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Oral history interview with Ben Shahn, 1965 October 3

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Transcript

Preface

The following oral history transcript is the result of a tape-recorded interview with Harlan Phillips on October 3, 1965. The interview was conducted at Ben Shahn's home in Roosevelt, New Jersey by Harlan Phillips for the Archives of American Art, Smithsonian Institution.

Interview

HARLAN PHILLIPS: Yes, that's a very super-sensitive microphone.

BEN SHAHN: Oh, good. Well, do you want to try it? Well, sit down and I'll....

HARLAN PHILLIPS: Yes. This period ought to be put back in its context.

BEN SHAHN: Well, I'm putting it back. I'm going to put it back in its context. I recently went through the thirties with the BBC.

HARLAN PHILLIPS: Did you?

BEN SHAHN: I was very curious and I said, "Did you have the thirties in Britain, too?"

HARLAN PHILLIPS: He said, "Indeed we did."

BEN SHAHN: I said, "I never heard of them. Did you have a lost generation?" You know we were a lost generation, because I was in Paris from '25 to '29. So he said, "Indeed we did." Well, I said, "You don't get enough publicity for your thirties or your lost generation."

Anyway, I came back a week before the market crash from Europe and until then had total security. I was a trained lithographer, you know, commercial lithographer; and I could always go up to the union and just get a job. When I came back, there weren't any jobs and my knees shook, you know. I had this wonderful sense that I am a craftsman, I can do this, and I can earn my livelihood. I came back with a baby; that was the other thing. So I shook, you know. It was a terrifying experience. They said, "Even if there were a job, you won't get it, Ben. You've been away from your table for four years, but the guys that have been sticking with their table are going to get it." Like that.

Well, I decided then I would try to exhibit. I had never exhibited before. I went around to galleries, and so on, and so forth. Anyway, I can't go into the details of the two years of '30 and '31, but in '32 Rivera saw my work and invited me to work with him on the mural he was going to do in Rockefeller Center. I was flattered and everything else. And I did. And I was on a salary. I was the rich guy on the block, you know. I had already gotten involved rather excitedly in mural work.

HARLAN PHILLIPS: Had you?

BEN SHAHN: Yes. The Modern Museum in '32 – early in the spring or December or February of '32 – invited a group of, I don't know, 15 people to do sketches for an imaginary mural. I thought they were going to try to find someone, or several of us, who would do murals for the new building they were building then, you see. They gave us a subject – they called it a postwar subject – to do a total sketch two feet by four and then pick up a detail four feet by eight. I've written about it, so I won't go into it because a great scandalous situation arose. Anyway then, I worked with Rivera through the year from about March of '33 right through the year till about November, I guess. And then there was nothing else again.

Suddenly they set up a project called the Public Works of Art Project, the PWAP. You were on a salary. I was on a salary for two weeks before I knew why. I received two checks. I had been working. I was so imbued with the idea of murals that I thought I would do a sort of a story of Prohibition, which had just gone out you see. I had been working on this idea anyway, again for imaginary space, you know, imaginary murals. When I found out what this PWAP was about, Public Works of Art Project....It was under the head of the director of the Whitney.

HARLAN PHILLIPS: Juliana Force?

BEN SHAHN: No, no. Who's running it now? The head of the Whitney Museum right now?

HARLAN PHILLIPS: Lloyd Goodrich.

BEN SHAHN: Lloyd Goodrich. He might have been under Juliana at the time, but he was in charge of that. When I

discussed it with him, he said, “Go right ahead with that.” So we talked the possibility of putting it in one of the city-owned restaurants in Central Park, Tavern on the Green; but it was very, very vague. Then in a couple of months, that ended. Whang! Like that.

I remember the day it ended. I wandered around the Cooper Union Museum for some unearthly reason. I’d never been there. I saw fascinating things of decor of the 18th century, original sketches. But I associate it with that day of getting the pink slip. But we were all cut off simultaneously.

I was really in murals at that time. I’d made details of that very imaginary fresco, of the imaginary mural in fresco. I had learned fresco from Rivera, you see. I was teaching fresco to other people, people who had nothing to do except learn things. You know, we were all in the same economic boat.

Then the state took it over; and I think it was called the CWA, Civic Works Administration, some such thing. The state took it over; but they dropped that project that I had already started, the Prohibition thing. By the way, they’re all now in the Museum of the City of New York, all the originals of that thing.

I’d known Lou Bloch for several years, and Lou is very good in devising a project. He looked the situation over, and he must have known that they were building this new Riker’s Island Penitentiary. He wrote the project up. It just made your mouth water when he wrote up a project, and it was inevitable that we get it. We started on it under the state aegis; and we had the most incredible cooperation from Commissioner of Correction McCormick, the unusual man in a political job. He had been a professor at Dartmouth. LaGuardia became interested. We saw him. Commissioner McCormick would drive over with his 300-foot Cadillac on this dingy little street we lived on, and all the kids would be so curious. LaGuardia came down once or twice. We went to see him. Things were going along swimmingly.

We sent to study these institutions. We visited Sing-Sing. We visited other prisons. We visited penitentiaries, reformatories all over the state. I was really going on all cylinders, and I just was knocking out one foot after another of the sketches. Lou (we were working in the same room)….I didn’t pay too much attention, and he sort of bent his work toward the idea I had. Murals are always simplistic, so that we decided one wall would be the good and the other would be the bad, you know.

Then along came a situation where there was a question whether we’ll get it, whether we’ll get to do it. Something had happened inside the inner sanctum of politics; and suddenly they said it’s not to be painted on there. I never knew why. Well, it created quite a stir; and the people at the Modern Museum, and other people, decided to ask the prisoners themselves whether they wanted it. I suppose Lou has told you enough about that. Some psychologists got up a questionnaire. It became a cause celebre, very quiet, when the *Daily News* called me. They had the rumor; and I said, “Well, I think it will be settled. I’ll tell you tomorrow.” They said, “Boy, it won’t be news tomorrow.” That ended that, you know.

All efforts were made, and then it was suggested that we go and see one of the courthouses in the old Customs Building – not the one that’s down at the Battery, but the old Customs Building on Christopher Street. Then Lou and I came there, and I tell you I felt like the Christ before the rabbis. These three judges, old and deaf, couldn’t have us come too near to them because it interfered with the dignity of the court. It was a hot, boiling day, one of those August days in New York. So they closed the windows so they could hear us. When they closed the windows, it was too hot; and they had to shift back and forth. There they were sitting in their judicial robes, you know, listening; and I felt utterly hopeless. They hadn’t the slightest interest; and one of them summed it up by saying very simply, “Well, look, young man….” I guess I was the more articulate spokesman; Lou could do it much better in writing. The judge said, “Look young man, if there was any money for painting, we’d paint the toilets first.” That was that.

It had gone on for – oh, I don’t know – almost a year actually into ‘35, you see, from ‘34 into ‘35. They had assigned several assistants. One is now a big Hollywood guy. I don’t know what he does, producer or something. The other was the brother of Morris Kantor – Izzy Kantor, I think his name was – a very gifted boy, crazy as hell but very gifted boy. Then we realized it was over.

We even went up to Corsackie, up on the Hudson near Albany somewhere, where there is a reformatory. We spent a couple of days there – the possibility of doing it there – but all the time in my heart of hearts I knew that it was pretty hopeless. In the research, we went to see the famous sociologist and penologist at Columbia, an old man then, Lirchway. Yes, and we spent strange hours with him. We saw everybody that had anything to do with it.

The assistant of Commissioner McCormick was this chap, Marcus, who was later a colonel in the Israeli army and was killed in the fighting there. He was an assistant to him, some socially-minded person that took that job, I think. He had money.

Anyway, this is briefly the story of the Riker’s Island mural. The anticlimax was when someone brought in a

sketch. I left my sketches there. I got a job. About two weeks after the WPA was formed, I got a real job in the Resettlement Administration, and I left all my sketches. Then, when the WPA was broken up, some junk dealer bought it all, you know, for weight. There was a very canny gentleman by the name of Chaim Gross, a sculptor, who knew where it went and bought them up. The last time one of them was sold, it brought $3500.

HARLAN PHILLIPS: One of these sketches for the mural?

BEN SHAHN: Yes, yes, yes. I got pretty bitter about it, that this character has always scavenged around art, you know, and knew his way.

HARLAN PHILLIPS: Life is untidy.

BEN SHAHN: Well, that character is untidy. I have difficulty controlling myself when I see him. He's a good sculptor, I think, and so on; but that facet of it I don't know.

HARLAN PHILLIPS: I saw, I think, a sketch in the *Art Front* in a story or rather an editorial.

BEN SHAHN: Yes, yes, that Stuart Davis had written.

HARLAN PHILLIPS: Yes, which aimed at Jonas Lie. I don't know whether he figured in it or not.

BEN SHAHN: Jonas Lie was head of the Art Commission. And I did a caricature in *Art Front* if you remember.

HARLAN PHILLIPS: Earlier. Of course!

BEN SHAHN: Even though I was riding high with our mural, I felt he was a menace; and I did a caricature of him with....Well, he was so shocked at the kind of assignments and the way the work was going along so different from what he was used to having seen all the time that he made some crack somewhere like let's not worry about those murals, there'll be plenty of whitewash to....That's the caricature I made of him looking like Patrick Henry, I believe, on the base of a statue with a brush that looked like the American flag and a bucket of whitewash. I don't remember it very well.

HARLAN PHILLIPS: Well, he didn't give either one of you due process of law then, sitting on the Commission.

BEN SHAHN: Nothing, no. It never got to the Commission, though they may have seen....He may have put a stop to it. We don't know. We never knew. And the irony of ironies when the count was made of the prisoners' reaction....I had little faith in it. I know that prisoners sense what is wanted of them, and they will say it, you see. And they thought....except for the homosexual section, who were very shocked at those murals. They said we should have painted flower and birds and things like that, which I understand. The rest of them just kept saying....Well, I remember one vividly: "Picture east wall, good; picture west wall, good; picture north wall, good; picture south wall, good; all pictures good." Not a very literal guy. But ninety-five percent apparently favored it because I think they knew that was expected of them. Do you know, the next day the *Tribune* and *Times* came out: "Ninety-five Percent of Prisoners Reject Mural." This was just fed right out of City Hall; and I don't know why I'm so sweet and gentle, why I haven't retained more cynicism than I have.

HARLAN PHILLIPS: There's a phrase used in the editorial which purports to quote someone to the effect that the murals were "psychologically unfit." Is that the phrase?

BEN SHAHN: I think something like that. I can't remember. *Art* (I forget which magazine) had a big piece on it by a man by the name of White. I can't remember....a long story on it in one of the art magazines in this country.

Then *Art Front*. Stuart Davis had written that piece. I don't think his heart was in it, and Stuart in subsequent years hated to be reminded of that whole period. He just hated it. It always reminded me of a story of two girl ostriches walking along and two boy ostriches following them. When they get close, the girl ostriches got kind of scared, and they walked faster. Finally the girls just stuck their heads in the sand; and the two boy ostriches said, "My God, they were just here a minute ago. Where are they?" That was the situation at the time and the subsequent reaction of people, people who were embarrassed to death by having had any connection.

I only once lost my temper on it. I was on that program with Susskind, and Bob Motherwell was on. You'll see from the transcript that I tore into him. He was asked about the WPA. He said, "Nothing good came out of it, really nothing." I just stuck my head in front of his face. I knew my head was back to the camera and I knew Bob. I said, "Look, Bob, you just had a show. The critics quoted the following people who influenced you: Jack Pollock, Bill De Kooning, Adolph Gottleib" and a few others. I remembered them because it was just at the time. "All of those people, the critics said, had influenced you; and all of them had been on the WPA." It's so long ago, you know, that I don't have the spleen that I had at the time. I have a file of the stuff somewhere, or maybe I gave it to you. I don't remember.

HARLAN PHILLIPS: I don't know.

BEN SHAHN: The correspondence and so on. I don't remember whether I gave it to you. If I didn't, then I never went through this file cabinet at the time because I couldn't open it. One of the drawers had stuck.

HARLAN PHILLIPS: There is some indication that you started using a camera in these days, too, going to the prisons. I think you published a small booklet on.

BEN SHAHN: No, no.

HARLAN PHILLIPS: Photographs of the day?

BEN SHAHN: No, I didn't. *Vanity Fair* laid out four pages, and they loved those photographs. See, I shared a studio with Walker Evans at the time. At that time I had gotten very hipped on the subject that if I can create an intense reality, it will generate some broad generalities, you see. And if I could create the right fold in the thing in just a small area, it will cast an aura of reality in adjoining areas. And that out of these very intense observations, some broad statement can be made. I think I was rationalizing it then as I am rationalizing now when I walked away from that imperceptibly. I wasn't aware of it. As I look at it now, I feel that I make much broader statements from which specifics can be drawn. I think all of that is a rationalization. I don't think one really knows, and it's dangerous to really probe oneself as I tried to in one of the lectures I gave up at Harvard: *The Biography of a Painting*. I tell you I was upset for months after that, and I thought I roiled my insides too damn much with that kind of probing.

HARLAN PHILLIPS: Well, in thinking about a mural, particularly the Riker's Island one since it was shortly after the Rivera....Did you have misgivings about Rivera's approach to murals?

BEN SHAHN: I did. I did from the day I went to work with him.

HARLAN PHILLIPS: Well, this was to be worked out on the Riker's Island?

BEN SHAHN: Yes, yes. I had arguments with him. For instance, I felt that he was crowding his things too much, just cluttered; and I said so. He said, "Well, look around you. Do you see any space?" In a sense it's true, you know. As I look around now, I see those blueprint cabinets, the books over there, and if one were to photograph it, it would be a clutter. But I always felt that the role of the artist is to bring an order to disorder. We used to have some pretty strong arguments. I speak French fluently, and so he could speak. We'd be on the scaffold there endless hours.

But nevertheless, when I finally got a wall (and it looked as if I'd never get one) which was in this town, I crowded too much. The fear I'd never get....The stay of being kept away from a wall so long frightened me, and I think I put in too much. The next mural I did was in the Bronx, and it was much quieter in that sense, you know, of using space. I think it's very telling to me. It's like a silence in a musical composition where the next thing is so much more meaningful. I think it went even better than the one I did in the Social Security Building. Then, later murals I've done I've departed from that. I did a huge mural for a Negro college and did just one figure about 30 feet long. You develop. Your ideas change, their influences, whatever it is. But I differed very strongly with him on the kind of mind-made-up approach to things, that the workmen always had heavy wrists and that kind of nonsense. I couldn't go along with that. But I was very happy to work with him, because I learned the trade, you know. I learned the craft from him, and that's all I wanted from him.

HARLAN PHILLIPS: Sure, oh, sure. I mean, he kicked open a window in that sense.

BEN SHAHN: Yes, yes.

HARLAN PHILLIPS: But the walls at Riker's Island, did they face each other?

BEN SHAHN: Yes, yes.

HARLAN PHILLIPS: ....which is a different problem when you have to walk. What do you see as you....?

BEN SHAHN: Well, there are all sorts of concepts of seeing. If you were to look at a single printed word and just focus on one letter, the rest is out of focus. So that it's the same thing. You just focus in and out automatically. You either encompass a large area or you encompass a very tiny area – just as you want, you see – so that this didn't trouble me very much. I felt that murals are visualizations of strong but simple ideas. They have to be that, just as simple as you can really make them. If they get too complex, if the idea gets too complex, they are seen almost like billboards. They have to have that kind of simplicity. But then, that concept was in harmony with the work I'd been doing up till then. It was nothing more except to think of large spaces and the experience of being on a wall with Rivera for a number of months on another job. They did give me that sense of space.

Right now I'm working on a 40-foot stained glass window. The cartoons were drawn up, and the architect was down recently. He said, "Well, how do you feel that size?" I said, "Well, Lord, I've been around enough murals that you know, even if you make a sketch that size, that this scale is going to be that and so on and so forth."

My friendship with Rivera ceased in the queerest way. He came to live with me when the mural ended or suddenly was stopped. (You've heard enough about it.) I had a very big house, but it had no heat in May when that job was stopped. We didn't need heat, so they came to live with me, Frida and Diego, for a while. Then he went to the Brevoort Hotel. We still used to have these discussions sometimes becoming rather violent at different approach to what one's work should be. I admired him for the, I thought, kind of futile sacrifice he made. He was the supreme aesthetician while he studied in Paris. And he said, "Now I'm going to speak to masses, and I must spell everything out." I thought that was over, over simplified you know, the approach. You read it like too many words, and I had infinitely more enthusiasm for Orozco.

HARLAN PHILLIPS: Yes, yes. Even though your whole experience at Riker's Island is illustrative of a problem which an artist confronts – where he had to negotiate his way through to acceptance. It's the antithesis, I would think, of what you really want to do.

BEN SHAHN: Oh, of course!

HARLAN PHILLIPS: But frustrating.

BEN SHAHN: I had this experience very early, this realization that you have to negotiate. When I was quite a youngster, I knew someone who liked my work. I was about 23 or something like that; and he went up to the czar of good taste, the editor of *Vanity Fair* which was *the* magazine of the time, Frank Crowninshield. Well, I don't think Frank shared the view of this man who sent me to him, who was a good friend of his; and he got rid of me by sending me to O'Neill. O'Neill quickly got rid of me by sending me to Robert Edmond Jones, and Robert Edmond Jones got rid of me by sending me down to the Provincetown Playhouse where they gave me a job. A fellow by the name of Throckmorton was doing all the scenic work there, and Throckmorton was having a cocktail party to sell himself. I was very naive, I guess. I thought, gee, if you're good, people will come to you. Well, they come to you pretty late in life, unfortunately.

[Interruption]

HARLAN PHILLIPS: You were in the midst of this abominable necessity, you feel, to negotiate.

BEN SHAHN: No, I felt I don't want to negotiate. But I saw, in reality, that it goes on, you see. That statement by one of those judges, "If we had any money, we'd paint the toilets," was enough to sicken you.

We have three kids that are artists, three of the five. One is a black sheep; he's a physicist. The boy, the sculptor, had an experience, and when he told it to me....I think I'll tell it, because it is unbelievable. My heart bled for him. He was having it at 19 or 20; and I thought, my God, it's much better he have it now than get it at my age. I was 32 or more, 34 when that happened.

So, his experience was simply this. He had left some drawings at a little gallery in Cambridge. Then he was off in Europe, so that this dealer sent them in to the Boston Festival. When we came back, there were about half-a-dozen letters for him. People were interested in buying it. I sent him....He did nothing about it. They're remarkably unvenal, the kids, about their work. One of these people traced him – he was a big shot businessman – and brought him out to the house for dinner. The drawing was marked $75, a big drawing that size. The man handed him $50 in the presence of the family. One of the kids said, "Poppa, why are you giving this man all this money?" Then he said, "Well, Johnny, how much does a bust run these days?" Johnny said, "I don't know what they cost; I haven't cast anything." He wanted to have busts made of the three kids. His wife said she didn't want a bust of the kids. She wanted "I don't know what you call it; it's kind of black." Johnny said, "Oh, silhouettes; well, I haven't studied that yet." He played along pretty well. The man showed him some of the paintings that he owned with plenty of 3D in it. They were very realistic things. He said, "Why did you make this thing, this Oedipus?" (The dealer called it "Oedipus.") Johnny said he decided he'd tell them what Oedipus was, so that the mother put her hands over the ears of the kids. And then he said, "Johnny, you notice we're pretty well-to-do here," – Johnny said he could see the curvature of the earth in the living room, it was so big – "and I have a party once in a while. I always have a gimmick. Now last time at a party here I rented a dozen cows from a farm nearby. All the guests milked them and had so much fun squirting milk at each other and everything else. Now, if you'd dress up like an artist and sketch everybody and put on a smock and a beret, you could make yourself quite a lot of tips here."

HARLAN PHILLIPS: He didn't?

BEN SHAHN: No, of course, he didn't.

HARLAN PHILLIPS: But, how insensitive can you get!

BEN SHAHN: Well, that's how insensitive you can get. But then there was one strange twist in this thing when they went in for coffee into the living room. They had a coffee table that was made of a furnace bellows, enormous thing; and on it was a copy of Harry Golden's *Carolina Israelites*. Now this man didn't know anything about me, knew nothing about artists. Johnny said, "My parents subscribe to that." And he said, "Oh, well, I know him. Recently his place burned down, and I loaned him $50,000 and he's on his feet again. I'm interested in any sort of thing like that. You see, I'm chairman of the NAACP in New England, and my brother and I" (they were huge lumber merchants) "we're offering a million dollars in building material, interest free, to anybody who will build an unsegregated housing project."

Without making a moral out of it, I said, "Johnny, there are people that have many facets, see, and you'll never find a totally faceted person. So you may as well learn to find that facet which appeals to you and nurse that one you see in people. But, as I say, I was glad it happened to him when he was 19 instead of 34; because it was a very, very shocking thing for me to have that kind of a crack.

HARLAN PHILLIPS: Well, had the context been other than it was, a fellow could have taken it in stride; but it was, you know, groceries.

BEN SHAHN: Well, it was already dismal. It's just hopeless, you know.

HARLAN PHILLIPS: Yes, by that time, yes. Well, did the College Art Association figure in this? Audrey McMahon?

BEN SHAHN: Yes. Audrey McMahon was heading the Civic Works Project when it was under the aegis of the states. Then, when they were setting up the WPA, she and Force were having an incredible battle (when two women fight for something – wow!) to control this thing; and it ended up in her hands, in McMahon's hands. The College Art Association used to run a Christmas show every year, you know. You brought in things; $25 was top. I very boldly put on $35 for two or three things, and they sold. She bawled the hell out of me for it. So I said, "Well, I'll get that money back. I pay the grocery bill with that, and I pay the shoemaker, and so on. But I'll try to get it back and give it to you. What are you going to do with it? Give it back to these...?" I later saw the two things. I offered $1000 for one of them to the woman who owns it in Princeton.

HARLAN PHILLIPS: Really?

BEN SHAHN: Oh, yes, yes. And she wouldn't give it to me.

HARLAN PHILLIPS: Good. ....that kind of feel for it.

BEN SHAHN: Well, I was very sentimental about it. But they battled, those two women. Wow! When we had one of the early meetings of the unemployed artists before there was any project.... There was a Gibson Committee, of course; you know about that?

HARLAN PHILLIPS: Yes, yes.

BEN SHAHN: I had a certain cockiness about my trade, you see, so that I.... When the College Art sent out questionnaires about needs and so on, I didn't answer it. I just don't like questionnaires, anyway. So they finally got down to me anyway; and I was invited down to the Gibson Committee, which was a brokerage office, had nothing to do. The women were very nice; and whatever money they collected, they would be able to pay them $8 a week, or $12 a week, depending upon how much money they had. They repainted churches, just repainting and varnished the pews and things like that. It was a desperate time.

They called me and they said they had a job for me. They said, "Have you ever done window dressing?" I hadn't but I said yes, yes. They said something else about it; and I said, "How much is the salary?" They said, "Twenty-two dollars." I said, "Oh, no. I need $75 a week. I didn't take it; I couldn't partake in anything.

I was on the WPA two or three weeks, I would say, until I got this Washington job. But we had to go to one of the high schools to get our money for the work we were doing, the salary as the CWA; and it was an ugly day in March. It had snowed, and then it got very warm. I was pretty damn bitter having to stand in line. I had worked; I didn't feel I had to stand on line. I left a sketchbook lying there, and somebody cut out about 30 pages of it, you know, little watercolors.

I was walking along with a chap who was a Frenchman. I think he had been an anarchist in France, and he was here under a pseudonym. As we were walking away from the high school there (I think it was Textile High) toward Eighth Avenue, a car went right up against the curb where all the slush was and splashed us up to our ears. So we ran after him pretty hopelessly, and then a traffic light stopped him. It had gotten very warm that very next day, and both windows were open. Simultaneously we socked him, and he began to bleed very badly.

We didn't pay too much attention; we were just in that ugly mood, you know. As we came around the corner walking south to 14th Street, this chap with a bloody shirt and a cop is coming toward us. Well, I knew that would be the end of my job. I didn't worry so much about it as I did about that guy. If he were involved and caught, he would have been deported. The cop said something. I said, "Well, this man rammed up and just did it on purpose." He said, "Look, I'm traffic there at 14th and 8th, and I get splashed all the time. How would it do if I socked everyone who splashed me?" Then he said to this man, "Well, what do you want to do? Do you want to bring charges? You know you'll spend three days in court and everything." He was making it impossible for him. Then he said, "Why don't you guys shake hands and make up?" Which we did, feeling very foolish, you know, and that was that.

HARLAN PHILLIPS: No, but that illustrates the time.

BEN SHAHN: The time, yes. What do they call it? The psychologists have given a name for it: the Brooklyn syndrome. And we had it.

HARLAN PHILLIPS: Yes. Well, it's hanging on. It's grim. And, you know this striking out that.

BEN SHAHN: Yes. This guy that had a car was the establishment, as it were.

HARLAN PHILLIPS: Sure. But the whole concept of standing in line is part of it, too.

BEN SHAHN: And then you had to go and take a poverty oath to get on the WPA. Of course, I refer to the present situation – where probably 5000 artists have jobs in our colleges and universities as teachers – as a WPA without a poverty oath.

HARLAN PHILLIPS: Yes, yes.

BEN SHAHN: And still, I'm on the Jersey Art Commission there; and Thomspon, the Congressman here....His bill was just signed by the President with big ado. He came down after the signing and again....People get very worried about his getting into politics. I said, "Well, hell, they say we run a very efficient army; and that's run by the government, and the Bureau of Standards, and Post Office, and so on. It's very efficient; and when we drop a letter in a box, we know it's going to get there. If you don't have anything, you can't correct it. If you have something, bad as it is, you can always correct it, put pressure and correct it."

HARLAN PHILLIPS: Work at it, yes.

BEN SHAHN: I talked once in Colorado on this very subject of the government being the patron, and some young man got up and pointed to someone – an older man, who probably was not an abstract-expressionist – and said, "You mean he'd be in it!" I said, "This is going to be so beautifully broad that even you will be in it."

There never has been a period in art without some large patronage. I've looked it over myself, and I thought....The Church is no longer a patron. The industry which, during the war when they had nothing to sell, became a patron in a way....The labor unions (and I've had experience with them) they're not going to be a patron. So the only thing that's left is the government, the federal government. Aside from the ugliness of the pauper's oath and so on to satisfy the lawmakers, it ran beautifully. The fact that Stuart Davis could stand beside a Soyer, nobody questioning it. This ugliness goes on today with on hop, pop, and so on after another. It didn't exist then, and it was very curious that we became interested in our expression of the mediums. Since we were all on equal salary, it didn't make much difference. The competition was there mostly on the work and not on how much you'd sell a picture for, because you didn't sell anything.

Now I've been on several....I was on Eric Goldman's program on the '30s, discussing the '30s. Of course, I don't know very honestly whether I really have this feeling about the '30s or that I regret that I'm 30 years older. That makes a lot of difference. But there was a kind of a friendship and something that I will never forget.

One personal incident: A lot of friends of mine that were graduates of university and so on having no jobs would hang out at the library all day. I used to do the same thing. I'd just go up there and get in that art room on the third floor and get immersed in something obscure. If I had a dollar a day everything looked bright, because it covered the whole day including newspapers, cigarettes, breakfast, lunch, and dinner. I had just gone down to the automat around the corner – I don't know whether you know New York very well – and had already had breakfast earlier. I had a package of cigarettes and a newspaper. And I had 60 cents left in my pocket, which was more than ample for dinner because we knew Italian families. Four or five of us would arrange to have dinner with a family. We'd pay 40 cents each, and that almost fed the family down in the Village, a lot of lovely families, you know. They were glad to have us, and we had a real home meal with them. So coming toward me is a friend, and I know he's going to tap me for a loan. I couldn't give him the dime; and if I gave him the half dollar, there'd be no dinner. I was fondling these two coins in my pocket when he rushed to me, and he said, "Hey, Ben, do you need money? I just got $6 from *The New Republic* I sold something to them." I still blush

inwardly when I think of that.

HARLAN PHILLIPS: Yes. Well, it was a great day for him.

BEN SHAHN: It was a great day for him, but....

HARLAN PHILLIPS: And he was over generous.

BEN SHAHN: He was generous. He was generous, and he knew that I had a kid then or maybe two kids at the time. Yes. Two kids. So he was offering me money, and there I was doubting whether I should give him the half-dollar or the dime.

HARLAN PHILLIPS: Yes. But I think there was a....The boat was large, and all of us were in it, I mean, in that sense.

BEN SHAHN: Exactly. Exactly.

HARLAN PHILLIPS: We really had come high center, and I think we were more fruitful with experimentation. We put rude hands on the nation to see what happened.

BEN SHAHN: My God, you know what experiments were done in the theater during those few years have still not been used up.

HARLAN PHILLIPS: Yes. Well, all walks of life.... I think we did it in administrative.... Lawyers went down to Washington.

BEN SHAHN: Exactly.

HARLAN PHILLIPS: ....and shuffled cards....

BEN SHAHN: ....learned to work on $3800 a year.

HARLAN PHILLIPS: Yes. This was the land of opportunity for them. Wall Street was discredited.

BEN SHAHN: Yes.

HARLAN PHILLIPS: Life was empty except for the generation of idea. On the East Side, there used to be teahouses where you could go in and drink from these long, tall glasses and tear society down the first six hours and build it back up the next six with all kinds of varieties of idea. The teahouses became the main stem. Your library people who congregated.

BEN SHAHN: Yes.

HARLAN PHILLIPS: Ideas were in the air; this was a popular front period.

BEN SHAHN: There is no such thing as congregation today. We had the Artists Union. Now it contained a lot of utter incompetents, because all you had to say was that you were an artist and you'd get a job. I remember going down with Mrs. McMahon and Lou Bloch to see Harry Hopkins about the possible organization of the WPA. Now she didn't know – and I didn't tell her – I had worked with Harry Hopkins before that in the New York Tuberculosis Association. I had known him. So she said for us to shut up when they were talking.

HARLAN PHILLIPS: Sounds like her.

BEN SHAHN: Then he had asked her, "Just how many people do you think we'd employ if we had the project going full blast?" She said, "I don't think there are more than 200 artists in the country." Which might be a fair evaluation if one takes it from the Olympian heights at which she sat. So he said out of a clear sky, "Ben, how many do you think?" She looked at me that he had called me by my first name. I said, "Mr. Hopkins, I would say about 5000." She glowered at me, you know, and there were more than 5000.

HARLAN PHILLIPS: More, yes. I think it....

BEN SHAHN: But, I said it as a wild, wild shot in the air there.

HARLAN PHILLIPS: Yes. It's interesting, that in itself.

BEN SHAHN: It is, yes; because she was the priestess, the high priestess.

HARLAN PHILLIPS: And powerful.

BEN SHAHN: Yes. And powerful, indeed! Just before it all ended, I got together six or seven of us who were called supervisors and sent a telegram to Johnson protesting the ridiculous salary we were on. We had responsibility; they suddenly assigned six people to me and so on. And I signed it “so and so, supervisors.” He didn’t know what the setup was, and he thought there was only one supervisor in New York, Mrs. McMahon. He sent a burning telegram: “What the hell does this all mean?” She called us in. I already had this nibble about the job in Washington from Tugwell, and I just didn’t care.

Then the *Journal American* or the *New York American* I think it was, had a Sunday section; and they had been scouring the Village. They were going to do a piece on artists, and everybody was eager for the publicity. I don’t know. I probably wouldn’t have allowed it if they’d come to me, but they didn’t come to me. Anyway, the temptation hadn’t been there. Then it came out and it was ugly, all the innuendos, you know, sex and drugs and this. So Stuart and I and one other person went to see the editor of the *Journal American* about this thing; and with us came about a thousand people, a delegation. They were all downstairs. When we came up, they were being beaten by the police, and they shoved them into the hallways of these loft buildings. And boy, it was ugly! The next morning I left for Washington. That was the last view I had of New York.

HARLAN PHILLIPS: Yes. Well, you didn’t have to face the necessity for quota reductions or anything like that, which got even uglier.

BEN SHAHN: For what?

HARLAN PHILLIPS: For the quota reduction.

BEN SHAHN: Oh, yes, yes.

HARLAN PHILLIPS: What criteria do you use?

BEN SHAHN: Yes, yes. Well, frankly, I was a little envious of them.

HARLAN PHILLIPS: Were you really?

BEN SHAHN: Oh, yes. I felt I was missing something.

HARLAN PHILLIPS: Well, the fluidity of it....

BEN SHAHN: Yes. I had left this thing. Though I confess the first year in the Resettlement Administration, or Farm Security as it was called later, I never felt as if I were functioning totally before, but totally. I attached the same importance to doing a line of lettering as I did to making a poster or the possible assignment of a mural. As soon as I came down there, I began to think practically in terms of, say, doing posters; so I took some of my annual leave and went up to New York, Baltimore, Philadelphia and investigated what posters would cost and so on. And I sent in a memorandum.

Well, the memorandum made an impression; so I was offered a bigger job with a soiled rug, some kind of a crummy sofa, and a secretary. I didn’t want any secretary, and I would have loved the extra money. It was about $600 more, but I didn’t want it, didn’t take it. In Washington I really was at it full blast. I remember a friend who had a child who had trouble reading, a boy about fourteen. They were sending him for some remedial reading. I said, “Look, if you’re really functioning, you never have to read except a handbook.” I remember that year I read nothing. I worked day and night. I became sick and I went to the hospital. The head of the hospital there, whom I’d met socially, said I was to keep away from these crab cakes, which were wonderful. Those little gelatinous things apparently were killing my insides....and also just to slow up a bit. “You know you’re not going to do this all yourself.”

I never took a trolley; I’d take a cab and would be shocked. If I came into an existing agency at 3:30, the women were all washed up already waiting for 4:30 to go home. I’d work through the night sometimes and so on.

HARLAN PHILLIPS: Yes, yes. But you missed all this excitement in New York.

BEN SHAHN: Well, I’d come into New York occasionally. I’d get reports on it, but I felt I was an outsider.

HARLAN PHILLIPS: Yes. Well, I don’t envy....However powerful Mrs. McMahon was, I don’t envy her caught between Somervell on one hand and the Artists Union on the other; because it was pick and choose.

BEN SHAHN: Yes. The Artists Union – they were hard. But you know what she did one day when we had a meeting in the New School? I was the more respectable one of them. I mean my work had already been seen and talked about. She handed me a hundred bucks to use in whichever way we could, and I consulted the other guys in the Union. I said, “What’ll we do with that?” I sent telegrams, I don’t know, 50 or 100 telegrams, to various Congressmen and Senators with that hundred bucks. What she was doing was to get on the right side of

us when it became a project, you know. Just sheer graft, you know.

HARLAN PHILLIPS: Oh, look, she knew where the aim was heading.

BEN SHAHN: Yes, yes, yes.

HARLAN PHILLIPS: I think you correctly pointed out that it was a question as to whether she or Juliana Force would run it.

BEN SHAHN: Oh, absolutely!

HARLAN PHILLIPS: Once that was determined, she had the sense of power.

BEN SHAHN: Oh, she hinted; she hinted. “I wouldn’t blame you if you threw a brick through the Whitney Museum.” It was as simple as that. She confessed to me one day. She took me out to dinner and said, “You know, I’m a bitch. I’m just a bitch, and I think you’re a son-of-a-bitch. You’re hiding it pretty carefully – your impression of being removed from all this – but if we know that, we can get along.” Quite remarkable!

HARLAN PHILLIPS: Quite candid, too. I talked with her a year or so ago.

BEN SHAHN: Is she still around? My Lord, she must be ninety.

HARLAN PHILLIPS: She still ignites if she.

BEN SHAHN: She isn’t, but she....

HARLAN PHILLIPS: No, but she’s still on fire about....

BEN SHAHN: Oh, yes, yes. Well, she was fired all up. And I confess I never voted till the ‘36 election. No. Because I was in Europe those years, and my battle was not a political one. It was an aesthetic and philosophic one. It wasn’t anything of the kind. I remember I came down from this place where I had a studio in 1928, November of the election; and it was when Hoover was elected. He was running against Smith; and I remember the concierge there saying, “Well, are you happy with Monsieur Hoover? You content with Monsieur Hoover?” You know, she was horrified. They almost never support our candidates there, in France and Italy.

No. I was in Italy after the war. All over there were signs: Long Live Wallace! Even later I still saw some of those signs on bridges: Viva La Wallace!

HARLAN PHILLIPS: But there was.... In the early ‘30s, there was room. There was elbow room for idea in the early ‘30s.

BEN SHAHN: Oh, yes, yes.

HARLAN PHILLIPS: Even if Hoover as the great engineer did dominate the scene, he was discredited as Wall Street was; because people had to deal with what was right in front of them.

BEN SHAHN: Yes.

HARLAN PHILLIPS: You couldn’t explain that by some theory called “individualism.” Whatever it meant in Hoover’s terms....

BEN SHAHN: Oh, no, no.

HARLAN PHILLIPS: It was unreal, you know.

BEN SHAHN: Yes. So that I remember going somewhere with McMahon in, oh, the spring of ‘35; and she said, “What are you boys going to do about re-electing Roosevelt?”

It was the first time I became involved. I was working for Tugwell in ‘36, and Tugwell introduced me to John L. Lewis. I began to make posters for the organization of the C.I.O. and, under a pseudonym, doing leaflets. They had their own campaign headquarters. I didn’t have too much to do at the Resettlement Administration.

HARLAN PHILLIPS: Gee, they had a....Did you ever run into a fellow in Washington by the name of Heber Blankenhorn, an economist?

BEN SHAHN: Only the name. I don’t remember such a person. I confess I thought I was pretty close to things up there; and, as a matter of fact, when Roosevelt rid himself of Tugwell after the election, which shocked me, because....Really, I’m naive about these things, or was certainly. There was a kind of a stag farewell party, and I

was invited to it. Ickes was there, and Wallace was there, and Benjamin Cohen, and all these people. It was a nasty little affair – the digs at Tugwell by Wallace and so on. It was incredible, and it was a revelation to me. Then when the Red-baiting began in '47 under Hoover, I felt, "Why the sons-of-bitches! They left me; I didn't know a single soul that was involved in it." I thought I was very close to it, you know.

HARLAN PHILLIPS: Yes, yes. Well, the New York scene had splattered around – artists banding together in a kind of collective voice, discovering a collective voice, operating as a group, wholly antithetical to their.

BEN SHAHN: Yes, yes, yes.

HARLAN PHILLIPS: But organization was in the air.

BEN SHAHN: The union became a little bit....It was just too much communist dominated; and, while I knew it was, I didn't pay too much attention. Then a suggestion was made that I would be editor of *Art Front* for the first few months. A suggestion was made that we submit our work to a little inner group. I just said, "Why, I wouldn't submit my used toilet paper to you. I share the economics of this thing with you but not my work. My God, I wouldn't go near you with my work!" That didn't make me very popular, because I squelched it right there then with this very arrogant statement.

HARLAN PHILLIPS: Well, you know the collective thinking gave rise to visualization of whatever the American scene was but didn't affect a fellow like Davis. It didn't affect you.

BEN SHAHN: Arshile Gorky. It didn't affect Arshile Gorky, whom I knew very well at the time. I ran across a lot of snapshots of him at a May Day demonstration.

HARLAN PHILLIPS: Oh, sure.

BEN SHAHN: It couldn't affect him, no. While I had known the Soyers and been to school with them, we parted at a certain point. I remember the day because....This is long before the WPA, around 1927, when I came back from Europe for a while to recoup my fortune. They said almost in one voice that they are dedicated to carrying on the tradition of Degas and Renoir and so on. I said, "Tradition is only carried on by those who rebel against tradition. That is the true tradition."

By God, this thing came up just last spring. I'm on the American Academy of Arts and Letters, and we were having some meeting about possible gold medals we were giving out. This was a sort of a small group discussing this thing and whether we give the medal. Wait now. Who were we going to give it to? Oh, yes, we'd first sent out a kind of a probing among all the members to suggest the names, and the three that came out on top we were then going to submit to the membership for a final vote. This is like a primary. Bill de Kooning as a painter, Walter Lipman for essay and criticism, and....There were three categories, three of each category. There were three painters with Bill de Kooning as one of them. I don't remember the other two now. Of the three writers, essay, and so on, criticism, Lipman, Kenneth Burke, if you know who he is, and who is the third one? I've forgotten now. Anyway, Ralph Ellison got up and said, "This Academy was created to carry on and protect the tradition." I found myself repeating these words. I said, "Look, Ralph, tradition is only carried on by those who break tradition." He was very shocked, because he was so proud to be in this thing and had a different idea of what tradition is.

HARLAN PHILLIPS: Yes. He ought to go back and read the *New York Times* when the PWAP was announced. All the old line outfits rebelled against the....They said that it was the wrong thing to do. It shouldn't have been paced with Juliana Force. It shouldn't have been this, that, and the other thing. I think John Sloan said something to the effect that as in a chicken coop, when you toss corn, the feathers fly.

BEN SHAHN: Well, he said something else to me. I was asked to speak at an artists and writers dinner club where they get free meals. Sloan said, "What's all this fuss about? We've been in this pit, and we've been making our little noises forever. Then these other guys slipping down, they say, 'Who's making all these noises?' We say, 'It's we. We've been here for a long time.'" About being depressed, you know.

HARLAN PHILLIPS: Yes, yes.

BEN SHAHN: Then I followed Heywood Broun, and I took Rivera along. And Heywood Broun came over and introduced himself. Rivera spoke English a little. He didn't understand when it was said, because the last thing you learn is to understand when it's spoken. He said, "I'm Heywood Broun." Rivera said, "Yes, please." He didn't understand; he probably thought in his own Spanish way bowing or something. Twice he repeated it, and Heywood Broun walked away hopelessly. I followed him. There was a pitcher of water on the lectern there, and I poured myself a glass. I smelled it simultaneously – straight gin. I took a drink of it, and I began to cough. I expected water. By the time it came to my nose, I smelled it. It was gin.

HARLAN PHILLIPS: Yes. That's one of his great calling cards, Heywood Broun.

BEN SHAHN: Yes. I know this has nothing to do with it, but Heywood Broun told a wonderful story. He was on his way to go to work one morning and stopped at a little coffee shop on Madison Avenue on the East Side where he lived, the upper Easties. A bum approached him for a nickel for a cup of coffee, and he said, "Look…." He was a wonderfully human guy. "Look, I'm going in to have breakfast, why don't you come in with me?" They did and they sat at the counter and probably they had everything. It all came to probably 70 cents, and Broun picked up the two checks. When he went to pay, he realized that he had changed his clothes and hadn't taken his wallet. Great embarrassment. And the bum pulled out a dollar and paid. Heywood was so humiliated and embarrassed, and he said, "Look, I'm Heywood Broun. I write on the *World*. Why don't we take a cab and run down to the office, and I'll pay you. I'm very embarrassed about this." The bum said, "Look, I don't care who you are, Bud. You've gotten a breakfast out of me. I'll be goddamned if you get a cab ride out of me."

HARLAN PHILLIPS: But he was part of the scene.

BEN SHAHN: Of course, he was. In his sentimental way, he thought he could save the situation by individual acts, organizing benefit shows and things like that. Well, it was way beyond that.

HARLAN PHILLIPS: Yes. I don't....

BEN SHAHN: Recently I spent an evening with the Director of Poverty in the State here, a nephew of Bullitt, who quit a high-paying law job to take on this job. I think perhaps he has political ambitions; I don't know, but a very bright man. We were sitting out in the garden here. It was midsummer and it was lovely, 20 of us, candlelight, very lovely. He said, "Why can't we get that enthusiasm that we had in the '30s? Here we are." I said, "Look, John, if 20 of us were sitting here in the '30s, we would have all been without a job, every one of us." That makes an enormous difference.

HARLAN PHILLIPS: Oh, sure.

BEN SHAHN: In 1931, I got a call from the union about a job; and I had to get off at the Chamber Street….no, the City Hall station. I came in from Brooklyn. There was a demonstration going on at City Hall; and, frankly, I wasn't too hip to these things. These guys had signs. They said they wanted rent and....I thought, "They're weak! Who the hell is going to do this? How can the government pay your rent and so on?" I got curious and wanted to get closer, and I got hit on the shoulder by a club. There was a little pushing, an absolute accident, you know. I went on to this place where the union sent me, and they told me to come in. I think it was a Thursday or Friday. They told me to come in Monday; and, my God, a foreman sensed the situation and he slipped me 10 bucks till I came in on Monday. I bought $2 worth of apples. I went up and down the street and got big bags and kept....And I thought the Depression was over for me, you know.

HARLAN PHILLIPS: Yes. Look.

BEN SHAHN: Yes. What do they say? If your neighbor is out of a job, it's deflation or whatever they call it. No, they don't....What do they call it? It's not a depression. But when you're out of a job, it's a depression.

HARLAN PHILLIPS: Yes.

BEN SHAHN: But this is the way one sees it through his own eyes.

HARLAN PHILLIPS: Yes.

BEN SHAHN: It's unfortunate.

HARLAN PHILLIPS: Yes. I suspect that the general spirit that characterized the period is precisely that everybody was in the same boat.

BEN SHAHN: We were in the same boat. One evening there were a group of people over in my place on Bethune Street there in the Village – friends. A number of them had jobs. They taught or they were lawyers or something, jobs with law firms and probably earning 30 bucks a week. It was a black Sunday night, because I didn't have a cent in my pocket. I wanted to face Monday with five bucks, Monday morning. I brought out a portfolio of gouaches, and I said I'd sell any three there for five bucks, just pick out any three. And I didn't have a taker, except one guy was ready to take one for two bucks. I said, "No, you've got to take three." He didn't take it.

HARLAN PHILLIPS: It was a desperate move.

BEN SHAHN: Yes, yes.

HARLAN PHILLIPS: But it illustrates the necessity – grim.

BEN SHAHN: Oh!!

HARLAN PHILLIPS: Yes. But then still it gave rise to the other polarity – laughter – too.

BEN SHAHN: Oh, yes, yes. The similar 20 getting together. Let's say we could have scraped together a dollar-and-a-half among us all, and we'd have a wonderful spaghetti dinner. It was still during Prohibition, and I knew a store where they'd give you half a gallon of wine for 50 cents, homemade stuff, and spaghetti. You could even get some anchovies and make it real fancy.

I know when the banks closed I was incredibly wealthy. What happened was that we were heating by gas, and it was running to about $40 a month with Walker sharing it. They said they were going to shut it off. It was grim. There was a terrible winter of '32-'33. I mean actual mean temperature was mean. So we went all over, and we collected close to $90 to pay. We were three months in arrears. I had the $90, and I was going down to the Edison Building there on Union Square. As I came out and I walked Bethune Street and up 8th Avenue, I see at the first newsstand: Banks Closed. Well, they couldn't shut off the gas when the banks are closed; and I have $90. I got on the phone and called people and asked them if they needed any money.

HARLAN PHILLIPS: You had your own Point Four program.

BEN SHAHN: Yes, yes.

HARLAN PHILLIPS: Yes. This is what happened, I think. Whenever someone did get something or sell a painting, it became a Point Four.

BEN SHAHN: Well, that boy coming over, that young fellow coming over to me with the six bucks....As I say, I blush inwardly still at what my private thoughts were and what the reality was.

HARLAN PHILLIPS: The impulse is understandable.

BEN SHAHN: Yes, yes.

HARLAN PHILLIPS: Sure. So that when opportunity did come, you reached for it like the Riker's Island thing – to go steady with it as one does with a woman until she vanishes for reasons which are not understandable.

BEN SHAHN: Yes. Well, this was a great thing. I used to....There were little windfalls. For instance, a friend of mine, who did publicity and had those things where they paid you in goods for your publicity....What do they call it? There's a name for it.

HARLAN PHILLIPS: Barter?

BEN SHAHN: Bill, no, due bill, something like that. Well, this friend had done publicity for Luchow's, and he could have three meals a week there as an exchange. He had other things, so he turned it over to me. I could go into Luchow's three times a week with that due bill. He had a similar thing at the Cotton Club. I could go to the Cotton Club then three times. This is the most fantastic irony.

One day I was walking with Lou in East Fifty somewhere. We passed a garage, and there was....It looked like a brand new Rolls standing outside with a sign on it: For Sale. We just asked what it was, and they said it was $500. Somebody left it there and didn't pay the garaging for over a year, so they wanted to get rid of it. Well, if somebody said you could buy a Rembrandt for $500,000, it was parallel to that. Much as I would have loved to buy the Rembrandt, this was a red Rolls-Royce convertible.

HARLAN PHILLIPS: Yes. It was being sold for space. It's ironic.

BEN SHAHN: When people talk about that time – those who weren't touched by it you know – it's very hard for them to understand. It's how Bullitt, our poverty director here, resented the fact that there wasn't enough enthusiasm at this garden party for this thing.

HARLAN PHILLIPS: Yes. Didn't understand its roots go deeper.

BEN SHAHN: Bullitt gets probably a measly salary of $35,000 a year to run this thing.

HARLAN PHILLIPS: Yes. They're mutually exclusive ideas, running a poverty program on $35,000 a year.

BEN SHAHN: Yes, yes. In order to get good people, he's had to pay out some high salaries; and he's been....Well, in one case where the director for the poverty program, I thing in Paterson, gets more money than the mayor. So you know there was a big stink about that.

HARLAN PHILLIPS: Weren't you surprised somewhat – or maybe you weren't – that, once projects were set afloat, creative people also became reasonably good administrators?

BEN SHAHN: Well, I tell you I'll say no about that. I had a very curious upbringing. My father was a woodcarver, and grandfather, and uncles. One was an engraver, worked for the American Bank Note for 45 years. I have that kind of background and have no use for people that didn't at the end of a day have something really tangible to show for it. So that no, I didn't have any respect for them at all. I mean when Lou went into it, I thought, well, that's where he belongs. When Harry Knight went there, I said, well, Harry isn't much of an artist. I think he's a lovely guy, both of them. Only when I got to Washington and I met Roy Stryker, I realized that he was protecting us. He was like a policeman, who is necessary, is protecting us against Congress, against budget cuts and so on. But the ultimate thing when it was all over, it wasn't what Roy did; it was the photographs that came out of it.

HARLAN PHILLIPS: Right.

BEN SHAHN: While I've gotten over it and I don't carry a chip on my shoulder about the administrators or anything, I still have that, at the end of the day, what can you show for your work? I still carry that. It was bred into me. I was born in Russia, and I came here when I was almost nine. I had a lot of schooling but a different kind – Bible and so on. Anyway, I hadn't been here less than maybe a year when I was suddenly aware of the whole business of Mayflower and ancestry. I had never thought of ancestry. I had two sets of great-grandparents, so I had plenty of ancestry. There were grandparents and so on, endless uncles and aunts, but not ancestry; and I craved a little. I began to ask my father how could I establish ancestry? I lived with my grandfather for three years, you see. My father had been a Socialist and had been sent away and escaped immediately. So I didn't see him for three years. My mother and we three kids went down to stay with my grandfather. I knew that, as I say, my grandfather was a woodcarver and he had....A half-a-dozen or eight people worked for him doing this baroque stuff that they could do naturally. That was my father's work, too. So I began to probe. I said to my father, "What did your grandfather do?" "He was a woodcarver like my father." I said, "Do you know what his grandfather did?" I was looking for a Mayflower, you see.

My father drew very naturally, as my grandfather. He could draw anything, just as some people can, had no training. He drew a man hanging on a gibbet when I asked about the great, great-grandfather. I said, "What's that?" He said, "He was a hoss thief. If I ever catch you asking me about ancestors...! Only what you do counts, not what your ancestors did." Whang! Like that, you know.

HARLAN PHILLIPS: Yes. Good lesson, though.

BEN SHAHN: Yes, and it stopped it dead. Many years later when I was working on the mural in Washington....There are professional mural sitters, you know, women who have nothing to do and just come around with a little stool and some bring their lunch even. One woman was nagging me, sort of baiting me about the subject I was painting – workmen in a government building. "It's Communistic," and so on. One day I decided I can't take this anymore, and when she came over and addressed me directly.... Generally she used to wait to nag me when I was off scaffold. But she said, "My ancestors fought in the Battle of Lexington. I'll see this kind of work doesn't...." I picked up....We had big pots of paint. I said, "Look, lady, my ancestors fought in the Battle of Jericho; and if you don't get the hell out of here, I'll pour this on you." I just couldn't take it anymore. She ran. She had a little mink jacket, I remember. That was the last I saw of her.

HARLAN PHILLIPS: I thought you were going to ask her, when she said her ancestors fought in the Battle of Lexington, you were going to ask her which side.

BEN SHAHN: Well, a friend of mine wrote a musical comedy –it's never been produced but it's a wonderful idea – on the D.A.R. They're having a D.A.R. ball. The present women and their ancestors appeared smelling of manure, coming in with a pitchfork, or what ever else they did.

HARLAN PHILLIPS: Yes, yes. The complete, complete, the distant daughters....This period was filled with a lot of things. How much effect or impact on your own work has the photography had?

BEN SHAHN: It did. I took to it, actually. I remember I wanted to do a painting. There used to be three blind musicians walking up and down 14th Street. I used to walk in front of them with the crowd, walking backwards sketching them. And I thought: My God, I can't get all that detail, ever. That's during that period of sharp detail.

I asked Walker if he would show me how to use a camera and so on. So he always promised but never got around to it. One day – he had some very nice connections – he got invited to go on a yacht trip in the South Pacific. Lincoln Kirsten and I were helping him pack, and I remember we filled up one suitcase... We borrowed a lot of suitcases. We filled up one suitcase with telephone books. We thought those might come in handy, just to be funny. There was the cab. We got him in a cab; and I said, "Walker, you remember you promised to...." He said, "Well, look Ben, there's nothing to it: f45 on the shady side, f9 on the sunny side, twentieth of a second, hold your camera steady."

Then I began to....Oh, yes. My brother was a lawyer and an accountant. So I asked my brother to get me a camera. I'd seen one in a camera shop, a Leica for $25. I said, "You get it for me; and if I can't get anything in a magazine off the first roll," – I was pretty cocky – "then I'll give it back to you." And I did. I got one in some theatre magazine.

Then, when I came to work for the Farm Security or the Resettlement Administration, that in itself was fantastic. Tugwell came to see me. Someone advised him that I might be good. See, Walker already was employed. He held out the following: You get $5 a day travel per diem, 5 cents a mile. I knew I could get that Ford running on a penny a mile; so I figured, my Lord, I'm in. He said, "Now, what do you want as salary?" I said, "Well, that's enough, 35 a week and mileage." He said, "No, no. That's just expenses." I nearly died....start with $3200, some such thing. It was unbelievable.

Anyway, but he said, "First we want you to go around the country for about three months, look at our projects and see, know what we're working with and about." Well, I had never traveled in America at all. I'd been to Africa. I'd been all over Europe and never in America.

Off I went; and, boy, that shook me up. I took a lot of pictures and photographed a lot and drew a lot, but it shook me up to this extent. I realized [that] everything I had gotten about the condition of miners or cotton pickers I'd gotten on 14th Street. I found realities there that I had no idea about.

I was down in e mine country in West Virginia. There was a small strike going on, and I got to see the picket line there. So I fortified myself with a pack of Raleighs because they're union made. I figure you can always start a conversation by offering – and I can easily – a man a cigarette. I came down. There were a couple of guys in the picket line, and I picked a man there that looked more sympathetic and came over and offered a cigarette. He said, "They're no damn good." I said, "They're union made." He said, "The hell with that; I've been in the union 35 years." Here he pulled out a pack of Luckies. Well, this was shocking. I found out that, if you had a copy of The Nation with you, you might have been beaten up. And if you said a word against John L. Lewis, you would have been beaten up – who was being extolled in The Nation you see. This was the irony. These things shook me up no end.

I was down in Arkansas, and I knew that people there were on $2 a week relief. They couldn't have any work projects for them because they lived in a national park and they couldn't. They had no ways of traveling; and, in order to collect that crew of six, you'd spend all day driving around it. They were so isolated from each other. I saw one house that was neat as a pin and a mile down – same amount of money – and it was a horrible slum. Why, I don't know. But all those things shook me up no end, no end.

The other thing that shook me up even worse [was] when I went down first to Little Rock, and I presented my credentials to our regional director. He said, "What the hell are you coming down here for, making more trouble for us?" This man was a big plantation owner, who was a regional director.

These were the things; these were the realities. That I didn't know anything about. I thought that – if a man works for this revolutionary agency, this elementary agency – he's going to have a heart of gold. I remember one driving me around for a couple of days; and he said, "You ain't seen Niggers here, have yah? Well, the Niggers know that they ain't to be seen here after sunset."

I drove round with Joe Robinson for a couple of days, the Senator. I drove around with Brooks Hayes for a couple of days who later became Congressman and then was kicked out because he took a fairly strong stand there on the integration. And then the Bogalusa thing had started – resulted from the fact that he was invited to speak there. That's when the riot down there started.

HARLAN PHILLIPS: Joe Robinson was something, wasn't he?

BEN SHAHN: Yes, yes. Anyway, I became acquainted with America. I came out to a plantation to take photographs, and I knew I'd have to be there at 5:30 in the morning when the crew got together. The sun was low, just rising; and it was beautiful. They stood there, and they were singing sort of spiritual things. On the truck they put huge cans of water [for] when they'd get thirsty; and by 8 o'clock, those were as warm as piss, those cans of water. At the end of the day, they'd get back to their company store where they started; and they'd drink three Cokes out of the 60 cents they earned in the 12 hours – 5 cents an hour. At one plantation, a guy stood with a shotgun to keep any other plantation guy recruiting labor off this one – in case he'd offer them 6 cents an hour. Those things I had no idea about, you know, and to see them; and I have to see these things. I can't read too much about them. Afterwards I can read but not before.

HARLAN PHILLIPS: Yes, but the collection you made....The camera is an extension of an eye, isn't it?

BEN SHAHN: Oh, yes. To me, images are images. I don't care whether they're made with pen, pencil, brush. They're images, and they can be moving or not. That's all there is to it.

HARLAN PHILLIPS: But you kept it subservient to your main interest.

BEN SHAHN: For a couple of years after that, I did use it to some degree. Then, as I say, it sort of sloughed off imperceptibly; and I never touched a camera since then. I couldn't just go around taking snapshots that didn't interest me.

HARLAN PHILLIPS: No. Well, the whole sense of justice or injustice, whichever way snapped the camera....This is the propellant.

BEN SHAHN: Yes. Well, I became a little cynical about the use of the camera when a group of our photographs, mostly mine....A Swiss magazine, about a year after I came to work there, did a whole issue devoted to what a democracy does when it's in trouble. And those same pictures were smuggled out of there into Italy under the high time of Mussolini. And they used the same photographs to show you what democracy can be, you see – as ugly as that. So you can do anything with images.

HARLAN PHILLIPS: Oh, sure. No, but you know when you reach for....It's like you backing up in front of the blind musicians.

BEN SHAHN: Yes, yes.

HARLAN PHILLIPS: You just couldn't capture it all.

BEN SHAHN: I couldn't. No. I couldn't. And then later when I saw them again with a camera, I'd run out of film. It was the most tragic thing.

HARLAN PHILLIPS: One of life's great frustrations.

BEN SHAHN: Yes, yes. I didn't realize that I had already used up my roll; and I kept turning and shooting, turning and shooting. But I had used up the roll. I hadn't been aware. I had rolled it. I had taken off all the film off it.

And later I did a painting of something like it: *The Blind Musicians*, which many people will say was based on the story that when Roosevelt died, the Negro sergeant from nearby was leading the group of mourners – I think the cortege actually when it left the....Where was it in Georgia? Warm Springs.

HARLAN PHILLIPS: Yes, Warm Springs.

BEN SHAHN: He was weeping. I saw newsreels of it later. But I actually did that....Did I do that painting before? I think, no. I don't know whether it was before. It was within the period of Roosevelt's death. I don't remember.

HARLAN PHILLIPS: What sort of idea did you throw at Warden Lawes?

BEN SHAHN: Oh, now, he was just full of cliches, you see, in having been around the Welfare Island. We saw criminals and they looked like criminals, by God, you know. At Sing-Sing they didn't look like criminals at all, and I commented on that to Lawes. So Lawes said, "Oh, well, we have all kinds here – bankers, doctors, lawyers, not enough of those, you know. He must have said that to everybody that ever came there. No, we got nothing from him at all.

HARLAN PHILLIPS: Nothing?

BEN SHAHN: No, nothing. No, no, no. We attended one parole hearing – not in Sing-Sing – and I realized that those things are all arranged beforehand. Then they're all going to give their report. I had one other person as a guest there – McMahon was with us. That's right. They all said when they were asked, you know....The priest, the disciplinarian, and the doctor each gave his report on the kid. And they asked him, "What are to going to do?" "I'm going to get a job when I get out" and so forth.

One kid came in, and all that had been rehearsed. Apparently he changed his mind and became honest. "What are you going to do when you get out?" He said, "Steal; what else can I do? Show me where I can get a job; and if I get a job, I get four bucks a week. How are you going to take a girl out on four bucks a week?" He was shaking when he made up his mind to be honest. The doctor was a sympathetic man and sort of grabbed his wrist and tried to quiet him. The parole was denied because he was being honest.

HARLAN PHILLIPS: It was a charade otherwise.

BEN SHAHN: Yes.

HARLAN PHILLIPS: God Almighty! Well, you'd never been involved in this sort of....This was a whole new experience. This was another side of life, wasn't it?

BEN SHAHN: Oh, yes. Yes, yes, yes. Just seeing it as an outsider.

HARLAN PHILLIPS: Yes. This is like a search for theme or idea.

BEN SHAHN: Well, I was totally immersed in that subject, in any phase of it. I don't know how much more I would have done. I had finished my sketch about half way when the thing was stopped. So I don't know just what would have come of it.

HARLAN PHILLIPS: Well, what isn't, I think, generally known is the lengths to which artists will go in terms of research.

BEN SHAHN: Yes, yes. You can't put it down on three by five or five by eight cards, you know.

HARLAN PHILLIPS: Part of tissue.

BEN SHAHN: No. That's right.

HARLAN PHILLIPS: That's right. And you've got to get soaked in it.

BEN SHAHN: Well, I've done books occasionally in the last few years; and I've got one I've done and every publisher wants it. I'm playing hard to get on it. I want special conditions, because I think they're all crooks except the Harvard University Press and the Museum of Modern Art. I'll show you the book. This is a thing that I ran across many years ago when I read Rilke's *Notebook Malperry*.

HARLAN PHILLIPS: Oh, yes.

BEN SHAHN: I didn't know who Rilke was. I read it in French, and I thought he was a French writer. This was prose he had written, you know. So it made a terrific impression on me. Later on I learned who he was and so on. I read it exactly the same time....Well, here it is. You criticize it. It'll take five minutes to read. I treated it like a musical thing. This would be the title page. This is the frontispiece, and this is going to be my introduction, still unwritten. I'm going to do some work now that I'm learning to see. I'm 28 years old. I was 28 when I read this thing, so it's particularly mystical. Well, go through it and then you'll see it. I wrote it like a musical theme.

Do you want to shut your mike off?

HARLAN PHILLIPS: Yes.

END OF INTERVIEW

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