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Oral history interview with George Fedoroff, 1980 July 8-1981 Jan. 21

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Transcript

Preface

The following oral history transcript is the result of a recorded interview with George Fedoroff on July 8, 1980 and January 21, 1981. The interview took place in Brewster, Massachusetts, and was conducted by Robert Brown for the Archives of American Art, Smithsonian Institution.

The Archives of American Art has reviewed the transcript and has made corrections and emendations. This transcript has been lightly edited for readability by the Archives of American Art. The reader should bear in mind that they are reading a transcript of spoken, rather than written, prose.

Interview

ROBERT BROWN: —interview on July 8, 1980, in Brewster, Massachusetts, with George Fedoroff. Robert Brown interviewing. I would like to begin by asking you how you did come to be interested in the fine arts, the visual arts. And you were born in Russia.

GEORGE W. FEDOROFF: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

ROBERT BROWN: Is there anything in your childhood—I mean, I believe your grandfather was an architect. Your father also was an architect.

GEORGE W. FEDOROFF: Was an architect, yeah.

ROBERT BROWN: What are some of your early memories that may relate to your later interest in the arts?

GEORGE W. FEDOROFF: It was largely through the environment. My family, my relatives, they were all interested in the arts. Of course, it was an interest, as far as I was concerned, of a child, practically, in creative things. It was not an understanding of an adult, what art means and what the periods are, et cetera, et cetera. But I suppose I was compelled sometimes to be interested in the arts when I was young, all the arts.

ROBERT BROWN: How?

GEORGE W. FEDOROFF: Particularly by my maternal grandfather, who was practically a dictator.

ROBERT BROWN: He compelled you? You mean he would take you in hand and say, “You must know this”?

GEORGE W. FEDOROFF: Right. He was dictating it through his homes or house, or even taking me to the museums; us, not me, generally. He would take two or three of us. I mean, we had a large family: cousins, brothers, et cetera.

ROBERT BROWN: This was when you were very small. [00:02:00]

GEORGE W. FEDOROFF: I was very small. And my mother was interested in the arts.

ROBERT BROWN: This was in Petrograd?

GEORGE W. FEDOROFF: Right.

ROBERT BROWN: Yeah. And where would you go, then? Which museums were they that you could see?

GEORGE W. FEDOROFF: Well, you would go to the palaces, et cetera, you know, where they had things.

ROBERT BROWN: Oh, they were open then?

GEORGE W. FEDOROFF: Oh, yes. Well, you see, my grandfather was at one time one of the palace architects under Alexander III. That’s twice removed, practically, in generations. I suppose he had permits, et cetera. When the palaces were unoccupied and so on, you could really go there if you had the right access through somebody, and again, my grandfather had it.

And then, of course, he would take us on special occasions, but even when I was very young, to an opera or a ballet, et cetera. In other words, all the arts were there. My family was not necessarily musical, but they all played piano, and mostly Chopin, you know, but sentimental Russian music, et cetera.

ROBERT BROWN: Do you recall any paintings or anything that stood out?

GEORGE W. FEDOROFF: Oh, there were Russian historical paintings. I know my grandfather had some by a chap named Repin. I still remember the name. And I don't remember Russian painters. To me they are essentially nothing now. Universally, they are not necessarily in the upper echelon of artists. But they had folk artists, if you will, of historical paintings. [00:04:02]

ROBERT BROWN: This was Repin?

GEORGE W. FEDOROFF: Repin, his name was, a genre type of paintings. He would paint a peasant or a landowner, whatever, but realistic. They were academicians. That's more the type. But they're not great artists of any sort. I don't think my grandfather had great sensibility for understanding of all the arts, because he was an academician himself, architecturally speaking, if nothing else. But he was just a rich man who could do all these things, collect these things. He had a lot of them around his house. But it's a habit of seeing things which are above the average.

Then my father, too—you see, my father was, of course, younger. He collected Oriental art himself. As a consequence, I developed an interest in Oriental art. He used to travel in China and came back, et cetera, brought these things back to St. Petersburg. So all these things accumulated an interest in me in the arts. Not that I wanted to be an artist, in particular, but after all, I was only about 10, and I had no aspirations of any sort. I hated mathematics when I was about six. [Laughs.]

ROBERT BROWN: But you remember looking at these things that your father would bring back.

GEORGE W. FEDOROFF: Oh, yes, right.

ROBERT BROWN: What do you think there was in that Oriental art that struck you?

GEORGE W. FEDOROFF: I don't know. Today it's another story. But for a child, I suppose it's the exotic rather than the actual form or a style or whatever it happened to be, color, that sort of thing. For instance, beaded embroideries or bronzes, et cetera. They fascinated me without knowing why, really. But it's a habit. These things were introduced into my life at one time or another. Later on, as I matured, et cetera, they became rather important in my life. I suppose I understood them better. I knew why I liked them. [00:06:29]

ROBERT BROWN: Why did you like them, as you think about it?

GEORGE W. FEDOROFF: You know, all these things that, of course, describe why one likes anything, you just do. Of course, to make liturgy [ph] you would naturally have a reason for liking these things. But they interested me for form, color, you name it. You can't pinpoint it.

ROBERT BROWN: Now, these were very exotic to you.

GEORGE W. FEDOROFF: When I was a child, they were.

ROBERT BROWN: Was that because your lifestyle was pretty much a Western one?

GEORGE W. FEDOROFF: My life was indeed Western, even—it wasn't particularly Russian, excepting we've got that religion, you see. And that was a little bit overbearing. Of course, at that time, at that time I just accepted that it was part of my life. You had to go to church on Sundays, and you had to celebrate Easter, Christmas, you name it, you know. And my grandparents and my parents were all very religious. I was not.

ROBERT BROWN: Even as a small child?

GEORGE W. FEDOROFF: Well, not—yes, as a small child I went to church, but to me it was the pageantry more than the substance. And I was afraid of God, the saints, you name it, you know. But it was the thing to do, all of my cousins, and we used to travel in hordes, you know. On Sundays, you go—all of us go to church. We lived nearby, you see, so—I mean, in the church and after the church, et cetera, but I suppose the church was an important factor in our family's life. And I rebelled against it later on. At the age of 14, I saw the light. And it was not a question of philosophical or political predilection. I simply gave it up. [00:08:47]

ROBERT BROWN: Why do you think you did?

GEORGE W. FEDOROFF: Well, I just questioned it. Well, to me it was pagan, and I can't remember why, where or when it happened. That was during the revolution, you see, and I had seen a lot of death, et cetera, around as a child. And even then I was still going to church. And I've seen a priest murdered, et cetera, the bishop, I remember, in a town where we were trapped. We were trapped there for about a year on our way from—actually, it was on our way from St. Petersburg to Vladivostok in Siberia. And we became good friends of the bishop in that particular town. Well, the poor man was disposed of by the Reds.

ROBERT BROWN: Your family, then, was thoroughly in the establishment, so that—[0:10:00]

GEORGE W. FEDOROFF: Oh, they were.

ROBERT BROWN: So you had to flee.

GEORGE W. FEDOROFF: Right.

ROBERT BROWN: Do you have any fairly vivid memories of that, or as a child, were you just brought along as part of the baggage?

GEORGE W. FEDOROFF: Well, it was more or less that. Of course, I remember all of the things that happened. It was a difficult period for everybody. My grandfather is the one who engineered our escape first. He escaped shortly afterwards. But he told us where to go and where to end up. We were supposed to meet in Paris about a year or two later, which didn't happen. He did get to Paris. But anyway.

ROBERT BROWN: Well, your father was an architect; is that right?

GEORGE W. FEDOROFF: Yes. My parents were divorced in 1914.

ROBERT BROWN: Was that quite an astounding thing in that day?

GEORGE W. FEDOROFF: I didn't feel—you see, we were brought up rather differently from children in the United States, you see. We were brought up by governesses, et cetera. We were not in the family's presence all the time. We were fond of our mother and father, but to us they were almost like mythical creatures whom you saw only on certain occasions, until the revolution. Of course, when the revolution came, our mother took me and my younger brother, and she became a mother who was with us all the time. But in normal times, we very rarely saw our mother or our father. We saw less of our father than mother. Of course, after they divorced, we hadn't seen our father at all. He remarried early. So we were with our mother. Well, anyway, it's a long story. [00:12:09]

ROBERT BROWN: You have written about going and finally ending up in Shanghai, and then eventually getting to Paris. And your mother remarried in China to an Austrian who was also an architect.

GEORGE W. FEDOROFF: Right. He was an architect.

ROBERT BROWN: But actually, she married him in Siberia before they went to China, just before. And then they married in a little town called Nikolsk-Ussuriysk, which was on the border of China and near Vladivostok. That's after they escaped from a town near the Ural Mountains. That was, let's see, I believe it was 1918, I believe, or '17. It was '17 and '18. They were married in 1919. They went to China. We followed—we escaped with our father, my brother and I. And as soon as my mother and stepfather were established in Shanghai—you see, they were going to France, but things didn't work out or they had good fortune in finding employment. My stepfather did, anyhow.

ROBERT BROWN: In China?

GEORGE W. FEDOROFF: In China he found it. He was working for a British firm as an architect, and he was able to support his wife and two stepchildren. So we went to join him.

ROBERT BROWN: Did your father, then, stay back in Russia?

GEORGE W. FEDOROFF: Oh, yes. Well, he was remarried, you see.

ROBERT BROWN: I see. And he stayed in Russia? [00:14:06]

GEORGE W. FEDOROFF: He stayed in Siberia. I didn't know where. But that was the last time I saw my father, which was in 1919. And we had two, three contacts since, but very brief. I don't know what happened. I know he was in China in 1940.

ROBERT BROWN: Of course, your relationship with your parents had been rather formal until the revolution.

GEORGE W. FEDOROFF: Yes.

ROBERT BROWN: And then afterward, when your mother remarried, now you were sort of like a little bourgeois family. While you were in China, you were much more with your parents, your mother and your stepfather.

GEORGE W. FEDOROFF: Yes, our stepfather, right, right, normal family.

ROBERT BROWN: And you went on and finished most of your schooling.

GEORGE W. FEDOROFF: I was schooled in China. I went to an English school there for many years. But I went through what is equivalent to high school plus. Then, of course, my stepfather just thought I should be an architect. Well, I couldn't make it in mathematics. I was awful. I hated it since I was a baby. So they decided—I was interested in the arts, so I was sent to Paris by my stepfather and my mother.

ROBERT BROWN: From China?

GEORGE W. FEDOROFF: From China, to study in Paris. By then, my grandfather was in Paris.

ROBERT BROWN: Was that a tremendous change for you; I mean to leave China?

GEORGE W. FEDOROFF: It was a change, but—

ROBERT BROWN: You went on your own, by yourself.

GEORGE W. FEDOROFF: I went there all by myself, right. I was about 16, 17 years old. In Paris, my grandfather kept an eye on me, but we were already separated by a lag in interests, and the same sort of a thing like in religion and the roots, et cetera. By then, I became already interested in internationalism. I don't mean countries, international like that, but I simply didn't believe in labels or extreme attachment to any one particular culture. I felt that the world was much more than that. It was still immature, you know. It was just forming in my mind that I simply could not remain a hundred-proof Russian and lament about the lost past, et cetera. [00:17:07]

ROBERT BROWN: Whereas your father did—your grandfather did live in the past.

GEORGE W. FEDOROFF: Oh, yes. And of course, he immediately established the Russian university in Paris. And he was quite burdened by me, I suppose, because I did not show an adequate interest in old Russia, or the language, or religion, et cetera. So we had a rift of sorts.

ROBERT BROWN: What were you interested in when you lived in Paris?

GEORGE W. FEDOROFF: I went to study art, and I lived—of course, I worked with French students. And I was interested in art. I didn't give a damn about the Russian politics and the preservation of something that was gone forever, you know. They still had illusions that they were going back. Of course, their losses were much more vivid than mine in their lives. I still had a whole life in front of me, whereas they had lived their life. They accumulated whatever they accumulated already in Russia, and my grandfather was a rich man. And all of his—all of my relatives had suddenly found themselves in a position where they were considered as refugees. They didn't drive taxicabs, but nevertheless, they were poor. They went from multimillionaires. My grandfather had to scrape up whatever he had invested in Europe, which was very little, and most of it went to this university, whatever he had left. He was a great patriot, and uh—[00:19:14]

ROBERT BROWN: So he put most of his resources into this Russian university in Paris.

GEORGE W. FEDOROFF: All of it into this university. Of course, his wife was—he escaped alone, you see. My grandmother was trapped, caught, and most of my relatives were caught in Russia. I don't know what happened to them. Some of them died, of course, but a few escaped. I have relatives in France and England. But to me, it was not a vital link with the future, my past. I was looking ahead, you know. [00:20:05]

ROBERT BROWN: You felt that was outmoded, what your grandfather was trying to do.

GEORGE W. FEDOROFF: Right. And realistically, it was impossible to recapture the past, you know. I mean, it was a sentimental thing. And with years, for instance, very often you wonder whether you should have or shouldn't have kept up with old traditions, et cetera. Well, I never have. I adjusted myself to wherever I happened to be, like a chameleon.

ROBERT BROWN: Now, in Paris, though, you went to the—you studied partly the decorative arts and other things?

GEORGE W. FEDOROFF: That's my first school, the School of the Arts Applied to Industry, l'Ecole des Arts Appliques a l'Industrie. It was a very good school. Because I was rather influenced by the then-building of Exposition of 1925.

ROBERT BROWN: Oh, yes, the exposition—[inaudible].

GEORGE W. FEDOROFF: It was, you know, Art Nouveau, Art Moderne. But modern art had its birth during that

exhibit. And my school happened to be exhibiting there, and that's how I got involved in it all. I was interested in everything that had to do anything with the arts—applied arts or fine art.

ROBERT BROWN: Were you studying drawing and painting?

GEORGE W. FEDOROFF: Oh, yes, all of that, drawing, painting, and also design. I worked in ceramics, and I worked in architectural sculpture. I worked in commercial art at the same school. But all of it brought me back to realizing that I—essentially I was interested in fine arts, not in the practical end of it, like the design or commercial art. And through that environment, I became involved in a group of students from Ecole des Beaux-Arts, for instance, which had a certain prestige even at that time, and they convinced me that that was the school to go to because it was a national school, so for a foreigner, it was difficult to enter it. So anyway, I managed to get in. [00:22:35]

ROBERT BROWN: You did manage to get into it.

GEORGE W. FEDOROFF: Oh, yes, by producing work and, I suppose, talking to the professors there, et cetera, who felt that I probably could make some sort of a contribution to the school. At that time I thought so, too, but within a year or so I realized it was another mistake.

ROBERT BROWN: It was what?

GEORGE W. FEDOROFF: It was another mistake.

ROBERT BROWN: That you really weren't cut out to be a painter, or—

GEORGE W. FEDOROFF: Well, no, I still thought I would be a painter at that time, but I felt it was too confining. And it was, with me, you know. It was a traditional school which took you from A to Z.

ROBERT BROWN: And yet you were on your own a bit, weren't you? You were simply under the—

GEORGE W. FEDOROFF: Yes, you were in the studio. The professor came once or twice a week, as I remember. And this particular professor—his name was Lucien Simon—he was considered as a liberal of the whole school in painting. Of course, there were studios in painting, architecture and sculpture. And he's the only one who refused to accept the membership in the academy, which at that time was unheard of. So immediately, younger artists accepted him as the man to work with. [00:24:14]

ROBERT BROWN: What was he like as a teacher?

GEORGE W. FEDOROFF: Well, he was still an academician. He was an old man. He was about 60-some then. And he took you through the paces, the normal thing. You spent so many days drawing, so many days painting, so many days studying anatomy, et cetera, et cetera. And it might have been useful, and I suppose so, if you had a whole lifetime to spend in bloody school. Well, I didn't have that much time. I didn't think so, anyway.

ROBERT BROWN: You felt it was rather tedious.

GEORGE W. FEDOROFF: Hmm?

ROBERT BROWN: You thought it was rather tedious?

GEORGE W. FEDOROFF: Oh, yes. And creatively, it was lacking. But at that time I didn't appreciate the background, the solid foundation which was being provided, regardless of what you happened to be in the future. Whether you became a cubist or not didn't really matter. But associations outside of the school with other artists or students meant to me a lot more than the school.

ROBERT BROWN: Can you describe some of the artists you got to know at that time?

GEORGE W. FEDOROFF: Oh, no. They weren't very important. I met, you know, for instance, Derain, met Lhote, I met Leger, I met—I said "How do you do" to Picasso. That was a great moment in my life, you know?

ROBERT BROWN: Oh, even then he was really a—

GEORGE W. FEDOROFF: Oh, yes. But then, you see, you didn't talk to these people. You just sit in a café. I spent lots of time in cafés. Most of the cafés [inaudible] or something like that, but where you would meet all these people, like [Tsuguharu] Foujita, models like Kiki, one of the shining examples of women who were mistresses, models to—by appointment to various artists, like Foujita or Picasso. But I was only a student, you see. Picassos, et cetera, were already on the way, you know, much more serious, much more dedicated than I was. And the young people I knew were—I don't know what happened to them since. One or two became, I suppose, great

painters. But at that time, they looked upon you as that little boy who's trying to draw or paint, whatever it is, you know. I was not a participant in that entourage, you know. I was on the outskirts, a wide-eyed, young student, like all of us were, you know. If even by accident you came face to face, if you do, it's like meeting a—to a lot of people here—meeting a movie star. I mean, you don't wash your hands for a week after, you know. But superficial. [00:27:43]

ROBERT BROWN: In Paris you met, among others, Americans, I gather.

GEORGE W. FEDOROFF: Oh, yes.

ROBERT BROWN: That's how—that was the urge to come to America, to the United States.

GEORGE W. FEDOROFF: And again, though, you see, they were not typical Americans, necessarily. They were the rich or they were intellectually ill-adjusted for this life here, so they were expatriates in Paris. So I was caught between the two, more or less: the rich students who were going back, and the ones who were very competent intellectually, who were not going back because they felt that the United States had—at that time, they were simply living there because they must have had means, but they wanted to develop themselves as either writers, musicians or painters outside the United States because the United States at that time was not very receptive to artists, as you know. [00:28:55]

ROBERT BROWN: Whereas France seemed to be—

GEORGE W. FEDOROFF: Oh, yes. Well, there nobody cared, you know. For instance, if you were a homosexual, or whether you were poor or rich or irresponsible, it didn't matter at all. You were considered, first, if you had something to contribute as an individual, regardless of your social or economic status.

ROBERT BROWN: This was very apparent to you at the time.

GEORGE W. FEDOROFF: Oh, yes, yes.

ROBERT BROWN: This must have been the start of your interest in being a citizen of the world rather than, say, a Russian.

GEORGE W. FEDOROFF: Right. Right. And I was interested in the United States at that time. In fact, before I left China, some people thought I should come to the United States instead of going to Europe.

ROBERT BROWN: Why would they suggest that?

GEORGE W. FEDOROFF: Well, security of sorts. I mean, this was the land of plenty, et cetera, et cetera. Romantic notions, mostly, about the United States. With opportunity, some have, and they made it, I suppose. They just went directly from China, wherever, came to the United States long before I did. [00:30:08]

ROBERT BROWN: These were?

GEORGE W. FEDOROFF: People—my contemporaries, whom I knew. I mean, I've heard about them since, they've become good, solid citizens, you know. It's not what I wanted, particularly. But America was sort of a pickle [ph] to me. And, of course, the Americans I knew in Paris, you see, were out of my economic bracket entirely. They were rich people, mostly. So I thought, well, they are the sort of people I like, you know. I said, well, that's the way I want to live too. But I couldn't.

ROBERT BROWN: Did you run around with those people quite a bit in Paris?

GEORGE W. FEDOROFF: Oh, yes.

ROBERT BROWN: I imagine you lived pretty high.

GEORGE W. FEDOROFF: I lived pretty high, and spent—of course, I had an income, you see.

ROBERT BROWN: You had what?

GEORGE W. FEDOROFF: I had an income from my family. So I didn't have to earn anything. I was better off than the average Russian was. Not rich. I had enough, but not enough to patronize nightclubs every night. I had to save for a month in order to go to a nightclub. But I did. I did. And I enjoyed it. But it was an awful waste.

ROBERT BROWN: A waste in what terms?

GEORGE W. FEDOROFF: In terms of my work. I mean, I wasn't doing that much work. I enjoyed the people, you

see. Of course, a lot of my French friends thought I betrayed them, you see, by becoming one of the—[inaudible]—society members. And then, of course—[00:32:04]

ROBERT BROWN: Why did they think you betrayed them? Because they didn't have the money?

GEORGE W. FEDOROFF: Well, they didn't have the money, and they thought I was one of them, you see. We were all going to be great painters someday, struggle, et cetera. Most of them were poor. Some of them were not poor, but they were not rich, either. But they were dedicated to painting. Here I was, I was supposed to be dedicated to painting, and I became involved in the social life of certain groups of people who were much richer than I was. I mean, I could never really attain that.

ROBERT BROWN: What was it in the social life, do you think, that appealed to you?

GEORGE W. FEDOROFF: I enjoyed the good life, I suppose. I enjoyed going to nightclubs. I enjoyed fine restaurants, et cetera, whenever I could. And I liked American girls. [Laughs.] You know, they were attractive. I don't know why. But I was about 18, 19 years old now, or 20 years old. And of course, I learned about life in general later on when I came to Boston.

ROBERT BROWN: Because you didn't learn about it there. [Laughs.]

GEORGE W. FEDOROFF: Not there, no. It was sad to see.

ROBERT BROWN: Very superficial?

GEORGE W. FEDOROFF: Oh, very.

ROBERT BROWN: Then your mother and stepfather came over to see you in Paris—

GEORGE W. FEDOROFF: They did.

ROBERT BROWN: —in 1928 or so.

GEORGE W. FEDOROFF: Right, before I left for the United States.

ROBERT BROWN: By that time you had made up your mind that—

GEORGE W. FEDOROFF: Oh, yes.

ROBERT BROWN: You had already met this director of the art school in Boston, Miss Child, Katherine Child.

GEORGE W. FEDOROFF: Right, Katherine B. Child.

ROBERT BROWN: She offered you a—

GEORGE W. FEDOROFF: —a scholarship and a teaching sort of a job.

ROBERT BROWN: Did you have some idea of what it would be like?

GEORGE W. FEDOROFF: No, not the slightest. [00:34:00]

ROBERT BROWN: But it was at least a chance to come over here.

GEORGE W. FEDOROFF: Right. So I took the chance, and I thought that—I simply didn't think about the practical end of it at all. I suppose I like to travel and change countries, et cetera.

ROBERT BROWN: What was your impression when you first got here?

GEORGE W. FEDOROFF: I liked it. I had a wonderful time. No, the first impression was awful. I landed on Ellis Island. That was my first impression. I was about ready to go back.

ROBERT BROWN: You mean your papers weren't in order or something?

GEORGE W. FEDOROFF: Something, yes. As I remember, I didn't have a guarantee from my parents that I had the support for a certain number of years before my permanent visa was granted. See, I went as a student. It was all very complicated. Of course, I had this awful Nansen passport from the League of Nations, you see, so I was a man without a country sort of a thing.

ROBERT BROWN: What's it called, a Nansen?

GEORGE W. FEDOROFF: Nansen it was called. He was a Scandinavian—

ROBERT BROWN: The explorer?

GEORGE W. FEDOROFF: No, it's not the same one. No, but he had something to do with providing for refugees, giving them some sort of document and identity of sorts, people who were without a country, and I was without a country.

ROBERT BROWN: So you went to Sweden?

GEORGE W. FEDOROFF: No, it was after. It was issued through Geneva.

ROBERT BROWN: But you went from Paris, then, to—

GEORGE W. FEDOROFF: To Boston.

ROBERT BROWN: —to Ellis Island.

GEORGE W. FEDOROFF: To Ellis Island.

ROBERT BROWN: And to Boston.

GEORGE W. FEDOROFF: And then I was rescued there because I had some friends who were meeting me in New York from Louisville. [00:36:00]

ROBERT BROWN: These were people you met in Paris?

GEORGE W. FEDOROFF: Right. And I couldn't even see them. I was whisked away from the boat to Ellis Island. And I was furious. They were rude, and I was livid. I was obstinate. I just told them, "I'm not used to being talked to like this." And of course they said, "Shut up" and all that sort of thing. There was a black woman there who took me aside. She was one of the officers, the immigration officer. She said, "Don't talk to them. They don't understand. They are like this, they are"—et cetera, et cetera, et cetera. So she gave me a long lecture on how to behave in the presence of bureaucrats, small fry in immigration. So at that time, it was anything but liberal, you know. Well, anyway, so my friends immediately called Washington. They had powerful friends there. They had Mr. Barkley, who was then a senator. He became vice president eventually. Then Davis—I can't remember his first name—he was secretary of labor. So they talked to both of them, and they wired Ellis Island to let me off immediately. So it was very fine of them, but it took two or three days before all of it came through.

ROBERT BROWN: Meanwhile, you were incarcerated.

GEORGE W. FEDOROFF: Oh, it was awful. I was livid. I was mad. I just wanted to get a ticket back home, back to Paris. Anyway, so the wires came through or whatever, telephone calls, from Barkley and Davis to Ellis Island, and they changed their tune. They were polite. They were apologizing for the inconvenience and all that sort of thing. In fact, they gave me flowers as I was leaving, you know. So I got out. And that was the first round. Then, of course, then I went south to Louisville, where I was dined, wined, and dined. [00:38:28]

ROBERT BROWN: By these people you had met in Paris?

GEORGE W. FEDOROFF: Those people.

ROBERT BROWN: What was their name, the family you knew?

GEORGE W. FEDOROFF: MacLean. They were Canadians who—there was a thing called Wood-Mosaic Company. It was a great establishment for manufacturing flooring or something, in lumber. They were extremely rich people. They were very nice to me. The boys I had met in Paris, they were supposed to be in Cape—no, Oxford, but they didn't spend much time in Oxford. They were in Paris most of the time. And we met through a classmate. They went to Yale, all of them, and one of the classmates—or maybe he was not a Yale man. I think he was a bit older. In Paris he was a serious student. He was writing. He introduced me. So anyhow, we became fast friends.

ROBERT BROWN: So you went to Louisville for a bit and visited with them.

GEORGE W. FEDOROFF: So I spent two or three months—

ROBERT BROWN: And then you came back—

GEORGE W. FEDOROFF: —in Glenview, Kentucky playing tennis, and attending mint julep parties, and all that

sort of thing. It was just one glorious holiday. I mean, the Southern hospitality was overflowing, you know. Then they took me to [inaudible] line, to our camp in Canada to hunt and fish. And I liked hunting and fishing, so I went with them. [00:40:07]

ROBERT BROWN: This was, what, 1929 or ’28?

GEORGE W. FEDOROFF: Twenty-eight. You see, I landed in April in ’28, and just to later go to school in Boston. And I didn’t care, really. So I went to Louisville, and then from Louisville, I went to Canada. I hunted and fished at the camp, which was some hundred miles from Ottawa. It was a long trip by all sorts of transportation—train and boat, horses, you name it.

ROBERT BROWN: Did you develop close friendships there?

GEORGE W. FEDOROFF: Well, with the same people. They had guests from everywhere. It was a tremendous camp, you know, luxury. They had everything, including a company store, that sort of thing. And they used to fly in and out, but we went there the long way out. On the way out, I flew out. Of course, at that time there weren’t many people who had planes. And that was a nice time. Then they suddenly realized that I was irresponsible financially.

ROBERT BROWN: Well, did you have any funds, or had your parents cut you off?

GEORGE W. FEDOROFF: They cut me off. The minute I landed in the United States, no more. They didn’t want me to go.

ROBERT BROWN: So the MacLeans—it wasn’t irresponsible, it was—

GEORGE W. FEDOROFF: No, it was irresponsible because I couldn’t support—

ROBERT BROWN: They realized you had no money.

GEORGE W. FEDOROFF: Well, they didn’t do anything. I mean, they simply dropped me.

ROBERT BROWN: No. But the MacLeans, I mean, saw that you had no money. [00:41:57]

GEORGE W. FEDOROFF: Right. They knew that. They paid for my transportation to Canada. Of course, we drove from Louisville to Ottawa, but on the way back, they paid my fare to Boston, and that was the end of it. No, I went there once about 10 years later. They found me or something and they asked me to come and visit them in Louisville. By then I was working in the theater already. And I spent a few days. It was not very satisfactory, and I didn’t get along with them at all. I had no big respect for multimillionaires, et cetera. I liked those particular friends. One of them was a particularly good friend of mine. I liked his wife too well, and that didn’t work out.

ROBERT BROWN: [Laughs.]

[Audio Break.]

GEORGE W. FEDOROFF: Well, should we start here?

[Audio Break.]

ROBERT BROWN: Second interview with George Fedoroff, in Brewster, Massachusetts, January 21, 1981. Robert Brown, the interviewer. We talked about your coming to America, staying for a while with a wealthy Canadian family, but your original reason for coming here was through a scholarship you got from Ms. Katherine Child to come to Boston to teach at her school in Boston, an art school. About when did you come to Boston?

GEORGE W. FEDOROFF: I came to Boston in the fall—I came to this country in 1928, and I spent several months in Louisville—[00:43:57]

ROBERT BROWN: You mentioned—you described that.

GEORGE W. FEDOROFF: —with a family which originally came from Canada. They had the Wood-Mosaic Company in Louisville. It was a hardwoods manufacturing plant. Anyway, I met them in France. One of the sons went to Oxford University, and he spent most of his time in Paris rather than London—I mean Oxford.

ROBERT BROWN: We talked a bit about them.

GEORGE W. FEDOROFF: Right.

ROBERT BROWN: When did you finally then come to Ms. Child’s school in Boston?

GEORGE W. FEDOROFF: Well, then went to Canada. And I returned to Boston in 1928. It was in September or October. I would say October. And then I went to school immediately.

ROBERT BROWN: You were also meant to be a teacher at her school, right?

GEORGE W. FEDOROFF: Yes. I had a sort of working scholarship there. I had to teach drawing, and simultaneously I was a student in painting.

ROBERT BROWN: Did you enjoy teaching drawing?

GEORGE W. FEDOROFF: Yes, I liked it.

ROBERT BROWN: How did you go about it? Do you remember?

GEORGE W. FEDOROFF: Well, I was rather traditional in my approach there, I suppose. Having studied at the Beaux-Arts in France, I had a certain routine. But we didn't have the antique plasters which we had to copy the first year or two at the Beaux-Arts.

ROBERT BROWN: Right, because she didn't have it at her school.

GEORGE W. FEDOROFF: No. We started immediately with live drawing, the nude and the heads, et cetera.

ROBERT BROWN: Were the students quite good?

GEORGE W. FEDOROFF: The students were rather talented. Most of them were—developed, I suppose, into dilettantes [laughs], but they had considerable talent. There were two or three who carried on after they left school. Of course, I was out of touch with them since I left there in Boston, so I had—[00:46:05]

ROBERT BROWN: Was Ms. Child pretty serious about—

GEORGE W. FEDOROFF: Ms. Child was. Oh, yes, she was quite serious.

ROBERT BROWN: What was she like?

GEORGE W. FEDOROFF: She was rather old-maidish, rather demanding. She had a sense of quality, but in the antiquities, mostly [laughs].

ROBERT BROWN: Ah.

GEORGE W. FEDOROFF: She was a classic student, I suppose.

ROBERT BROWN: And you studied painting yourself. Who with?

GEORGE W. FEDOROFF: In Boston I studied with Charles Hopkinson, who was a portrait painter, essentially, but he allowed you certain freedom. And at that time, I was not really gelled in any one school of painting.

ROBERT BROWN: Did you go out painting with him, or mainly in school?

GEORGE W. FEDOROFF: No, mainly in school. I visited him in Manchester, where he lived with his father.

ROBERT BROWN: I know he followed various color theories.

GEORGE W. FEDOROFF: Right.

ROBERT BROWN: Did he have you students to follow those?

GEORGE W. FEDOROFF: Oh, yes. Yes. He followed—it was a spectrum which was based on spinning a disc which gave you a number of values in color rather than black and white. However, it was based on the shadings of black and white. There was a group of followers, and I believe Hopkinson and a chap by the name of Cutler. Robert Cutler? I can't remember. He was a painter too, in Boston, during that period. Both of them were older men even then. I believe Hopkinson died perhaps 15 years ago.

ROBERT BROWN: Yes, a very old man.

GEORGE W. FEDOROFF: He was almost a 100 then, and Cutler was roughly his age when he died, or if he died. And then there was a man name of Giles, Howard Giles, who was a proponent of dynamic symmetry in design and painting. He was essentially a technician. He painted, but he was not really a painter in the full sense of the word. He probably wished he was Buckminster Fuller or something of that sort. [00:48:26]

ROBERT BROWN: Did you take to these things? Were you enthusiastic?

GEORGE W. FEDOROFF: Oh, yes, I was interested in all of it. So I studied. I studied dynamic symmetry and colors theories, et cetera, which were superseded later on, of course. And then you had people like Albers or Itten from the Bauhaus, who developed this to the finest degree.

ROBERT BROWN: Did you paint quite enthusiastically? Did you get to know other young artists?

GEORGE W. FEDOROFF: In Boston area, yes, I got to know them. I can't remember who they were. There were a couple of Italian boys I remember, [Joseph] Butera and Peter Pezzati. And then there was a chap the name of Cummings, or Cumming, who was a portrait painter. He is dead now. He became quite successful. He opened his own school. Then there was a young woman by the name of Esther Williams, who was very talented. She was perhaps a year or two my senior. But she was exceptionally good, and she became a professional painter. She moved to New York. I don't know what happened to her now.

Then—

ROBERT BROWN: Was Boston very exciting to you after being in Paris?

GEORGE W. FEDOROFF: Well, at that time, yes, because for me it was a new experience, and I got to know a lot of people. And being a Russian at that time, I was sort of lionized by the local people. You know, a Russian refugee was not exactly the scum of the earth. [Laughs.] And that was a rather good period. Socially it was rather interesting. But then, unfortunately, I didn't continue. I gave up shortly after I joined the University Players. [00:50:28]

ROBERT BROWN: How did you get into that?

GEORGE W. FEDOROFF: Well, in 1929, I was told that in order to be an American citizen in the full sense of the word, one had to knuckle down and work at any kind of a job.

ROBERT BROWN: Who told you this?

GEORGE W. FEDOROFF: Ms. Child.

ROBERT BROWN: She didn't think you were—

GEORGE W. FEDOROFF: No, she thought I was a snob, which I might have been. So through one of the students of the school, I met Charles R. Crane, who had a summer home in Woods Hole. One of his grandsons, a chap the name of Charles Crane Leatherbee, was involved in the theater in Falmouth at the time. They had a company of young university people who were interested in theater as careers, possible careers, in future. So they gave me a job as—a jack-of-all-trades sort of thing, as they all were. I was essentially interested in design and construction of stage scenery, et cetera. So that's how I got there. So I worked with that group perhaps for three years on Cape Cod as well as in Baltimore. [00:52:13]

ROBERT BROWN: Baltimore. You mean south in the winter—

GEORGE W. FEDOROFF: Winter. We played one and a half winters, or something of that sort, in Baltimore.

ROBERT BROWN: Did you act very much?

GEORGE W. FEDOROFF: No, very little. I had to. Everybody had to act. I was an extra in a number of productions. [Laughs.] But I never wanted to act, never cared to, but in order to survive, we all had to pitch in and do whatever had to be done. We had about 40 members, I believe, altogether.

ROBERT BROWN: In your staging time, did you check out what was being done elsewhere, or did you sort of—

GEORGE W. FEDOROFF: Oh, more or less.

ROBERT BROWN: —start from scratch?

GEORGE W. FEDOROFF: Well, I suppose I started from scratch. Generally, I was rather bored with conventional interiors, and I felt that theater was due for a change. But unfortunately at that time when they were beginning, the commercial theater consisted of rather realistic interiors, with a change in proportions, for instance, like the height of the room, instead of being 10 or eight feet, would be 16 feet, et cetera. But interiors were interiors, you know: color, detail, furniture and so on and so on. But with the University Players, we had certain leeway, and we had a number of experimental plays, which I enjoyed doing. And following that, of course, I worked with other companies, usually small theaters, stock companies, summer and winter. I didn't like the commercial theater at

all. [00:54:01]

ROBERT BROWN: Why not?

GEORGE W. FEDOROFF: For the same reason, that you were under obligation to produce what was in demand at the time, unless it was a musical. Even that, I was not particularly interested in.

ROBERT BROWN: You mentioned earlier that as a boy in Russia, you would have seen innovative theater.

GEORGE W. FEDOROFF: Yeah, but I was a baby then. I was only about eight years old when I left.

ROBERT BROWN: Oh, that's true. And possibly in Paris you would have been aware of some innovative—

GEORGE W. FEDOROFF: Well, in Paris, yes, indeed, in Paris I have seen—

ROBERT BROWN: Then you came here and had to do very conventional—

GEORGE W. FEDOROFF: Right. Right. In Paris I did see some. Of course, when I lived in Paris, I had no professional interest in stage design. I just enjoyed theater, ballets in particular. So when I become involved in the theater, I thought, well, maybe that's a career, rather than becoming a painter. At that time I was young and inexperienced, so I changed rather rapidly and very easily from one thing to another. And then, of course, I did some industrial designing and—

ROBERT BROWN: And this would be in the 1930s?

GEORGE W. FEDOROFF: Yes, commercial designing, that type of thing, and furniture, et cetera.

ROBERT BROWN: Did you get to know some artists at this time in New York or Cape Cod?

GEORGE W. FEDOROFF: Well, important artists, not—well, later, yes, much later in New York I did meet some better-known artists, but that came perhaps in 1940, et cetera, when there was an influx of European artists, like Legér and Seligmann and Yves Tanguy, and who else? Not Miro. Duchamp was here. Of course, he traveled back and forth. But that came in—most of them I met just before the war, and upon my return after the war. See, I served in the army during. [00:56:18]

ROBERT BROWN: But when you were here on Cape Cod in the '30s, did you—

GEORGE W. FEDOROFF: Well, Howard Gibbs was, of course, a close friend of mine.

ROBERT BROWN: How did you happen to know him?

GEORGE W. FEDOROFF: I met him in Paris in 19—just before I sailed for this country. It must have been 1928, very early, because I came to this country in April, so it must have been February or March, something of that sort, just briefly. I met him and a chap named Littlefield, also from the Boston area. Then Howard—both of them returned to Boston, so we had this bond of sorts by then, and so I used to see them quite frequently. Howard lived on Cape Cod and so did Littlefield. He lived in Falmouth, and Howard used to come to Harwich Port.

ROBERT BROWN: Did you discuss painting a lot or—

GEORGE W. FEDOROFF: Oh, yes.

ROBERT BROWN: —paint together?

GEORGE W. FEDOROFF: We used to paint together quite frequently; draw mostly, actually. And that was before 1931, I would say. Then I decided to make a go of it in New York. Of course, the Depression was in full swing, and I was still in the theater then. I believe it was in 1931, I moved to New York hoping to find a job in stage design in New York. And Fonda, who was in our county at the time, also came to New York, and so the two of us got an apartment from our producer, Charlie Leatherbee, who went to Russia to study under Stanislavsky. And Josh Logan, the two of them—Joshua Logan and Leatherbee—went to Russia. While they were in Russia, we had this apartment in New York, Fonda and I, but that's all we had—no jobs. So we had a rather rough time of it that winter until finally we did get jobs. Fonda got a job as a clerk in some flower shop, My Florist, as I remember the name of it. [00:58:50]

ROBERT BROWN: My Florist.

GEORGE W. FEDOROFF: My Florist, on 57th Street. And I got a job with an interior decorator, who happened to be a Russian, who was doing a mansion, even during the Depression, on Long Island. So we did a lot of—he

employed two, three other chaps, and we did a lot of work around the mansion, like painting suit closets, et cetera, with inlaid mother-of-pearl ceiling, and God knows what. It was a luxurious establishment. I can't remember the name of the woman who owned it.

ROBERT BROWN: But some of your—did you have close, steady friendships during the '30s? You've mentioned Howard Gibbs.

GEORGE W. FEDOROFF: Well, Howard was one. And, of course, I met Bouchard, Tom Bouchard, in 1934—Horton O'Neil was a very close friend.

ROBERT BROWN: And Tom Bouchard was what?

GEORGE W. FEDOROFF: I met him in 193—

ROBERT BROWN: What was he at that time?

GEORGE W. FEDOROFF: He was a photographer, and he was doing mostly commercial photography at the time, just going into dance photography. And whom else did I know? Well, they were mostly theater people, actually, like directors. But Windust was my closest friend. [01:00:13]

ROBERT BROWN: Windust.

GEORGE W. FEDOROFF: Bretaigne Windust, right. He was the director of—one of the directors of the University Players. Then he went to work for the Theater Guild as a stage manager before he became a full-fledged director.

ROBERT BROWN: What was he like?

GEORGE W. FEDOROFF: Windust I liked. First of all, he was a cultured young man, and well-educated. He was a Princeton man but he traveled a great deal. And his father was an English musician, a violinist, in fact, a well-known violinist in England. His mother was an American. Then the rest of them, like McCormick and a chap named Dalrymple, et cetera, there were quite a few members of the University Players who either lived in New York or around New York. But of the entire group, Windust was my closest friend. And, oh, yes, a Turkish chap by the name of Saeed [ph]Riza.

ROBERT BROWN: How do you spell that, Riza?

GEORGE W. FEDOROFF: R-I-Z-A. His father was a Turkish poet. He looked like an Indian philosopher, long, flowing beard and so on. He was an ambassador to England, I believe. So Riza, of course, was educated in England mostly, I believe, and then he went to Princeton. He was also, like myself, trying to find himself in the United States. He married. He was married then. He married a sculptress, a girl named Jane Belden [ph], whom he met at the Art Students League. He painted. He wrote poetry. He wanted to be an actor. So he did a little of everything. [01:02:10]

ROBERT BROWN: What sort of people do you think you liked at that time? Can you generalize?

GEORGE W. FEDOROFF: Like?

ROBERT BROWN: What sort of people did you have an affinity for at that time, do you think?

GEORGE W. FEDOROFF: Well, I assume most of them had something to do with the arts, mostly visual arts, be they architects or what.

ROBERT BROWN: Would you discuss art quite a lot?

GEORGE W. FEDOROFF: Oh, yes, yes.

ROBERT BROWN: What were some of your concerns at that point?

GEORGE W. FEDOROFF: Well, at that point I was—frankly, I was still trying to find myself because I scattered myself in so many fields. I liked sculpture, I liked painting, I liked stage design, liked industrial arts, more or less. I liked to work with my hands. And I did a little of everything. I was master of none. And so I wasn't really sure that I wanted to be a painter.

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GEORGE W. FEDOROFF: —New York. You know, I was always sort of on the fringes. I didn't like half-measures or

being with people whose standards weren't up to snuff, yet personally, I was not at the top of a career in art, you see. So I was really on the fringes. I was learning. For instance, I met quite a few artists through Bouchard and Edgard Varese, for instance. We used to gather either at Varese's or one of the restaurants in Greenwich Village and have discussions.

ROBERT BROWN: What sort of things would you discuss?

GEORGE W. FEDOROFF: Well, they would discuss the latest exhibits, styles, politics, you name it. It was not necessarily a super-professional type of a group, but usually about the same people, like Hans Hofmann used be there, or—oh, God, what's his name, he died—Ozenfant, people like that.

ROBERT BROWN: What was Hofmann like? Do you recall?

GEORGE W. FEDOROFF: Hofmann was rather methodical. To me, he was very Germanic, a professorial type. However, I didn't know him intimately. I just met him there. I didn't know much about his private life.

ROBERT BROWN: What about Varese?

GEORGE W. FEDOROFF: Varese was an outgoing, gourmet type. He had a great appetite for all the arts, the foods, good living, et cetera. And Bouchard was much like that, very gregarious people, and rather intolerant of mediocrity. [00:02:00] So in order to be with them, you had to keep up a certain standard of living as well as professional standard. Well, I didn't have much of either, frankly speaking, simply because I was, well, rather young, and I simply hadn't discovered myself. And I also had this conflict of leading a rather social life outside, the nightclub life, et cetera, which my other group despised, like Bouchard, Varese, et cetera. They liked certain phases of it, but not the average cocktail party or the theater groups, et cetera, which was a waste of time, essentially. And I later on realized I probably wasted many, many years in that particular environment, the café society, and much of it I could ill-afford.

ROBERT BROWN: So that's pretty much what you had done in Paris also?

GEORGE W. FEDOROFF: In Paris, yes, but however, in Paris I had—first of all, I had certain means, and being younger or something, and I knew what I wanted in terms of schooling and art, et cetera.

ROBERT BROWN: But here, you weren't quite certain.

GEORGE W. FEDOROFF: No, I wasn't quite sure of it. I was rather shaken by the American civilization, in a sense, that there was so much materialism. In order to be a part of the civilization, I felt I simply had to achieve this financial security above the needs. And I've taken this particular course, and which was a mistake to begin with. I should have concentrated more exactly on my work rather than on making impressions on the capitalistic world. [Laughs.] And it was materialistic, you see, and materialism and I had never mixed too well. However, I liked to live well myself. I always did and I still do. [00:04:24]

ROBERT BROWN: But about the only thing you could do in the '30s was to—

GEORGE W. FEDOROFF: It was rather difficult.

ROBERT BROWN: —[inaudible] out and to live beyond your means.

GEORGE W. FEDOROFF: Oh, yes, right. I mean, I would go to a nightclub and spend my entire earnings for a week on one night, you see, without letting people know that I couldn't, oh, buy their expensive clothes, for instance, which I did do, even if I had one suit or something like that, but I had to have a suit. But I had to have tails and I had to have a dinner jacket so I would be able to attend all the social functions if an opportunity arose and I wanted to, because some of the women I courted at the time were in that particular circle. And it was sort of a superficial life, and I spent too much time on it, you know.

ROBERT BROWN: Well, at the end of the '30s, you had—

GEORGE W. FEDOROFF: Then I dropped. I returned to the Cape.

ROBERT BROWN: You returned to painting, you say.

GEORGE W. FEDOROFF: Yes. I decided New York was not for me. I simply had to escape this artificial life, so I returned to the Cape.

ROBERT BROWN: Oh, you did, to paint.

GEORGE W. FEDOROFF: To paint, right. That was just before the war, you see, about two years before the war.

ROBERT BROWN: What sort of paintings were you doing?

GEORGE W. FEDOROFF: I worked—well, semi-realistic sort of things. I was trying to break away from realism. But I was very concerned with techniques, which was unfortunate. I became a slave to being secure in the technical fields. And similarly, my feeling for three-dimensional work interfered with my painting considerably. Of course, in Paris, I did both sculpture and painting. Even there I couldn't quite make up my mind, simply through accident of meeting painters and sculptors. I was torn between the two. I looked up to certain artists there and, let us say, like Despiau, Noguchi or somebody else, or—what's his name—Brancusi. And then you suddenly go to an exhibit and see a Picasso, a Matisse, and you say, "No, I'm going to be a painter. I like color better." Of course, I was then, what—[00:06:45]

ROBERT BROWN: And you still had this conflict, say, in the 1940s.

GEORGE W. FEDOROFF: That conflict persisted throughout my life, until finally I decided I was going to be a painter. And so I moved to the Cape to escape all the fringes, you see. And then, of course—

ROBERT BROWN: You lived pretty much in isolation?

GEORGE W. FEDOROFF: Yes, I lived—yes. Of course, I still had my friends here, the Gibbses and the Robinsons. I know you know Walter Robinson, perhaps.

ROBERT BROWN: Yes.

GEORGE W. FEDOROFF: So we used to have a fair social life, but generally speaking, I lived alone, you see. I lived on Stony Brook Road here.

ROBERT BROWN: In Brewster?

GEORGE W. FEDOROFF: In Brewster. And then, of course, the war came and I got into service.

ROBERT BROWN: How did that happen? Were you a citizen by that time?

GEORGE W. FEDOROFF: I became a citizen just then, right. And then they discovered I had a hernia. I always enjoyed building stone walls, so I was building a stone wall on Stony Brook Road, and apparently I lifted too many rocks, and finally I did have a hernia problem. So I was rejected the first round, which was a great disappointment because I thought I was in excellent shape. And I wanted to serve, you see. I felt that to be an American, you had to be a soldier. [Laughs.] And I didn't mind because there was a purpose in that war. Then I went to Boston and had myself examined by a friend of mine, Bartlett Quigley. And he was in the service then. He said he can't do the surgery himself because he was just leaving for the front or whatever. He was commissioned in the medical corps. So a friend of his did perform the surgery, and in two weeks I was out of the hospital. In three weeks, I was in the army. It didn't take very long for them to get me back. [00:09:01]

ROBERT BROWN: What sort of thing did you want to do?

GEORGE W. FEDOROFF: In the army? Well, I wanted to be a soldier, to begin with. But I found myself on the train to Little Rock, Arkansas, in the medical corps. And just the thought of hospitals made me sick. I don't like blood, to begin with. If it's a person killed, it's something else, but if it's an accident or surgery, I practically pass out cold at the sight of it. I've seen dead people, of course, in subsequent years. If people were killed or badly wounded, it somehow didn't touch me the same way as a hospital would. So I fought, trying to get out of the medics. Finally, I got into—I took an exam for Army Specialist Training Corps in languages. I passed it. They said, "Fine, we'll advise you when you'll be moved to a specialist training corps school." Well, every time they would advise me, we were moving from one camp to another, and if your unit is listed for a move from, let's say, Little Rock, Arkansas, to Medford, Oregon, you were frozen. You had to remain with your unit. So that was my misfortune, so—[00:10:40]

ROBERT BROWN: So it was quite a delight for you to—

GEORGE W. FEDOROFF: —get out of the medics. Well, finally, we were shipped out. First of all, we were trained for the Pacific and we went to Europe. [Laughs.] And my languages were completely useful. I spoke, of course, Russian, German and French. Well, we went to England; of course, there was only English there, and we spent, what, a year and a half or so.

ROBERT BROWN: But you've said that you served as sort of a cultural liaison.

GEORGE W. FEDOROFF: Yes. They finally sent me to school. Of course, I wanted to get out in the worst way. My company commander finally relented on that, sent me to a school in Shrivenham. It was Information and Education school, and mostly on current events and that sort of thing. So while I was stationed near Cardiff,

Wales, I became involved in British Council somehow. And through British Council, I had various little jobs like being sort of a cultural attaché to my unit and—or the district, whatever it was. I was only a corporal then. [00:12:05]

ROBERT BROWN: What sort of things would you do? Did you organize—

GEORGE W. FEDOROFF: Well, organized. We went to museums, sight-seeing, castles—

ROBERT BROWN: Mainz?

GEORGE W. FEDOROFF: Mainz, for instance; concerts; all the things I liked. And we had sort of a club where we mixed with the local population, also British servicemen who were either artists in civilian life, or craftsmen, or whatever. And we had exchange of ideas and we found people in our unit, in our organizations, who were also interested, if not active professionally in the fields of art, at least they were interested. So we had sort of cultural evenings where we would have exchange of ideas, perhaps performances, or we would paint murals in the clubs, like I used to paint—I was painting murals in our NCO club, which took me off duty for a considerable time. And we had absolutely nothing to do except we were waiting for the invasion, and excepting bombing, well, that became sort of second nature. And then I traveled a lot in England by virtue of my connections with the British Council or something, or the Information and Education. I would go to London quite frequently, for instance, and had some friends in London.

ROBERT BROWN: You got to make some British friends there.

GEORGE W. FEDOROFF: Oh, yes, and made some very good, lasting friends who happened to be in politics, in the Parliament. Then I had a friend whom I knew in Paris out of the dim past, a chap by the name of Dennis Weaver, who was correspondent of the *News Chronicle*. And he was in London. He was about my age. And then he was—unfortunately, he was shipped almost immediately to a place unknown. Finally, I tracked him down. He was in Scandinavia then during the balance of the war. [00:14:21]

ROBERT BROWN: So what sort of things—who were some of the British politicians you got to know?

GEORGE W. FEDOROFF: Well, Bevin—

ROBERT BROWN: They were Labourites, mainly?

GEORGE W. FEDOROFF: Labourites. They were all—I met this man by the name of Strauss, George Russell Strauss. He was a Labourite MP, a Cripps—he was a Cripps man.

ROBERT BROWN: Cripps was what in the—

GEORGE W. FEDOROFF: He was prime minister, eventually. Then people who were on British Council, people like Michael Foot, for instance, who was a very liberal man.

ROBERT BROWN: A leader on the left, the Labour Party.

GEORGE W. FEDOROFF: Yes. I got to know them, but not intimately. People like Wilmot, who was one of the heads of the British Council, him I got to know very well. A chap named John Wilson, got to know him very well. Ultimately, he ended up in this country. I ran into him shortly after I was mustered out. He was with the United Nations organization in Boston. He was one of the early British members of the United Nations.

ROBERT BROWN: What sort of things did you do with these people, spend an evening—

GEORGE W. FEDOROFF: Well, evenings. We were at dinner parties, even during the war. I mean, we had bombs falling, but you still go to the theater, for instance. [Laughs.] I stayed there with the staff since they had this big mansion on the palace green. But again, I always had sort of a tendency to be with the rich. And I just met them by sheer accident while I was painting a mural in a club. Mrs. Strauss came over, and she was sort of a liaison of some sort for the press. She had some uniform. I don't remember now what she wore. Well, anyway, she started talking to me. She said, "You must come and visit us in London if you can." So—"and drop us a line or call," so which I did. And then the first time I went to London, I stayed at a motel, and they said, "Oh, you mustn't. You must come immediately." And I had some business to do for our organization, I mean for our unit. So I stayed there, which was rather luxurious, I would say, for a soldier to be in this big mansion with servants and all. [00:17:00]

ROBERT BROWN: So you were given pretty free rein by your—

GEORGE W. FEDOROFF: By my commander. Oh, yes. Well, I always had to bring something back. I remember once—and then I introduced some of my people to that group, my friends in our organization, soldiers. I would

go with them to London and get them into the Strauss house, not to stay there, but to visit.

ROBERT BROWN: You were supposed to make reports or you were supposed to be writing? What was your official duty?

GEORGE W. FEDOROFF: Well, of course, I had to write a report, but I was collecting material for lectures, for exhibits, for whatever, connected with cultural affairs, British Council.

ROBERT BROWN: This had to do with morale, I suppose.

GEORGE W. FEDOROFF: Right. People who had—you know, when you are stationed, a soldier stationed in a relatively safe area with very little to do, they become restless, even the best of them. Of course, we had riff-raff there, too, who spent most of the time brawling in bars off the waterfront. But there was a certain strata in our military service who were looking for cultural outlets, you see, or to meet people on that level, because generally they're not accessible, you see. So I tried and made them accessible. For instance, even in Cardiff I got to know a woman and went around with her for quite a while. Her name was Joan Stone [ph]. She was a British Council representative in Cardiff. So through her—you know, she would plan certain things and I would carry them out for our unit sometimes, you see. It wasn't a constant sort of a connection. In other words, British Council was not my job. I was to spend a hell of a lot of time in the hospital, in the lab work, for instance, looking through my microscope. I was in bacteriology, mostly syphilis and gonorrhea. [00:19:20]

ROBERT BROWN: Did this continue right through the end of the war?

GEORGE W. FEDOROFF: No. That lasted for a year and a half or two years, something like that. And of course, the most exciting part of it was indeed being in London, bombing or no bombing, where I met these very interesting—I met people like Eric Sevareid, even, at the Strausses. Then Jennie Lee, who was also a member of Parliament. She was Aneurin Bevan's wife. Of course, he's dead. She's still alive. And artists. I've forgotten their name.

ROBERT BROWN: But again, were you sort of an observer? Were you sort of on the fringe of these people, or did you become a close friend with them?

GEORGE W. FEDOROFF: Well, I became a close friend with many of them, not many, but some of them, like Wilmot and Wilson. And the Strausses, of course, I corresponded till they finally disappeared just two years ago. I think they were in an airplane crash, and I couldn't—I still haven't found out.

ROBERT BROWN: What was their name?

GEORGE W. FEDOROFF: George Russell Strauss. He became minister of supply under Cripps, and Bevin was foreign minister.

ROBERT BROWN: You were transferred to France.

GEORGE W. FEDOROFF: Right.

ROBERT BROWN: How did that happen? Were you still with the medics?

GEORGE W. FEDOROFF: I was still—you see, I was stuck with the medics, but by then, I was not doing medical work. [00:20:54]

ROBERT BROWN: You went to France with that group.

GEORGE W. FEDOROFF: Right, but we were sent after D-Day. It wasn't on D-Day at all. It was towards the end of the war, in fact, and we went to Suippes, Mourmelon. It's all in the RAS [ph] era, where again, I was in Information and Education. By then the war was practically over, and we were getting ready for the Pacific war. So my research had to be in the Japanese era; in other words, Japanese history.

ROBERT BROWN: How were you able to do that in France? [Laughs.]

GEORGE W. FEDOROFF: Oh, yes, I went to—my company commander was awfully good to me. He said, "Now, you go to Paris and bring back research, all you can find, on Japan, modern Japan, part of Japanese history, their military history, and whatever else." You know, it went into one ear and out of another, actually. I did do that. I came back with clippings and God knows what else, and I went to the Information and Education headquarters. By then, you see, Paris was, of course, liberated, and the Information and Education headquarters was established in Paris. And a friend of mine who was also in Information and Education, he was a good driver, so we get a Jeep and drive from Suippes, or Mourmelon, I believe—anyway, all brown, grass. [00:22:43]

ROBERT BROWN: Were your parents in Paris at that time?

GEORGE W. FEDOROFF: No, my relatives. I had some relatives. So the first thing I did, actually, the first time I went to Paris, instead of going to a whorehouse, I went to look for my relatives. Well, I found my cousin, by sheer luck. I knew the school he went to, which was called Ecole Violet. It was electrical engineering school. I knew that before the war, and I figured that he should have either graduated or be in the last year of the school. So as soon as I landed in Paris, of course, I went to the Montparnasse looking for my old friends there, who were gone. [Laughs.] I couldn't even find my house in the Paicee [ph] area, where I used to live.

ROBERT BROWN: But you did find your cousin.

GEORGE W. FEDOROFF: But I found my cousin. And first of all, I found—yes, I found the house where he lived at one time, a year or two before. Because the whole thing was during the war, it was sad to see. Then through that concierge there, I tracked down the new address, and I found them, his mother and my cousin. She was the wife of my mother's brother. And he was just out of school. [00:24:14]

ROBERT BROWN: What did you learn of your family?

GEORGE W. FEDOROFF: Well, my grandfather by then was dead, and my cousin, one of them was dead, another one—I'm speaking of my cousins who lived in Paris at the time I left Paris. The other cousin went to England, a woman. Then her daughter was in the South of France, and I couldn't go there, of course.

ROBERT BROWN: But you couldn't find your mother or your—

GEORGE W. FEDOROFF: No, no. They were in China.

ROBERT BROWN: Oh, they were out.

GEORGE W. FEDOROFF: My mother was in China. No, my brother was in the French Foreign Legion, so I had no way of finding him. He was in Italy by then or something. I think they were—not think, I know, he was in the invasion of Italy. But I didn't know where.

ROBERT BROWN: But you had been away from them a long time.

GEORGE W. FEDOROFF: Oh, yeah.

ROBERT BROWN: So you came back, then, in '45 to this country.

GEORGE W. FEDOROFF: I came back in '45, right, and immediately went to Cape Cod again.

ROBERT BROWN: Now, you decided to return to painting.

GEORGE W. FEDOROFF: Right.

ROBERT BROWN: And you mentioned in here that several of your artist friends advised you to do so.

GEORGE W. FEDOROFF: Well, yes, they encouraged me.

ROBERT BROWN: Léger, Bouchard, and Kurt Seligmann.

GEORGE W. FEDOROFF: But I still don't understand why, because I was a very bad painter.

ROBERT BROWN: What was Léger like? Did you get to know him?

GEORGE W. FEDOROFF: Well, yes, but Léger was, yes, a robust—I mean, he didn't talk much, we didn't discuss art per se, because it was sort of a mixed gathering, like Varese, Léger, and—

ROBERT BROWN: Was he sort of direct and he would say—[00:25:57]

GEORGE W. FEDOROFF: Oh, yes, very direct. Oh, yes. At the same time, he was sort of—to me, he was rather—not condescending, he was kind, because looking back in retrospect, looking at my work at the time—I mean, he was a great painter. Whether you like his work or not, he was considered as one of the great painters of that period. And I felt that it was unnecessary for him to do anything about it, you know. I mean, not that we were—we weren't intimate friends or anything of that sort. I don't see why he dared to encourage me. He told me to get Guggenheim fellowships. He said, "That will help you." Well, by then, I realized suddenly that it was hopeless because I simply didn't—I mean, I may have, if I had made an effort, produced enough work to qualify, but I was still uncertain of my—I wanted to be the best painter or not at all. That's my life, really.

ROBERT BROWN: Why did Kurt Seligmann encourage you?

GEORGE W. FEDOROFF: Well, Kurt, I got to know him very well.

ROBERT BROWN: Why did he encourage you to go—

GEORGE W. FEDOROFF: Well, Kurt Seligmann and I were—see, Bouchard was a very close friend of mine, so I'd see him just about every day. And Kurt had a studio below him, so there was constant movement up and down, you know—parties, dinners, lunches, or just talks. And it was an interesting group of people. I was still also on the fringes of it, you know, because I was not there all the time. And I was then on the Cape, more or less. By then, you see, I had a little money saved. During my service I had bonds and whatever else. So I was thinking, well, should I retire on the Cape—not retire, but establish permanent residence on the Cape, buy a lot, build a house, or what should I do? And so I spent maybe a few months in New York after that.

Of course, once on the Cape, I was isolated again. The only person I knew here was Howard at the time, Howard Gibbs. And there was a chap named Lutz [ph], who—I rented half of his—a portion of his house, where I had a little studio, on Stony Brook Road. And I went back to painting. By then, I had the GI Bill of Rights, et cetera, et cetera, you know, so I had no immediate problems financially. And I was looking for a piece of land at the same time.

While all this was happening, I suddenly received this call from Kurt Seligmann to come to New York; he has a very interesting proposition, you see. And that was in '46. So I called him, and he said, "Well, it's about Alaska." I said, "What about Alaska?" He said, "Oh, I have a very, very interesting proposition. A very interesting person is coming here on such and such day. You must meet her and consider this job." And he recommended me for this job in Alaska for the Indian Arts and Crafts Board. And the person who was originating this program was Katharine Kuh, who was—[00:29:52]

ROBERT BROWN: She was an art critic.

GEORGE W. FEDOROFF: Then she was an art critic, of course, and then was one of the directors of the Chicago Art Institute.

ROBERT BROWN: Why did he think you might have been interested?

GEORGE W. FEDOROFF: Well, simply because I liked so many things, you see. I liked wood carving; I liked sculpture; I liked painting. I had general esthetic development which was necessary for that type of a job. I didn't have to be an accomplished painter, necessarily, or a known painter, as long as I had a sense of form, quality, in painting, whatever it was. I had enough exposure in the arts and I also knew how to do certain things, technical things.

ROBERT BROWN: Did he then introduce you to Katharine Kuh?

GEORGE W. FEDOROFF: So he introduced me to Katharine Kuh and we had a long conversation. She in turn recommended me to the Indian Arts and Crafts Board. Rene d'Harnoncourt was then the chairman of the board.

ROBERT BROWN: What did they have in mind to be done?

GEORGE W. FEDOROFF: Well, they wanted to establish a program, and Katharine Kuh was assembling an arts and crafts board to make a survey of the condition of the arts in Alaska during the period of 50, 20 years, something. Anyway, she spent a month making the survey, which was inadequate. But anyhow—

ROBERT BROWN: I read the survey. She did emphasize on the one hand promoting tourism to look at the older art, but in the contemporary Indian and Eskimo art, to develop quality rather than quantity.

GEORGE W. FEDOROFF: Right.

ROBERT BROWN: And she felt also that a luxury market in the States should be developed rather than the curio shops in Alaska and all this.

GEORGE W. FEDOROFF: But she also froze it in the classic sense. [00:32:00]

ROBERT BROWN: She did not advocate basic training in design and—

GEORGE W. FEDOROFF: No, and also producing contemporary Indian or Eskimo art. I don't mean imitation of the Western art, but it should be an art which is a living art rather than—

ROBERT BROWN: Which she didn't—

GEORGE W. FEDOROFF: Well, she didn't make it very clear. And also, she was overly optimistic about the potentials in Alaska, the reception one would get, response one would get. There was no response from the native people, as I mentioned in my report, I guess, or very little. And there was a constant feeling of suspicion and resentment by virtue of the fact that here are foreigners who are dabbling in our culture.

ROBERT BROWN: She hadn't really queried the natives to that to any great extent?

GEORGE W. FEDOROFF: Oh, no, she didn't, no, but she was rather a stranger, and not naïve, necessarily, but simply overly enthusiastic about the prospects, and there were no prospects at the time that were tangible.

ROBERT BROWN: Now, when you were interviewed in New York for this, did you stress that you wanted to train them so that they could develop their own art, or did you even discuss that?

GEORGE W. FEDOROFF: Well, yes, but rather loosely. I don't believe in formal type of education, particularly when you work with a different culture and adult. You simply have to live and work with them, and by virtue of experience, you can show them certain directions they could take, without being to specifically follow this course or that course. I worked with them as individuals rather than as blocks of various primitive groups. They weren't that primitive, to begin with. [00:34:11]

ROBERT BROWN: But apparently, the people who interviewed you in New York bought that argument that you made to them, suggested to them.

GEORGE W. FEDOROFF: Yes. Oh, yes. But it took some years to develop.

ROBERT BROWN: But I mean, they said that was fine. They went along with it.

GEORGE W. FEDOROFF: Yes, they went along with it. But nevertheless, they held on to the original concept, which was Katharine Kuh's concept.

ROBERT BROWN: To revive the native traditions?

GEORGE W. FEDOROFF: Right. And I was rather opposed to revivals, because revivals of the arts she admired—and I admired—was a dead issue. You simply could not revive something which didn't have—no longer had the purpose, culturally, religiously, whatever you will. I mean, the traditional arts were in the process of destruction for many years before my arrival there. So you had to find something that may be based on traditions but it's an evolving form of art rather than complete servitude to something that no longer existed.

ROBERT BROWN: So you were on your way there in spring of '47. You arrived in Sitka, Alaska, on April 1, you said.

GEORGE W. FEDOROFF: Right.

ROBERT BROWN: There's a letter attached from Willard Beatty, the Office of Indian Affairs.

GEORGE W. FEDOROFF: Beatty, yes. He was director of education then.

ROBERT BROWN: And he indicated that what they looked forward to your doing was increasing the economic well-being of the Alaskan—

GEORGE W. FEDOROFF: Right. Well, that's just the excuse, you see. The government's supposed to do that.

ROBERT BROWN: I see. That's why they can—feel they can support it. [00:36:00]

GEORGE W. FEDOROFF: Right. But in order to develop economic well-being, you have to establish sound production, sound approach to the arts or crafts. In other words, you have to start from scratch. In order to destroy the trinket market, et cetera, you have to go through this long process of re-education.

ROBERT BROWN: They thought you could immediately make it economically profitable.

GEORGE W. FEDOROFF: They want it right now, right. Well, and I was considered to be a detriment by the people in Alaska, by the bureaucracy in Alaska.

ROBERT BROWN: Yes. Well, here you have a letter in May of that year from George Dale to you. He was in Juneau at the office—

GEORGE W. FEDOROFF: Yes, he was director of education for Alaska Native Service, right.

ROBERT BROWN: He says you are going to have a small budget, you can't have assistants, and you will have

the students make models from traditional designs. “This will increase your prestige as an instructor,” he said. Get the totem poles restored. You were concerned about that.

GEORGE W. FEDOROFF: Yes.

ROBERT BROWN: I mean, in terms of your role as a teacher, he advocated traditionalism and revival of—

GEORGE W. FEDOROFF: Right. Right. Well, you see, it’s all very blind, short-sighted type of a program. It was all based on the existing art forms, which have existed for centuries, let us say, but which no longer had the producers nor the cultural need. It was very difficult to explain to people that we are not trying to recreate the past; we’re trying to create a future, or the contemporary artist or individual as individuals, not as a tribal movement of some sort, be it Eskimo or Indian. Of course, with Eskimos, who—were much more flexible, in a sense. [00:38:27]

ROBERT BROWN: You reported to George Dale again in May of ’47 that you had limited equipment and that many of the children were working imitating things from popular magazines, though some of the Indians were producing—or rather Eskimos were producing handsome drawings of the native landscapes. In other words, these weren’t traditional things.

GEORGE W. FEDOROFF: No.

ROBERT BROWN: Those drawings, they were doing very well. And you also felt that you should be working with adults, as well, to convince them, in your words, “that a better quality of work would find a ready market.” But I gather they want you to concentrate on the young children.

GEORGE W. FEDOROFF: Well, at the time, yes, because I was on Mount Edgecumbe, which is an island, and they had this big boarding school. By virtue of the fact I had no funds for travel at the time, I was isolated. And the only people I could work with there were the 700 children.

ROBERT BROWN: How many, 700?

GEORGE W. FEDOROFF: About 700. And of all ages, you see. And it was a beginning. But I don’t consider it a waste, simply because I got to know them rather well. So I formed my friendships, like Ron Senungetuk, for instance, was one of them.

ROBERT BROWN: One of the children.

GEORGE W. FEDOROFF: One of the children. Now, of course, he is a professor himself. [00:39:58]

ROBERT BROWN: You—this is rather important, I think. You were writing to Willard Beatty again, back in Chicago in June of ’47, prior to your first weeks of teaching. You felt that “the natives have an innate sense for design and a vivid imagination which will, with continuous application, aid them tremendously in materialization of a contemporary function in the world of creative work.” Can you comment on that? Once again, you were advocating working basically, right, not trying to revive. [00:40:34]

GEORGE W. FEDOROFF: Right. And they were. The work they were producing at the time had very little relationship with established, rather strict cultural traditions, particularly the Indian. Southeastern Alaskan Indians had a very rigid system which evolved over the years, you see, but at one point it stopped evolving. Consequently, there was no progress forward. They kept on harking back to the past, and very badly, I felt. They lost a sense of quality because there’s no need for it any longer, except a commercial need. So with that came simplifications and production of tourist trinkets, et cetera.

ROBERT BROWN: But you did say again to Beatty, feel that they hadn’t lost all sense of—

GEORGE W. FEDOROFF: No.

ROBERT BROWN: That there was some hope.

GEORGE W. FEDOROFF: There was some hope, right.

ROBERT BROWN: As you were saying this, you didn’t want—you wanted your program to continue.

GEORGE W. FEDOROFF: Oh, yes. No, but it was true, they had hope. Unfortunately, I didn’t grasp at the time the fact that the arts were very far from their plans for the future. It was something they enjoyed doing, but they never considered the arts as a part of their future development as adults, either careers or simply cultural development. Only a few remained in the arts, and in most cases because they had no other alternatives. They failed in academics, so they became not even artists, they became craftsmen. And out of that group, of course,

there were a few individuals who persisted, and over the years as adults, they became known or successful artists and craftsmen. [00:42:49]

ROBERT BROWN: Reporting back to the Arts and Crafts Board in Washington in July of that year, you said that the natives still continue to have mistrust; there's a need to develop a well-defined aim, therefore; and that the natives need to familiarize themselves with the current trends in arts and crafts, architecture, industrial design. You advocate establishing a reference library.

GEORGE W. FEDOROFF: Yes.

ROBERT BROWN: Did that come to pass? Did they begin to develop—

GEORGE W. FEDOROFF: Yes. Well, I started buying books on the arts, and there were quite a few books published, during that period particularly, on the traditional Eskimo and Indian arts. So—they're not very familiar with their own cultures, you see.

ROBERT BROWN: I see. Did you also include books on Western art; I mean, contemporary—

GEORGE W. FEDOROFF: Oh, yes. Oh, yes. Yes. See, I belonged to the Museum of Modern Art at the time, so I had access to publications. So whenever I got a new book, I immediately carried it to school. I didn't contribute it to the library; I simply left it there for exploration. And a lot of them were not only curious, but they were quite taken by the contemporary art which they had that sort of a freedom which they enjoyed, because they were rather intimidated by the classical arts—oh, classical arts, I'm speaking of the Renaissance, et cetera. But contemporary art, where there was color, form, which was free of slavish imitation, et cetera, was more or less their cup of tea. And again, I'll relate classical art of the Eskimo Indian to the classical arts of the Western world, where there were certain limitations as far as imagination is concerned, et cetera. A requirement of rigid systems, conformity to anatomy or whatever it happens to be. [00:45:12]

ROBERT BROWN: You found that that was rather daunting.

GEORGE W. FEDOROFF: Right, but it was a little too much for them to swallow, you see, excepting of those who carried on later, when mighty few, not many did. You see, only the ones who left Alaska for training outside finally understood what I meant.

ROBERT BROWN: You felt also, though, in this report, the summer of '47, that it would be good to have a school for the exceptionally gifted.

GEORGE W. FEDOROFF: Yes, because there was a tendency of the officials of the Alaska Native Service to send misfits to our art classes because they didn't know what to do with them. They failed mathematics, reading, writing, arithmetic, whatever else, so they immediately—or boat building, which they had a training course—so they would send them to me. So I had all the delinquents and misfits, et cetera, who didn't take to arts any more than they did to mathematics. And at the same time, amongst them were those who were indeed talented, and with a concentrated effort, we could have given them direction for the rest of their lives, which was not done. [00:46:38]

ROBERT BROWN: The Arts and Crafts Board didn't act on this recommendation?

GEORGE W. FEDOROFF: Yes, and they had no power too, you see. The schools had the power. My own encouragement was not enough. In other words, they needed the encouragement of the principal—director of education for Alaska, Dr. Dale, but they were all concerned with economics, primarily, how these people will make a living in the future, instead of, well, the future will take care of itself: provide them with the groundwork in something they can do best. But art was never considered as a serious effort for those who could have gone into other fields, like nursing or machine shop work or whatever else.

ROBERT BROWN: Even though there had been a considerable tourist market for Indian art, they still could not see that art would have an economic—

GEORGE W. FEDOROFF: No. Well, it didn't, actually. You see, most of the profits went into the pockets of dealers, of course. It was not even a 33 and a half percent then. They took half or whatever, and the native people received a pittance for a substantial amount of work. Now, of course, the tables have turned considerably. Now the native peoples simply don't produce for the gift shop unless they can afford to pay a living wage or plus. [00:48:11]

ROBERT BROWN: But you got no support from, say, George Dale?

GEORGE W. FEDOROFF: No. He professed interest in the arts by virtue of the fact he has a doctorate in education or something, but essentially all peasants, I mean, from the area director of education to teachers.

And the teachers were good missionaries, in a sense. I mean, they were kind, they were baby-sitting, et cetera, but they were ill-equipped for any kind of cultural activity, you see, or anything substantial. They simply held onto jobs, and they enjoyed the bush work, you know, in the outlying area.

ROBERT BROWN: The frontier atmosphere?

GEORGE W. FEDOROFF: Oh, yes, they liked that. And they were rather good. They knew how to mend a wound or set a leg if they break it, and they were concerned about the people's physical condition, but that was about it. But they were not bad people, but simply ignorant people themselves, you see.

ROBERT BROWN: By calling them peasants, you mean they had no sense of culture.

GEORGE W. FEDOROFF: No.

ROBERT BROWN: None.

GEORGE W. FEDOROFF: Well, that's a European expression, if you will. Right.

ROBERT BROWN: Finally, to placate yourself, you turned some interest to saving the totem poles.

GEORGE W. FEDOROFF: That was part of my responsibility.

ROBERT BROWN: Was it?

GEORGE W. FEDOROFF: Katharine Kuh recommended that, too. In fact, she was much more concerned about the totem poles than the living artists, it seems to me. However, that too became a problem because they thought it was feasible, but it was so complicated. When you have a soggy mass of wood about 30, 40 feet high that was standing in the rain forest for 20 or 30 years, you simply didn't know what was going on inside of the wood, you know, when you have something about three or four feet in diameter. The rotting that went on was fantastic, you see. Once you chop them down or dry them, they will disintegrate. So it required a wood technologist to analyze the wood and make recommendations. All that costs money.

So I invited the Forest Service, through various channels, people, wood technologists. They thought it was stupid to begin with, trying to save them. The Park Service already warned me that it was not going to be—of course, I was naïve, too. I didn't know much about it. But once I looked, I suddenly realized, good grief, it would take 10 years to dry a totem pole. Well, anyway, but I had to do it. So at great cost, I moved, I don't know, 10, 12 poles from Sitka to the island, to Mount Edgecumbe. I don't mean I carried them on my back, but I had heavy equipment. [00:51:22]

ROBERT BROWN: You had cranes to—

GEORGE W. FEDOROFF: Right, and put them in the hangar to dry. That's where they examined them, and it made sense. You know, it's like an old mummy. If you expose it to—

ROBERT BROWN: —a new atmosphere—

GEORGE W. FEDOROFF: —a new atmosphere, the whole fiber collapses. Well, this was beyond—Katharine Kuh didn't understand all that, so she blamed me for dragging my feet, not saving the totem poles. Till the day I left Alaska in 1970, she still—and she still holds me responsible that I failed in my mission, and also, of course, she opposed my modernization of native artists. [00:52:12]

ROBERT BROWN: But she thought that you had—you had recommended they go very slow with this preservation.

GEORGE W. FEDOROFF: Well, not only slow. I just gave up.

ROBERT BROWN: Yeah.

GEORGE W. FEDOROFF: Well, I told her, but it was—I told them all what was entailed. And Forest Service was much better equipped than I was to make decisions, so I thought—I mean, in terms of wood technology, I didn't know anything about it.

ROBERT BROWN: But the Forest Service was not given—

GEORGE W. FEDOROFF: No, no, they didn't have the responsibility. They simply provided advisory services. You know, it's Madison, Wisconsin, where they have a Forest Service lab. Well, they had scientists, they had experts in the field.

ROBERT BROWN: They were not given the power to—

GEORGE W. FEDOROFF: No, no, no. No. And, you know, this was something that pursued me for many years to come. I mean, whenever I ran into Katharine Kuh, she managed to—oh, she wrote an article. She wrote articles in the *Saturday Review* about the vanishing arts. She didn't mention me by name, but she mentioned the Indian Arts and Crafts Board.

ROBERT BROWN: You had formidable opponents. But she—

GEORGE W. FEDOROFF: She was not my opponent, but she simply—no, she didn't undermine me in any way. Otherwise, I would have lost the job, probably, earlier. No, no, she simply felt that I wasn't—I didn't meet her expectations. Probably at heart, she realized that she made a mistake in assuming that these things were salvageable. But later on, I belonged to—I was on the Council with the governor of Alaska. The Alaska State Council of Arts and Park Service and myself were involved in this. But that was much later, save the totem poles, Katharine, after her article. They were simply shamed into doing something about it

So the governor Alaska—it was Wally Hickel at the time—called these meetings in his office, which I attended, devising ways—trying to devise ways of salvaging, saving the totem poles, not just Sitka, but Ketchikan, wherever else, and museum people. And they dragged a few totem poles in Ketchikan from outdoors to indoors, but they didn't save them all. It's an unbelievable task, you know. [00:54:54]

ROBERT BROWN: It would be comparable to drying out a submerged ship or something like that.

GEORGE W. FEDOROFF: Well, exactly. I did save one totem pole, but it was sort of partially saved, which is in the museum. But even that was a miracle. I don't know how it stood there.

ROBERT BROWN: You mentioned that in about '47 or '[4]8, you were transferred to the Bureau of Indian Affairs.

GEORGE W. FEDOROFF: Yes. You see, I had a conflict with the bureau from the day I arrived. First of all, they resented an outsider coming in, because they had sort of a close clique there.

ROBERT BROWN: That's also in the Department of Interior, though.

GEORGE W. FEDOROFF: Yes. Oh, yes. But a different batch. And Indian Arts and Crafts Board is sort of an autonomous organization anyway, in the department. It's directly under the secretary. So Bureau of Indian Affairs were always sort of blowing hot and cold. They didn't know whether they should be with us or against us type of thing.

ROBERT BROWN: So that was yet another problem you had.

GEORGE W. FEDOROFF: Oh, yes. That was local as well as in Washington. [00:56:01]

ROBERT BROWN: But nevertheless, you felt you would stay on in Alaska.

GEORGE W. FEDOROFF: Yes. Well, I was very fond of Alaska. I liked the nature. I like mountain climbing and hunting—at the time. I don't hunt—I stopped hunting years ago because I just stopped —I don't like to kill anything. But it's a beautiful land, you know, and I liked the people. I got along very well with people, individuals.

ROBERT BROWN: You were going to be married up there, too.

GEORGE W. FEDOROFF: I married almost immediately upon my arrival. I was married in '48—'47, I'm sorry, not '48, '47. And both of us liked Alaska, and so we had children, two.

ROBERT BROWN: Was your wife also interested in the arts, or—

GEORGE W. FEDOROFF: No, she was a physical therapist. She was interested in the arts, but not in practicing arts, not anything of that sort. She just enjoyed art, all arts. She was exposed to them somewhere. And my children, of course, were born there—our children.

ROBERT BROWN: You were at the Mount Edgecumbe School for about six years, till '53?

GEORGE W. FEDOROFF: Yes, to '53, right. And then I had had it up to there, because I simply could not move. I was making some headway with a few students, but our department simply was neglected. We had no funds, no salaries, no travel, and you had to—in Alaska, you can't accomplish anything without travel, you know.

ROBERT BROWN: And you also mentioned that there was some resistance from the natives.

GEORGE W. FEDOROFF: There was some—oh, yes. They felt that—well, it was purely a cultural thing. They felt that the white people had no business in trying to revive their arts. If the arts were to be revived, it was going to be through their own efforts at all levels. And it doesn't necessarily mean that I was completely ignored, but I was questioned and questioned and questioned, and wasted too much time on the diplomatic relationships, and finally it became a bloody bore, you know. [00:58:25]

ROBERT BROWN: So at about that time, then, you wanted to freelance as a designer and craftsman in Sitka.

GEORGE W. FEDOROFF: Craftsman in—yes, we bought a house in Sitka.

ROBERT BROWN: What kind of a career did you think of?

GEORGE W. FEDOROFF: Well, I was working in wood, you see, so I became terribly interested in wood. So I started producing wooden objects.

ROBERT BROWN: You were no longer painting. By this time you were—

GEORGE W. FEDOROFF: No. By then, I was aware of the fact that I'll never be a painter. For sculpture, maybe, yes, but I also had to make a living then, you see. I already had a family. And sculpture was iffy; however, I knew that I could sell my wooden things, which were mostly salad bowls or things of that sort, fruit.

ROBERT BROWN: Utilitarian objects.

GEORGE W. FEDOROFF: Useful objects. And it caught on rather well.

ROBERT BROWN: Also in the States?

GEORGE W. FEDOROFF: Mostly in the States.

ROBERT BROWN: You exhibited quite a bit.

GEORGE W. FEDOROFF: Oh, yes, exhibited everywhere. And first of all, I jointed the Northwest Designer Craftsmen, which was sort of an offshoot of American Crafts Council. And through them, I finally got to be recognized as a very competent artist in wood. I did do some sculpture, too, but little. I simply didn't have time. I had to work around the clock to make a go of it. I had to import all the woods, which was very expensive, hardwoods. Alaska doesn't have any, excepting alder, and that had to be seasoned, all that problem. [01:00:03]

ROBERT BROWN: What's the wood called?

GEORGE W. FEDOROFF: Alder.

ROBERT BROWN: Alder, yes. So you gained some national recognition at that time.

GEORGE W. FEDOROFF: National, international, right. And my work appeared in publications, et cetera, which helped. I spent most of the time actually establishing my reputation, rather than producing potboilers. So I had to spend more time than it was worth, actually, in terms of returns. I would spend more time on a piece than I would have if I was producing for the market alone.

ROBERT BROWN: But you were able to eke out a living.

GEORGE W. FEDOROFF: Right, but both of us worked. My wife also worked.

ROBERT BROWN: Then in '61, you were offered a new job by the Indian Arts and Crafts Board.

GEORGE W. FEDOROFF: Yes. The board was reorganized. You see, I kept in touch with the board throughout all these years, unofficially. I wasn't doing any work for them at all, but whenever they sent their representatives to Alaska, they always came to me, as a senior citizen or something. And I corresponded with them and I corresponded with the present manager, who asked me some—he was writing a book on crafts or something. So I did keep in touch with their Arts and Crafts Board, and then it was reorganized and this new manager was coming in.

ROBERT BROWN: Who was that?

GEORGE W. FEDOROFF: Robert G. Hart, his name was. And he was a sensitive guy and very knowledgeable guy in the arts as well as the practical aspects of the arts. And he asked me whether I would care to work for them. At that time, I was really hard-pressed financially because the children were growing up and I thought, "Gee, whiz, they've got to go to college soon." And I knew that I would have to make super-human effort to provide for

their education. And between the two of us, we managed, but it was just a bit tight. And it was a good job they offered me, a considerable raise, so I accepted it. And I worked with them until my retirement four years ago. [01:02:21]

ROBERT BROWN: What did your job all amount to, a lot of travel—

GEORGE W. FEDOROFF: No, yes. Then I began to—see, my first job in Alaska was in southeastern Alaska, so after 1960, ’61, I took care of the entire state, which helped a lot. In other words, I had immediate contact with the artists and craftsmen in communities throughout Alaska, the producing communities, not every community.

ROBERT BROWN: You were to start workshops or at least provide instruction and equipment?

GEORGE W. FEDOROFF: Some workshops, but—right, markets, provided equipment, right, in the likeliest areas.

ROBERT BROWN: You found that there were, you said, many more challenges than there had been before.

GEORGE W. FEDOROFF: Oh, yes. Right.

ROBERT BROWN: What do I mean by that?

GEORGE W. FEDOROFF: Well, first of all, it’s not just visualizing a possibility, but also I was able to move into the area where I suspected we had potential artists and craftsmen, not only the needy people, but also the talent, the cultural background, et cetera. In the past, it was just a dream of sorts. I thought, well, maybe someday I would do it, but I never did while I was working for the Bureau of Indian of Indian Affairs. Here, I was able to move in and follow through on development of an individual or a group of individuals or a community.

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ROBERT BROWN: So this new position that you started in 1961, did you enjoy it much more than you had in your earlier work?

GEORGE W. FEDOROFF: Oh, yes. Yes. I had considerably more freedom, independence, and acceptance of my plan or ideas, et cetera. So I had a flow of information; financial assistance from our agency, like in development of workshops, materials; and a recognition, of sorts, of the arts and the needs, and the potentials—the real potentials, not imaginary potentials—of what should be done but could be done, and what the conditions were in Alaska. After studies—we made quite a few studies, and others made studies, et cetera—it suddenly dawned upon them that there are certain things which are not desirable, that you simply cannot command the natives to do this or that, but they will respond to ideas informally. See, my total approach is very informal. There’s no whip or—

ROBERT BROWN: This was even before you had come on the job that they had made studies, had they?

GEORGE W. FEDOROFF: Right.

ROBERT BROWN: And they realized the old approach was—

GEORGE W. FEDOROFF: Right. And of course, they were a little bit ashamed of the loss of values, the loss of culture, et cetera, particularly Indian people. So the rebelling was part—so they were a substitute for their own shortcomings, you see. And it never—somehow it didn’t produce anything positive. The efforts they made to cover up, for instance, their inadequacies were rather childlike. They were transparent. However, you could not deny them completely. They had to find their own way. [00:02:14]

ROBERT BROWN: This was occurring in the sixties?

GEORGE W. FEDOROFF: Throughout my career in Alaska. However, they also wanted to know what—it’s not simply conversations with them, but what are you going to do for us or with us? We don’t want you to interfere, but provide us with the tools to do it, or be patient, or whatever, you see. And you have to be very subtle providing them guidance, you see. You cannot demand anything. You simply suggest certain things. Maybe a year or two later, maybe years later, you finally see the realization of your particular plan. It may not happen immediately.

ROBERT BROWN: So you would often be meeting with groups as you moved around the territory—

GEORGE W. FEDOROFF: Right.

ROBERT BROWN: —and perhaps only obliquely suggesting things.

GEORGE W. FEDOROFF: Right.

ROBERT BROWN: You spent more time just by listening to them and—

GEORGE W. FEDOROFF: Listening to them and showing them certain things without saying, well, why don't you do this or that? But showing it to them. And there some are imitators, but others borrow the right things. They're sensitive to an object or to a material. They're not stupid, by any means.

ROBERT BROWN: In effect, you were sorting out—they were sorting themselves out.

GEORGE W. FEDOROFF: Right. Right.

ROBERT BROWN: And the more talented and gifted came to the top.

GEORGE W. FEDOROFF: Right. Right. Right. I used to just simply underline the universal values of an object of art or craft. I tried to explain to them why certain things are unacceptable at certain levels, why certain things—I used to translate, for instance, to more tangible terms, like economic returns, even though I didn't believe in it. However, if they were economically inclined, you simply show them by doing, producing something of quality, they will increase their income immediately. [00:04:28]

ROBERT BROWN: Did they understand these differences that you pointed out?

GEORGE W. FEDOROFF: Oh, yes, eventually. But they had to be shaken out of their lethargy or out of their habits. And it was also a battle—my battle with the dealers, you see. The dealers, many of them resented my being there, because they felt I was spoiling the natives. Well, I treat the natives as I treat anybody else. I mean, they were your friends or acquaintances. I didn't speak down to them. I depended on them to some degree, but nevertheless, I did not impose myself on their lives or their work, et cetera.

ROBERT BROWN: The dealers simply wanted the status quo—

GEORGE W. FEDOROFF: All they want is production at a certain price, you see, which was slave labor, practically.

ROBERT BROWN: [Cross talk.]

GEORGE W. FEDOROFF: Right. Oh, yes, something they had been doing for 10 years, and something they could knock out, which was—I mean, they would immediately translate a piece of work into hours. For instance, I would say, "Why don't you do this instead of doing that?" They would say, "Ah, but this takes me five minutes; this would take me maybe a day, maybe longer." I said, "Okay, you'll be paid," but they didn't believe, because the merchants simply got them into a situation where they could see only one thing, that they want a certain product which they would do over and over. They knew exactly how many minutes it would take. [00:06:04]

ROBERT BROWN: They were paying on a piecework basis.

GEORGE W. FEDOROFF: Piecework basis, right. Right. And the quality was insignificant there. It didn't matter. Of course, they varied. The dealers varied, even in Alaska, but the majority of them were tourist dealers, you see.

[Audio Break.]

ROBERT BROWN: — you would point out to the Eskimos and Indians things that were unacceptable in terms of design. What sort of things would they be? You said you—when you would be discussing these things with them, you meant unacceptable in terms of the first-class [inaudible]?

GEORGE W. FEDOROFF: Right. I mean, certain shortcuts they take which were based merely on time and size.

ROBERT BROWN: But these were shortcuts that would have shown up among connoisseurs?

GEORGE W. FEDOROFF: Oh, yes, of course they would. Yeah.

ROBERT BROWN: That the work was shoddy.

GEORGE W. FEDOROFF: Shoddy work, shoddy design. The whole concept was not acceptable at certain levels. And simultaneously with that, I was upgrading the prices, you see, by finding markets for them which will pay adequately, or by practically forcing a dealer to pay more for quality.

ROBERT BROWN: Now, that, of course, was an idea that—

GEORGE W. FEDOROFF: By forcing, I don't mean I—

ROBERT BROWN: —Katharine Kuh was having for you—

GEORGE W. FEDOROFF: Right, right.

ROBERT BROWN: She saw what they needed [inaudible]—

GEORGE W. FEDOROFF: Oh yes. Right, right, right. But also, I was interested in original concepts. In other words, it's not only a question of quality in finishing a product, but also quality in the whole concept of a product: design, et cetera, and form. And all of that, of course, means—meant, at the time, shattering the precedents which were set by—for many, many years by the buying public, by the pioneers and bureaucrats, you name it. I mean, you had to spend considerable time in reversing those trends, you see. And it was not just saying, well, let's do it right now. [00:08:30]

ROBERT BROWN: Do you feel that, on balance, you did?

GEORGE W. FEDOROFF: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

ROBERT BROWN: You did reverse this inertia?

GEORGE W. FEDOROFF: To some degree, yes. Right.

ROBERT BROWN: How about education of the children? You had a few—that was probably the bright side of the earlier phase, the fact that people like Ronald Senungetuk made a career on the outside.

GEORGE W. FEDOROFF: And indirectly through Ronald, many others, and also during the last few years there was a new crop of artists who finally tore themselves away from the dependence on the gift shops. They began to exhibit first in Alaska museums, then later on they started exhibiting outside in galleries and museums, et cetera. So they became participants on almost universal basis.

ROBERT BROWN: Did you encourage, though, this time the most gifted students to go on down to the Lower 48 to study?

GEORGE W. FEDOROFF: Well, yes, but—

ROBERT BROWN: On the other hand, you developed, in '67, a program for a visual arts center in Alaska.

GEORGE W. FEDOROFF: In Alaska. Yes, but that was a cross-cultural type of a thing, which was not—

ROBERT BROWN: Which was to involve—

GEORGE W. FEDOROFF: Right, where they would have—that it would be all integrated. So there would be exchange of ideas on a permanent basis, and acceptance of various cultural differences, and understanding in terms of materials, quality, markets, et cetera. And prestige, of course. And it helped a great deal, because a lot of the artists now are indeed making a very good living by it. By "a lot," I don't mean—[00:10:22]

ROBERT BROWN: But this took a good while to establish this mixed center.

GEORGE W. FEDOROFF: Right. And of course, there was a fear that it would become a white-dominated type of establishment. But fortunately, it did not, because the artists who were involved, the white and the natives, didn't look at it from that point. It was apolitical. It had nothing to do with politics, racial problems, et cetera, which were rampant at the time.

ROBERT BROWN: The center was established, though.

GEORGE W. FEDOROFF: Oh, yes. It's still going on.

ROBERT BROWN: In Anchorage or in—

GEORGE W. FEDOROFF: In Anchorage. And we got the building from the state of Alaska, which was abandoned after a theater, a contemporary building which was suitable and is still being used. However, funding was a bit of a problem, so I had to go to Ford Foundation and spent about two years raising funds through it. But we got enough money out of the Ford Foundation to—and the Rockefeller Foundation. They gave us the original grant of $20,000. And the Rockefeller—the Ford Foundation gave us about half a million altogether.

ROBERT BROWN: Eventually did the government, the state or federal, take over this?

GEORGE W. FEDOROFF: No. We stayed out of it. The only thing that belonged to the center was myself. [Laughs.] The Indian Arts and Crafts Board contributed me to work for the center. In other words, that was not

my only chore, but I spent—

ROBERT BROWN: You did that. [00:12:00]

GEORGE W. FEDOROFF: I did that. And I spent the better part of a year, let us say, by working with foundations trying to justify grants; employed the people to run the center, and interviewed them, et cetera. Making constant trips there to Alaska.

ROBERT BROWN: Did you feel that governmental funding would tie your hands or—

GEORGE W. FEDOROFF: Well, the government was not interested because—

ROBERT BROWN: They weren't?

GEORGE W. FEDOROFF: No, they couldn't because—they were, but they couldn't, simply because it was cross-cultural, you see. Our agency is essentially—

ROBERT BROWN: [Inaudible.]

GEORGE W. FEDOROFF: Right. But we also contributed my assistant, who was an Eskimo artist. He is dead now. His name was Seegana.

ROBERT BROWN: Peter Seegana.

GEORGE W. FEDOROFF: Peter. He died. Well, he was employed by us but he worked for the center with the native people who came to work there. They received small grants, but essentially they came there to use the facilities which we had, were provided some tools, et cetera, and seed money or whatever.

ROBERT BROWN: Now, in Sitka you continued a—

GEORGE W. FEDOROFF: And I had a workshop in Sitka.

ROBERT BROWN: —demonstration workshop for Indian and Eskimo artists.

GEORGE W. FEDOROFF: Right.

ROBERT BROWN: What did the word "demonstration" mean?

GEORGE W. FEDOROFF: Well, this was simply to show what can be done in the contemporary sense with the arts, native arts, in terms of products as well as audiences or—

ROBERT BROWN: This wasn't for tourists. The audience was meant to be—

GEORGE W. FEDOROFF: —museums, galleries, name it, as well as tourists. You see, unfortunately, as I told you before, the center, we were established—

ROBERT BROWN: Partly to serve tourists, weren't you? [00:14:00]

GEORGE W. FEDOROFF: Because we were connected to the Park Service. Park Service provided us with the physical facilities for the workshop, which was an excellent workshop. Of course, we bought the equipment, but the architect incorporated our design for the workshop, where we had Eskimo and Indian artists producing experimental models. In other words, they could be anything they wished them to be: traditional, contemporary, whatever. And they were paid to produce that work. They were on monthly salaries. So they could sell their work, but they didn't depend on that because they had enough of an income to survive, so they could produce things the best they could produce. In other words, they were not tied to any shop or gallery, et cetera, where they would be obliged to produce a number of pieces a month. They could produce one piece or produce a dozen pieces.

ROBERT BROWN: Mm-hmm [affirmative]. In the late '60s, then, the Arts and Crafts Board—[inaudible]—of Alaska when—did you say the Indians—

GEORGE W. FEDOROFF: Indians, right.

ROBERT BROWN: A decision was made that they should [inaudible].

GEORGE W. FEDOROFF: Right.

ROBERT BROWN: As you explained, in the process, a lot of the Eskimos left.

GEORGE W. FEDOROFF: They left because—there was a degree of chauvinism there. And the Indians, of course, in that area felt that the Eskimos had no business to be in southeastern Alaska. That's Indian territory. They were that narrow.

ROBERT BROWN: As you look back, were there any distinguishing differences between the Indians and the Eskimos in the set of students that you saw come along?

GEORGE W. FEDOROFF: Oh, substantially, yes, right.

ROBERT BROWN: Could you characterize those distinctions? [00:16:00]

GEORGE W. FEDOROFF: Well, first of all, the Indians had probably longer exposure and more exposure to non-natives, to the whites. They were somewhat more outspoken. They were also bitter, more so than the Eskimos, resentful of the whites, much more chauvinistic than the Eskimos appeared to be. Eskimos, out of their own environment, were sort of guests of the Indians. And the Indians made them feel that, you see, not being wanted; being tolerated simply because they were also natives, you see. Socially, they mixed to a point, but they also felt that they were—the Indians felt they were taking away jobs or space which should be Indian because it is Indian territory. So, eventually it just was a failure, excepting that the products were not a failure. A lot of people, that year or two they spent in the workshop gave them a chance to find themselves, to establish themselves and go on from there on their own. Some have already, but mostly Eskimos. The Indians are still carrying on, because the whole shop was turned over to the Indians.

ROBERT BROWN: And it does continue.

GEORGE W. FEDOROFF: Right. The quality is shaky. The best people, even Indians—we had an excellent man who is the best Indian carver in Alaska.

ROBERT BROWN: Who is that?

GEORGE W. FEDOROFF: Davis. David. No, what's his name? David Williams. I suddenly forgot. David Williams. Well, he was an older man. He was about my age. And he was excellent. He was a good teacher, too. However, he didn't get along—he came from Hoonah, which is a bit north of Sitka. But native people of Sitka were jealous of him, that type of thing. So when they took over, he said, "George, if you go, I go." And as soon as we left, he—I went to Washington, you see, at that time. [00:18:30]

ROBERT BROWN: Yeah. But then by now some people who didn't want to stay in Sitka could go to the Visual Arts Center in Anchorage, couldn't they?

GEORGE W. FEDOROFF: They could, right. They could. If they could afford it, they could go, right. And some have.

ROBERT BROWN: Now, your time in Washington—you went there in, what, '69 or '70?

GEORGE W. FEDOROFF: I went in '69, end of '69, right.

ROBERT BROWN: Was that a good time for you? Did you summarize a lot? Did you make recommendations?

GEORGE W. FEDOROFF: Oh, yes, of course. And I kept on going back to Alaska, you see, about two or three times a year. And during that period, that was the period when we started the Visual Arts Center. So I kept on working on that, as well as—well, we had a program at the University of Alaska, too, which was run by Ron Senungetuk. He was a professor of art, or associate professor then. So we provided him with assistance, or his students, financial, equipment, et cetera, to get him started.

ROBERT BROWN: That time when you came back to Washington and made your trips back was a pretty good era in the Indian Arts and Crafts Board.

GEORGE W. FEDOROFF: Oh, yes. Right. Right.

ROBERT BROWN: The understanding on both sides was quite good?

GEORGE W. FEDOROFF: Right. And it sort of established a precedent and remained. It was a root which bore fruit, you see. And even though without us—of course, the board is no longer involved now in Alaska, excepting exchange of information, et cetera. I don't think they are providing funds now to university or the Visual Arts Center. I'm sure they don't. Visual Arts Center is supported by Alaska State Council on the Arts, by the governor's office, by the state of Alaska and by the National Endowment for the Arts, and evidently are doing rather well. I still belong to the organization. I was on the board. And now, of course, I'm useless, more or less, but they keep me informed about what's going on. I get their pamphlets of exhibits. And it is integrated now

completely. [00:20:38]

ROBERT BROWN: You wrote a series of reports before your retirement. In ’71 you wrote a report on revitalization and development of Eskimo arts and crafts in Alaska, a pilot program.

GEORGE W. FEDOROFF: Right. That was for the Indian Arts and Crafts Board, right.

ROBERT BROWN: And this was based on your experience. Do you recall if there would be any radical differences from most programs that you had set up while you were in Alaska? Were there any really new things?

GEORGE W. FEDOROFF: No.

ROBERT BROWN: Simply to get it down?

GEORGE W. FEDOROFF: Get it down, right, because the board began to withdraw then, you see, from Alaska. See, Alaska became more or less self-sufficient at that point, the native people, because of a land claim settlement, oil, et cetera.

ROBERT BROWN: Money was coming in.

GEORGE W. FEDOROFF: The money was coming in, the established corporations.

ROBERT BROWN: You thought that you should direct-send them this as a program, that they might or might not, but—

GEORGE W. FEDOROFF: Right, right. But might not, right, right.

ROBERT BROWN: —serve as a guide.

GEORGE W. FEDOROFF: Right. And the board decided then that—first of all, it was very expensive to support a program there; as you know, the distances, et cetera. And the cost of living in Alaska was very, very high. That’s maybe one reason why I left. Of course, I personally had no objections to leaving. I was becoming, as they say, bushy, in Alaska. [00:22:07]

ROBERT BROWN: You mean a bit too out of touch with things?

GEORGE W. FEDOROFF: Right. Right. One is apt to become sort of introverted, and it’s like the old pioneers or explorers, you know, lost in the jungle.

ROBERT BROWN: But your being in Washington then revived you.

GEORGE W. FEDOROFF: Revived me. But I still feel that I have roots in Alaska, somehow. I kept up my interest in it, but I could no longer be actively involved with people there, you see, not to the extent I was before, you see.

ROBERT BROWN: Well, when you had to retire, were you ready to retire?

GEORGE W. FEDOROFF: Oh, yes, I had to retire at 70, you see.

ROBERT BROWN: Were you ready to retire when you were 70?

GEORGE W. FEDOROFF: No. I wanted to go on. But then I realized suddenly that I had to do something else then. You see, my job was just about finished then with the Visual Arts Center and other projects. We simply closed down shop, and they probably would have been hard put to find another job for me somewhere else. And I didn’t particularly care about a normal involvement throughout other states. I have traveled around. During my stay in Washington, I did work for other areas as well, you know. So I’ve covered most of the territory where—like the Southwest and the Plains.

ROBERT BROWN: But you felt that your main contribution—

GEORGE W. FEDOROFF: —was in Alaska.

ROBERT BROWN: Alaska.

GEORGE W. FEDOROFF: Yes.

ROBERT BROWN: Do you feel good now having been a bureaucrat off and on?

GEORGE W. FEDOROFF: Well, after a while, in the second—at first, no. But during the second tour of duty with the board, I felt that it didn't really matter. I was just paid by the board. But I could do what I believed in, and people accepted it, which was fine, and I showed some progress. And it was sort of gratifying, yes. But I could have worked in other—by the end of '71, I felt sort of useless there, you see. No, not '71, by the end of '69—'79. No. When did I retire? [00:24:27]

ROBERT BROWN: No, '76.

GEORGE W. FEDOROFF: In '76, right. By '76, I was—

ROBERT BROWN: Did you feel some impulsion to get back to sculpture or woodworking?

GEORGE W. FEDOROFF: I am now. That's what I'm doing now.

ROBERT BROWN: And that was one of the things you—

GEORGE W. FEDOROFF: —I wanted to do.

ROBERT BROWN: —had to postpone a bit.

GEORGE W. FEDOROFF: Oh, yes. I couldn't do it, of course. I tried. But from day to day, you didn't know whether you would have time to finish and whatever.

ROBERT BROWN: What are you doing now? Do you have outlets? Do you send things to exhibitions?

GEORGE W. FEDOROFF: No. Not yet. I haven't done anything.

ROBERT BROWN: You mainly do things for yourself.

GEORGE W. FEDOROFF: I do things in stone, like these things there or that thing here. It's fairly small, marble things mostly. But I'm not hard-pressed, but at the same time, I feel I should do something about it, you know. So as soon as I have—of course, I sent some things out to Alaska. [Laughs.]

ROBERT BROWN: How do you feel, as you go back? I mean, your life was, of course, greatly disrupted when you were a boy, and it took you a good while, I think, to find just what you wanted to stick with it, didn't it? You said you were—

GEORGE W. FEDOROFF: Oh, yes. You see, that's part of my whole development, because I wasn't settled, you see. As a boy, I would have known what I would do 10 years from now, and suddenly this was taken away, you know. So I had to adjust myself to various conditions: first, I mean, a revolution, starvation, horrors of all sorts. And then finally, relative comforts of China, and pretty good schooling, and then the adventure of going to France, studying art there, and then—but I was still unsettled. I didn't have my roots in France. I wanted to come to the United States. [00:26:27]

ROBERT BROWN: Even after World War II, you really didn't quite find what you wanted to do.

GEORGE W. FEDOROFF: No. No.

ROBERT BROWN: You thought you would want to—

GEORGE W. FEDOROFF: You see, I became more or less—I was sort of a dilettante, I guess, and with some knowledge. But I had fairly broad experience in social sets, let's say, and professionals, but it's sort of vicarious experience, you see. So when I went to work for the board, I suddenly realized that I have something to give, with my observations, my experience of seeing things, even or doing, to a lesser extent. I became sort of a teacher, if you will.

ROBERT BROWN: Do you think that partly your effectiveness with Indians and Eskimos was owing to your own—

GEORGE W. FEDOROFF: —experiences. Right.

ROBERT BROWN: —experience of being uprooted?

GEORGE W. FEDOROFF: Right, right, it was, because I had no racial problems. I still don't. You see, I actually don't draw any lines. I mean, I would be just quite at home with Chinese as I would be with French, let us say, or somebody else. I can get along with people of all races. And I don't—I mean, I don't want to be a chauvinist in any sense, or a patriot of any sort, except I'm a patriot of—I have responsibility to the country where I live, like I have responsibility to the United States in many ways. First of all, it gave me not only a living, living wage, or

retirement, or future, but also the whole pattern of living. And so, I mean, these things you just take normally. But I think these experiences were valuable by having lived through various phases of poverty, comfort, security, et cetera, et cetera. And so when you work with people who are insecure, like native people were—in Alaska, that is—the poor had an understanding of it. Or if they were rejected because they were yellow or had squinty eyes, I understood that, you see. I could see that. And the relationship between white and non-white, and both sides, mind you, I mean, both were prejudiced, or are prejudiced. It's not the chauvinism on the part of the white or the black or the yellow alone, it's a mutual sort of a thing, which I rather resent. I don't like any kind of prejudice, economic or otherwise. I mean, I even accept multimillionaires. [Laughs.] And I'm a royalist, I suppose. I like certain superficial things, the trappings that go with royalty. That is part of my—not that I was in the royal family, but my past—[00:29:37]

ROBERT BROWN: But didn't you feel—is that what you said—that among Indian and Eskimo students, especially the gifted should be given the chief attention?

GEORGE W. FEDOROFF: Oh, yes.

ROBERT BROWN: So you feel that's an elitism that should be encouraged.

GEORGE W. FEDOROFF: Right.

ROBERT BROWN: But an elitism with merit, rather than elitism that is inherited.

GEORGE W. FEDOROFF: Well, in this case, it's what they created themselves. It's that.

ROBERT BROWN: On the other hand, you said you're a royalist.

GEORGE W. FEDOROFF: Yes, but that's—yes, it's apart from it. It's the superficial trappings, as I said. It's not necessarily the mode of life in relationship to other people. I may be a snob in some way, but it's not necessarily a snob in relation between the poor and the rich or visa-versa. It has something else. It's a question of quality. In other words, a certain quality of living. By royalty, I don't necessarily mean that you are a descendant of the royal family or nobility, whatever. It's what you do with your life, a style of life, your style, your behavior and your relationships with other people, and also maintenance of a certain quality or standard, which may not have anything to do with the financial condition, or very little, let's say. [00:31:10]

ROBERT BROWN: That must be something that has been—

GEORGE W. FEDOROFF: But that's a part of my background which I left maybe 60 years ago, you see.

ROBERT BROWN: It must continue to frustrate you here in America.

GEORGE W. FEDOROFF: Well, it does very frequently, yes, but you find that anywhere to some degree. For instance, I couldn't stand the French [connoisseurs ?] too, you know, no more than the vulgarity of the nouveau riche. I don't like that. But nouveau riche also, it's not an American phenomenon alone, but here it's a little bit thicker, you know. But it's becoming less so. I think that younger people today—by younger, I mean younger than I am, let us say, your age and younger—they have this better understanding of global values which the gelled, hardened generation of Reagan-type of people have, the type of 1900s, et cetera, the ruthless moneymakers, et cetera, which unfortunately Reagan is trying to revive, without the sense of quality. It's power, vulgar display of wealth, et cetera, which I resent in anybody. Not that the royalty didn't have it. They had it too, vulgarity of sorts. Some. Well, anyway—

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[END OF INTERVIEW.]