

Boston University

OpenBU

<http://open.bu.edu>

Faculty

Professor Patricia Hills

1983-02-28

Interview with Bernarda Bryson Shahn

<https://hdl.handle.net/2144/49112>

"Downloaded from OpenBU. Boston University's institutional repository."

INTERVIEW WITH BERNARDA BRYSON SHAHN
FEBRUARY 28, 1983
INTERVIEWER: PATRICIA HILLS

PH: PATRICIA HILLS
BS: BERNARDA BRYSON SHAHN

PH: I'm talking with Mrs. Ben Shahn. Today is February 28th, 1983.

[Muffled conversation and brief stoppage of tape as PH and BS prepare for taping.]

PH: What I'm trying to do today is just to talk with you about Ben Shahn and also about your own involvement in the 1930s. And although I've already done the exhibition and I've organized it, for the *Social Concern and Urban Realism*, I am continuing my work, and I have a Guggenheim this year, and what I want to eventually do is to write a book on socially concerned and politically involved artists. But I want to deal with their art. In other words, why is it that Ben Shahn chooses the sort of style that he chooses? How does that relate to his social concerns and to what he thinks about art?

BS: You must recognize that there are conflicts in most people's lives, including Ben's, and that's one of the places where there is a conflict, in my mind. But ultimately, I think that conflict will be resolved, I'll tell you why a little bit later. I'll tell you one thing that I think should be taken into consideration in any discussion of socially oriented art, and that is that there are two very diverse approaches. One is the visual elaboration of an idea. The other is a person who has an inner compulsion and whose work is definitely driven and compelled by what he really believes. The one, I think, the first, I think ordinarily produces a sort of an irritating and unconvincing art, whereas I think that the second, when a person is truly motivated, when his feelings are involved, I think that that is the basis for social art. For instance, I would think of Goya, you know, who had passion,

instigated by the things that he had seen, experienced, and believed. And I think his work, then, fires the viewer with the same kind of an emotion that he obviously felt. Whereas I think many of the artists of the 30s were working from dogma and principles, and many of the principles really canned and handed down to them, so that that work, while the artists themselves, I'm sure, were perfectly sincere, I think the work lacks that intensity that it would have had, had it come from a more deeply rooted human experience and from a more deeply rooted emotion. Now, the reason why I think Ben was, very honestly think that Ben was different from most of the social realists was that he was really intensely moved by situations — intensely, not just intellectually, but emotionally — and so I think that his work has the kind of, has the kind of style from his own point of view that comes from a great impatience to express what he feels.

[Muffled conversation; tape paused apparently for adjustment.]

PH: Just wanted to make sure I was picking up your voice.

BS: Yes.

PH: I think what comes through in the writings that he has done is this belief in communication, that communication is so very important. Well, anyway, you started to say about the difference between him and some of the other artists, I mean, he was independent, right?

BS: Yes, quite.

PH: He wasn't a member of the Communist Party.

BS: No, he wasn't. And he was very close to it at various times.

PH: But then everybody was.

BS: I was a member of the Communist Party, but Ben never would really quite go that far, although he — I'll tell you, his problem was that they were already trying to tell him what to do, and it always drove him in the opposite direction, every time.

PH: When they told him what to do, what do you mean by that? What sort of thing would they be telling him to do?

BS: For instance, I, as a member of the Party, for about a year before I dropped out of it —squirmed out of it — I would, we had, for instance, in the Union, I was the head of the Union, and in the Union we had a bureau, so-called, five people, and in our bureau there was one individual from Thirteenth Street, that was the Central Committee of the Communist Party. And that person would come to us with directives, things that they wanted done, things that they wanted to accomplish. [Laughs]

PH: Would that person be somebody like V.J. Jerome?

BS: Very much like V.J. Jerome. Although he would have been the actual master of theory. [Laughs].

PH: What was the name, do you remember the name of the person?

BS: Oh, I don't remember the people. I do remember Jerome. Let me see who else. There was someone named Martin in the Central Committee. I wouldn't want to venture the names, because I've forgotten. So these people would come to us and tell us what to do. That was the function of the bureau, to instruct the Communist fraction within the Union. The fraction, so-called, was the members of the Party who would function in the Union. Then we also had a Steering Committee, and the Steering Committee, although nominations for offices were supposed to come, and did come, from the floor, the Steering Committee had the function of trying to maneuver the vote toward certain

individuals. One of my quarrels with the Party, one of the reasons why I dropped out of it, was that I was asked not to recognize certain people, such as our Lovestonite friends, the Dimitroffs, Lucie [Lucienne] Bloch and [Stephen Pope] Dimitroff, for instance, were Lovestonites, and then I had a couple of friends who were Socialists, and then there was a lovely fellow named [Thomas G.?] LoMedico who was part of the Sculptors' Union, you know, the Stone Carvers' [?] Union [sic - official name was Stone Cutters' Union]. We had an enormous membership. So I refused to — I always recognized people if they asked for the floor.

PH: Now was this in 1933, you said?

BS: I would say '33 to '34.

PH: That was just right after the PWAP [Public Works of Art Project] was formed? Was it along about that time?

BS: About that time, yes, because I was on the PWAP. So I was constantly brought up on charges, because I did not cooperate with Thirteenth Street. Ultimately I pulled out, and Ben encouraged me to pull out.

PH: Recognizing these people from the floor, what was really at issue, it was just about how to conduct union business, wasn't it? It didn't have to do with art, did it?

BS: No, not at all. The whole function of the Union, from the Communist Party point of view, the whole function of the Union had nothing to do with art. It was only to steer people into the Communist Party, and as art, to produce propaganda for the Communist Party. Now, the Communist Party was really — when Roosevelt showed himself to be totally dedicated to the welfare of artists, teachers, everybody, the country, the Communist Party then began to try to undercut Roosevelt. And that infuriated me,

because, for instance, we were supposed to, we were asked, or instructed, to, I think refer to him as a “misleader of the people” and really ridiculous sophomoric terms. [Inaudible - “which we wouldn’t do”?] The artists, you know, were all of them too sophisticated, we all laughed it off, but it got to the place where it was insufferable and that was why I pulled out of it. But there were many artists then who were really doing things — you know, for instance, the big thing of the Scottsboro Boys, it was probably an unjust conviction, however, to be instructed by the Communist Party to do something about the Scottsboro Boys, you know, nobody’s going to work passionately or intently about a thing like that because it wasn’t their issue. And if they had felt it themselves, and if they’d come to it themselves, then it would have been a different thing and that’s the distinction that I’m making. And I don’t think it’s exclusively a Communist issue, by a long shot. I think it’s an issue right now.

PH: Right, racism.

BS: Yes.

PH: I mean to be involved with that would be taking an anti-racist stand.

BS: Well, there’s another thing. It’s not just that. For instance, I think right now that, while I don’t think that galleries are seeking to tell artists what to do, I think that the reviewers of art are very definitely trying to steer art in certain directions. And I think that bowing to that is as unworthy as bowing to the Communist directors or any other directors. I think the function of an artist is to think freely and to act freely, and in fact, I think it’s a terribly important function.

PH: Shahn was involved, though, in the Tom Mooney series, wasn’t that something that the Communist Party was involved with?

BS: It surely was, but he had no relationship to it from that point of view. I'll tell you what Ben's — I'm just doing a book now, I mean, I've designed it. Ben did a series of paintings when he just got back from France on the Dreyfus case, and he and Walker had a joint exhibition, Walker Evans, had a joint exhibition at Truro, and Walker showed his photographs of around that area, and Ben did these Dreyfus pictures. And Ben was so impressed with the degree to which he could throw himself into that thing, how much it meant to him to do those things, that he realized that he had something, you know. So then the next thing that he did was the Tom Mooney thing. No, the next thing he did was the Sacco and Vanzetti thing.

PH: In other words, the idea of doing things in a series, right?

BS: That again is almost a stylistic turn.

PH: Yeah, I use it that way.

BS: Good. Because Ben also felt that once you were into an area, your whole feelings and your whole intelligence and your information are all involved in an area. To do one painting and drop it doesn't seem quite enough. It's nice to fill that area that you're concerned with. And so this thing of doing things in series. Besides, he adored Giotto, and he always wanted to, he always said that he envied Giotto for having a cause in Christianity that he could throw himself into with such utter belief and no misgivings and so on, and so when Ben found this Dreyfus thing, he did the first thing, the Dreyfus, rather in a light mood, and then he took it so seriously, and in France he had gone to a lot of the demonstrations about Sacco and Vanzetti and so on and so forth, and then he said to himself, "Gee, this is a real thing, and I do feel it," and so on, and he did those, and then he did the Tom Mooney thing which was a big issue at that time. Sure, it was an

issue of the Communist Party, but Ben certainly didn't get any guidance from that source. He wouldn't have taken it if he had.

PH: But it was sort of in the air.

BS: Oh yes.

PH: When he did that, then, you were probably in the Communist Party?

BS: No, no, I didn't even know Ben at that point. I had been teaching in the museum school in Columbus, and I also wrote for the newspaper, for the *Ohio State Journal*, I wrote the art column and the art news and so on. During the Diego Rivera hassle at Rockefeller Center, I said to my editor, "Don't you think it would be a good idea if I went over to New York and interviewed Rivera?" And he said, "Yes, that'd be a great idea." So I did. I had already written about Ben, because I had seen the Sacco and Vanzetti things, and I thought they were very exciting, and I had written about them. So Ben was with Diego when I went to the New School to talk to him. I told Ben that I had written stuff about you, and that I admired his work very much, and then I forgot all about it and went back to Columbus. And then about a year later, I came over to New York. The first night I was there, I went to that Unemployed Artists Association meeting and for some reason they insisted on my being secretary [laughing] and I said, "Look, I just arrived here, I don't even know anybody's name." They wanted me to be secretary, so I did. Then I thought that it would be a very good idea if we formed ourselves into a union, and everybody else seemed to think so too, so we made ourselves a union and we got a headquarters on 17th Street, and away we went.

PH: According to the chronology of the formation of the Artists' Union, you know, when I read other people, I'm not always too sure if they have their facts right, but

according to this Gerald Monroe, and I mentioned to you that he wrote his dissertation on the Artists' Union —

BS: Yes you did. I'd love to have known what he said.

PH: Well, it's a long dissertation. You can order it. It's easy to get through University Microfilms, and you get a small Xerox copy of it. He said that there was the Emergency Work Bureau, and a number of artists formed the Emergency Work Bureau Artists' Group, and from out of that came the Unemployed Artists Association, and from that came the Artists' Union. See, the same group of people. And it was really, well, of course it wasn't really a union.

BS: There's another thing you're leaving out, the Gibson Committee. The Gibson Committee was a group of private art appreciators, of art patrons, who were very concerned with what was happening to artists. So they formed a committee to get jobs for artists. One of the things that they did, I remember [laughing], was the ceiling of the Church in Saint Mark's Place, and things of that sort, about which there are some very funny stories.

PH: I think that Gerald Monroe —

BS: Did he know the story about Saint Mark's?

PH: Well, he quotes you as saying that they put a hammer and sickle —

BS: They did indeed.

PH: On the ceiling —

BS: Yes they did.

PH: And then they tried to paint it over, but in a few weeks it bled through.

BS: That was the big joke. See, all these young guys — in those days, everybody was very left. So these guys painted this enormous hammer and sickle on the [laughs] ceiling of Saint Mark's and then as he said, they painted two or three coats of white over it and forgot about it, and then after a while somebody whispered that [laughing] the hammer and sickle were coming through, and so people didn't notice it, you know, because only the people who knew would come in and they would see. It was a great joke in that area. I don't know whether it's still there. That was just one of the jokes. Now the Gibson Committee — it was the people who were helped by the Gibson Committee who formed the Unemployed Artists Association. Now, I didn't know any of the circumstances before that time. When I came into town and went down to the Church of All Nations, where that first meeting that I attended was held, and came out as secretary of the organization, then from then on, that's the extent of my background in it.

PH: So then you were sort of off and running. Then you were the secretary, and then later you became the —

BS: No, I was the secretary. And then about three of us, let's see, I think Phil Bard, and Max Spivak -- let's see, who else — Ed Lenny [phonetic] was one of them, Boris Gorelick — let me see, who else — we were the first ones, as I recall. Hugo Gellert wasn't in it at that particular point. So we were the ones who decided that it would be fun to be, good to be a union, then everyone said, "A union, what have we got to strike for?" We all agreed we had nothing to strike for, but we'd be a union anyway, so we were. We just simply formed ourselves in to a union. I wish I had the dates, I don't know the dates. And after, I came to know Ben, but at this time, there were no really eminent artists in it. Some of them later, Mike Loew was one of them too, was one of the first people. Some

time later, the more important artists, when we really had a union, the more important artists joined. [Yasuo] Kuniyoshi, and Stuart [Davis], and Ben, and — let me see — oh, gee, I can't remember, but everybody, practically everybody. I think there were just two or three people who didn't belong to the union. Reggie Marsh never belonged to it.

PH: He always, didn't he get steady work, though, Reginald Marsh?

BS: I don't know. He was on PWAP.

PH: He did the murals in the Custom House. But Marsh wasn't political at all, right? Although he was always drawn to these, some of the strongest issues.

BS: He was political in a very fundamental way, and that is that he had a wonderful sense of the reality of very simple, ordinary people, and I can't think of any more native way of being political than that. He wasn't political in the sense of [inaudible] to politics, no.

PH: Was he, did he live a different kind of lifestyle than the other artists, Reginald Marsh?

BS: Yes.

PH: He was more upper class, wasn't he?

BS: Well, a lot of the artists were quite upper class. You know, there were a lot of people who — it wasn't a class thing, they pretended a lot of class stuff, but it wasn't real. Reginald Marsh — in the first place he was never poor, I'm sure of that, but nevertheless he was on PWAP. I think the thing about him, the same as Adolf Dehn, and that is that he was a very solitary person, and I think that he did not — he may have been a little snobbish about joining the union. I don't think so, though, actually because of the very work that he did. I didn't know him terribly well, but I knew him and liked him very

much. I always admired him [inaudible]. But for instance, Adolf Dehn — I think Adolf actually did belong to the Union, but you never saw him, and he was always alone, always around the street drawing, always around streetcars drawing, always standing in the corner of a building drawing, and that kind of thing, and that was just the kind of person that he was. And also very shy. I think Lloyd told me that Reggie Marsh was shy too. Lloyd and he had been very very good friends, had been friends since their childhood, I think.

PH: Marsh and Lloyd?

BS: Yeah. I think so. Hopper didn't belong to the Union. But then he was already up on the Cape at that time. He was a great friend of Ben's.

PH: Hopper was.

BS: Yeah.

PH: I thought that Hopper was a very solitary man.

BS: Yes, he was.

PH: And very much of a loner.

BS: Yes.

PH: And he and his wife, they never had any children, they were really just

[inaudible].

BS: Now, Kuniyoshi at that time — then we started *Art Front*, so I asked about six artists of considerable reputation if they would be on the editorial board. And as I recall I asked Ben and Yoss [phonetic] and Stuart and I forget what other people were on it.

There were a few of us who did most of the work, but we wanted the names. Stuart was

wonderful, Stuart Davis, an abstract painter, was very terrific. He writes wonderfully.

Another person who was never a member of the Artists' Union was Benton.

PH: Everybody hated him, I thought.

BS: What?

PH: Everybody hated Benton.

BS: He hated everybody, put it that way. [They laugh.] But actually, I'm very fond of Tom Benton. I didn't like his work, but he was such a, sort of a little misanthrope that I liked him. And many, many years after all this all over, there was a party at the Institute of Arts and Letters. Tom, who's about my height, came over and put his arm around me and said, "I want to be photographed with your husband." [Laughing] And I said, "What?" Because they're like this, you know, real enemies. And he said, "Yeah, I want to be photographed with Ben." And so I went and found Ben. And the two of them put their arms around each other [laughing] for a photograph, and this was really amazing, because we'd had some really funny brushes with Benton.

PH: He was very scrappy. He was very "anti" the left, right?

BS: He was "anti" the left, but in a kind of a leftist way. [Laughs.] No, he wasn't left.

PH: Actually, he's been described more as a populist.

BS: That's precisely what he was, exactly. In fact he came from populist country. And he came also from a political family that I think were a populist family, if I'm not mistaken. But that's exactly what he was, populist.

PH: He hated big government, you know, he was suspicious of urban [inaudible].

BS: He hated Roosevelt. You're quite right, that was exactly the right word for him. [Laughs.] Well, it was a very funny time. Don't you want to ask some questions?

PH: I want to get back to the question about Dreyfus. What was it about the Dreyfus — considering that the Dreyfus case was the end of the 19th century, why was Shahn so intensely involved with it? Even though he had gone to Europe — why was it that he seized on that particular incident?

BS: I'll tell you, as a matter of fact, I'm just sitting down to write that right now, because they asked me to write an introduction to this Dreyfus book.

PH: What is this book? It sounds interesting.

BS: I'll tell you what. Ben did nine watercolors of the various persons, I call it the *dramatis personae* of the Dreyfus Affair. They were sold here and there, and I don't know how many years later, we were in France, and we were near Dijon, and having a wonderful meal at a little inn. And a young gentleman with a red beard came up to us and said to Ben, "I know your face. Can I ask who you are?" And Ben told him. And he said, "I'm a publisher, and I've always wanted to publish some work of yours." And Ben said, "That sounds great." And this fellow, his name was Arnold Fawcus, and he was the owner of the Trianon Press, a very, very elegant press. He had a 12th century chateau that was a dream in Flavigny[?], which is on the Paris side of Dijon. So we sat around in this strange old chateau and talked about books, and Ben told him that he had done these pochoirs, not pochoirs, he'd done these watercolors — partly watercolor, partly gouache — on the Dreyfus case, and Fawcus said, "Oh, that's very exciting." He said, "I have in captivity a rare genius, a Monsieur Crampe, and Monsieur Crampe does these pochoirs that are just unbelievable." So the upshot of all that was that Ben came back here, collected all the Dreyfus things, borrowed them from the owners, and we took them back to France. And Monsieur Crampe made incredible pochoirs. He would use from 45 to 50

plates to make one of these things. Fifteen greens and 40 grays, literally almost. And so he did three hundred and some, 380 I think, of the whole group, with the exception of the Zola, which we could never find. And so then all these pochoirs were put aside because Fawcus wanted to do a huge Haggadah, which is a Jewish Passover thing with the legends and all that business in it, that Ben had also at a very early stage made pictures for. So they put the pochoirs aside and they did this enormous Haggadah, and then Ben did a very elegant Ecclesiastes, which he hand-wrote, and Fawcus published that, and very beautifully, it was not only Arches paper but Richard de Bas, the most elegant Arches paper, and bound in leather, and vellum and all that kind of thing, and gold-leafed, [inaudible] beautiful. I'll show them to you. You'll see them.

PH: I'd like that.

BS: So then, Ben and Arnold Fawcus, both of them being, I think, geniuses, quarreled, and the Dreyfus things were never published. And so, recently — Arnold died after Ben did — they were sitting over in France, and a man in Cincinnati heard about them, a very wealthy man in Cincinnati, and he bought the whole thing. And the reason I'm doing it is he asked me if I would design the book, and I said I most assuredly would, and have. So that's why I'm writing right now about Ben's particular interest in the Dreyfus thing, which I'll now tell you.

PH: That's a good introduction. [They laugh.]

BS: Ben was coming back from France. Now, he had gone to France, you know, like all Americans, he wanted to soak up the French point of view, the whole thing that is French. He went to the Sorbonne to study French, and he went to the Académie de la Grande Chaumière, and he lived in France, and his first daughter was born in Paris, and

so on. So he was coming back to this country on a boat, and he had begun to say to himself that there was something wrong about the way he was painting. He was even painting some abstract things, and so on and so forth. He actually said that he painted like Cézanne, then he painted like Dufy, then he painted like Segonzac [laughing], and so on and so forth. Anyway, on the ship, on his way back here, he found a book about Dreyfus, and he was on a ship, so he read it. He got very excited about it. He started looking up all kinds of contemporaneous newspapers, and all the photographs that he could find, and the experts, and so on. He had all that material just whirling around inside him when Walker said, “Let’s have a show.”

PH: Hudson Walker?

BS: No, no, Walker Evans.

PH: Walker Evans. Right.

BS: So Ben did it. But the reason why it was important in Ben’s life is that he was already disturbed. He said to me, he said that here he was in France, and everything was line, form, and non-objective business, you know, line, form, and whatever else, I forget. Texture and —

PH: Color.

BS: Color, too. [Laughs] He was doing all that, and then he said he started saying to himself, “Here I am, a Russian-Jewish woodcarver’s son and grandson, and I’m full of the Talmud and I’m full of the lore of Judaism, and my father was a Socialist, and my grandfather was a Socialist, and what the hell am I doing here with line, form, and color?” And this was really disturbing him when he came across this Dreyfus thing and was just terribly interested in it. And the funny thing is that all the artists —

PH: That sort of all happened on the ship coming back?

BS: No, it had happened. His doubts about his work were building up in him. All the French artists, as you well know, even to André Breton, who was the father of most of the present-day art, they were all of them highly political and very involved in all those causes. So Ben was in Truro and he was painting these Cézanne-like beach scenes and bathers and that kind of thing, when he did this Dreyfus thing. And then this just hit him like a bolt of lightning. And he said, "This is for me. You know, I can involve myself, I really feel it." While the Dreyfus things are a little jocular, and they have a kind of a quaintness of some of those old French books, you know, that you see where you see all the military people and all the fancy hats and so on, while they had that quality, he found himself really, just really lifted by the possibilities that the Dreyfus thing opened up. And then I think the next thing that he did was the Sacco and Vanzetti.

PH: Did he do the same kind of research on Sacco and Vanzetti as he did on Dreyfus?

BS: Well now, the very interesting thing was that he was also involved with the Sacco and Vanzetti cause while he was in Paris, but in those days, he was not, he was, you know, an abstract artist, abstract to a kind of a figurative art in which the figure is used as part of design rather than as the end, the essence of what the figure is. So he knew the Sacco and Vanzetti thing very, very well. He could flow right out of one thing into the other. And then the Mooney fell into his lap. And then of course he worked with Diego. And then he was embroiled in another thing.

PH: You started to tell me in the automobile that the Communist Party got very mad at Ben Shahn because they were mad at Diego Rivera?

BS: Well, I don't want to overinterpret that.

PH: From what I hear, is that there were a lot of mixed feelings about Diego Rivera, is among the artists and the CP, that Diego Rivera had been kicked out of the Communist Party in Mexico —

BS: He sure had, yes.

PH: But that the artists really admired him. And many of the artists —

BS: [Inaudible] to, he was so confident.

PH: He was such a force, and so charismatic, everyone says. And that many of the artists wanted to invite him to the John Reed Club to talk, or the Artists' Union, I forget which it was.

BS: Not the Union. The Union hadn't been formed by that time.

PH: Maybe the John Reed Club.

BS: The John Reed Club.

PH: That he was invited to talk, but that the Communist Party functionaries didn't really want him to come.

BS: It wasn't that, the Communist Party functionaries wouldn't permit him to come. Diego — the saddest thing in the world — Diego's dream, his passion in life was to be accepted by the Communist Party. The reason they wouldn't accept him was because in Mexico, he had harbored Trotsky, and of course Trotsky was anathema to the Communist Party by that time. At least that's the reason that I've always been told, that they took him out of the Communist Party, and his dream was to be accepted by them. He would have given his shirt to go to any of their functions, to do anything for them. They wouldn't have him. They wouldn't have him at all.

PH: Do you think that the reason that he was so — I mean, that he painted the head of Lenin into the Rockefeller Center mural was really to kind of get back in good with the Communist Party?

BS: No, I think he intended to originally. I don't think there ever any question about it.

PH: I mean, he knew that it was going to, wasn't he pretty sure it was not going to be accepted by Rockefeller?

BS: No, he wasn't, he wasn't sure.

PH: I mean, it seems to me, if I were Rockefeller, I wouldn't want the head of Lenin in my mural.

BS: Why?

PH: What?

BS: Why?

PH: Because I'm Rockefeller, and Lenin represents all the opposite things from what I would stand for.

BS: I think that people who are interested in art as such don't give a damn what the content of it is.

PH: I mean, I myself would like the head of Lenin, but I'm saying if I were Rockefeller.

BS: I would like the head of Lenin if it were well painted, and if it weren't, I wouldn't. I certainly wouldn't want it if it weren't well painted, but I imagine it was.

PH: According the newspaper clippings it was well painted. E.B. White wrote a very funny poem on that. It's a dialogue between Rockefeller and Diego Rivera.

BS: How does that go — “You can’t something something, says ...” — oh, it was very nice.

PH: “For twenty-two thousand conservative bucks/You painted a radical. I say shucks!” [They laugh.] “I could never rent the offices, the capitalistic offices...” It goes on, you know, this is Rockefeller talking to Diego. And Diego’s saying that, he said, “I could throw in a head of Abraham Lincoln, and even da da da da da ... but the head of Lenin will ... /Or my friends will give me the bird today/The bird, the bird, forever” he says. It’s very amusing.

BS: Didn’t it start, “I paint what I please, said Diego”?

PH: That’s how it starts. And the thing that I like best — I should memorize the poem, because it’s very funny. And I have read it to many of my students, because I always show them, I always talk about that. Because that seemed to me to be one of the — it was a real cause célèbre in the 30s. Not only the stopping of the work, but as I gather, it was stopped in around May of 1933, and then it was actually destroyed several months later, in February.

BS: I think you’re wrong.

PH: Well, I’m trying to figure that out.

BS: Well, I’ll tell you what, they put a curtain over it.

PH: They put a curtain over it, right.

BS: Of course, Ben said that he and Diego were sitting on the —this is very funny. Ben and Diego — I believe Ben told me this — were sitting on the scaffold, and suddenly the scaffold started moving away from the wall. So that was it. Then a curtain was put over it.

PH: Some accounts say that it was covered over by canvas.

BS: Canvas, yeah, a canvas curtain. So it was covered over, and that canvas stayed there, I think, for years. I don't know how long. However, Ben and I were with Nelson [Rockefeller] — Nelson liked Ben very, very much, and we were there sometimes — we were with Nelson, and I think I said, or Ben said, “Nelson, why don't you really tell us whatever happened to the Rivera mural.” And Nelson said, “My lips are sealed.” That was it. But nobody knows. Nobody knows that it was destroyed. Nobody knows that it was destroyed.

PH: I thought that David Margulies — do you know him?

BS: Yes.

PH: He was, I think, an assistant.

BS: Yes he was.

PH: He told me that these people came and scraped it out.

BS: David told you that?

PH: Yeah.

BS: Did he know, or did he say it [inaudible]?

PH: I've got to ask him about that. I think that he said that he saw it. That's what I'm trying to figure out. Because, you see, this happened, it was covered over, I think it was around the 1st of May, or the end of April, of 1933. And then the following February, they had a big demonstration about the mural —

BS: Yes, they did. That was when I was first coming in to New York.

PH: But that was all the way around eight, nine months later, in February, and I thought, well, maybe —

BS: [Inaudible - "I heard"?] there was a demonstration before that.

PH: But this big town hall demonstration, why was it in February? I thought that maybe at that point it was destroyed. But I have to research it a little bit more.

BS: At the time when I said that I wanted to come over — no, let's see, Rivera was already working at the New School when I came over to interview him.

PH: 'Cause he did it all in fresco, so there was no way of rolling it up and taking it away.

BS: No. Now Ben tried to follow that very closely. And Ben had lots of ways of following it closely, because, you know, the people at the Modern Museum were all very close friends of ours, and of course they were close to Nelson. For instance, René d'Harnoncourt — you know, they always hidded [?] and kidded — and so sometimes we almost thought that the mural was still there, but that it was really covered over. It was a kind of a teasing situation. And nobody ever said, to my knowledge — and Ben was always trying to find out — to my knowledge, nobody ever really said, unless in much later times, that that mural was destroyed. But now I think it was. But nobody would ever say so. [Inaudible] We asked Nelson, we felt that we could tease him about it a little bit, and Nelson said his lips were sealed and left, and that was that. So it's hard to know. Of course, they've got that awful [José Maria] Sert thing up there afterward, but that wasn't in the same place, that's around the side.

PH: So what's in the front now?

BS: What?

PH: I can't remember, I haven't been there. I should walk in.

BS: Diego's mural was in the front.

PH: So what's there now? It's just a blank wall?

BS: [Inaudible] I don't know what's there now. Maybe Sert ultimately did that wall too.

PH: I'll have to go over [and look?].

BS: I sometimes wonder whether, underneath, the Lenin thing might still be there. Maybe I'm just being silly. But ask David —

PH: But why, did you ask him? Why he wanted it removed?

BS: Well, we knew that. We had written about that in *Art Front*, because Jonas — was it Jonas Lee? — who was the —

PH: I know who he is.

BS: Ivy Lee. I'm sorry, not Jonas Lee. Ivy Lee was the public relations director for the Rockefeller Center buildings. And Ivy Lee said that they could never rent the offices with the Lenin mural.

PH: That's what the E.B. White poem says.

BS: Yeah, sure.

PH: "I could never rent the offices, the capitalistic offices."

BS: That's right. But that was based straight on the news story. So, if David saw it, actually with his own eyes, being destroyed, I would believe it. But if he only heard it, because, you know, in New York everybody has inside information about everything.

PH: Well, I think that when he was telling it to me, and I'll have to ask him again, is that he said, "It was just terrible. They came in with scrapers and scraped it right down."

BS: Not while Ben was there, they didn't.

PH: No, that's what I mean. I mean, I have to find out when that happened.

BS: Maybe it was later. I'd like to know. I'd really like to know. Of course, Ivy Lee would have loved to scrape it down. But at that point Nelson was not a vandal, and I think he would have hesitated to do something like that. I don't know, maybe I'm wrong. I don't want to overromanticize a silly man like that. [They laugh.] No, I liked him, he was very nice. Let's see now, where were we?

PH: I wanted to get back now, you mentioned about the Dreyfus, and then after that he did the Sacco and Vanzetti, and of course the Museum of Modern Art had that exhibition on the murals. Didn't he do part of the Sacco and Vanzetti, well, he did them for the [sic] Edith Halpert's Downtown Gallery where they were shown.

BS: They were first shown, he didn't do them for the Downtown Gallery. They were first shown at Edith's gallery.

PH: But then also there was the Museum of Modern Art show, and the reason it seems to me that there's the one big panel is because the Museum of Modern Art, for their show, asked artists to do small panels of this uniform size and then also one big panel. It struck me that the reason why you have that great big panel —

BS: Thereby hangs the tail.[?] Because they did ask the artists, the museum was very interested in furthering the opportunities for artists to do murals.

PH: There was a protest, because a lot of artists protested —

BS: You're anticipating me.

PH: OK. Go ahead.

BS: There were two kinds of protests. One of them was because not enough artists were involved. But another one was — Ben, then, used the big Sacco and Vanzetti

painting, and they didn't want to, they wouldn't hang it, so there was a big hullabaloo, and even Heywood Broun came to Ben's defense at that point.

PH: Why wouldn't they hang it?

BS: They wouldn't hang it because they considered it subversive. It's amazing. I'll tell you, not subversive, controversial — and the museum has to raise its money from people who would hardly have favored it. But they wouldn't hang it. And so there was a committee [laughs], there was a very amusing committee formed that was called Hang Shahn. At this time, Ben got a streptococcal throat and almost died. So he said that when he found out that they wouldn't hang the — he was just getting sick and getting a fever when he first found out that they weren't going to hang his mural — and he said that he didn't know whether it was the fever, or —he was absolutely elated, because [laughing] he said, "I really have power in painting, because I'm able to make people so mad that they really won't hang the painting." Of course, he wanted to be hung. But he was kind of elated by the whole situation.

PH: Was it finally hung? It was. It's in the catalogue.

BS: It was hung. Now, I forget who interceded, but it would have been very interesting to know, it could have been Alfred [Barr].

PH: Lincoln Kirstein was involved with organizing the show.

BS: Oh, yes. Lincoln could have done it, that's true. Lincoln Kirstein would have done it. Alfred, I don't know what his position was on that at that point. Alfred was never a brave man. But I don't know where he would have stood.

PH: He was sort of a shy man.

BS: Yeah. That's why ["That's right"?].

PH: I used to work at the Museum of Modern Art a long time ago.

BS: Is that right? Did I know you then?

PH: I don't think so. I worked with Bill Lieberman, and I worked there from 1960 to 1962.

BS: Ben knew Bill Lieberman. I never knew him. Was that when René d'Harnoncourt was there, and was Jim Soby there then? Soby was a staunch [inaudible].

PH: Soby wasn't around all the time, but the staff was René d'Harnoncourt and Alfred Barr, and Bill Seitz, and Dorothy [Miller], and Betsy ...

BS: And Betty, yeah, Chamberlain.

PH: No, I didn't know her. Betsy ...

BS: Who would that be?

PH: Now I just forgot her name. Betsy Jones. Mildred Constantine, Bill Seitz, Peter Selz, Alicia Legg.

BS: Who?

PH: Alicia Legg. She worked for Bill Seitz [inaudible - "and Bill Lieberman"?].

BS: I saw Bill's wife not very long ago. I think she's still —

PH: She lives down in New Jersey, or Princeton?

BS: They always lived in Princeton. But I hear she's still in the area.

PH: But anyway, the character of the Dreyfus ones, I think, are different in their style from the Sacco and Vanzetti, and what strikes me about the Sacco and Vanzetti works, I think they're very powerful. By the way, you know, I've never seen them reproduced together, and I would like — it's difficult to see, there are like 23 of them, aren't there?

BS: Yes.

PH: Do you have photographs of all of them?

BS: I haven't got them together. I should, shouldn't I. There have been two or three books.

PH: I'd like copies of all 23. And they always reproduce the same ones over and over again.

BS: Yes, that's true, they do. Well, I couldn't get them right now. If I'd known before you came — or, I'll tell you what I'll do. I really should get them together. There's a book that was done by Martin [H.] Bush at the University of Syracuse, it was called *The Passion of Sacco and Vanzetti*. Ben himself tried to do a book called that, but he couldn't get it published, and then I think Howard Fast, some other writer, did a book and called it that. This fellow Martin Bush did the book, and that book has got a lot of Ben's documentation, photographs and newspapers of the time and so on, but I don't believe it has all the Sacco and Vanzetti.

PH: I haven't read that book.

BS: It's more a catalogue, actually.

PH: I know the book, and I don't think it reproduces them.

BS: I don't think so. I don't think so. But I'll look around. I might be able to find Ben's dummy[?] of the book that he intended to publish.

PH: I would sort of like to — there's nothing like seeing all the works together before you start talking about them, because, you know, if you're trying to discuss something. You see, with Ben Shahn's work, in my book that I do on the 30s, I would like to devote one chapter to his work, and I haven't really decided which aspects, but the Mooney

series and the Sacco and Vanzetti series are kind of natural, and in order to be able to do that I need to have photographs of all of them.

BS: Well, I have photographs of all Ben's work. I don't have them organized. But I'm not sure about the early Sacco and Vanzetti. Now, don't leave out in that the last series that Ben did on the Lucky Dragon. That in a way is Ben at the height of his maturity, and doing the very thing that impelled the Sacco and Vanzetti. I love it. I think it's a wonderful sort of thing.

PH: I think you're right, in terms of his own development, that it kind of is a culmination. It does fall outside of the 1930s. But that doesn't preclude my doing something about it. I'm primarily focusing on the 1930s, but one thing I'm not is rigid. You have to really write according to the way the material is. You can't fit the, kind of, structure on something. The material itself has to suggest its own structure.

BS: There's a term in physics that is called "compensation" and it's very interesting. It's the influence of a later event upon an earlier event. In the sense of viewing works of art, I think that the importance of the Lucky Dragon series, related to, let's say, the Sacco and Vanzetti, is important because the same kind of a compulsion stirred Ben to that same degree of indignation at a so much later time in his life. In other words, he wasn't just going from idea to idea and dropping them. Then of course he did so many other things, the two or three *Miners'* paintings are very wonderful. You know those, the *Miners' Wives*. Are you familiar with that painting, called *Miner's Wives*, and then another one called *Mine Disaster*? See, all of Ben's works, I mean not all of Ben's works, but so many of Ben's works, would start like this. He would become familiar with a situation, and then he would get more and more into it with drawings and with paintings,

so that it reached to a kind of a culmination of expression. John Bartlow Martin wrote a story for *Harper's* that was called "The Disaster in Centralia No. 5" [Note: title was "The Blast in Centralia No. 5" per Library of Congress finding aid to Martin's papers, <http://lcweb2.loc.gov/service/mss/eadxmlmss/eadpdfmss/2003/ms003018.pdf>), and Russell Lynes [Note: The Archives of American Art's oral history interview with Bernarda Bryson Shahn, 1983 Apr. 29 (<http://www.aaa.si.edu/collections/interviews/oral-history-interview-bernarda-bryson-shahn-11655>)] incorrectly refers to him as "Russell Lyries."] asked Ben to make pictures for it. And Ben, instead of making five or six pictures, made 45, [laughing] something like that, 35 or 45, and Russell used as many as he could. Many more than he originally intended to.

PH: You see, I would like to, and in fact, in my project, I have a budget for buying photographs. I'd like photographs of all of these, if possible.

BS: You'd just have to reproduce them from the photographs that I have. Because I have very spotty slides, and also the slides change colors, you well know.

PH: Well, I mean, I'm equipped to do that.

BS: If you would write to me and tell me the photographs that you'd like to —

PH: See, I don't know what the photographs [inaudible]. [They laugh.] I'd like them all.

BS: I just want to tell you, because this relates to what we were talking about, about the kind of a compulsion that causes an artist to do a thing —

PH: See, that's what interests me, is this kind of drive.

BS: I thought that might be. So Ben did all these drawings because he'd gotten so deeply into John Martin's story and into that issue, which was the refusal of the

government to enforce mine regulations, and the terrible disaster that happened, and the human tragedy, of course, around any mine disaster. After Ben had done all these drawings, then he did quite a few small watercolors of miners, and then he did the wonderful painting called *Miners' Wives*, which is really a very lovely painting.

PH: *Scott's Run, West Virginia*, is that related to it?

BS: No, that is not related to that. That is an earlier period. Actually the watercolors of miners are more in the Scott's Run era than they were. That's when we were photographing for the government that Ben [inaudible] *Scott's Run*. We did a lot of photographing, he did, and I drove, around Scott's Run. There were very big strikes. We covered a Republic strike, which was quite violent [laughing].

PH: Which one?

BS: The Republic Steel strike in, when was that, about 19 , what —

PH: Up in Chicago?

BS: No, Republic is Pennsylvania. Well anyway, getting back to these impulses. Then a fellow named Ralph [E.] Lapp did this story called "The Saga of the Lucky Dragon" [Sic - according to Harper's archives (<http://harpers.org/archive/1957/12/0008604>), the article was called "The Voyage of the Lucky Dragon"]. He was a doctor. And the American government doctors had said that no harm had come from the dusting of these Japanese fisherman from the fallout in that bomb-testing thing. And Dr. Lapp contradicted the findings of the American doctors. And then he wrote this very passionate story for *Harper's* magazine, and again Ben did illustrations for that. And he went right out of the illustrations into the paintings for *The Saga of the Lucky Dragon*. And they are intense paintings, and very wonderful, I think.

PH: Yeah, I mean, the ones I've seen reproduced.

BS: Who owns them, I don't know. I could find out. So then, for instance, a friend of ours, Dombrofsky [phonetic], Jim Dombrofsky, who lives in New Orleans, asked Ben to get involved in some prison practices in New Orleans. A young man there wrote a story, wrote a little book, I think he called it *The Disinherited* but I'm not sure, and Ben again went off, in this case, mostly in the series of drawings. This became a very important thing in Ben's life, the motivation of one of these evil situations that nobody will do anything about, where a lot of people are helpless, and there's a lot of injustice, and so on and so forth. And it would get him very angry and fired up. And it would go into drawings and then it would go into paintings and so on. It was very satisfying to Ben because instead of just doing an easel painting here and an easel painting there, this subject, that subject, and so on and so forth, in each case there would be something that he would get embroiled in, and get deeper and deeper and deeper into, so that the paintings came out like a real explosion of feeling.

PH: Right.

BS: And that was the difference that I was trying to tell you about earlier, to my mind.

PH: What do you think now, I mean, this interests me too. Do you think that in terms of early influences that might have made him that sort of person who is like that. Is it studying the Talmud?

BS: I can certainly tell you a very interesting one. When he was a kid, before he left Russia, his grandfather, who I told you was a Socialist and his father was a Socialist. So they had apparently, apparently people there lived in a kind of a court, a kind of compound, and so his grandfather's house was built around this sort of court. A desperate

refugee came and begged — who was another Socialist — came and begged his grandfather for asylum, that he was being sought by the Cossacks or the KGB or whatever the secret police were called then, and Ben's grandfather hid this man in his house. Ben was very young, and they really — what do you say — abjured him, not to — is that the right word? — not to, under no circumstances, to reveal to anyone under any circumstances that there was anybody in his house. And so the police did come. And they did search the house. They searched the house all over, even to a room where a woman who was demented had been kept. They searched the whole house, and then they quizzed Ben, as this little kid.

PH: How old was he?

BS: Well, he came to this country when he was nine, so he must have been very young. He was about Jasper's age, my grandson is seven, so I think he was about that age. And he said that he had only one thing in his mind, he mustn't tell, mustn't tell, mustn't tell. So he said he became, he was very, he pretended to be very casual, and he said that he didn't know what they were talking about, and he didn't know where this man was, and so on and so forth, and they left, and the man was there. And so, I think Ben always all his life took a great deal of pride in holding out in this kind of a situation. And then the next thing that happened, his father was exiled to Siberia for being a Socialist.

PH: What year was that?

BS: That must have been mustn't tell

PH: Before the Revolution(s)?

BS: Oh, yes. That was, see, Ben came to this country when he was 13 years old [sic - she earlier said nine years old], he came to this country I guess in about 1912, so his father, then, would have been exiled, I would say, in about 1910. His father was in Siberia and a number of prisoners escaped, and he escaped with them. He and his cousin, Ben's father and his cousin, made their way to Africa, and they lived in, his father lived in South Africa. He worked there as what he was, a wood carver or carpenter, he was both. So then he sent money to Ben's mother telling them to come to this country. He had relatives who were printers in this country. So Ben's mother took he [sic] and his — I think he had one sister and a brother by that time, and the rest of the children were born in [sentence cut off as first side of audiotape ends].

PH: This is the second side of February 28, 1983.

BS: So, his mother came to this country with Ben and I think his brother and his sister, I'm not sure how many had been born —

PH: Can you wait just one moment? I'm just [tape goes silent]. I mean, I can hear [tape goes silent again]

BS: My voice doesn't carry very well.

PH: This is not a terribly powerful tape recorder, but it seems to be OK. All right, go ahead.

BS: So then his father came to this country from Africa, and it's very interesting that the cousin with whom Ben's father went to Africa lived in Rhodesia and became a member of Parliament, and his son became a member of Parliament in Rhodesia. But they were ultimately jailed during the Smith business, during the troubles in Rhodesia, they had their troubles too, it's kind of interesting, and the boy came here to visit us. But

anyway, that's beside the point. So they came to this country, and now, what were we talking about?

PH: Well, I was asking you about this compulsion, you know, this compulsion to be very intense —

BS: Yes, yes, yes.

PH: And then he worked as a lithographer.

BS: He did indeed. He was an apprentice to a lithographer when he was 13. Now his father, his father, there had been a terrible fire, and his father rescued the children from this fire, but his father was horribly burned and could not work. And that was the point at which Ben had to go to work and Ben supported the family for a while, as a lithographer's apprentice. He joined the Young Socialists League when he was, I don't know, about 16 or 17 years old.

PH: Before you — so, his father was horribly burned, he was still a teenager at that time, right?

BS: I would guess, yes. He was very young.

PH: So that must have affected him too.

BS: It affected him terribly.

PH: The fact that the father was burned in a very heroic deed, right?

BS: Yes, and furthermore, Ben was not —

PH: I mean, his father was very heroic, in a way.

BS: His father was indeed. And also, Ben admired his father enormously. He was much closer to his father than to his mother for some reason. And yes, he was very affected by that. And then there were other things that affected Ben very powerfully in

his life. When Ben's youngest brother was 17 years old, and Ben had already bought his house in Truro, his father and his two brothers were all swimming and the youngest brother drowned. And Ben carried him to the house. This marked Ben terribly. You know, it really gave him nightmares, it was an awful thing.

PH: How old was Ben then?

BS: I don't know how old he was, really.

PH: Were you married to him then?

BS: No, no, no, but he was married to his first wife. He was married to Tillie then. But this was a ghastly thing for him. And, you know, he always had a terrible sense of guilt about it. I suppose he felt that he somehow could have saved the brother or something like that.

PH: Was his family[?] in the water too?

BS: Oh, they were all swimming, yes. That was something that affected him emotionally very much. Then there was another thing that marked Ben very strongly in a negative way, and that is that he had been very bright in school, and at the age of 13 he had to leave school. Now his younger brother was also very bright, and his younger brother went on in school, and his younger brother took the Latin prize, and his younger brother went, you know, did all the brilliant scholastic things at the same time Ben was working as a lithographer's apprentice, and it embittered him very much. And he was always jealous of his brother Phil, although he was very fond of him, he still had traces of that terrific jealousy. And then Ben —

PH: He wasn't the brother who drowned.

BS: No, no, no, he was not. Then Ben went to night school, and then he went to NYU. He became a journeyman lithographer at the age of 19 and he could put himself through college. By this time, you know, the family was, you know, was, I guess, liquid again. They had their own house in Brooklyn. He went to NYU and he went to City College. He went to NYU first, I understand. He got two scholarships [laughing] as a biologist, and went to Woods Hole on two different occasions. At the same time, he always drew and he always wanted to be an artist. So a professor at Woods Hole advised him to get out of Woods Hole if he wanted to be an artist, and forget about being a biologist, and he did.

PH: When he was at CCNY, or NYU, well especially at CCNY, did he know any of these other writers, or any of these people who later became part of the left-wing movement?

BS: No. No. I don't know, maybe he did. I remember, for instance, he talked about Morris Raphael Cohen as his philosophy professor, he admired him enormously, and I don't think that this man was in any sense a leftist. I don't know what people were in college when Ben was. I think most of the people whom he talked about as his friends became tycoons afterward. People like —oh, one of them became a very, very big public relations man, Ben, what was his name — I forget, but you know, he was a very wealthy man. And Ben's brother was always very well heeled. I think Philip Wittenberg was a friend of his at that point, and Philip, of course, became one of the biggest, one of the most important lawyers in New York, and so on. But I don't think his college in New York meant as much to him as his period of schooling in France.

PH: Which he did afterwards.

BS: Which he did afterward, yes.

PH: Was he actually, he was actually in school in France?

BS: Well, he went to the Sorbonne. I think only, though, I think he only studied French in the Sorbonne, but he had studied very intensively, and then as I told you, he went to the Académie de la Grande Chaumière. He lived in France. Now, in that ambience, he absorbed everything French at that point. He spoke French fluently, and read everything, and knew all the people who were of his generation at that time.

PH: In one of the books that I read by, in fact, you probably know him, Donald Drew Egbert —

BS: I didn't know him, but I'll tell you something about him. We had a friend here — I don't know what to think about him. We had a friend here who lived in this town, a very brilliant girl named Charlotte Freedman [phonetic]. And Charlotte was either his secretary or his assistant in Princeton. He asked, he pumped her continually about Ben. I gathered that his point of view was antagonistic, suspicious, and his mind was very definitely already made up before he mentioned Ben at all about anything. I'm sure it was.

PH: Well, the book purports to be a kind of study of, sort of, American artists and Socialism. Socialism in its broad meaning, you know, meaning, communitarianism and Communism and all of that.

BS: But Socialism by a person who is antagonistic to it.

PH: He seems to try to cover up his — I mean, he tries to present himself as somebody who's objective, but you really notice that it's —

BS: The minute he started sending questions over to us, we knew immediately he was not objective. Not objective in his point of view.

PH: Well, he wrote this book, you see, in the early 50s, and it was at the same time that Daniel Aaron wrote a book called *Writers of the Left*. [sound of door opening or closing] Is that somebody you know?

BS: Yeah, that's Johnny going in, or Jasper, or somebody. My son lives in the adjoining house.

PH: Oh, I see. It was written in the early 50s, when there were a number of studies of the left, you know, and it was mostly by people who were antagonistic. I mean, it was the McCarthy era that [inaudible].

BS: I was going to say, there was still gibberish of McCarthyism.

PH: He mentions one thing about Shahn, is that, he mentioned about, in terms of, and I don't remember exactly the context, but I remember that he said that Shahn read this book by Ernest Poole, called *The Harbor*.

BS: Yes, he did. Ben did. Now, how in the world did he know that? He picked it up from Charlotte. I'll tell you one thing, Egbert had every opportunity to know Ben personally, but he did not.

PH: He didn't [inaudible]?

BS: Never met Ben.

PH: Really?

BS: Never met Ben.

PH: I wonder why he never met him.

BS: He never met him because, I think if he had met Ben, it would have disturbed his prejudgment. I had not a high regard for Egbert — and I haven't read his book — based only upon what Charlotte would report to us about what he would say, what his point of

view was, and what he would ask, and what he would insinuate. All his questions were insinuating questions.

PH: He doesn't really say too much about any one person, he just sort of drops names in here or there, and at one point he mentions that Ben Shahn read Ernest Poole's *The Harbor*.

BS: So what?

PH: I don't know what relevance that was, except that it was a radical novel. I was wondering, what other books, you know.

BS: I didn't think it was radical novel. I thought it was a mystical novel — wasn't it? Wasn't it a novel that began with a man who was already dead?

PH: [Footsteps, and voice recedes, as PH presumably goes to get book] A man who was already dead?

BS: Something like that.

PH: No, I don't know, I just got it. I borrowed it from a friend.

BS: Is that it?

PH: This is it. [Laughs, returns to tape recorder.] I bought it because I've been reading about —

BS: I'd love to read it. I always heard Ben talking about it.

PH: I think it actually is about the waterfront, and about labor organizing on the waterfront.

BS: [Footsteps, and voice recedes, as BS looks for glasses] I'll tell you what, one thing, Ben used to live in [inaudible]. I don't think my glasses [inaudible]. Listen, I can't, I'm never going to see it now because —

PH: There's your glasses. Or are those mine?

BS: Those are yours. If they were mine, they would be [inaudible].

PH: No, these are yours.

BS: But they're my driving glasses.

PH: Oh, I see.

BS: [Inaudible, footsteps. Tape pauses, resumes.] ... all over the place. Our friends, our best friends over there were John Barrymore — what am I talking about — what's the poet's name? Berryman. John Berryman. John Berryman, and Erich Kahler, who's a great, noted philosopher. John Berryman was a very peculiar person, he was scared of McCarthyism, he was kind of fascinated by leftism. He was a very, very wonderful writer, terrific, a very close friend of ours. Most of our friends over in Princeton in those days were, for instance, Dick Eberhardt — who, God knows, he wasn't left — none of these people were, they were mostly intellectuals.

PH: Well, they were probably liberal, you know. Most intellectuals are liberal.

BS: I think so. Very few are not.

PH: I'm over at Harvard this year. I have a fellowship there —

BS: Oh, isn't that nice?

PH: Yeah. And everybody is liberal. Nobody would do anything quite so radical because they have their careers, you see?

BS: Yes. Sure. But they're liberal because, see, to me — I was talking to a judge in Texas, and we were in a very conservative party of people, and he whispered to me, "I am considered a liberal around here." And I said to him, "I consider the word 'liberal' the noblest word in the political vocabulary." And so he turned around very surprised

[laughing], and he said, “Well, you won’t hear many opinions like that down here.” This was a very conservative Texas group of people. But I’m reflecting my father, who was a liberal, and my father was a follower of, you know, a Bull Mooser and a newspaper editor and so on and so forth. And to me there were, liberal is the noblest word in the political vocabulary. Because to me, liberal means that you are moved by compassion for people, and by not only [inaudible], and that you take an objective point of view and weigh the circumstances of the situation rather than the position that you, a position that you’ve assumed.

PH: Then why was it that you were drawn into the Communist Party? Or did you see them as [inaudible]?

BS: Just for those very, very reasons. As a matter of fact, when I decided I would join the Communist Party, I had two or three funny conversations with my parents. I told my mother that I was going to join the, that I was thinking of joining the Communist Party, and my mother — my father, was very much in politics at that time — and my mother said, “You know, you could do your father a great deal of damage by joining the Communist Party.” So I told my father what my mother had said, and he said nobody would ever do me any harm by doing what he considers right. And I thought that was great. And he gave me a ten-dollar contribution for the Communist Party. [Laughing] My mother made the crowning comment. Let’s see if I can remember what she said. So then I said to my mother that I definitely am going to join the Communist Party. And my mother said, “Well, Bernarda, if you have any illusions about the proletariat, I guess that’s the best way to get rid of them.” [Laughing] So that was my family, and my

background. So I have a very liberal family background. And I do believe in liberalism. And let's see how this book starts.

PH: Well, I think, I haven't started to read it. I just finished reading Dalton Trumbo's *Johnny Got His Gun*, did you ever read that one?

BS: Many, many years ago, I did, yeah.

PH: It's an anti-war — it's very powerful. I very often was moved to tears by this pathetic spectacle of this mind, you know, who has nothing. He just has a trunk and he doesn't have a face. He just has a mind and a trunk. Actually, I just finished when the bus stopped at Twin Falls.

BS: You just finished reading it. Speaking of that —

PH: So this is the next book I'm gonna start. I find that riding on buses —

BS: This is something interesting.

PH: For riding on buses and things like that, that you can't read anything — I can't read art history books, you know [they laugh], and I really enjoy reading these novels. Anyway, he mentioned that Shahn read Poole's *The Harbor*, which apparently is about organizing on the waterfront, and maybe it's about the future too, I don't know. I'll read it and I'll let you know.

BS: So maybe it's another book that Ben used to tell me about. But I know that Ben did talk about this book, because I do remember.

PH: When I read it, I'll give you a synopsis.

BS: It may have affected him. It probably would have affected him. [Inaudible] I'd like to have it. I'll buy it.

PH: It doesn't belong to me. It belongs to a friend of mine.

BS: I've found a man who can find anything for me, he's simply wonderful.

PH: OK. Well, I'll read it, and then I'll send you a little précis of what it's all about.

BS: All right.

PH: What other books did he read?

BS: Ben read all the time, everything, absolutely comfortably.

PH: It sounds like it. He was very much of an intellectual. Would you call him an intellectual, I mean among artists?

BS: Oh, very much so. Actually, he wasn't a professional intellectual in the sense of constantly — he didn't pose as an intellectual. He was one of the most intellectual people I've ever known.

PH: Yeah, I've always sort of heard of him referred to that way.

BS: Well, after all, he had an honorary doctorate at Harvard, an honorary doctorate at Princeton, at Hebrew Union University, at Rutgers, and so on. He was a member of the National Institute, I think one of the first artists, maybe I'm wrong about that, but he certainly was the first artist ever to get the Charles Elliott Norton Lectureship at Harvard and the only artist, I think. But Ben was very much an intellectual, and I don't know anybody who read not only more, but in a more varied way. He read everything from history to philosophy to thousands of novels, in a number of languages, and then knew so many writers too.

PH: Did he read, like, Karl Marx, like *The Capital*?

BS: Not very much. I think I'm the only one in the family that read *Das Kapital*. My mother did. [Laughs]

PH: Your mother did?

BS: My mother was very funny.

PH: Your mother sounds great.

BS: My mother's terrific. She's a very funny woman. When she was in college she stayed with an aunt who was very, very conservative. My mother said that she didn't find *Das Kapital* very good reading, but she made it a point to carry it under her arm wherever she went. [Laughs.] She was like that. My father wasn't quite as — my father was much more philosophically serious in a certain way than my mother. My mother was a very ironic woman. She had two or three college degrees. She was interested in everything, but didn't take anything very seriously. My father took things very, very seriously. My father as a young reporter sat in on the first meeting of the United Mine Workers, and was always — even though at certain points in his life he was also a coal operator — but he was always on the side of labor. He was always on the side — about, I think it was 1931 or -2 — he was born a Republican, and he was a Republican all his life, but in that time he organized something called the Republicans for Roosevelt League in Ohio and it went for, I think, something like 16 years [laughs]. He adored Roosevelt. But he'd supported Teddy Roosevelt too. And when Teddy Roosevelt — my father got him to come to our town when he had a newspaper, you know, and so on and so forth. So I was born in politics, literally, ever since I could first breathe, I heard politics, and usually liberal politics.

PH: But Shahn didn't read any of this?

BS: I don't think he ever read Marx. I don't think he ever read Lenin. But he did read, for instance, he read [inaudible] Gorky of course.

PH: But you all must have read things like *The New Masses* and —

BS: Oh yes, of course.

PH: I mean that was, among artists —

BS: Everybody the *Masses*.

PH: And the *Masses*, *The New Masses*, and later, *Masses and Mainstream*.

BS: No, I don't think we read *Ma* — now, from then, Ben went on to *Partisan Review*, he always read *The Partisan Review*, which again was much more in the Trotskyite, if you would call it that, in the sort of Hilton Kramer-ish direction.

PH: Now, William Phillips still runs it. There still is a *Partisan Review*. And it's now situated up at Boston University.

BS: At BU? Is that right?

PH: It used to be at Rutgers, but it moved up to BU.

BS: That's interesting. I never knew where it was published, but I was, you know, God, it's been so long since —

PH: And he's still, I mean, I just read an editorial he wrote just a couple of months ago, and it sounded like something he might have written in 1939.

BS: Is that right.

PH: Yeah. He's fighting the same old battles, you know.

BS: That's interesting.

PH: He's still very anti-Soviet, and that the problem with America is that we trusted the Soviets. I mean, it's that whole —

BS: It gets to be a bore. See, in the first place, he's wrong, we didn't trust the Soviets that much, we felt that it wasn't a matter of trust, it was a matter of mutual ends.

PH: No, but he thinks that, I mean his point is that the left, you see, I mean he's still fighting this old battle that the problem with, I mean, the Communist Party, you know, trusted the Russians and they looked to Russia.

BS: Well, the Communist Party was the Russian [inaudible]. I don't mean it *was* —

PH: That they made mistakes and therefore, you know, the argument. And even today, he's so anti-Russia.

BS: That's the unfortunate thing, is that if they would look at the situation objectively, they would know first how conscienceless the Communist Party here was —

PH: Conscienceless.

BS: Con-science-less.

PH: Conscienceless.

BS: And at the same time they would know how colossally stupid it was. So there was nothing to be afraid of.

PH: Why do you think it was conscienceless?

BS: Well, I'll tell you something, that —for instance, you see, when I joined the Communist Party in Cleveland, Ohio, and in Ohio, and there was an organization called the Unemployed — see, I joined the Unemployed Councils because I was trying to help people who were suffering in Columbus, Ohio, I was just working with them. There was an organization called the Unemployed League, and it was run by a man named A.J. Musty. Musty was one of the noblest individuals, unquestionably, who ever lived. He was a beautiful man, a preacher and the son of a preacher, I think. Arnold Johnson was part of that, who I think later was connected with the New School, I'm not sure. But these

were noble people, just absolutely noble. And then a very wormy little fellow named Louis Budenz was part of the Unemployed Leagues too.

PH: That was up in Cleveland.

BS: No, the Unemployed Leagues were all over Ohio. I was working in Columbus, then, [inaudible — “working for”? “over at”?] the *Ohio State Journal*, actually.

PH: And you joined in Columbus, right?

BS: I joined in Cleveland, but only on a visit to Cleveland; I was active in Columbus. We were, we were told that we should denounce — now, we were supposed to be working together to bring about relief for poor people, for people who were just strapped in Columbus, who were being evicted and sent into the street with their children and their household goods and nowhere to go.

PH: This was back in 1932?

BS: That was 1931, -2, yes.

PH: Excuse me. [Tape stops, then starts.] OK, good.

BS: Well, if you're interested in this thing, it's a very closely complicated kind of story. But anyway —

PH: I'm interested in the way the artists, you know, how they, you know, how they start —I mean, like yourself, I find your story very interesting too. You know, what you were doing, and how artists got involved, and the Unemployed Councils, they were everybody, right? They weren't just artists.

BS: They weren't artists at all. I think I was the only artist in it in Columbus. I was working with a lot of college students. Students were extremely involved.

PH: Were you a student then?

BS: Well, I was out of college. I was working on the *Ohio State Journal*. In fact, I had been married and divorced, because I was married when I was a senior in college. So we were asked to denounce the Unemployed Leagues. And this was a frightful thing to do, these people were noble, they were beautiful. And you know why we were supposed to denounce them? Because they were not Communists.

PH: The Unemployed Council, or the Unemployed League?

BS: No, the Unemployed Leagues. The Communists were the Unemployed Council.

PH: I see.

BS: And this was a frightful thing to do, because they were trying to help people.

PH: Well, what were the Unemployed Leagues doing?

BS: They were gathering people out on demonstrations to go to the Capital, and to protest to the governor. The governor, for instance, had vetoed the legislature of Ohio, raised something they called the “1 mil levy,” believe it or not, which was a little tax which was supposed to go to helping the unemployed, and the governor vetoed it. That was Governor White, who was a very perfect Reagan man in those days.

PH: Was he in the Taft tradition? The Taft tradition was more liberal, wasn't it?

BS: The —

PH: Taft.

BS: The Taft tradition was more decent. It wasn't really liberal. Taft was a much better man, he was an educated man. Governor White was a real Reagan, just like that, the same pattern. You know, in other words, a Birch-like conservative. Now Mary Kay Bell [phonetic], a friend of mine and I — Mary Kay had three jobs. She worked on the *Ohio State Journal* as a reporter, and she worked at the museum as a public relations

director and I was teaching etching and lithography at the museum, and she also was a part-time statistician for the state of Ohio. [Laughing.] That's how you had to work to make enough money to live on in those days. So Mary was very indignant about how starvation, literally starvation, malnutrition, was being catalogued statistically in the state. So we made a map, and I drew it and colored it, and she provided the statistics of starvation and malnutrition in the state of Ohio. Our paper wouldn't handle it. The [Columbus] Dispatch wouldn't handle it, the Scripps paper [poss. Cleveland Press: <http://ech.case.edu/ech-cgi/article.pl?id=CP3>] wouldn't handle it, so we took it to the Communist Party. And they, what did they do with it? Anyway, they buried it. We never saw it again. And it was — Mary and I were invited to one day to come to lunch at a very elegant restaurant with the head of the museum who was also the owner of Ohio Central Paper Company, a great big organization. This man took us to lunch, and so he said to us, "I know that you girls are moved to sympathy by the situation of the unemployed in Columbus," and so on and so forth. And he said, you know, very fatherly, "What you girls must realize is that there are certain people who are no good to themselves, and no good to anybody else, and by the laws of nature, they would die out. Now, we should not interfere with that process." And that's when Mary and I went to make this map.

[Laughing.] We were so furious. Well, we had lots of fun and lots of trouble. [Laughing.] It was a lively time, very exciting. I don't know what I was trying to tell you at that time. I've forgotten what I was talking about.

PH: We —

BS: I'll tell you what I was telling you about. Why I consider the Communist Party to have been a very rotten organization. You see, they were going by principles that they

read in Marxist books and they were in a sense misinterpreting them, because Marx said that lying is, that honor is a bourgeois quality, and that honor should not be observed when the values of the working class are at stake, and so on. And the Communist Party lied freely, and horribly, and they lied about Roosevelt, and as a matter of fact that's one of the main reasons why I left the Party, I was horrified at their attempting to undercut what Roosevelt was so earnestly trying to do for the people of the country.

PH: Well, you know, I don't have any strong feelings about Roosevelt one way or the other —

BS: I adored him.

PH: But I am aware that there is a lot of criticism going on, and reassessment, and people are saying that Roosevelt was just a very practical man and wanted to be re-elected, and didn't — you know, there are a lot people who are writing those kinds of books now.

BS: People with minds down here, trying to judge somebody whose mind is up here, have got to judge it on their own level and according to their own capacity and that's what's happening with Roosevelt.

PH: And then other people will say, well, what Roosevelt did was to save capitalism by instituting — and that is often the line that I get from some of the people who used to be members of the Communist Party.

BS: That was a Communist line.

PH: But on the other hand, the Communist Party itself at one point, or maybe some of the artists who were close to the Communist Party, very much jumped on the Roosevelt bandwagon and were very supportive of him in 1940, you know.

BS: All the artists. I don't think there's any artist who is not conscious of what Roosevelt did for artists, my God. Because, you know, American art never would have emerged as it did had it not been for the art projects. Name me one of that period who was not a beneficiary. I think that [Eugene] Speicher was the only artist who was never on a project [laughing], so far as I know.

PH: He was selling his artwork, too.

BS: What?

PH: He was selling his artwork.

BS: He was selling, sure, but he was a very accepted artist. But everybody was on, even people who now pretend they weren't.

PH: Well, I think that the Stieglitz artists weren't on the project, were they? Georgia O'Keeffe —

BS: Georgia O'Keeffe wasn't, no.

PH: And Arthur B. Dove, and [John] Marin ———

BS: You see, they were — Arthur B. Dove was almost passé by the time of the Roosevelt things.

PH: And also he had gotten some inheritance, Dove had.

BS: See, now, I don't think Dove — certainly Niles Spencer wasn't on it, and John Marin didn't have to be on it. But John Marin was very sympathetic, don't forget that. At least I think he was, because, young John certainly was. See this was really an earlier group who had arrived in a certain sense. However, American art, the art that they were doing had not arrived, and the art that they were doing was buttressed by all the young artists who came up and were doing modern art and made what they were doing very

highly acceptable. Now somebody like Edith Halpert was a passionately pro-Roosevelt person.

PH: A lot of the, some of the people that I've been interviewing say that actually, that they didn't really feel that the Communist Party was telling them what to paint in their art, that the Communist Party were mostly involved with artists because they wanted artists to leaflet, and to picket, and to do things like that.

BS: They did. That was one of the things that they told artists to do.

PH: But the idea of actually dictating to them what their paintings ought to be, many of the artists I talked to said that wasn't going on, that the Communist Party officials never really had that high hopes for artists doing anything that would be that effective in terms of propaganda.

BS: I think that it might be that they didn't even realize that they were being affected. They were being affected by — I think they were being affected. I don't know who you're talking about. Gwathmey, maybe?

PH: No, I haven't talked to him.

BS: To whom did you talk, to Raphael [Soyer?]?

PH: To Raphael.

BS: Raphael was —

PH: Raphael didn't think that the Party really was ever dictating to anybody how to paint their pictures.

BS: Raphael in the first place is an angel. In the second place, he loved the Communist Party because to him, it was what the Church is to a Catholic. I don't think he was ever actually a member either. But it was an idealism that Raphael had. You have to

understand him. On the other hand, the people — the things that people around him were doing — Raphael did belong to the John Reed Club. And the John Reed Club was being dictated right straight down the line from the Communist Party. Sure, a lot of people — Gropper fought with them from the ground up, fought with them all the time. But the Communist Party was always into the John Reed Club, always, on the bureau, sending down directives which were never told —

PH: Telling people how to paint their pictures, though?

BS: Never told overtly, never told overtly, ever, even with *Art Front* — well, *Art Front*, they actually were overt.

PH: They weren't that involved with *Art Front*, though, was the CP? The CP wasn't in any sense controlling *Art Front*?

BS: Are you joking? Of course they were.

PH: How were they doing that, though? Because —

BS: I forgot to mention Hugo. Hugo Gellert ultimately was on *Art Front*. I hate to say this, but Hugo was always a spokesman for the Party.

PH: Although a lot of people say he was never in the Party.

BS: Well. I couldn't say. I would never say that anybody was in the Communist Party [inaudible - "I, myself"?] ever, anybody.

PH: After a while, it doesn't make any difference to me. It depends upon how they act, what they do.

BS: Hugo was a very doctrinaire person. And Hugo was also on *The Masses*.

PH: But he was very pro-Roosevelt. I mean, I went and I interviewed Hugo and he was extremely pro-Roosevelt.

BS: He was now. But then, he would have done what the Party wanted him to do.

PH: But then, I mean, it was —

BS: This thing was really very subtle, because with one hand the Party was supporting Roosevelt; with the other hand, they were trying to undermine him.

PH: I can understand that.

BS: And Hugo and Phil Bard, were, more than anybody I know, were the spokesmen for Thirteenth Street. And whether —and I would never say that any one of them was a member of the Party, because, you know, you can't say that about anybody. If they don't want to be known as a member of the Communist Party, you shouldn't say so. And maybe they weren't. I don't know. Because everybody — I'll tell you a very big joke. When I joined the Communist Party, I was the only person I knew who was under my own name. The only one. Everybody else had an assumed name.

PH: Really?

BS: Everybody. And they had cards, and they had these assumed names on their cards. And I thought it was a joke, because what I said was, if I didn't believe in what I was doing, I wouldn't do it, and if I do believe in it, I certainly want my name attached to it.

PH: Well, there was a lot of red-baiting and there was a lot of — I mean, the thing about the red-baiting and McCarthyism, that actually started way back in the 30s, you know, there was [sic] Project artists because of this Colonel [Brehon] Somervell who had been in charge. I mean, he was very anti-red and trying get them to sign loyalty oaths and things like that. So that started long before McCarthy.

BS: But you didn't have to take a loyalty oath to belong to the Projects.

PH: Well, I think he tried to institute, Somervell did, Colonel Somervell, when he —

BS: He probably did.

PH: That was in the late 30s, '39 or so.

BS: Oh, that late. See, I left, Ben got me a job in Washington, I think it was in '34, and I left New York, and then from that time on I was in Washington.

PH: What were you doing in Washington?

BS: Well, I set up a lithograph shop under Special Skills.

PH: For the WPA?

BS: No. No, it was under the Department of Agriculture, and a friend of ours, Adrian Dornbush, well, later our friend, was the head of this very interesting — it was part of Resettlement [the Resettlement Administration] — the part of the government that built this town was Resettlement — and Ben had gotten a job and then he was transferred over to Roy Stryker to do some photographs. He wrote to me and asked me if I wanted a job setting up a lithographic shop, and I went down, and it was marvelous. I designed a perfect shop, and even knocked a wall out of the building and so on and so forth, and just carried out everything the way I designed it. It was the nicest lithographic shop I've ever seen, almost. And so I did lithographs based pretty much on Roosevelt's speeches on the new social frontier and so on and so forth, and the breaking down of the old frontier.

PH: I'd like to see those, too.

BS: Oh, I have to dig them [inaudible].

PH: So the *Art Front*, you feel, there was a lot of — you know, when you look at *Art Front*, though, the articles are so varied.

BS: Oh, yes, because look who was editing it. We were.

PH: There was Stuart Davis —

BS: I wasn't ever on the masthead, [inaudible - "I don't think"? "another thing"?].

PH: You weren't on the masthead. You should have been on the masthead.

BS: I didn't want to be on the masthead. I wanted the masthead to have people who counted. You know, I had no name as an artist. But Ben had, and Stuart had, and [inaudible - "Vias" "Rias"?] had, and I forgot who all was on the masthead. Hugo was on it.

PH: And there was Joseph Kainen? Or he was a little later?

BS: Yes, Joseph Kainen was on it.

PH: And then [Clarence] Weinstock was a little later. He came later.

BS: Weinstock was on it. He wasn't terribly well known, neither was Kainen, but Weinstock wrote very copiously and rather well, in a kind of peculiar way.

PH: But there's a variety of articles, and one gets the sense that it's not doctrinaire.

BS: But that's because we fought it like hell. We fought Thirteenth Street right down to the line. Nevertheless, if you look through *Art Front*, you're going to find "defend the Soviet Union" in it, in spite of all hell and high water, you're going to find these little boxes that defend the Soviet Union, defend the Scottsboro Boys, this thing that Thirteenth Street would insist on, but you should see what we threw out. And I told you that I was called up on charges once a week, every time. You know, it was fun. No, Thirteenth Street had tried — they didn't succeed — they tried very, very hard to dominate the *Art Front*.

PH: Would you say that the percentage of people who were on the editorial board of *Art Front*, was it like 50-50 or hardly anybody?

BS: No, I think if anybody was a Party member, it would have been Hugo. And I would not say — if Hugo says that he wasn't a Party member, I think he wasn't. But he would have been the closest to the Party [inaudible].

PH: I didn't ask you, though. I've just heard some people say he was, some people say he wasn't.

BS: It doesn't make any difference.

PH: It doesn't make any difference if they're following orders, if they're trying to transmit orders from the Communist Party, then it doesn't make any difference if they themselves are in it or not. What sort of a man was Stuart Davis? Was he a doctrinaire in terms of wanting Party things to be in the paper?

BS: Oh, no, no. Stuart was, he was, you'd have to know Stuart [laughs] to know what kind of person he was. He was very dry, very humorous. He came from a very aristocratic family, wrote wonderfully and wittily. Stuart, I think in a certain way, his attitude was a little bit like mine, although I think I was a little more idealistic than he was. But Stuart felt that what this Communist Party was doing, intellectually speaking, had to be done. He thought that the — I think that Stuart thought at that point, not later, I think at that point Stuart thought that this country was in a hell of a mess, and that something pretty revolutionary had to happen, and that the Communist Party were the people to do it. And I would say that would have been Stuart's attitude, although this is only a guess.

PH: Well, another thing that comes through in all my readings and talking to people is that, you know, they say that you can't overemphasize — I mean, it's such a fact, and such an overpowering fact, that what Russia was doing looked so terrific.

BS: Yes, it did.

PH: You know, that they were creating a new society and people would go over there, and maybe they would have complaints about one thing or another, but by and large, this sort of feudal land mass was turning, was changing, and people were participating and it was tremendously exciting for those people.

BS: Well, I'll tell you, remember this too. I grew up, when I was a freshman in college was the time of the Teapot Dome Scandal. And my best friend, in my sorority, was a granddaughter of the Speaker of the House. For instance, we were invited to the White House, to the Congressional Ball and all that kind of thing. So Kit McKee and I went to Washington, and so we were able to listen to Gaston B. Means read out of the little black book and we were following — she, a very ardent Republican, and I, a very ardent liberal — were following the Teapot Dome Scandal, so I grew up in that. And then the dubious death of Harding, and then Coolidge, and then Hoover, and so by the time I joined the Communist Party, I had the belief that by the time anybody in American politics had reached the point where he could become president, he would have been so compromised that he could not possibly be independent of the forces of the industrial forces that seemed to be running the country at that time. So then along came Franklin Roosevelt, who dissipated every little truism that I had stuck in my head, Franklin Roosevelt, who defied every rule of how people ought to behave that you could ever imagine. And I think that Roosevelt was an incredibly great man, but all these little, little, nasty hating people will have to die off [laughs] before he'll ever come into his own. The humanness of him. He ran the country from a strictly human point of view. His wife was great, I loved them both.

PH: Eleanor Roosevelt was one of his great assets.

BS: Well, but he was a great asset for himself. He was — you see, when people talk about his ambitiousness — you know, ambition to effect certain things in the country is a great deal of difference from ambition to look like a cowboy in the presidency. It was not personal ambition, it was philosophical ambition. He was an incredibly great man. Well, anyway, I shouldn't talk that way, but that's how I think.

PH: Well, I was trying to ask you which books that you remember that Shahn had read, you know, and you said that he didn't really read Marx or Lenin, but of course he would have read things like *Art Front* and *The New Masses* and later *Partisan Review*. You said he was —

BS: Well, not only that, but Ben's reading was mostly books. It would be easier to name something that he hadn't read of American writing than anything that he had. He certainly had read all of [Theodore] Dreiser. He certainly had read all of Sinclair Lewis, of Upton Sinclair, of [Thorstein] Veblen, of, name it. And all the contemporary writers, Malcolm Cowley. Everybody contemporary. All the Southern writers.

PH: He read a lot of Upton Sinclair.

BS: Of course. Yeah. We all did.

PH: Sinclair was very prolific.

BS: Yes, sure. We read everything. Then Ben read all the European writers.

Everybody. He read Camus, he read, just I don't know how to start naming things that —

PH: Did he read Sartre?

BS: What?

PH: Sartre?

BS: Oh, yes, of course.

PH: He knew French, right?

BS: Yes, perfectly.

PH: Would he read these in French, or in English?

BS: We read in both French and English, mostly in French. I think he read Sartre probably in English, but he read Camus in French, and then of course the general writers like Alain-Fournier. I don't know how to start telling you — Ben's taste was just catholic. And then read also our Columbia intellectuals.

PH: Trilling?

BS: Trilling, whom he did not like.

PH: He did like?

BS: He did not like. But he read him.

PH: Diana Trilling? Did he like Diana Trilling?

BS: Oh God, no. [They laugh.] Neither did I.

PH: I don't think anybody liked her. She sounds like a very disagreeable lady.

BS: She always looked as though she was dressing for a horseback ride. [Laughs]

PH: How about Lillian Hellman?

BS: Ben read her and liked her very much.

PH: Mary McCarthy?

BS: Mary McCarthy. Yes, of course.

PH: And Edmund Wilson?

BS: And Edmund Wilson, whom we knew. And in fact, our first meeting with him was very, very funny. We were at Erich Kahler's house in Princeton. So, Edmund Wilson

said, “Well, I think that what Ben Shahn would have said about this ... ” in the middle of a conversation, and Erich said, “Well, Ben Shahn is here, why don’t you ask him?” And Edmund Wilson said, “Is Ben Shahn in this room?” [Laughs] It was really very funny. You know, he was such a, sort of a, vague, absent-minded man. But everybody admired Edmund Wilson. Of course we read him. But who’s *The House of Intellect*? Who’s the big intellectual from Columbia? Who wrote *The House of Intellect* and —

PH: Not Barzun?

BS: Yes, Barzun, Jacques Barzun. He read Barzun, not necessarily liking him too much, but Ben read absolutely everything. And then, you know, all the Italian writers — [Alberto] Moravia whom he knew, and everybody in Italy, and we spent so much time back and forth, sometimes twice a year, in Italy.

PH: He knew a lot of languages, then, right, and you too, right? French?

BS: Well, I read French very well, I don’t speak it very well, I speak Italian fairly well, and don’t read it very well. But Ben read everything, and —

PH: Usually in the original language, right? French, and Italian?

BS: Well, he didn’t make it a cause of it; he read it as it came.

PH: Let me ask you a question about the effects of the Cold War and McCarthyism. Because I see in a lot of Shahn’s work a kind of motif that I see in a number of other artists during the 1950s, and that is of masks.

BS: If you’re thinking about that painting called *Conversations*?

PH: Right, that’s at the Whitney.

BS: That had nothing to do with McCarthyism. I think — see, Ben was a kind of a philosopher, and, I mean, I think every artist is, and I think that that was, that was a sort

of a wonderful comment on people's — I think he'd probably been reading Kafka [laughs] a great deal at that point. I think that was a sort of a comment on the fact that nobody ever knows anybody else, and everybody is always masking himself, and that kind of a thing. I would [wouldn't?] think that that was the kind of a comment that that was. I wouldn't say for sure.

PH: Well, to me, they all go together, you know.

BS: Yes, they do.

PH: Meaning Kafka, and existentialism, and also this kind of, this idea of the Cold War and that people weren't really knowing who other people were. Those things are related.

BS: McCarthyism, the way it touched us, of course, was a lot more immediate, because Ben was brought up before the Un-American Activities Committee. No, before the Walters committee [sic - "Walter" - Francis E. Walter was the chairman of the House Committee on Un-American Activities, 1955-65]. No, wait a minute, no, that's right, which one was it?

PH: Well, the House is the —

BS: Is the Un-American Activities.

PH: Right.

BS: And the Senate was the, what?

PH: Well, maybe it was the Walters [sic]. I forget what the name was.

BS: I guess Walters [sic] was a congressman, though. Anyway, it was the —

PH: The Senate committee, he was brought up before.

BS: He was what?

PH: You said it was the Senate committee, not the House committee.

BS: I'm not sure, because Walters [sic] was the chairman of the committee.

PH: Oh, OK.

BS: So maybe it was the House. Anyway, so Ben was asked about Cliff Odets, who was a friend of ours, and Ben said, "How should I know what the politics of any of these people are?" But he was, you know, he was ragged a little bit by the committee. But then a very funny thing happened when this thing was through. The magazine *America*, which is circulated in Russia, in Russian, by our State Department, had just carried a full story about Ben, with many reproductions of his pictures, and so on and so forth. So when this interview with the Walters [sic] committee was all through, the congressman said, "Mr. Shahn, you're a neighbor of mine" — he was in Pennsylvania, and we were in New Jersey — "Mr. Shahn, you're a neighbor of mine, tell me, what's this modern art that you're doing? What's it all about, really?" And Ben happened to have this thing in Russian, and [laughs] he handed this thing, and Walters [sic] had been trying to accuse him, you know, of being a red and so on and so forth, and Ben handed this thing in Russian to Walters [sic], with all his pictures in it, but this magazine was circulated by our State Department. [Laughing.] It was a very funny gesture, and, you know, Ben enjoyed doing it, and that's all he could say.

PH: But why was he called up, though?

BS: Oh, he was called up because, he was always being accused, you know. For instance —

PH: Just because he was a famous artist, and they wanted to —

BS: No, no, no, no, because we were involved. We always signed everything that was to be signed, we were against the Vietnam War, against, you know. So I think that this was possibly in connection with the Emergency Civil Liberties Committee. We had always worked with the Civil Liberties Committee, and then, it was considered by some people, very left I think people, radical, that — should it be flashing?

PH: Yeah.

BS: Oh, OK. That's what it does.

PH: It's not flashing? Oh, you know what? You're right. I think that it should be lit. It's OK. It's almost out, though.

BS: I'll finish very fast. The reason why he was brought up, I think, was that there were many cases before the Civil Liberties Committee that they either could not handle, or did not want to handle, or had too much of a burden to be able to handle, so a group of people started something they called the Emergency Civil Liberties Committee, and they were people who on the whole were a little to the left of the regular Civil Liberties Committee [laughs], and —

PH: They're not very left at all, now.

BS: What?

PH: They're not so left anymore.

BS: They never were. They never were. They were always — a perfectly, completely liberal organization never existed.

PH: I mean, they defend the Nazis, you know.

BS: Oh, absolutely. They're interested in freedom of speech.

PH: Right. That's their primary.

BS: Yeah. That's, OK. So this was a relatively radical group. See, this was the McCarthy period, even if McCarthy was, I think he was even still active, but it was a very McCarthy nervous period, and I was interviewed by, the FBI came here, and interviewed me. [Laughs.] They asked me all kinds of questions, and I was as forthright with them as I have been with you. I did not mention any names because I don't think it's right and I didn't know anybody. I wouldn't have anyway. But when they were all through, I said, "Gentlemen, I'd like to ask you one thing. Nothing that I've said to you is to be held in confidence." [Laughing.] And they were very upset by this, because they felt that, you know, I was giving a lot of information. But anybody who belonged to the Civil Liberties —

PH: Did that bother you at all? It didn't, kind of —

BS: That the FBI came here?

PH: Yeah, it didn't spook you or anything like that? Kind of upset you that people —

BS: I think it made me too mad. It didn't, no. See, I'll tell you something —

PH: Some people get very intimidated by those kinds of things.

BS: I've never been intimidated. I'll tell you why. Because I have never done anything that I wouldn't defend right now. Never. And, so, I refuse to be intimidated just because I did something that I believed in. And if I found out it was wrong later, all right, I found out it was wrong later, and I could say that too. But I wouldn't retreat from, you know, the basic belief in humanity that prompted me ever to do whatever I've done. And I have the same basic belief in humanity right now that makes me very anti-Reagan. But I am also very anti the Communist uses of such people as me, and I think, I did not know then

that I was going to be used rather than you know, supported. That was the thing that I objected.

PH: Well, what would you be used for?

BS: Oh, you're used for your influence in getting other people to think in a certain way, but then the minute you think independently, you're no longer useful.

PH: But didn't the Communist Party, I mean, weren't their goals more or less just to make a better world? I mean, wasn't that also the goal?

BS: That's what I had believed, of course. And I think that was Lenin's belief.

PH: I mean, it wasn't their idea to take over the world, to have Russia take over the world.

BS: No, there is a term of the "permanent revolution." It isn't that they wanted Russia to take over the world, they wanted Communism to take over the world.

PH: But if Communism took over the world and it was a better world, then that wouldn't be bad.

BS: But the point of it is that philosophically speaking, Communism does not produce a better world. Communism produces a very dreadful world. It produces a world of suppression and injustice and violence and but particularly the suppression of free thinking. And if I joined the Communist Party, it was because I was thinking freely, and if I got out of it, it was for exactly the same reason. No, I would never support any government that suppresses freedom of speech. You know, as a matter of fact, I'm basically very much an American in the sense of believing that our Constitution is incredibly right. I really think so. Do you?

PH: Well, I see a lot of racism in this country, and I'm always —

BS: You see racism, but that's not in our Constitution. No, not at all. I see a lot of racism in this country too, but certainly less than in any other country. In other words, we're the least worst. I really think that.

PH: Well, I mean, I won't deny that things don't seem to be very good in the Soviet Union, and if there was an ideal of Communism, I think that the Soviet Union has betrayed that ideal.

BS: Oh, I do too. However —

PH: I wouldn't want to throw out the baby with the bathwater, and that is that the ideal of a world of egalitarianism is something that [inaudible].

BS: I guarantee you that if you threw out the bathwater, you would find that there hadn't been any baby in the first place. And the reason why I say that is that when I finally came to the place where I began to analyze Communism, which I really know, when I began to analyze it philosophically, I think that it is exceedingly fallacious philosophically. It is based upon the domination of people, not the freedom of people. And you cannot have a dictatorship, and put power, you cannot put power, arbitrary power, over one person, vest arbitrary power in another person, without its being abused. So you have to begin on the basis — Communism, oddly enough, seems to be egalitarian, but the moment you have commissars who have power over people, it is no longer that.

PH: Then it's no longer Communism, you see.

BS: But you see, Communism is not —

PH: I mean, I wouldn't say they have Communism in the Soviet Union.

BS: Well, they don't have Communism in the Soviet Union.

PH: They have some sort of bureaucracy in which you have an elite that is the bureaucracy.

BS: But, you see, Communism is based upon the common ownership, the belief in the common ownership, of property.

PH: Right.

BS: But one of the most beautiful things that people, one of the most hedonistic pleasures that people have, is the ownership of things. And I believe in the pursuit of happiness, and there's no reason for inhibiting people's owning things. You have to inhibit people's owning things at the expense of other people. And that I believe in. But I think that's democratic, I don't think that that is, I don't think that that's Communist. I believe, for instance — in the Soviet Union, look what's happened to farming, it's practically on its ear, because people have no joy in what they're doing. They're not, you know, they're not working independently because they've got an idea and decide they will work and they'll do it, they're working because they have to.

[END OF TAPE]