had some South American guys, friends, coming from South America, from Colombia.

MR. BROWN: Some women -

MR. FINK: Two guys, two men. And they had no place to stay. And this apartment I had was very big that he had let me use. And so I said, "Oh, you can stay in this place because there's plenty of room." And so when Eskil came back, I said, "Listen, I'm sorry, but I didn't know you were coming back." I told him - he knew the woman. I said, "These friends of hers are staying." He said, "That's fine. No problem. I gave you the apartment to do what you want." It turned out somebody else told me that during the Second World War, he had 14 refugees living all - you know, in that apartment. He was that kind of guy.

MR. BROWN: He was a very generous man.

MR. FINK: Yeah. A lovely man.

MR. BROWN: You also, I assume, continued your museum-going?

MR. FINK: Well, as I say - yeah. Well, as I say, Stockholm is not as rich as, say, London or the Prado. But they have the national museum there. It's quite a good museum. And they have a fantastic Rembrandt, one of the best Rembrandt paintings. King Claudius, I think. It's a great Rembrandt painting. And they have also some very good El Grecos. But I got to know a lot about Swedish art, you know, artists that you wouldn't hear of ordinarily, you know, that have more of a local reputation. They have the Carl Milles museum, the sculptor, which I visited.

MR. BROWN: Did you care for his work?

MR. FINK: Not especially.

[END TAPE 1, SIDE A]

MR. BROWN: So I think you then went - you were aiming to get back, where, to Paris? Is that where you [inaudible]?

MR. FINK: Yeah. Barbara, when we were in Stockholm - and she then look this Liniabuss with her parents down through Germany - Denmark, Germany, and -

MR. BROWN: To Italy?

MR. FINK: To Italy.

MR. BROWN: To Lake Como, you said?

MR. FINK: Right. That was, I think - that was in early August or late July. I can't remember exactly.

MR. BROWN: This would have been 1950, I guess. Right?

MR. FINK: '50. Right. And so what we - I mean, talking about plans, she said, well, her parents were scheduled to leave some time late August back to the - or early September back to the - go back home. So we said, well, we'll meet in Paris in September. That was our plan. We didn't say when in September or where in Paris. But we said we'd meet in Paris in September. Anyway, it got to be late August and I had to think about getting back to Paris to meet Barbara. And these South American fellows that were staying in this apartment, they had - it turned out they had a car. And so they - and they were driving back to Paris.

MR. BROWN: Which was a fairly rare thing, wasn't it, then? Cars weren't that common.

MR. FINK: Yeah. Right. So they had a car, and they - and of course, since I was so generous in offering them a place to say, they said, "Well, we're going back to Paris. You can drive with us." So I had a ride. And when I left, I had - there were stops along the way. We stopped in Copenhagen for a couple of days. I had a lovely experience in Copenhagen because my friend Eskil knew one of the curators at the state museum in Copenhagen. And he called her, saying that his American friend is coming through Copenhagen and could you take care of him?

What she did - so when I got to Copenhagen, the first stop was the state museum and I looked her up. She spoke English very well. And she was a woman with two small girls. But she said, "My apartment is small, but you can stay with us." So I had a place to stay and eat, and was able to see all the back rooms of the museums. And it was - and so I had a great time in Copenhagen.

Then we kept driving, and we got as far as - and we made stops along the way, but nothing - of no artistic significance. Our next major stopping was Amsterdam. And in Amsterdam, they decided that they actually were not going to go to Paris after all from there. They had some other plans. So that was fine. So I - this was till late August, and I had several days. And Amsterdam, of course, is a great city - the Rijksmuseum, the Van Gogh museum. And so I stayed in a youth hostel in Amsterdam for several days visiting the museums.

It was - and I never - I remember I never ate in a - I didn't have much money. There wasn't much of that $700 left. And so I just brought herring at the port. You know, there were guys that would chop up herring. And there was - they delivered - I remember men delivered milk in kind of a pushcart kind of thing. And I would go up to them and buy a quart of milk, and herring. And I ate like - and there were milk stores also where you can buy - just go in and you have a glass of milk and some cookies, things like that. And that's how I ate in Amsterdam.

And after - it was getting now to be late August, and in September I was supposed to go to Paris to meet Barbara. And in fact, I already bought my railroad ticket. I remember it cost me like $5. I thought it was very expensive; it cost me like $5 for this train ticket.

MR. BROWN: Train ticket to Paris?

MR. FINK: To Paris from Amsterdam. And I made my last visit to the Rijksmuseum, and I had a certain route. This is - I think this is a really extraordinary story, and it is absolutely true. I had a certain route that I went from the museum back to the hostel so that I wouldn't get lost. But by this time, I knew the city well enough, and I left the museum going back to pick up my - I was traveling with just a little gym bag - to pick up my bag and then go to the railroad station.

So I decided, I know the city so well and I don't have to take these same streets all the time. So I decided I had time, I would take a little diversion walking back to the hostel. And by taking that diversion, I walked by one of the very few outdoor cafés in Amsterdam. And you wouldn't believe it, but who is sitting at this outdoor café? Barbara. She's actually - she had left her parents off - she had seen her parents off at Rotterdam, and it still wasn't September, so she said, well, instead of going back to Paris to meet me because it wasn't September yet, she would come to Amsterdam.

She was sitting in this outdoor café with an - she taught briefly at Wellesley College after her graduation, and she had met a former student of hers. And the two of them were sitting in this outdoor café. And I looked at her and I kept walking because, you know [laughs], I didn't believe it. It was one of these classic double-takes. You know, and I looked - and she did the same thing. Neither of us could actually believe it. But there - it was unbelievable. And she had just arrived that afternoon.

And so I went back to the railroad station and returned my ticket for my five bucks, and stayed with Barbara in Amsterdam. When I went back to the youth hostel to try and get a room, the room was taken. So this woman called her son and I stayed with her son. And it was so much nicer. I stayed in somebody's home. It was - you know, it was a man and a woman, and they had a child. And Barbara stayed somewhere else.

So we went around to the museums again together in Amsterdam. And then we also, which I wouldn't have done otherwise, we went to the Kröller-Müller museum in Otterlo, which is a fantastic museum.

MR. BROWN: You wanted to go there for -

MR. FINK: Well, I wasn't going to go there because I didn't think I had the time. But now we were together, so we had no constraints, so we -

MR. BROWN: So time was not a factor?

MR. FINK: No longer. So we went there. That was a lovely trip and we had a great time. We stayed in a farmhouse.

MR. BROWN: That was out in a small place, was it not?

MR. FINK: In Otterlo. Otterlo.

MR. BROWN: And what do you recall of that museum?

MR. FINK: Oh, they have this great Cézanne cypress tree and Van Gogh cypress tree. I was constantly comparing those two. They had a great French collection - I mean, a Seurat, a dancer with a band. It was a fine - a really terrific collection.

MR. BROWN: Yeah. Huh.

MR. FINK: It wasn't a big - not a huge museum, but very fine. And we had a lovely, lovely time at a farmhouse. Because when we got the museum, it was about to close because we couldn't find it. The bus driver left us off and said, "Go that way." And so we walked five miles through some woods, and we finally got there, you know, a half hour to closing or something like that. So that's why we stayed overnight. And it worked out well because we had a great time with a nice family.

MR. BROWN: So you knew wanted to see more of Barbara by now?

MR. FINK: Oh, yeah. We were definitely an item at that point. I mean, we went back to Paris after that, and then again back to - and we stayed in Paris for a while, and then we went back to Sanary for - the second trip to Sanary - the first trip, I think, was three months in Sanary. The second trip was for nine months.

MR. BROWN: You stayed into the next year, then, 1951?

MR. FINK: Yes. Right.

MR. BROWN: And had Barbara been working at all when she was in Sweden or -

MR. FINK: No.

MR. BROWN: She left everything in Paris?

MR. FINK: No. She wasn't working when she was traveling with her parents. And she was sick. No, she wasn't working. That was one time - and she was very anxious to get - that's one reason we went back to southern France because she was really anxious to get back to work. And it was - and that was a terrific place to work. I mean, it was quiet, and we had a house rather than a hotel room.

MR. BROWN: Yeah. And were you doing some - resuming some painting yourself, or what were you -

MR. FINK: Yeah. Yeah, I did.

MR. BROWN: And lots of reading?

MR. FINK: Reading. I painted a fair amount, essentially that second nine months.

MR. BROWN: Uh-huh [affirmative]. So this is - we're now - you've been gone, what, a year and a half, something like that, approaching two years.

MR. FINK: Yeah. Uh-huh [affirmative].

MR. BROWN: Did you think you would go back to Chicago?

MR. FINK: Well, I did. I went back. I did in fact go back to Chicago just for a couple of months. Barbara, when we finally separated in Sanary, I said - when it was time for me to go home; I ran out of money [laughs] - she went on to Italy. I saw her off in Toulon. She took a train in one direction and I took a train in another direction. And she was going to - she had a couple more months left on her fellowship. So she went to Italy. I went back to

Paris, and I stayed there with a friend, this guy with the French rent control thing. At this point, he had a room in Paris.

MR. BROWN: And he had a job there?

MR. FINK: Not a job. He just had a room.

MR. BROWN: A room?

MR. FINK: But he was doing this research on the French rent control system. So I stayed with him. And then I came home. I came back to Chicago until Barbara returned to - well, she would have returned to Newtonville at that time. And then -

MR. BROWN: Right here in suburban Boston?

MR. FINK: Right. And when she came back, then shortly after that I came to Boston. And that's a good ending point, isn't it?

[Tape stops, restarts]

MR. BROWN: The second session of the interviews with Alan Fink at his gallery, 14 Newbury Street in Boston. And this is January 29, 1996 [sic].

Alan, we talked about your life till you got to Boston. You came here in, what, September '51?

MR. FINK: Right.

MR. BROWN: You partly, or perhaps largely because Barbara Swan was here. But also, you knew - you had met a number of artists.

MR. FINK: Well, Barbara was the principal reason, though. I had met other artists.

MR. BROWN: Yeah.

MR. FINK: And that was a big plus, having known these people. But if it weren't for Barbara, I would not have come. It's as simple as that.

[Laughter.]

MR. BROWN: And you came knowing that you wanted in some fashion to develop a career in art?

MR. FINK: Yes, I did. I wasn't exactly sure how that was going to happen, though.

MR. BROWN: You had met - of course, over in France you had met people like Ralph Coburn?

MR. FINK: Well, he was a very pivotal person, actually. He was the one who had - why we got to - went to Sanary to begin with, because he had been there. I think I'd mentioned that.

MR. BROWN: Yeah. Uh-huh [affirmative]. Yeah, through an uncle.

MR. FINK: Right. And when I came to Boston in 1951, he had been - he had returned prior to my coming here. And he was working as - at the Boris Mirski Gallery at 166 Newbury Street.

MR. BROWN: Uh-huh [affirmative]. And had you heard of that gallery?

MR. FINK: Oh, yes.

MR. BROWN: People had talked about it?

MR. FINK: Oh, Barbara was already a member of the gallery. And other people I had met - Arthur Polansky, Jack Kramer, people who are also associated with the gallery.

MR. BROWN: Uh-huh [affirmative].

MR. FINK: And when I first came to Boston, I took a room on Newbury Street near the corner of Fairfield. It was a one-room thing. And I met - you don't want to hear about another job I had for a month before -

MR. BROWN: Oh, tell me for a moment. Why not?

MR. FINK: Well, we were invited one night to somebody's house that had been a private pupil of Barbara's. And another guest at the house was a man named Markson [phonetic], who owned - whose family owned jewelry stores and things like that.

MR. BROWN: Uh-huh [affirmative].

MR. FINK: And he said - and I had just - I had only been in Boston actually a matter of days at that point. And he asked me what I was doing, and I said, "At the moment nothing. I've been looking for a job." So he asked me to come see him in his home on Beacon Street. He had one of these fabulous granite-faced single family homes.

MR. BROWN: A big Victorian townhouse, huh?

MR. FINK: Oh, a major - a major townhouse. And I was - I appeared on the appointed day. I was ushered into his great oval living room and served little sandwiches by his wife and all that. So I think, this is terrific. I'm going to get some - this is going to be some kind of a job offer, I'm being treated so royally. It finally wound up that what he was offering me was a job as an inventory clerk at one of his - at his offices that controlled inventory for - he had - there were several retail outlets, and this office controlled the inventory in and out of these several retail outlets - watches, rings, you know, jewelry things like that.

Well, I took the job because I needed - as I said, I came - I had about 30-some-odd dollars in my pocket when I came to Boston. So I took the job, and I stayed there for about a month. And at that point, Ralph Coburn decided he wanted to go back to Europe. And that left that opening at Boris Mirski.

MR. BROWN: Because Ralph was sort of the gallery assistant or -

MR. FINK: Well, he actually was the - I don't - today you would call him the gallery director. In those days, nobody had titles, really. And so that left that position open. And Ralph knew me and recommended - I had already met Boris and also other artists that were associated with the gallery. So Boris asked me to take over, you know, from Ralph, which I did.

MR. BROWN: What was Boris like on first meeting? Can you describe him a little bit?

MR. FINK: Well, he's very round and jovial, and extremely friendly and earthy and very - you know, seemed like a very nice, straightforward guy. I was very happy to get the job.

MR. BROWN: Yeah. yeah.

MR. FINK: And so I - and I worked there for 16 years in that same position as - being called director, I suppose, until I opened up the gallery. The job became - it got - became very difficult at the last couple of years.

MR. BROWN: Yeah. But in the early years it was good, wasn't it? I mean -

MR. FINK: There was a lot of fun. It was like a family. The openings were sensational, not like today where - I mean, today when we have an opening, some friends of the artist and a few clients will come, but mostly friends of the artist. But there's no particularly loyalty among the same artists of the gallery. At any particular opening, you may or may not get another artist from the gallery at that opening. In those days, an opening was a major social event and everybody came to it, all of the artists, whoever - you know, who you had [inaudible], you came to these openings. And they were very lively and very - you know, a lot of fun.

MR. BROWN: Who were some of the artists that you remember from the early years when you got going?

MR. FINK: At Mirski?

MR. BROWN: Yeah, at Mirski's?

MR. FINK: Bernard Chaet, for example, who's currently having a show.

MR. BROWN: Having a show right here now? Yeah.

MR. FINK: He was one of the artists that was - who had - was one of the original artists showing with Boris. I remember Arthur Polansky. David Aronson. Leonard Baskin was not there the very first year, but the second year I was there he became an associate of the gallery.

MR. BROWN: Uh-huh [affirmative]. And you'd get to know them pretty well?

MR. FINK: Very.

MR. BROWN: They were all fairly young artists then.

MR. FINK: Yeah. They were all very -

MR. BROWN: About your age.

MR. FINK: - very close to my age.

MR. BROWN: Yeah.

MR. FINK: I don't think there were three years separated any of them, really. And we were all very friendly, saw a lot of each other outside the confines of the gallery.

MR. BROWN: Uh-huh [affirmative].

MR. FINK: It was really a very warm, friendly situation. You didn't make any money; you didn't sell much art. But it was a very pleasant life.

MR. BROWN: No. People weren't buying their work.

MR. FINK: Well, people weren't buying art very much at all then, as a rule. Today people are just - there's much more art being sold, just generally speaking, now than there was at that point.

MR. BROWN: Was there a resistance, do you think, to buying contemporary work or work by younger people?

MR. FINK: Yes. And there still is, as a matter of fact. But it was moreso then, and especially in Boston. I think in New York and also Chicago, which I've had some little experience with, I think people are a little more receptive to new art, to younger people without big reputations.

MR. BROWN: Yeah. But not here?

MR. FINK: Not so much, no.

MR. BROWN: Yeah. Was Mirski's gallery one of the principal or the principal -

MR. FINK: He was one of the principal. There was Boris.

MR. BROWN: Showing contemporary?

MR. FINK: Showing contemporary. There's Hyman Swetzoff, who had previously worked for Boris.

MR. BROWN: Okay. Yeah.

MR. FINK: And Margaret Brown.

MR. BROWN: Yeah. And she had a whole range of things, though, didn't she?

MR. FINK: Well, she was -

MR. BROWN: Including contemporary.

MR. FINK: That was mostly contemporary.

MR. BROWN: Uh-huh [affirmative].

MR. FINK: And she had a very good gallery, had, you know, good artists. And there was a gallery that closed before I came to Boston that [inaudible]. I think it was called Grace Horn, and I don't really know much about - I know nothing about it because it closed before I came to Boston.

MR. BROWN: What was Margaret Brown like? Did you get to know the rival dealers very much or -

MR. FINK: Not - I knew her, but not really well.

MR. BROWN: What about Hyman Swetzoff?

MR. FINK: I knew him, but again, not as well as I knew the artists in our gallery. But Hyman was always friendly and willing to talk about things. I thought Margaret Brown was perhaps little bit more standoffish. I don't know if she was like that generally, but she was with me.

MR. BROWN: Uh-huh [affirmative]. Yeah. Well, did your artists - how did you augment your stable of artists? Or did Boris do most of this? He would - what would he be doing day to day?

MR. FINK: Making frames.

MR. BROWN: He continued? He was really trained -

MR. FINK: Oh, the whole basement was given over to the frame shop. And he continued to make frames up until the very end. I mean, he stopped making frames - I don't [inaudible]. I left in '67. I would say somewhere in the early '60s he stopped making - like '62, '63, maybe, he stopped making frames.

MR. BROWN: Uh-huh [affirmative].

MR. FINK: That is, he physically stopped making frames. He gave the framing business over to his daughter. He brought - there was a frame shop called the Bunnell Frame Shop that was actually run - owned and operated by a man named Bunnell. And Boris bought him out and installed his daughter. And it's still there. It's still called Bunnell. But that was bought by Boris and Debbie, his daughter.

MR. BROWN: His daughter, yeah. Yeah.

MR. FINK: Who still owns it, I guess.

MR. BROWN: Uh-huh [affirmative].

MR. FINK: But the lifeblood of the gallery was frame-making.

MR. BROWN: Okay. So you were the one, from what you said, principally involved with these younger artists rather than Boris? Or isn't -

MR. FINK: Well, Boris was involved, but -

MR. BROWN: You can't generalize?

MR. FINK: But on a day-to-day basis, he was making frames all the time. But he was always - he was involved in the other aspects of the gallery. But he didn't actually do daily work in the gallery. He was busy making frames. And he would deal with certain clients that he had known for years, well before my coming there. But basically, I ran the gallery, he ran the frame shop, and - but he was consulted on everything and was involved.

MR. BROWN: Yeah. Did you find you had an aptitude right away for talking up the art to clients? Or did you let it sort of sell itself? Or was it fairly low key?

MR. FINK: Low key.

MR. BROWN: Yeah?

MR. FINK: I mean, there was not a lot of selling going on.

MR. BROWN: Yeah.

MR. FINK: [Laughs.] It was mostly - you know, I also, you know, helped in the framing in the sense of doing the - keeping accounts or where the frames were, and contacting - billing people, and things of that sort. So I was involved in the administrative aspect of the framing business, but not the actual making of them.

MR. BROWN: Yeah. Yeah, that was sort of your training, wasn't it?

MR. FINK: Yeah. Yeah, I could do that easily.

MR. BROWN: Yeah. Was Boris himself fairly administrative or not?

MR. FINK: No.

MR. BROWN: Was he - he wasn't inclined toward that?

MR. FINK: Terrible. Terrible businessman, terrible record-keeper. [Laughs.] That was not his forte at all.

MR. BROWN: How would you maintain that group or artists or add to them? I mean, can you recall how that would come about? Because presumably you were there that long, you saw new ones coming in.

MR. FINK: Well, like Leonard Baskin came in, was the first major artist to be taken on after I was working there.

MR. BROWN: And he had quite a big reputation at that time?

MR. FINK: Not really.

MR. BROWN: Not yet?

MR. FINK: No. He was - in fact, I think I mentioned to you he's the sister-in-law of a man named - of an artist Mitchell Siporin, who was then teaching at Brandeis. And Mitchell Siporin brought him in and [inaudible] him. Because Leonard had moved to Worcester from New York, and he was teaching at the Worcester -

MR. BROWN: At the art school?

MR. FINK: The Worcester museum. And so he was up in this area then. So Mitchell Siporin brought him in, and his work was - this was 1952, probably - and the work was sensational. That, I think, was his strongest period, those early woodcuts.

MR. BROWN: Woodcuts?

MR. FINK: And so that - generally by reference, in other words.

MR. BROWN: Yeah. Yeah.

MR. FINK: If you're asking me how did artists come into the gallery, mostly by references. And they were often referred, too, by other artists.

MR. BROWN: Now, was Siporin in Mirski Gallery?

MR. FINK: He was showing with the Downtown Gallery in New York.

MR. BROWN: In New York?

MR. FINK: And Boris was very friendly with Edith Halpert, who was the owner and director of the Downtown Gallery.

MR. BROWN: Uh-huh [affirmative].

MR. FINK: So we did show Mitchell's work, but it was through the Downtown Gallery because he was with her.

MR. BROWN: Uh-huh [affirmative].

MR. FINK: And we had several shows through the Downtown Gallery, but they were mostly like American folk art shows.

MR. BROWN: Yes. That was a strong -

MR. FINK: A very strong -

MR. BROWN: - sub line.

MR. FINK: It was a very strong gallery. Whatever it did, it did very well.

MR. BROWN: Yeah. Yeah.

MR. FINK: And, you know, it had a great group of artists - you know, John Marin and Georgia O'Keeffe and all those people.

MR. BROWN: Yeah. Yeah.

MR. FINK: Stuart Davis.

MR. BROWN: Did you ever meet Edith Halpert?

MR. FINK: Oh, yes. Often. As a matter of fact, she had an antique house in Newtown, Connecticut, and I stayed with her there overnight once. And she made dinner, and [inaudible] for breakfast for me. She was - I met her, you know, many times.

MR. BROWN: What was she like as a personality, would you say?

MR. FINK: Tough. Very tough, but a straightforward, honest woman.

MR. BROWN: Yeah.

MR. FINK: But a little sort of hard-nosed in a way [inaudible]. But on a personal level, she was very - you know, very friendly, soft woman. I liked her.

MR. BROWN: Yeah. What about Siporin? What was he like?

MR. FINK: He was a great guy. He was - he should have been a comedian. [Laughs.] I mean, he was very - he could improvise. He could - I can remember evenings where he would take a theme and just improvise on this theme, like a standup comic would.

MR. BROWN: Yeah.

MR. FINK: And he was hysterical, I mean, very, very funny.

MR. BROWN: Huh.

MR. FINK: I don't mean - all these people you're mentioning, I don't know - he was not really part of the gallery.

MR. BROWN: Yeah.

MR. FINK: I mean, we showed his work, I think, once or twice through the Downtown Gallery. But he was not a regular member of the gallery. So I knew him but I didn't know him as well as some of the other artists.

MR. BROWN: Yeah. Did you get to know Baskin a bit?

MR. FINK: Yeah. Very well. I know him very well. In fact, he still owes me a white shirt because he was so poor at the time of his first opening, he didn't have a shirt to wear, and he borrowed one from me. I never got it back.

[Laughter.]

MR. FINK: But we were very friendly with he and his first wife Esther.

MR. BROWN: Esther, yeah.

MR. FINK: And they would stay with us. We would stay with them. We lived in Castle Street in Worcester at the time, sort of a decrepit street. And one of his first prints he made was called Castle Street Dogs [1952] - or he made a book, rather, called Castle Street Dogs, a little small soft-covered book. He did a print. He did a long print called Castle Street, which was a building [inaudible].

MR. BROWN: But his woodcuts really stood out by their strength and expressive -

MR. FINK: Yes. They were really quite remarkable. And I'm not sure, in my own personal opinion, he's done anything to top those early works.

MR. BROWN: Yeah. Yeah.

MR. FINK: In fact, I think he's deteriorated quite a bit, unfortunately.

MR. BROWN: Was he - what was he like as a personality at that time?

MR. FINK: He was a - he had a certain arrogance always a lot, and a certain certainty that what he knew was - what he thought was the correct thought [laughs] always.

MR. BROWN: Which it was.

MR. FINK: And he didn't have too much - he wasn't flexible in terms of giving credence to other people's opinions. But he was pretty sure of himself, and he was a great collector. And in fact, his collecting, I think, might have been one of his downfalls because he was so - he became such an ardent collector, especially of incunabula - of everything, incunabula, Roman coins, Old Masters drawings, Old Master prints, oriental rugs - he had a house later on when he moved to Northampton and was teaching at Smith that was like little museum when you were walking in. He was - and he went for very high art styles. He didn't like primitive art, for example. And he became so - and he was a very astute collector. And he was a very - and when it came to prints, he was a - he probably knew as much as any art historian, although he was trained formally as such. But he knew an awful lot about prints of all periods, and drawings.

But he needed money to maintain his collecting habit, and I think that had an effect on his work because he began, I think, thinking a lot about the monetary aspect of making work and selling work. And -

MR. BROWN: Yeah. Yeah.

MR. FINK: I can't be for sure; this is only speculative on my part.

MR. BROWN: Yeah.

MR. FINK: But I think he wanted money for collecting so badly that I think that that took precedence over being - you know, exploring new areas of creativity [inaudible].

MR. BROWN: Did he sell to any Mirski to any degree or was this really -

MR. FINK: Yes. Oh, he sold a lot -

MR. BROWN: He did?

MR. FINK: He sold a lot of his work. He sold very well.

MR. BROWN: So he was a good seller among -

MR. FINK: Absolutely. He was the best.

MR. BROWN: The best?

MR. FINK: I would say he and David Aronson, I think, sold the best in those days, the early days of Mirski. But Baskin also had a New York - you know, got a New York gallery shortly after that, Grace Borgenicht, and he sold work there.

MR. BROWN: Uh-huh [affirmative]. Aronson had quite a few shows, I think, even in the '40s, hadn't he? Wasn't he a bit more shown than others of his near contemporaries here?

MR. FINK: Yes. Yeah, he was a star student, and he - I think even - in fact, he showed very - he was a very young person when he showed at something called - I think it was called "Fourteen Americans" at the Museum of Modern Art in New York. He was one of - you know, they had shows of these -

MR. BROWN: Uh-huh [affirmative]. Yeah.

MR. FINK: And he was included in a group of young Americans in one of those shows at MOMA. I'm not sure of the exact title. I was not around then. But I think it was called "Fourteen Americans" or some such title.

MR. BROWN: Yeah. They had shows of that name for years.

MR. FINK: Yeah.

MR. BROWN: Did you get to know him also pretty well?

MR. FINK: Oh, yeah. Yeah, very well. He was part of the group. And, you know, especially when we were having his shows or [inaudible], you know, we'd be working with the artist on his or her show. And we usually got to know them quite well. Although we saw them socially as well, he and his wife.

MR. BROWN: Did most of those artists take great pains and were very - greatly interested in how their work was presented, would work - would you labor long and hard with them in the presentation?

MR. FINK: No. It wasn't - it usually went fairly easily. Also, I think artists in those days were not as career-oriented as artists are now. I think artists right now, if they want to be in a group show, they want to know who else is in the group show, whether this is going to be good company for them or not. They're thinking about their reputations and their long-term careers, which is a phenomenon of the last couple generations. It was not so true then. Artists didn't think as this is a career, and they were less calculating in that sense. Not that being career-minded is bad; I think it's quite good, and I think artists should be. But they weren't really that much, at least the artists around the Mirski Gallery. Elsewhere it might have been different. I mean, artists in New York, for example, at that very same time I think were thinking very differently.

MR. BROWN: Yeah. And certainly people like Wyeth, who I gather from beginning to end, or till now, is carefully calculating.

MR. FINK: Right. But artists of a lesser name than that, I think, even in New York, probably were thinking more of

a career aspect of their work.

MR. BROWN: Yeah.

MR. FINK: Moreso than the artists I was associated with at Mirski.

MR. BROWN: Is that partly reflective of the Boston ambience, the fact that most of them had - there were very few outlets and little prospect -

MR. FINK: Yeah. And there was little expectation. The expectations were much less.

MR. BROWN: Yeah.

MR. FINK: I mean, I can remember, you know, one of the artists we now show and have been showing for quite a long time now is Scott Prior, and he's always sold fairly well. And I remember hanging a show with him when we were at 21 Newbury Street. And he said - well, he had a friend who had moved to Peru. And he said, well, after this show, from the proceeds from the money he was going to make on this show - nothing had been sold yet - he said, "From the money I'm going to make from the show, I'm going to visit my friend in Peru." And I said, "Okay. Good luck to you." But I didn't say anything, but I thought to myself, now, this is really something because in my earlier experience, an artist who is making plans to go to Peru on the sale of work that had not yet been sold would have been really foolhardy. But he - the times have changed, and he was correct. He sold so well he wound up in Peru.

MR. BROWN: Uh-huh [affirmative].

MR. FINK: And it was possible to think that way after a certain point. But it was not possible to think that way in the early '50s in Boston.

MR. BROWN: Yeah. Yeah.

MR. FINK: No one would say, I'm going to do certain things with the money I make off the show. You were lucky if you sold anything, and it was a big deal. If you sold one thing, you'd call up the artist and you'd have a little celebration. It was a major event to sell something. Now, these days, when you sell something, you don't necessarily tell the artist till maybe months later when you send a report or something like that.

MR. BROWN: Yeah. Yeah. Well, these artists couldn't really keep everything together on their art alone, then?

MR. FINK: No. Not -

MR. BROWN: Were many of them teaching?

MR. FINK: Yeah.

MR. BROWN: Yeah?

MR. FINK: And they wound up - like they wound up, many of them, at Boston University.

MR. BROWN: When David Aronson -

MR. FINK: [Inaudible] like really, although it was a museum school, people would go over to Boston University.

MR. BROWN: Oh, That's right.

MR. FINK: Reed Kay, David Aronson, Joe Ablow, those are all Boston Museum people, and some of them are on the faculty, moved over to Boston University when they started their art school.

MR. BROWN: Uh-huh [affirmative]. Yeah.

MR. FINK: Actually, David Aronson was the head of the first art school.

MR. BROWN: Yeah. that was in the late '50s, I think, something like -

MR. FINK: Somewhere around there, yes.

MR. BROWN: Yeah. There were no - was no institutional backup in terms of exhibitions or collecting here, were there? I mean, was the -

MR. FINK: Well, the museum -

MR. BROWN: What about the Institute of Contemporary Art?

MR. FINK: They didn't do any collecting.

MR. BROWN: No, they don't have a collection.

MR. FINK: Of course, they still don't. But they did show - they had a show called "View," I guess it was called. Do you remember such a show called "View"?

MR. BROWN: I've heard of it.

MR. FINK: There are annual shows of Boston artists, and then they give a prize to whatever the jury or the director thought was the most outstanding painter or artist in that particular show. So that gave a little institutional support. But, I mean, the [inaudible], when it was on Newbury Street, became actually the enemy of the contemporary artist. You know about that whole story, don't you?

MR. BROWN: Well, I heard about the blowup in the late '40s or so.

MR. FINK: Right.

MR. BROWN: And did that attitude persist into the 1950s?

MR. FINK: Yeah.

MR. BROWN: Huh. There was a good deal of resentment among local artists?

MR. FINK: Yeah. But then the administration of it actually changed. James Plowden and Fred White left, and other people came in.

MR. BROWN: Yeah.

MR. FINK: And I think it was Tom Messer who started that view. There's a woman from Texas - I can't remember her name - who preceded Messer, and she had a show occasionally for local artists. But that was the only institutional support. The museum itself gave none at all.

MR. BROWN: The Museum of Fine Arts?

MR. FINK: Yes.

MR. BROWN: Yeah. What about -

MR. FINK: Which is what it should have been.

MR. BROWN: Sure. They gave no - they wouldn't -

MR. FINK: They didn't have any shows. They didn't buy the art. They didn't do anything. I don't think they - like Harold Zerbe was head of the Museum School, a very respected teacher and artist, and the museum didn't own a thing of his.

MR. BROWN: Right.

MR. FINK: It still doesn't, as far as I know, unless somebody's given them something.

MR. BROWN: Yeah. At best, they had maybe a show somewhere in the museum of current students at their school?

MR. FINK: Oh, at the - in the museum itself. But they didn't have a proper gallery like they do now. But they would show student work at the gallery and faculty work in the confines of the Museum School.

MR. BROWN: Right. But not in the museum proper.

MR. FINK: Right.

MR. BROWN: Yeah. What about the Harvard Art Museum? Did they play any role?

MR. FINK: In supporting local artists?

MR. BROWN: [Coughs] Excuse me. So you began to look at the individual collectors. Now, do you recall some

that you got to know early on when - those early years?

MR. FINK: Well, I think the - I think, well, Jerry Goldberg was the - I think I mentioned him.

MR. BROWN: No.

MR. FINK: No?

MR. BROWN: Huh-uh [negative].

MR. FINK: Well, he was a particular friend and supporter of Hyman Bloom. But he bought Boston artists in depth. He had - his house was - he lived in Brooklyn - was just full of Boston artists. And he - an opening wasn't really an opening unless Jerry Goldberg showed up. And he was a very nice man. He was a dress - he managed, actually, women's dresses, I think, or wholesaled women's dresses, I think. But he was always at the openings. He usually - not always, but usually - bought something. And he was the major collector of local artists. And then - and they weren't expensive pictures. I mean, he'd - you know, you'd buy a picture for - a painting, a decent painting, for $200, $300 at that point. But nonetheless, not many people bought them anyway even at those prices. But he bought. And he influenced a few other people that were friends of his to become interested. A man named [inaudible] - he was an ophthalmologist; I think I mentioned his name - Pollard, Dr. Pollard.

MR. BROWN: That's - okay.

MR. FINK: And he also bought local artists, not at the same scale as Jerry Goldberg, but he did become interested. And after Jerry Goldberg died from an elective operation, [inaudible] became sort of the luncheon - the Saturday luncheon partner of Hyman Bloom. He took over.

MR. BROWN: Oh, I see. Well, did you show Bloom at Mirski?

MR. FINK: No.

MR. BROWN: No?

MR. FINK: As a matter of fact, the very first day I came into Mirski's, when I got off the train that day and walked into Mirski's gallery, there was a picture at the end of the - in the back room, against the back wall. And I looked at it. It was a chandelier painting of Hyman Bloom. So Boris did have some paintings of Hyman Bloom, but he never showed while I was there. He showed at Swetzoff.

MR. BROWN: And what about the other major Boston-based or originated figure, Jack Levine?

MR. FINK: Jack Levine? He was already in New York at that point. And he showed with Downtown Gallery.

MR. BROWN: Yeah. Well, as you say, you stayed for a number of - 16 years off and on. You took some time off, you mentioned to me.

MR. FINK: There was a four-year period when I -

MR. BROWN: In the late '50s or early '60s, something like that. Because meanwhile, you'd married Barbara. You married, what, in '52?

MR. FINK: Right.

MR. BROWN: Yeah. So you were -

MR. FINK: And we had our children. Aaron was born in '55 in Joanna in '58.

MR. BROWN: Uh-huh [affirmative].

MR. FINK: And there was a period when - I think it had to do with Boris's personal life, which I don't think we need to go into - but it became difficult at the gallery. And I think money became very tight for Boris. And so he recommended I look for something else. It wasn't very - it wasn't like I was fired. In fact, I never actually stopped working. I did get a job with a contractor, a general contractor. I worked for four years in the office estimating, things like that.

MR. BROWN: Yeah.

MR. FINK: But during that four-year period, I worked for Boris at least once a week. I keep doing his books and his tax returns and other things. And sometimes on a Saturday I'd work in the gallery . And when he went on a trip somewhere - I can't remember where he went - but I stayed in the gallery while he was away. So I was

always in contact with him, even then, and working part-time even during that four-year period. Then he asked me to come back full-time, which I was glad to do because I -

MR. BROWN: Yeah. You preferred being there.

MR. FINK: Yeah. Right.

MR. BROWN: You've said that there was a promise, or maybe unstated, that eventually you might come into part ownership of the gallery.

MR. FINK: That's true. But that didn't ever work out.

MR. BROWN: Yeah

MR. FINK: And one of the principal reasons I left.

MR. BROWN: Did his family want to maintain complete control?

MR. FINK: Well, I don't know.

MR. BROWN: Or was he the only one really involved? You mentioned his daughter became a frame maker, but -

MR. FINK: Yeah. I think Boris could have done anything he wanted to do, although he mentioned as an excuse that his wife was sort of balking at the idea. But I don't - I personally never believed that. I think Boris just did what he wanted to do as far as the gallery was concerned.

MR. BROWN: Uh-huh [affirmative].

MR. FINK: And there were a lot of - but anyway, it was getting to the point where there was - he was having so much personal problems with members of his family, and that was draining money from the gallery.

MR. BROWN: Yeah. Yeah.

MR. FINK: It was not - it was a very unhealthy situation. And the biggest favor he did for me was not giving me any ownership in the gallery because I was free to leave.

MR. BROWN: Yeah.

MR. FINK: And I was glad to do it. I mean, I had to.

MR. BROWN: Yeah. Yeah. I wanted to ask, back to contemporary things in Boston, the Boston Arts Festival, that started in the early or mid-'50s.

MR. FINK: Uh-huh [affirmative].

MR. BROWN: And it lasted well into the '60s, I think. Were you always involved in any of that?

MR. FINK: Oh, yes. Yeah, all of our artists participated in it. We were very -

MR. BROWN: What was it - was it significant, or what would you say?

MR. FINK: It was - yes, it was, in the sense that people who were afraid to come into galleries went to the Boston Common and saw art.

MR. BROWN: Yeah.

MR. FINK: It wasn't displayed under ideal circumstances, all these tents, but it did attract people and brought the art scene to the attention of the general public. And there were performances as well, you know. And it was a very nice event.

MR. BROWN: Yeah. Would you say by the '60s, were people - was the interest in contemporary art growing gradually?

MR. FINK: Yes. Yeah.

MR. BROWN: Because you had - you began to have even more galleries, I'm sure, by then of contemporary art. You have Nexus. You have Kanegis.

MR. FINK: Kanegis opened - I'm not sure exactly when it opened, but Kanegis opened. Then Nexus opened on Charles Street.

MR. BROWN: Charles Street, yeah.

MR. FINK: And then later on there was Harcus Krakow opened.

MR. BROWN: Yeah. Nina Nielsen.

MR. FINK: Nielsen worked for Boris for a while in the frame shop, and she married [inaudible]. And Nielsen is her married name. And there's a Nielsen frame, these metal - welded metal frames.

MR. BROWN: Yeah. Yeah.

MR. FINK: That's a Nielsen. It's called a Nielsen.

MR. BROWN: Oh, I see.

MR. FINK: Her husband invented it. And that was the principal source for their money.

MR. BROWN: [Laughs.]

MR. FINK: She's now - they're now - she's divorced and remarried to somebody else. But that was the source of the money, was that frame that he invented.

MR. BROWN: So there were many more places for people to look. I mean, I gather was business becoming tougher or was it sort of -

MR. FINK: No. I think -

MR. BROWN: - generally getting better all around with more competition?

MR. FINK: No. I would say the emergence of more galleries was - it wasn't really that competitive. I think the emergence of more galleries actually stimulated interest, I mean, brought more people around. And it was now worth more - worth going to Newbury Street more often because there was more to see than, let's say, one gallery or two galleries. You could go gallery-hopping.

MR. BROWN: Uh-huh [affirmative].

MR. FINK: And Nielsen opened the gallery, and then Obelisk opened a gallery before they - then they merged with Harcus Krakow [inaudible]. And then they opened up one called Parker 470. Do you remember that?

MR. BROWN: Yes.

MR. FINK: The big, beautiful space but it not a very good location.

MR. BROWN: No, down to the south - lower Roxbury or something like that.

MR. FINK: Yeah. Right - it wasn't far from the museum, actually.

MR. BROWN: That's right.

MR. FINK: But south of Huntington Avenue.

MR. BROWN: Yeah. Uh-huh [affirmative].

MR. FINK: And they eventually gave that up, and they joined forces and opened up Harcus Krakow Rosen Sonnabend. It sounded like a law firm, but that was the name of the gallery. [Laughs.]

MR. BROWN: [Laughs.] That's right. And was Sonnabend connected with galleries elsewhere or -

MR. FINK: Well, she's a very good friend - she was a good friend of Phyllis Rosen, and she got involved in the art world through Phyllis.

MR. BROWN: And Phyllis, you might explain Phyllis Rosen.

MR. FINK: Phyllis Rosen, well, she actually ran the Nexus Gallery. She ran it after a while. And she was an art dealer. Never had her own gallery but always worked. But - well, she did have her own gallery. Obelisk was

Phyllis Rosen and Joan Sonnabend. And Obelisk still exists, actually, on paper.

MR. BROWN: Yeah.

MR. FINK: John Sonnabend still maintains that name. She works out of her home.

MR. BROWN: Uh-huh [affirmative]. There were - okay. There was one or so dealers who dealt in tribal or primitive art, didn't they, by then?

MR. FINK: Well, we did. Boris did.

MR. BROWN: Yeah. That's -

MR. FINK: And that was - that became a rather major function of part of the gallery, was - it happened, again, by referral. A dentist friend of ours who was frequent in the gallery who would [inaudible] - I can't remember his name - but he also had a position at the Peabody Museum of Harvard. And another - a man who's a medical missionary in Africa named George W. Harley had this incredible collection of African art, mostly masks and some - principally masks. And he was being financed partly by the Peabody Museum for his mission, his medical work in - I think it was Nigeria. And he had this huge collection. He came - and he needed more money to continue his work in Africa.

So he came back to Boston and gave part of the collection that he had to the Peabody Museum for the work - for the funding that they had given him and were still giving him. But he wanted to sell the other part of the collection to raise some money. And this dentist who was at the Peabody Museum knew us, and brought this Dr. Harley into the gallery. And he had these suitcases that he opened up that were full of these incredible African masks.

MR. BROWN: Umm.

MR. FINK: And one of the great shows we had there was we had this - we showed his - I mean, we had three rooms full of African masks that would be worth a fortune these days. These were great ones. Artists were buying. Everything was buying. We sold them very, very well.

MR. BROWN: Was this in the '50s -

MR. FINK: Yeah.

MR. BROWN: - or later. Yeah.

MR. FINK: And I got to know Harley pretty well. He wrote a book, a monograph, called Masks as Agents of Social Control in Southeast - or Northwest Nigeria [sic]. ([Transcriber's Note: Actually Masks as Agents of Social Control in Northeast Liberia [George W. Harley; Boston, Peabody Museum of American Archaeology: 1950]) And I can't remember what sector. I think it's probably Northwest Nigeria and Liberia. And he gave me - he taught me an awful lot about these masks and the whole culture that gave rise to these, and the functions that these masks - some were dancers; some were doctors; some initiated boys into the so-called Poro society.

MR. BROWN: Poro?

MR. FINK: P-o-r-o. It was a secret society that existed in - I think it's really Liberia. And they were called Dan masks, d-a-n. And he had others, other kinds. And we continued to deal with him and get masks from him, and also from other sources. Now we started looking elsewhere for [inaudible].

MR. BROWN: Uh-huh [affirmative].

MR. FINK: We bought some primitive art - there's a man named John Fredericks [phonetic] who designed women's hats, and he had a very lovely collection of African art, statutes -

[END TAPE 1, SIDE B]

MR. BROWN: This is tape 2. We're talking about then called primitive art, and how well it did, and how you at Mirski began looking.

MR. FINK: Yeah. We were very successful. And because it was so successful - and Boris and I generally liked it a lot, something that also was - it was a good thing for - made it very nice - made it easy to like. But we liked it anyway, of course, for itself. They were great. Because we were handling at that point really great stuff, not the kind of thing you see being sold on the sidewalk outside the Museum of Modern Art in New York.

MR. BROWN: Yeah.

MR. FINK: But, I mean [laughs], really great stuff.

MR. BROWN: And the prices, I suppose, were quite low then.

MR. FINK: Oh, for $40, $50, $60, you'd get a great African mask.

MR. BROWN: Wow.

MR. FINK: A great one. And even - very rarely there were these small messenger masks that were regular masks, but they were very small so a messenger could carry them under his arm.

MR. BROWN: Oh.

MR. FINK: And they were given, the messengers were, from one tribe to hours because they would identify the messenger as being legitimate to carry a message.

MR. BROWN: If he had that with him?

MR. FINK: Yeah. If he had that little - but those are very rare. And we had - I don't know how many. We had 50, 60 of them in that one show.

MR. BROWN: Wow. Huh. Was this an interest that Boris had had even before then or -

MR. FINK: No. It was really something that was dumped in our laps.

MR. BROWN: Yeah. In this - the way you described.

MR. FINK: But we liked it very much, and it was something to follow up on. We continued to show other primitive artists also. There was a man named Ford - I can't remember his first name - who had a huge, huge collection of pre-Columbian. And because of our reputation now of having dealt with - you know, with the primitive arts, he came to us with this great collection of pre-Columbian. I still have a couple of his - of the pieces from that collection in my house. And he had very find things. And we sold - had a big show of Mexican art, which also did very well. And we would - we actively went out looking for the art now at this point. We wound up with some Eskimo things, which were very - those were the most sought after -

MR. BROWN: Were they?

MR. FINK: - because they were most rare. Boris, in fact, bought a huge totem pole, an enormous totem pole, and we -

MR. BROWN: From the Northwest Coast?

MR. FINK: Yeah. And we even took it to Provincetown when we had a gallery there a couple summers. And I remember it blew over in a hurricane one year.

[Laughter.]

MR. BROWN: Well, the Eskimo art was - this would have been carvings at that point. Right?

MR. FINK: Yes.

MR. BROWN: Or just -

MR. FINK: Yeah. Not the stone carving. Not that slate carving. These were wood.

MR. BROWN: Wood?

MR. FINK: Masks. Totem poles. Rattles.

MR. BROWN: Yeah.

MR. FINK: Things of that sort.

MR. BROWN: Yeah.

MR. FINK: Beautifully carved. Beautifully carved. But they were not the stone carvings that you see more

commonly.

MR. BROWN: Uh-huh [affirmative]. There was an Origins Gallery here, started in the '60s.

MR. FINK: Yeah. She bought stuff from -

MR. BROWN: Which I think specialized a great deal -

MR. FINK: Edyth Shulman was her name.

MR. BROWN: Uh-huh [affirmative].

MR. FINK: She and her husband Morris, who was a - we were very friendly with them. And she bought things from us and started - actually started out her gallery with things that she had bought from us.

MR. BROWN: Hmm. Well, what do you think attracted people in the '50s and '60s to this then called primitive art as opposed to your local young artists' work?

MR. FINK: Well, it was exotic. It was very different.

MR. BROWN: Yeah.

MR. FINK: And the quality was really apparent to anybody.

MR. BROWN: Uh-huh [affirmative].

MR. FINK: And they were old, and yet they were very contemporary looking as well.

MR. BROWN: Uh-huh [affirmative].

MR. FINK: You know, Modigliani and Picasso had already made that kind of image famous.

MR. BROWN: Yeah. Yeah.

MR. FINK: I mean, they borrowed from the primitive arts.

MR. BROWN: Oh, yeah.

MR. FINK: So that it wasn't altogether strange, that strange.

MR. BROWN: Yeah.

MR. FINK: But it just had an exotic quality that attracted people because it was very good art.

MR. BROWN: Yeah. No doubt. By the late '50s or certainly by the '60s, you're beginning to - there are increasing numbers of people who are trained to be artists, aren't there? I mean, there's -

MR. FINK: Oh, yeah. They were pouring out of art schools at this point. Not many of them, you know, wind up being practicing artists, but the art schools were -

MR. BROWN: Really moving, huh?

MR. FINK: - really scooting them out.

MR. BROWN: So that presumably you were looking at people well beyond your core of Boston, latter-day Boston school people, Zerbe pupils and all. Were you beginning to pick up by the '60s a number of new people in the Mirski Gallery?

MR. FINK: Yeah. I mean, there were always - there were artists being added. I remember Michael Mazur, for example, who's now a very prominent Boston artist. He was then living and teaching in Rhode Island. And he became a member of the gallery. And I think - I can't remember when Hyman Swetzoff, you know - do you remember when he was killed? Did they -

MR. BROWN: No. It was late '60s, I think, maybe a little earlier.

MR. FINK: It was late '60s. You're right. No, it was probably '69, '70, something like that. But the source of the artists - not many artists were added, you know, every year because that was a fairly full house already. But if an outstanding artist from the museum school was around, like Henry Schwartz, for example, who's slightly later

than, say, Aronson and Chaet and Barbara Swan from the museum school - he's a couple years their junior - then he came on because he was an outstanding student.

MR. BROWN: Yeah.

MR. FINK: And mostly the core of artists stayed fairly close. I mean, Dubois came back from Europe, and he would have a show.

MR. BROWN: Now, he'd been a contemporary of Barbara's in France and in school with him?

MR. FINK: Right. He was in school with her. And he moved afterwards out to California.

MR. BROWN: Were there others from other regions that came in sort of on their own?

MR. FINK: Not really.

MR. BROWN: Not many?

MR. FINK: It stayed mostly - it stayed a fairly Boston-oriented group.

MR. BROWN: So you've mentioned in - what was it in - that you'd decided you would go off on your own by the later '60s?

MR. FINK: '67, I believe, I opened.

MR. BROWN: '67. And what were you going to start with? I mean, did you have a stable in mind or - you presumably had assembled something.

MR. FINK: Well, some of the artists that were with Mirski came with me who - because they associated with - they were closer to me than they were Boris, both on a personal level and on an artistic level. So some of those people came. And also like Tovish, who also - and Marianne Pineda both came. And an artist named Elbert Weinberg, who actually was a sculptor.

MR. BROWN: Elbert Weinberg.

MR. FINK: Who actually came from Hartford, Connecticut. But he was - he wouldn't - he was not a Boston artist, really.

MR. BROWN: Yeah.

MR. FINK: And he had some fairly early success. He was on the cover of an arts magazine at one point with a piece of sculpture. The Jewish Museum had bought this big shofar player from him. And he had gone to Rome on some traveling fellowships. In those days, the cast - there was a lot of - that's where sculptors who wanted to cast in bronze would wind up because it was very cheap and had a lot of - many foundries and very highly skilled foundries there.

MR. BROWN: Yeah. Yeah.

MR. FINK: He was also with Mirski at this point. So he was one artist that was not really in the Boston group, the early - that did come to Mirski Gallery.

MR. BROWN: Yeah.

MR. FINK: But he also - he decided to come with me when I opened up the Alpha Gallery.

MR. BROWN: Uh-huh [affirmative]. Was there hard feelings when you -

MR. FINK: Absolutely.

MR. BROWN: - decided to open up on your own?

MR. FINK: I think there must have been.

MR. BROWN: Yeah. But it wasn't talked about much with Mirski?

MR. FINK: No.

MR. BROWN: You just did it. [Laughs.]

MR. FINK: As I say, it was a necessity. And a lot of the artists realized the necessity, and they - some of them volunteered. Some I asked. People like Aronson and Baskin, who were the most important artists for Boris, I didn't ask. In fact, I was so friendly with Baskin that I went out to talk to him and told him what I was going to - what I'm doing. But, you know, you can't leave Boris. It would have broken Boris's back. And Leonard understood that, so he stayed with Boris.

MR. BROWN: Yeah.

MR. FINK: And David Aronson was also very close with Boris, and so he stayed. And there were others that stayed. But there were a number that came with me, and I showed - then Mazur came with me, for example, and a friend of Mazur named Robert Birmelin, who's a New York artist, was in my original group of the Alpha Gallery. And a sculptor named Philip Grausman, who's not associated - who's a New York artist, who was showing, I think, with Borgenicht. He came in with - I think about the original group of artists that I started the Alpha Gallery with.

MR. BROWN: Mazur. Birmelin. Yes.

MR. FINK: Oh, and Chaet was in that group. Obviously, Swan was in that Group. Marianne Pineda and Harold Tovish and Elbert Weinberg. I have pictures of that opening so - I'd have to look at -

MR. BROWN: Yeah.

MR. FINK: An artist named James Hennessey. I don't - who is not - who was also in Rome at the American Academy. I knew some people through Chaet and through other people at the American Academy. And he joined the gallery. I think he was in our opening show.

MR. BROWN: You said a bit earlier some of these artists that you brought along, over from Mirski or otherwise, you were close to on a personal basis, but also you said artistically or aesthetically. What would it have been at that time as you look back that appealed to you in these people? Presumably - since I guess that's what you meant, really, is that these were people who really appealed to you. Their work appealed to you.

MR. FINK: Yeah. Well, and I still do. And there were some artists that were associated with Boris at the time whose work I cared for less. I mean, it isn't inevitable -

MR. BROWN: Sure. Oh, yeah.

MR. FINK: - when you're dealing with a group of artists that you're going to like some artists' work better than the others.

MR. BROWN: Yeah. Yeah.

MR. FINK: So I only asked those whose work I cared for. There was no overriding thought like it has to be expressionists or it has to be this or that. I did it mostly on a gut basis that I just liked their work.

MR. BROWN: Yeah. And that was an important thing. You had to - for the most part, you wanted work around you that you liked.

MR. FINK: You have to. It's the only way you can really sell it, if you believe in it.

MR. BROWN: Yeah. Yeah. How did that first opening go? That was September 1967.

MR. FINK: Late September of '67. It went incredibly well. We couldn't fit the people in. It had overflowed onto the sidewalk. Very, very - very well attended. And it got off to a real good start.

MR. BROWN: Yeah.

MR. FINK: I have pictures. I have photographs of it.

MR. BROWN: Yeah?

MR. FINK: You know Steve Trefonides?

MR. BROWN: Uh-huh [affirmative].

MR. FINK: He took pictures of the opening. So I have a number of those still.

MR. BROWN: Did you think of documenting then what you were doing?

MR. FINK: No.

MR. BROWN: Or not at that; that was just a celebratory -

MR. FINK: Yes. Yes, I don't -

MR. BROWN: He just offered to do it?

MR. FINK: Yeah.

MR. BROWN: He's someone you would have known pretty well?

MR. FINK: I knew him very well. We were very friendly with him. He was - he never showed with us. He showed with - well, he turned to photography. He's a painter, as you know, and a draftsman. But he made his living principally by commissioned photographs. And that was something he did on his own. There was no - and as far as showing his paintings and drawings, I think he showed Carl Sinbad, I believe.

MR. BROWN: Yeah. Sinbad is at a photography gallery.

MR. FINK: Yeah. But he had a regular gallery he showed other things besides photography.

MR. BROWN: Yeah.

MR. FINK: That is not far from Mirski, actually, on that block between Dartmouth and Exeter.

MR. BROWN: Did you consider showing photography?

MR. FINK: I've had a - not really. Not really, I'm going to say.

MR. BROWN: No?

MR. FINK: I've had photography shows.

MR. BROWN: Yeah.

MR. FINK: But they were sort of one-shot deals. I never thought about -

MR. BROWN: Yeah. Well, say, in the '50s or '60s, photography wasn't a major seller, was it, with a few exceptions?

MR. FINK: Well, I wasn't - probably not. I was not involved in it. Carl Sinbad -

MR. BROWN: He'd be - yeah.

MR. FINK: He was the photography gallery in Boston at that time.

MR. BROWN: Yeah. And I think he was one of the first of modern times.

MR. FINK: That's right. He was. I saw him just the other day. [Inaudible.]

MR. BROWN: Uh-huh [affirmative]. So you felt you'd made the right choice when you - judging from this opening and the reception?

MR. FINK: Oh, the opening was a great success.

MR. BROWN: Yeah.

MR. FINK: And I never really had any second thoughts about opening the gallery. And it was hardly a choice. I'm not going into all kinds of other details, but it was - I had to leave the Mirski Gallery. So it was either continue in the art business as a dealer, because that's what I knew how to do, or something else altogether. And I didn't consider anything else, but I just considered the art business.

MR. BROWN: How did this work out, that -

MR. FINK: At this point I had made - there were more clients around, by the late '60s, and I knew them all.

MR. BROWN: Yeah.

MR. FINK: I knew a lot of them quite well. And I was - I felt they would not - you know, that they would patronize

me as well as they would any gallery.

MR. BROWN: Uh-huh [affirmative]. How did you pick the name Alpha?

MR. FINK: Just Barbara and I were just shouting names out to each other, and finally we said that. Oh, that's good. I always joke that it's "Al Fink" for in brief.

[Laughter.]

MR. BROWN: Did Barbara support you in this?

MR. FINK: Oh, yes. Yeah. She was all for it.

MR. BROWN: That all worked out - had worked out very well. I mean, your young family and her painting all the time, and then your -

MR. FINK: Right. No, she was very supportive of the move, and she realized, as well as I did, the necessity of it.

MR. BROWN: Yeah.

[END OF INTERVIEW.]

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