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Oral history interview with Esther Dick Gottlieb, 1981 Oct. 22

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Transcript

Preface

The following oral history transcript is the result of a recorded interview with Esther Dick Gottlieb on October 22, 1981. The interview took place in New York City, and was conducted by Phyllis Tuchman for the Archives of American Art, Smithsonian Institution. This interview is part of the *Mark Rothko and His Times* oral history project.

The original transcript was edited. In 2024 the Archives retranscribed the original audio and attempted to create a verbatim transcript. 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. The sound quality for this interview is poor throughout, leading to an abnormally high number of inaudible sections. When possible, the original transcript was used to clarify words.

Interview

[00:00:29.57]

PHYLLIS TUCHMAN: How did you meet Mr. Gottlieb?

[00:00:32.15]

ESTHER GOTTLIEB: What's that got to do with it?

[00:00:34.04]

PHYLLIS TUCHMAN: Well, it just seemed like that would be—lead into how you met Mark Rothko.

[00:00:37.76]

ESTHER GOTTLIEB: No, they had no relationship at all. There's no value.

[00:00:42.38]

PHYLLIS TUCHMAN: Well, you married Mr. Gottlieb in '32. And he, according to the Guggenheim Rothko catalog, met Mr. Gottlieb around 1929 or '30.

[00:00:54.13]

ESTHER GOTTLIEB: That's right. Yes, Adolph met Rothko, I believe it was through Milton

Avery. Well, Milton Avery at that time, was living on 67th Street, to my recollection. They met shortly thereafter. Plus, at the same time, he had a small studio across the street, on the other side of the street. But I do believe that they met at Opportunity Gallery. I think each of them had been invited to show. We used to go to Mark's studio and across the street to Avery's studio. And that was the beginning. Now that would be around 1930, I would say. Yeah, because we married in '32, so that must have been in '30.

[00:01:52.08]

PHYLLIS TUCHMAN: So you met Mr. Gottlieb first. You didn't know Avery or Rothko?

[00:01:55.71]

ESTHER GOTTLIEB: No, no, no. I just met—I was not—like this is not important. I don't come from New York. I came from Connecticut. And I just met Mr. Gottlieb at a party, in the Village, like everybody else does. [Laughs.]

[00:02:11.34]

PHYLLIS TUCHMAN: I can't imagine what it was like to be in the Village at a party back then.

[00:02:16.41]

ESTHER GOTTLIEB: Well, I was going with my sister and friend. And they took me there.

[00:02:22.23]

PHYLLIS TUCHMAN: Could you describe, at all, what life was like, in the early '30s, being married to an artist?

[00:02:28.41]

ESTHER GOTTLIEB: Well, my opinion is maybe not the same as anybody else's. After all, I was teaching at the Vocational High School, so that I was not available during the day. And Adolph was the sort of person who liked to work in the studio and didn't want to be disturbed, and so artists used to come in the afternoon or he would go out and meet people. But I don't know that being married to an artist would be much different than being married to any other group that is cohesive. I know that Adolph had more friends among poets, young men who he had known at school. And Aaron Siskind was among those people. And [inaudible] was—

[00:03:33.04]

PHYLLIS TUCHMAN: Oh, I've heard that name, yeah.

[00:03:34.44]

ESTHER GOTTLIEB: It was just coming to me. There was another young man who was a musician. I mean that was—point was that's the way things were. So it was not just a community of artists in the beginning.

[00:03:55.13]

PHYLLIS TUCHMAN: Yeah. Did that ever change?

[00:03:57.77]

ESTHER GOTTLIEB: Well, I think those men like Aaron Siskind who became interested in photography. And he used to come to Massachusetts when some of the early photographs were made on the docks. They used to find old rope and stuff and throw it in a casual way, so it looked like that's the way it was, and photograph it. But he was someone Adolph had known. He was not—And of course, early on, after one year in Manhattan, living on Christopher Street, in the midst of all the activity and in a limited space, a one-room studio, with a bed in the wall—so Adolph decided this is very inadequate having been accustomed to a big apartment, and I having come from the country in a big house. So we went to Brooklyn, looking, and found a place in Brooklyn. So we were on the other side of the bridge.

[00:05:07.45]

PHYLLIS TUCHMAN: Could this be 1000 Park Place, Brooklyn?

[00:05:10.98]

ESTHER GOTTLIEB: No. No.

[00:05:12.47]

PHYLLIS TUCHMAN: Oh.

[00:05:12.89]

ESTHER GOTTLIEB: No, we lived in Brooklyn on State Street, then we lived on Joralemon Street. I believe that Mark lived, briefly, in Brooklyn. Yes, in fact, I was talking to a friend of mine the other day. And she told me—she said, "What are you going to do today? Can we meet this afternoon?" I said no. She said, "Well, I knew Mark." She said, when he was —"During WPA, when you were not here," when we were out of—out in Arizona at that time. She said, "Mark was teaching at the Brooklyn Museum. And so was I—WPA." And we used to walk home together. And she found him very charming and very, very gentle. She doesn't understand why everybody says that he's quite so different. Because when she knew him, he was very gentle. But I don't remember. But that must be the address you got from. It must come from—

[00:06:03.56]

PHYLLIS TUCHMAN: The back of a painting.

[00:06:05.15]

ESTHER GOTTLIEB: In the back of a painting? Now, I think, if we check the WPA, they would know where he lived. She said she used to turn in on a street called—I think she said Bergen Street. She didn't remember how far they used to walk. But I imagine WPA, they must have records, WPA records, at the Foundation there, don't they? They should.

[00:06:24.99]

PHYLLIS TUCHMAN: Yeah, they should. What were you teaching at the vocational school?

[00:06:30.80]

ESTHER GOTTLIEB: Oh, it's not important.

[00:06:32.15]

PHYLLIS TUCHMAN: Oh, okay. Do you recall when you first met Mark Rothko?

[00:06:38.54]

ESTHER GOTTLIEB: Well, I just recall that we went—I think we went to Avery's. Adolph had evidently met him at Opportunity Gallery. And we went to the Avery's. And Mark came, too. And so we used to see Mark under those circumstances.

[00:06:55.01]

PHYLLIS TUCHMAN: Did you socialize with him at that time?

[00:06:57.75]

ESTHER GOTTLIEB: Yeah, well, we did, briefly. I mean as much as one does. I mean artists who don't maintain a strict schedule hang around early morning until late at night. And that wasn't Adolph's way, at all. And I don't think Mark did that either. I think both of them worked specific hours, worked very conscientiously, and spent a great deal of time in the studio. Even though—perhaps, even though they weren't working, they were looking at their own work or reading the paper, just being with their own paintings.

[00:07:28.83]

PHYLLIS TUCHMAN: Yeah, right. Do you have any recollection of either one of them talking about what the Art Students League was like?

[00:07:37.59]

ESTHER GOTTLIEB: No, I don't. I don't even know that Mark Rothko was in the Art Students League when Adolph was there.

[00:07:43.24]

PHYLLIS TUCHMAN: Oh, no, he wasn't. But they sort of—

[00:07:44.78]

ESTHER GOTTLIEB: No. But Adolph went—I know I heard him say that he went to Sloan's class. And he found Sloan—Adolph had been in Europe already. And he came back. And when he was in Sloan's class, he was stimulated and found that Sloan left him alone. He didn't try to—he allowed artists who wanted to just work. And he didn't go around poking around the way some others do art. And then he also took the—so he never mentioned the fact that Rothko was there. Maybe Rothko wasn't in his class. I know—

[00:08:22.29]

PHYLLIS TUCHMAN: No, he was in Bridgman's.

[00:08:23.71]

ESTHER GOTTLIEB: Yeah. So I know, in Adolph's class, there was Calder and Otto Soglow. We have a photograph of him. And so Adolph never mentioned having met Mark at the Art Students League.

[00:08:44.63]

PHYLLIS TUCHMAN: Do you know how the founding of The Ten came about?

[00:08:49.88]

ESTHER GOTTLIEB: You know, I don't really know. I think Joe Solman tells a big story about that, and I don't really know how it came to be. I know that it was just the usual problem at that time, not having a place to show, and there not being a sufficient number of galleries. And so they conceived of the idea of—there were many vacant commercial buildings that were on the street, you know, stores and so forth. And they conceived of the idea of asking permission to show their paintings in these vacant stores. And they would promise not to—they'd clean it up afterwards, and so on. I think the whole thing came about because there were not any private dealers who were willing to—anyplace to show. I mean everybody showed at the Independent, so that was once a year.

[00:09:50.81]

PHYLLIS TUCHMAN: Yeah.

[00:09:51.26]

ESTHER GOTTLIEB: And there were small galleries that would invite one artist or the other. And it was just a matter of convenience of getting a group together so they could function. And of course, it didn't—it was constantly changing, if you've read all the material about it. They were talking about The Ten, who were always nine. But that's what it was. And it was very likely an interesting group, interesting to people who were interested in art. Because I believe one of the famous, old-time dealers who didn't deal in contemporary art—what his name was? I just lost him —who arranged for these painters to have a show in Europe. And he didn't, himself, handle contemporary art. They—I know Adolph—I don't know who else went, maybe Mark, too. Because he had beautiful early Coptic art and so forth.

[00:10:52.11]

PHYLLIS TUCHMAN: It was Joseph Brummer.

[00:10:53.41]

ESTHER GOTTLIEB: Yeah, possibly. Yeah. Anyway, it was like Brummer, but it wasn't Brummer. And he evidently thought these boys had something, because he arranged for a show. And I can't remember where the show was. But it was The Ten.

[00:11:08.14]

PHYLLIS TUCHMAN: Yeah. When you mentioned The Ten using vacant downstairs spaces, I know that was the kind of space they used for the Ninth Street show in the early '50s.

[00:11:21.33]

ESTHER GOTTLIEB: Yes. Yes.

[00:11:22.83]

PHYLLIS TUCHMAN: Were they comparable in spirit?

[00:11:26.16]

ESTHER GOTTLIEB: Well, I don't—I think it was—I think The Ten was more exclusive. They just did this, this small group of men. There were nine sometimes, sometimes only eight. And it was not the same. But I mean, it was the principle.

[00:11:41.26]

PHYLLIS TUCHMAN: [Inaudible] that they had known about that kind of idea. The Foundation was hoping you might be able to fill in material on Jacob Kufeld, who he was, what happened to him, what his paintings looked like.

[00:12:05.61]

ESTHER GOTTLIEB: [Pause.] I'm trying to remember what the man looked like. I have a vague image of him. The other man, who I can think of is Tschacbasov, who was also a big, burly man, who was in the group. And he sort of disappeared. He hasn't disappeared. In fact, he has a very, very large, expensive looking house in East Hampton.

[00:12:33.60]

PHYLLIS TUCHMAN: Oh, he's still alive?

[00:12:34.50]

ESTHER GOTTLIEB: Yeah.

[00:12:34.95]

PHYLLIS TUCHMAN: Oh, I don't know if they know about that.

[00:12:36.75]

ESTHER GOTTLIEB: Yes, he's still alive. I didn't know. A few years ago, when there was these very severe storms, and I read in the local paper, East Hampton paper, talking about which houses were endangered and which houses were—and they mentioned that Tschacbasov had a house. And this was not in East Hampton, directly. It was one of the—

[00:12:58.63]

PHYLLIS TUCHMAN: Yeah.

[00:12:59.44]

ESTHER GOTTLIEB: And then his house was swept away. And then, the following year, I'm on the train going out to East Hampton, and this man comes over to me. And he says hello. I look at him, and I recognized him, and he introduced me to his new wife. And he told me he just rented—bought a house on Ocean Avenue. When he said, "Ocean Avenue," I figured he must have a great deal of money.

[00:13:20.85]

But I said, "Well, do call me," because he didn't have a phone number yet. I said, "I'm in the phone book." And he never did. But he's still alive. Because recently, I think this season or last season, there was an article in the paper about him, someone, just a woman who goes to various great artists and interviews them and talks to them about their work. So he's still alive. But the other people, I can't remember. I just sort of vaguely remember him as a big man. He and Tschacbasov were sort of heavy, burly looking. He wasn't as tall as Mark, but very heavy.

[00:14:04.40]

PHYLLIS TUCHMAN: And I don't remember Mark Rothko as being tall. [Laughs.]

[00:14:08.02]

ESTHER GOTTLIEB: No. Well, I can't remember anything about Kufeld. Isn't that something?

[00:14:11.63]

PHYLLIS TUCHMAN: Yeah? Well, it seems to be universal. I was kind of curious. I noticed that you were in Europe, during 1935 for two months. And that was the same time period when David Smith and Dorothy Dehner were in Europe. Was there something going on in Europe in 1935, or in your lives, here, that you went there?

[00:14:34.34]

ESTHER GOTTLIEB: Dorothy Dehner and David Smith, at that time, lived on State Street just a block below us, and we were great friends. And both Adolph and David were friendly with John Graham. In fact, Adolph knew John Graham when he first came to this country. And he was going to—he met him in Sloan's class. And he wanted to be an American citizen. So Adolph went with him down to town hall, to city hall, rather, to get his citizenship, and there were papers. And they were great friends.

[00:15:08.61]

When we moved to Brooklyn Heights, John used to come frequently to visit us. And we introduced him to David and all of the people who we knew, in the area, artists. And then, as time went on, he just established himself. And he was a great friend of Gorky's and other people. But he was knowledgeable about Primitive art or African art. And in '35, Museum of Modern Art had the first show of a Negro or African art.

[00:15:46.31]

PHYLLIS TUCHMAN: Well, it was "Negro art" at the time.

[00:15:47.51]

ESTHER GOTTLIEB: Yes, well, African art. And we all went. We were all very excited about it. And we planned to go to Europe. John was friendly. And John with us. And so John said, "Oh, look up so-and-so, go to Verity, and go to this dealer and that dealer." And we acquired—some of the things that I have, here, we acquired at that time. We didn't have much money. [Laughs.] But we—

[00:16:14.16]

PHYLLIS TUCHMAN: Were you with David Smith?

[00:16:15.75]

ESTHER GOTTLIEB: No, we were not with David. Just Adolph and I.

[00:16:16.68]

PHYLLIS TUCHMAN: But it was just coincidence.

[00:16:18.87]

ESTHER GOTTLIEB: Just coincidence. I don't remember where they were. They spent more time in Italy than we did, I think.

[00:16:22.62]

PHYLLIS TUCHMAN: And they went to Greece.

[00:16:23.76]

ESTHER GOTTLIEB: Greece? Greece, that's right. We didn't get—no, we didn't. We planned our trip to be able to see some of the great art. Now Adolph had been in Europe as a student, and so he knew. He'd been in Paris and had been in Munich. So he knew that, the museums there and that area and all the work. But he didn't know—and we did want to see—we were going to go to Italy, first. And we didn't go to Italy, because at the Petit Palais they were having a great show. And many of the Venetian paintings, they were being, for the first time, sent to Paris. And we'd then go on to Belgium, to Brussels, because they were having a big post-Impressionist show.

[00:17:10.19]

PHYLLIS TUCHMAN: Oh, you're kidding.

[00:17:11.30]

ESTHER GOTTLIEB: And then we went, from there, to Holland—yes, to Amsterdam, because they were having a big—it was some sort of an anniversary for Rembrandt's work. So that's how we planned our trip.

[00:17:26.30]

PHYLLIS TUCHMAN: Oh, my.

[00:17:29.25]

ESTHER GOTTLIEB: So that's how it was.

[00:17:35.24]

PHYLLIS TUCHMAN: Was Rothko aware of your travels then? And would he have—would he have seen catalogs you might have brought back?

[00:17:41.98]

ESTHER GOTTLIEB: I don't know that he was as interested in Primitive art as we were. And Adolph was much more friendly in those days with Barney Newman. Because Barney Newman—I should say "Barnett" Newman. Because Barnett Newman was part of that group, that I talked about, that went to NYU together. You know, Aaron Siskind and those people.

[00:18:10.93]

And Adolph, at that time, was showing at Betty Parsons, since she had a little gallery in a bookstore, in a bookshop downtown. And there was about to be published a book—I've forgotten now which book it was—on Primitive art, pre-Columbian and so forth. The book was to be published. And Adolph was interested in that. And Adolph and Barney used to go to the Museum of Natural History. So they—What am I supposed to be talking about? What else do you want to talk about?

[00:18:47.42]

PHYLLIS TUCHMAN: Oh, no, that's fine. Because they're interested in the period, and stuff.

[00:18:51.80]

ESTHER GOTTLIEB: So Adolph suggested to Betty Parsons, since she had the space, it might be good for her gallery if she could put on a show at the time that the book is coming—is to be presented, with sort of little opening. She thought that was a good idea. So Barney and Adolph went to the Museum of Natural History. They'd been going frequently, so they knew

some of the curators there, and asked whether they could borrow some things. And they went—took them down to the storerooms, where the—the things they don't show. And they selected things.

[00:19:28.60]

PHYLLIS TUCHMAN: Great.

[00:19:30.44]

ESTHER GOTTLIEB: And she put the show on. And I think Barney wrote the foreword to the catalog. And it made a big—It helped her place herself. And also, it helped Barney, because he was able to write something. And this idea of promoting the Primitive, it is important, I think.

[00:19:49.89]

PHYLLIS TUCHMAN: I'm curious about the bookstore for one connection I've never been able to figure out. A very early show of Rothko's had an anonymous introduction that I remember asking him about once. And he said Marius Brewley.

[00:20:09.66]

ESTHER GOTTLIEB: What's the name?

[00:20:10.11]

PHYLLIS TUCHMAN: Brewley. B-R-E-W-L-E-Y. He was a literary critic, who wrote—And I never understood how he came to having a literary critic writing an introduction.

[00:20:21.15]

ESTHER GOTTLIEB: Well, I think that is something which Europeans always were interested. They always had a poet. I mean, I remember going to Europe, being in Europe, and having this man who was interested in various of the French painters, and he was an art dealer in something. I don't remember what. But anyway, he said, "Who was the poet who writes for you?"

[00:20:46.57]

PHYLLIS TUCHMAN: Oh, no kidding?

[00:20:47.44]

ESTHER GOTTLIEB: So it seems to be sort of a European tradition that this happens. When Adolph was—this was years before Barney was painting. He wasn't painting in those years. And when Adolph said to him, why don't you—when there was an opportunity for Betty Parsons to leave that little bookstore and to go into a gallery. Adolph was urging her to do that. And he said, "Why don't you go in with her, Barney? You're enjoying this activity, here, and your writing." He said, "Why don't you do that?" He said, "Oh, no, I don't want to be a dealer." He said, "What do you want to do?" He said, "I want to be the Breton of American painting.

[00:21:30.44]

PHYLLIS TUCHMAN: Oh, no kidding?

[00:21:34.42]

ESTHER GOTTLIEB: We shouldn't—erase that part.

[00:21:36.00]

PHYLLIS TUCHMAN: No, it's fine.

[00:21:37.21]

ESTHER GOTTLIEB: Because Annalee will be so furious with me. She can't stand anything I

say, anyway, so.

[00:21:45.76]

PHYLLIS TUCHMAN: To backtrack a bit into the '30s, I was wondering if you thought the Artists Union, or the Artists Committee of Action, or the Art Students Council were effective organizations?

[00:22:02.28]

ESTHER GOTTLIEB: Well, I don't—I remember the Artists Union became an important factor in the art, among the artists—or, at the time, WPA. And that's—and they were the ones who were trying to help lay down the rules and regulations, which artists could and should be doing, just working in their studios. I remember that the artists, in our area, in Brooklyn, there were a number of them who were on the project.

Okay, so they had to go into New York, spend a nickel to get in, sign in, and a nickel to come home. And they were wasting ten cents. So David Smith, who was active—he lived down the street from us. And he was active in the union. He brought this up and requested that there be a central check-in place in Brooklyn. So he lived on the top floor, down the street. And our studio was on the first floor, at this end of the street. So Adolph's studio became the check-in place for the artists. I mean, I remember that being—I mean, he worked through the union. And they also were helpful. And at that point, I think that's the reason is because of the WPA. But of course later on, artists broke away from the Artists Union because of the fact that they were supporting Russia.

[00:23:37.79]

PHYLLIS TUCHMAN: What exactly did the Artists Union do?

[00:23:40.33]

ESTHER GOTTLIEB: What did they do?

[00:23:41.21]

PHYLLIS TUCHMAN: Yeah.

[00:23:41.57]

ESTHER GOTTLIEB: I don't know anything else they did except what they did—

[00:23:43.60]

PHYLLIS TUCHMAN: Except signing their names?

[00:23:46.12]

ESTHER GOTTLIEB: What did they do?

[00:23:47.05]

PHYLLIS TUCHMAN: Yeah. I mean, look, I have no idea what kind of organization it was.

[00:23:51.88]

ESTHER GOTTLIEB: Well, it wasn't in the beginning—I don't think Adolph—Adolph didn't—and the other people, who were not politically-minded and who were sort of anti-Communists, if they had been in a position, they would have of course tried to lead the group away from that. But the artists who were most active were those who were also the most active politically. And then when they sided with—too much with Russia and approved of Russia's invasion of this place and that, and then they split. And they split away and they formed the Artists' Congress. And then I think the Artists' Congress became also too much involved. And they then broke away and they formed the Federation. So it's—you know?

[00:25:01.29]

PHYLLIS TUCHMAN: Yeah.

[00:25:02.73]

ESTHER GOTTLIEB: Meyer Schapiro was active, at that time, with the artists group. And he was very helpful in guiding away from that. Then they made a big manifesto. And it appeared in the paper, you know?

[00:25:26.63]

PHYLLIS TUCHMAN: And so that's why it was important for Picasso to talk over the phone at some gathering, at Carnegie Hall, I think, around 1937.

[00:25:37.72]

ESTHER GOTTLIEB: I don't remember that. But anyway, that's how it grew. And they were—I mean, they were helpful. The union was most helpful at the time of the project, I'm sure. But Adolph was only with it about a year, and then we went to Arizona. But when we came back, Adolph was still very much involved with the artists, the artists' group. But people who know much more about those things are people like Joe Solman, who was politically interested. And I don't remember Mark's activity in it. I don't remember too well.

[00:26:19.27]

PHYLLIS TUCHMAN: I just know he was a member.

[00:26:20.80]

ESTHER GOTTLIEB: Oh, yeah, he was a member. I saw him. I mean, I don't know that it was mandatory for people, or just they were. Because if you had some grievance or some different points, you didn't like the assignment you had, you had somewhere to go.

[00:26:39.16]

PHYLLIS TUCHMAN: Oh, you mean the WPA painting?

[00:26:40.69]

ESTHER GOTTLIEB: Yes, this is during the WPA days. That's when the union was very active.

[00:26:44.35]

PHYLLIS TUCHMAN: Yeah.

[00:26:44.77]

ESTHER GOTTLIEB: And after the WPA days, the other the artists, who were not politically active, would have left anyway.

[00:26:53.33]

PHYLLIS TUCHMAN: Got it. Exactly.

[00:26:54.89]

ESTHER GOTTLIEB: I mean, does that set something straight in your mind?

[00:26:56.45]

PHYLLIS TUCHMAN: Yeah, that the Artists Union was representing the artists in terms of their jobs at the WPA.

[00:27:03.05]

ESTHER GOTTLIEB: Yes, yes, yes, it completely was.

[00:27:04.22]

PHYLLIS TUCHMAN: No, I never realized that.

[00:27:04.94]

ESTHER GOTTLIEB: Yeah, that's right. Yes, it was. Because of the WPA, it was essential. The men wasting ten cents every day to go into the market and go back again? Doesn't make any sense.

[00:27:18.19]

PHYLLIS TUCHMAN: Were many of Mr. Gottlieb's paintings lost from that period?

[00:27:22.86]

ESTHER GOTTLIEB: Oh, well, after all, you had to—if you were on the easel project, you were required to give a certain number of paintings in payment for your work. But since he was with them only less than a year, they didn't get that many paintings. But at the end, I mean some of Adolph's paintings, I remember, even while he was still there, were allocated to museums and universities. But at the end, that stuff was sold by the pound. That was used as—all those paintings, they were used for insulation around pipes. Yeah, plumbers brought them and wrapped the pipes in them.

[00:28:01.50]

PHYLLIS TUCHMAN: So that would have been a lot Rothko's paintings, too.

[00:28:05.74]

ESTHER GOTTLIEB: Whatever paintings there were.

[00:28:07.44]

PHYLLIS TUCHMAN: Yeah, went around pipes.

[00:28:08.64]

ESTHER GOTTLIEB: Yeah, well they did. And of course, they sold by the pound. But some people, who were acute and close to the IRS and had the money, would go down and go through it, pick out stuff and buy it by the pound. It was an effort to—you know?

[00:28:27.41]

PHYLLIS TUCHMAN: Just by the pound? Was that a particularly depressing thing to know about?

[00:28:32.83]

ESTHER GOTTLIEB: Oh, of course, it was very depressing. And I mean, men who had been with the project for a number of years and who were doing paintings all the time. And from that point of view, after that was over, they thought, easel painters thought "Weren't we foolish? Look at how much better off the mural painters were, because look at all the beautiful murals that are up." But then all the murals have been covered up—most of them, anyway. So now, it's—you know. But I think at that time, it was, I think, important to both Mark and to Adolph, I think, from this point of view, that they—neither one of them, was interested or attempting to do either political paintings or American scene paintings. So I think that was an impetus for them to stand up on their hind legs and decide, what do we want to paint?

[00:29:30.13]

PHYLLIS TUCHMAN: Mm-hmm [affirmative]. What kind of images would they paint?

[00:29:32.89]

ESTHER GOTTLIEB: Well, Adolph was doing some landscapes and things like that. But I mean, they were—not only was the WPA important for painters, but writers, dancers, musicians, and so on. And the writers were assigned to go to the countryside, to go here or there, and interview everybody and try to write the history of the community.

[00:29:57.81]

And the whole attempt seemed to be to create an American Heritage, you see. But interestingly enough, they were trying to do this, getting these writers to write, and getting these painters to paint, but the early, very early, Primitive American paintings, nobody looked at them. They didn't even—no one even knew they existed. It was not part of the education or the knowledge. But government money was being used. And so they were promoting Americana.

[00:30:41.37]

PHYLLIS TUCHMAN: Oh, son of a gun. I'm just—wait a minute. I'll turn this—

[END OF TRACK AAA_gottli81_4127_m]

[00:00:02.26]

PHYLLIS TUCHMAN: —from that time.

[00:00:03.19]

ESTHER GOTTLIEB: That's right. That's right. I mean, guidebooks, really, they were excellent. So there was an effort to do—And the painters were painting, you know, like Curry, those kind of painting.

[00:00:19.03]

PHYLLIS TUCHMAN: Would that be why, say, David Smith—there was a certain kind of figurative imagery that, say, David Smith had in his sculpture of the time. I'm thinking of some that I saw in Edmonton of, say, a photographer and a model, of billiard players. Is that part of a sense of the subject matter, of recording a scene?

[00:00:40.04]

ESTHER GOTTLIEB: Well, I don't know that—

[00:00:41.57]

PHYLLIS TUCHMAN: The billiard players is one I'm speaking of.

[00:00:43.28]

ESTHER GOTTLIEB: Well, I don't—I don't know. I think that—he had been a painter. So his first images were—I remember some of those early paintings. And did you ever see those medallions?

[00:01:05.49]

PHYLLIS TUCHMAN: Yes.

[00:01:05.73]

ESTHER GOTTLIEB: Yeah? Well, he was politically interested in Spain and the problems. But he was originally a painter. So I don't know that the images that he used in his sculpture was anything to do with Americana, or whether it was just part of having been a painter, and being interested in social problems in this country and, later on, in the world situation.

[00:01:40.28]

PHYLLIS TUCHMAN: Yeah, it's just a bit of a change from landscape paintings, those early dock scenes. This is more—it's a strange way to phrase the question, but I think it might say something about New York. And it's—was the situation so bad in New York that the opportunities were the same when you and your husband went to Tucson, Arizona?

[00:02:05.40]

ESTHER GOTTLIEB: No. We went to Tucson, Arizona, because I was ill, and the doctor wanted me to be in a dry climate. As far as the situation was concerned, it was in the depths

of the Depression. And there was a certain amount of feeling of rejuvenation in the fact that the government was now attempting to help creative people. But I don't know how much it changed in that year or so that we were away. But I think it continued for some time. And it certainly had—I would be the first one, one of the first people to say that the opportunity that was presented to the young creative people at that period, was a great deal to do with setting the scene, too, and important figures.

[00:03:04.72]

PHYLLIS TUCHMAN: When you returned to New York, in 1939, were Gottlieb and Rothko talking about the Myths? Did that—

[00:03:16.16]

ESTHER GOTTLIEB: Well, it came—

[00:03:16.60]

PHYLLIS TUCHMAN: —come about almost immediately?

[00:03:17.20]

ESTHER GOTTLIEB: It came—no. It came, I think, a bit after that. I think both Adolph and Mark were influenced by the painting of Avery—not the conversation, because Avery didn't talk much. But the paintings, they felt that it was close to Matisse and sort of a French feeling. And they visited him all the time. And we used to all go to the studio. And they used to rent or hire a model between us, and everybody would chip in. And we went to the—at that time, I think they already were living in the Village—Milton and Sally. And that was the sort of central point. I mean nobody wanted to go out to Brooklyn. As we used to say in those days, you can't invite anybody out for a drink. You can only invite people—you have to —without making dinner for them. It's too far to go.

[00:04:23.35]

PHYLLIS TUCHMAN: That's true.

[00:04:23.79]

ESTHER GOTTLIEB: So that was a central point. But then—and they were younger than Milton. And when we used to go to the country, usually, to Rockport, to Gloucester. In those days, for $25, you could rent a place for the summer. And you'd chip in and go together, hire a car to take us. And if the car rode at night, it cost less to hire a car. So we'd have to take turns sitting in front with the driver to keep him awake.

[00:04:55.43]

Anyway, but then, when we went to Arizona, I think Adolph had an opportunity to not be so much involved with Milton and Milton's point of view. And not that Milton spoke very much, but I mean just the lure of being with him. And he was working so quickly. Adolph, while we were away, I think I remember he worked first from sketches that he had made, and wherever it was in the country, Vermont or wherever we've been. And then he wasn't satisfied. He wasn't interested in landscape, either, too much.

[00:05:37.29]

We used to walk in the desert and find dead cactus and bones and whatnot, so he began doing this, most of all, those still lifes. And when he came back, all his friends said, "Oh, you're going abstract." And he was highly insulted. "This is not abstraction, you see?" And then from there, having drifted away from Avery, and Mark had also drifted away from the influence of Avery, and then, I think, they were also influenced by the fact that as a reaction to American scene painting, they were searching for some new subject matter.

[00:06:21.28]

And I do believe I would say that these young men were interested in Jung. And from this, I believe, from this interest, and what he said about the collective unconscious, and so forth and so on, that they then began digging in, I believe. And so what images do we have that

are common to all of us? So I believe that's where that comes from. It was a matter of evolving some—like a strong need to find other subjects. I don't know if that makes any sense, what I say, but—

[00:07:10.46]

PHYLLIS TUCHMAN: Oh, no, it makes a great deal of sense. Do you have any idea about how soon after you would return from Arizona when Rothko made his first mythic picture? Within the year, within three years?

[00:07:26.91]

ESTHER GOTTLIEB: When he made his what?

[00:07:27.75]

PHYLLIS TUCHMAN: First kind of mythic picture.

[00:07:30.78]

ESTHER GOTTLIEB: Well, I don't really know. I think that he did those paintings, the myths, evolved at the same time as Adolph's, with many, many discussions, and this feeling of wanting to find something. And so they both worked on, simultaneously or approximately, at the same time, evolved these paintings, which they used mythical images verbally, but not that they actually were producing any mythical image. Because they were so involved with trying to find something else, that they used titles that evoked what they were feeling. I mean, that's as I see it.

[00:08:23.83]

PHYLLIS TUCHMAN: Do you think there was any kind of relationship in there to Surrealism?

[00:08:30.03]

ESTHER GOTTLIEB: Well, I do think that the Surrealists and Surrealism affected most of the artists at the time. And though I think that, at certain times, they would deny that. It was not so Surrealist. But the mystic image, the mythical image, was certainly something which is related to Surrealism.

[00:09:05.76]

And I know that not only did artists have difficulty in deciding whether they were Surrealist or not, but people like Sidney Janis couldn't decide. I remember when he was having his show, he was publishing a book about Surrealism. And he was also having a show. And he couldn't make up his mind, in which division these two men belonged. Should he put them here or should he—and he would decide to make a show and put them here. Well, that's not right. Next time, or in the book, I don't know. He's so and so.

[00:09:36.60]

And I know this happened to both Mark and Adolph. It's being sort of ambiguous, whether they were or whether they weren't. But there were the Surrealists who were, here, of course, influenced many of those people. And since Adolph didn't—when we were living in Brooklyn—didn't spend as much time in the company of those men, he was perhaps less influenced than some of the other people were.

[00:10:03.46]

I don't think either Mark—neither Mark nor Adolph, I don't think we're the kind of people who were easily influenced by these other artists. Of course, they were a bit older than Bob Motherwell and Baziotes. They were older. And so they weren't as naïve, perhaps. I don't know. But the fact is that Adolph didn't spend as much time with them, so—I don't know if Mark spent a great deal of time or not. But Adolph living in Brooklyn, without all his friends, where you're isolating yourself, that's what he wanted, to have time to work and not be interrupted.

[00:10:37.96]

PHYLLIS TUCHMAN: [Inaudible.] I have a bunch of addresses that the foundation asked me to ask you about, if they ring a bell. But the first one is someone's name, S.A. Greenburg. [Pause.] And he might have—I have an address, 2137 East 23rd Street in the Bronx.

[00:11:13.28]

ESTHER GOTTLIEB: East 23rd Street couldn't be Bronx.

[00:11:15.39]

PHYLLIS TUCHMAN: Oh.

[00:11:15.59]

ESTHER GOTTLIEB: East 23rd Street is downtown.

[00:11:17.39]

PHYLLIS TUCHMAN: Yeah.

[00:11:18.26]

ESTHER GOTTLIEB: What's the number?

[00:11:18.92]

PHYLLIS TUCHMAN: No, it couldn't be 2137. Could be—

[00:11:21.68]

ESTHER GOTTLIEB: 2137?

[00:11:22.68]

PHYLLIS TUCHMAN: Manhattan is 23rd Street.

[00:11:24.39]

ESTHER GOTTLIEB: Yes, Manhattan. It wouldn't be the Bronx.

[00:11:26.16]

PHYLLIS TUCHMAN: It's too far, 2137. It would have to—it wouldn't be higher than that. That's the river.

[00:11:33.01]

ESTHER GOTTLIEB: That's an address that's on a painting or something?

[00:11:35.45]

PHYLLIS TUCHMAN: Yeah. I have another address, 3 Great Jones Street.

[00:11:40.70]

ESTHER GOTTLIEB: Great Jones Street still is in the Village.

[00:11:42.41]

PHYLLIS TUCHMAN: Yeah.

[00:11:43.31]

ESTHER GOTTLIEB: Now, Great Jones Street? We didn't live there. We lived on Christopher. And before that, we lived—it wasn't Great Jones. And the Averys weren't on Great Jones, either, at this point. It was one or two, 14th and 11th Street, because two streets come together.

[00:12:05.77]

PHYLLIS TUCHMAN: And there's one other that seems—

[00:12:07.45]

ESTHER GOTTLIEB: Wait a minute, didn't Mark live downtown when he was married, first married to—I can't think of that woman he was married to.

[00:12:18.54]

PHYLLIS TUCHMAN: Turns out she died while the letter was in transit.

[00:12:22.90]

ESTHER GOTTLIEB: What was her name again?

[00:12:25.17]

PHYLLIS TUCHMAN: I heard it for the first time yesterday.

[00:12:27.68]

ESTHER GOTTLIEB: I didn't know she died while the letter that was being sent—

[00:12:30.52]

PHYLLIS TUCHMAN: Yes, in September, sometime.

[00:12:32.33]

ESTHER GOTTLIEB: Yeah, well she was here. Let's see, who interviewed her? Well, they did live in the Village. And maybe that—was it Jones Street, Great Jones? That's a possibility that was a place where they lived. I can't remember where Great Jones Street is. That's not too far.

[00:12:55.12]

PHYLLIS TUCHMAN: Oh, it's right over here. That's why we're above where Bob Rauschenberg lives. There's like a little diner, a gas station there.

[00:13:03.79]

ESTHER GOTTLIEB: Well, I mean, they lived somewhere in the Village. I just remember walking to 14th Street to take the subway, to go to Brooklyn from their place. Oh, I'm sorry she died. The fact that she wasn't—after Mark died, and we contacted her, she was living in a hotel. I think Diane Waldman went over and tried to get her. But she was not "with it" as far as that was concerned. I mean, she wasn't herself.

[00:13:33.30]

PHYLLIS TUCHMAN: There also seems to be another address that's on the back of a painting that both your husband and Rothko painted together, 2092 Madison Avenue. [Pause.]

[00:13:52.17]

ESTHER GOTTLIEB: I don't know where that would be.

[00:13:53.22]

PHYLLIS TUCHMAN: It's on the Upper East Side.

[00:13:54.78]

ESTHER GOTTLIEB: Upper East Side? It's a painting that Adolph and Mark both— I never saw the painting. I don't know the painting.

[00:14:04.50]

PHYLLIS TUCHMAN: I don't. I don't know either. A know a card he painted with de Kooning,

but I don't know about a painting with Rothko.

[00:14:10.85]

ESTHER GOTTLIEB: That's on the back of the painting? Now, interestingly enough, you know, that I in trying to establish the exact date for Adolph's paintings, which were not dated, was by the addresses, and addresses that he had occupied with his family, before. And I would just try to find out from his sister when were they at that and that address. But no addresses that—I can't [inaudible].

[00:14:36.68]

PHYLLIS TUCHMAN: Yeah. Yeah. Right. Do you have any recollection of how Tony Smith might fit into everything?

[00:14:47.71]

ESTHER GOTTLIEB: Tony Smith?

[00:14:48.34]

PHYLLIS TUCHMAN: Yeah.

[00:14:48.85]

ESTHER GOTTLIEB: Okay, let me see. Tony Smith, I remember when he first came to New York, he had been a student of Frank Lloyd Wright. And he came, here, and he was friendly at that time, with Buffie Johnson. And in fact, she had a little townhouse on the East side. And he redid her house, planned it. A very interesting man. He began—now, let's see. He was downtown. I don't know what he was teaching. But Barney Newman, when he was teaching in the evening, at Washington Irving High School, he'd get to see Tony, quite a bit of Tony. But I don't remember what his relationship was with Mark. Buffie Johnson might know.

[00:15:56.65]

PHYLLIS TUCHMAN: Yeah. And Buffie Johnson's name keeps coming up, but she's not on our list.

[00:16:01.50]

ESTHER GOTTLIEB: Well—

[00:16:01.98]

PHYLLIS TUCHMAN: I heard she made great parties in the '50s.

[00:16:04.92]

ESTHER GOTTLIEB: Well, I don't know anything about her parties. But we knew her, because she—I don't know how we really met her. But she knew many artists. And she also knew many of the writers. And she came from the South, I think. And therefore, she knew Tennessee Williams and that crowd. And her parents, or her mother—I never met [inaudible]. I met her mother, and a very "Southern Belle" type. Now, she may know something of the connection there between—because I don't know if she knew Tony later on. How about—

[00:16:51.26]

PHYLLIS TUCHMAN: Tony became good friends, stayed friends with Tennessee Williams 'til he died.

[00:16:56.23]

ESTHER GOTTLIEB: Yes.

[00:16:57.08]

PHYLLIS TUCHMAN: Yeah.

[00:16:57.80]

ESTHER GOTTLIEB: Yeah, so I mean that there was that relationship. But I don't know how—I can't think of any. I don't know of any relationship between Tony and Mark.

[00:17:13.22]

PHYLLIS TUCHMAN: No, last year, you told me that Mark Rothko passed on his studio to Tony Smith.

[00:17:19.67]

ESTHER GOTTLIEB: Oh, downtown.

[00:17:20.48]

PHYLLIS TUCHMAN: Yeah. And that all had to do with NYU and the club [inaudible].

[00:17:25.71]

ESTHER GOTTLIEB: Yeah, that's right. That's right. But that's as much as I can tell you.

[00:17:32.55]

PHYLLIS TUCHMAN: You briefly mentioned Jung when I was asking you about some of the mythic paintings. Is there any other kind of literature that you recall everyone sharing in common at the time?

[00:17:47.43]

ESTHER GOTTLIEB: [Inaudible]

[00:17:49.38]

PHYLLIS TUCHMAN: Oh. I don't know [inaudible].

[00:17:52.38]

ESTHER GOTTLIEB: Well, he talked about the [inaudible]. And what else? Jung more than Freud, I mean.

[00:18:05.93]

PHYLLIS TUCHMAN: Yeah. I've heard the detective novels were very popular.

[00:18:11.54]

ESTHER GOTTLIEB: Which novels?

[00:18:12.44]

PHYLLIS TUCHMAN: Detective novels.

[00:18:13.35]

ESTHER GOTTLIEB: Oh, yes, of course. [They laugh.] That was very easy. Yeah, that was one of them. When it was, it got the grippe, and you couldn't do anything else, you could read. Or it's a way—I was reading for long time to fall asleep.

[00:18:28.88]

PHYLLIS TUCHMAN: Oh, I seem to have turned this over a little prematurely. Do you think that very much was achieved by the writings, like in *Tiger's Eye*, or the letter to the *Times* or the panel discussions that were held in the '40s? Do you think very much was achieved by those things? Did they give satisfaction to your husband and to Rothko that they just were able to vent their feelings?

[00:18:57.72]

ESTHER GOTTLIEB: Oh, I'm sure. I'm sure it was helpful. Because they both felt that they were sort of outcasts, and the public was not interested in them. An opportunity to talk, I mean that first time at the WNYC. I think that they both felt very much isolated, that they lived isolated. They were isolated from the general public. And I believe, they did have a great deal of satisfaction about being able to tell the world.

[00:19:36.81]

PHYLLIS TUCHMAN: Well, would you ever think that one could characterize them as being angry? Or were they just like young artists who have been overlooked?

[00:19:45.30]

ESTHER GOTTLIEB: No. They weren't any more overlooked than anybody else was. They had more. They were less overlooked than many of the other artists, who, like Joe Solman, who stayed with the sort of Americana, so to speak. But I think that they strongly—had a strong feeling of isolation, that they didn't feel isolated from their own artist friends.

[00:20:14.78]

PHYLLIS TUCHMAN: Yeah.

[00:20:15.90]

ESTHER GOTTLIEB: That was not it. It was being isolated from the world that—the whole world was isolated from. And they were. The world was isolating them, because they didn't accept them.

[00:20:31.84]

PHYLLIS TUCHMAN: I'm kind of curious about how the Kootz Gallery fits in with Parsons.

[00:20:37.12]

ESTHER GOTTLIEB: Oh, Kootz Gallery. Okay. Sam Kootz? Adolph was, at that time—let's see, Adolph was—when Sam Kootz opened the gallery, Adolph was with Nierendorff. He had a contract with Nierendorff. And Sam had come to see a show there. And Sam, at that time, had Byron Browne, Bill Baziotes, and Bob Motherwell. [Pause.]

[00:21:09.64]

PHYLLIS TUCHMAN: Hofmann?

[00:21:11.06]

ESTHER GOTTLIEB: No, he didn't have Hofmann at the beginning. He only had about five painters. And he came to Nierendorff, [inaudible] and said how would Nierendorff feel if he invited Gottlieb to become part of his stable? So he approached Nierendorff first, and then Nierendorff told Adolph and urged him. He said he thought he should do it. Because he said, "I'm not so young anymore. And my background is with the European artists." And—[inaudible]

[00:21:49.89]

He said, "Not that I don't love your paintings. And you're not going to take them away from me, because I'm going to buy them all. But I think, for your career, it would be better for you to go with a younger man, who's going to really—who opens a gallery with an American artist, and he's going to promote American painting." Now, well, let's see. While Mark and Pollock and Motherwell and Baziotes were with Peggy Guggenheim, Adolph was with this man, who used to be with Peggy. He died.

[00:22:28.04]

PHYLLIS TUCHMAN: Howard Grant. Grant?

[00:22:31.62]

ESTHER GOTTLIEB: No, no, no,. Not him.

[00:22:34.13]

PHYLLIS TUCHMAN: Putzel? Howard somebody.

[00:22:38.71]

ESTHER GOTTLIEB: Putzel.

[00:22:39.37]

PHYLLIS TUCHMAN: Yeah.

[00:22:39.79]

ESTHER GOTTLIEB: That's right. So Adolph was with Howard Putzel. And I think Rothko came to Howard Putzel later, too. But that was—Adolph was not as close to the Surrealist group, Max Ernst and so forth, as those boys who were with Peggy. I'm backtracking at this point. Now, Sidney Janis had a gallery on 57th Street. And that whole floor belonged to—I forgot the name of the art group that owned it, the men who were dealing in the area—fake paintings of real paintings.

[00:23:28.45]

Anyway, the floor was—the floor was available. Sidney asked for part of it. And Adolph thought that would be a good place for Betty Parsons to be, because she would benefit from people coming to him, and so it would be a help to him and so forth. So that's how it came about, that she was occupying that floor. Now, Rothko had not been with Janis. Adolph, at the time that Peggy, he urged Martha—not Martha Jackson. He wasn't with Martha Jackson. What's her name? I was just talking about her, too.

[00:24:20.19]

PHYLLIS TUCHMAN: Peggy Guggenheim?

[00:24:20.90]

ESTHER GOTTLIEB: Peggy? No, Betty Parsons. Betty Parsons—Peggy Guggenheim had closed her gallery. Mark went to be with—because Mark and Ad Reinhardt and Clyfford Still were with—not Peggy.

[00:24:48.49]

PHYLLIS TUCHMAN: Betty.

[00:24:48.83]

ESTHER GOTTLIEB: With Betty. And Pollock wasn't with either one. Pollock wanted to be with Janis, but Janis didn't want to deal with an artist through his wife. It seems like he didn't bother going, and it seemed that Lee Krasner was trying to [inaudible]. Adolph was with Kootz at the time. Now, let's see, who else was with Jackson? Later on, when Kootz closed, Adolph was with Martha Jackson for one season. And then he was on his own with connections. [inaudible]. He was [inaudible].

[00:25:37.56]

PHYLLIS TUCHMAN: Yeah.

[00:25:38.43]

ESTHER GOTTLIEB: And then, later on, he was with Sidney. So they were all on that floor. That was a very big center. Yeah.

[00:25:49.31]

PHYLLIS TUCHMAN: Well, it's very sort of so surprising is that, here, Adolph Gottlieb and Mark Rothko were showing together in The Ten, allied with one another, go to different galleries, and then, eventually, end up at Marlborough together. But it's sort of a surprise in the light of their writing that letter in the *New York Times* together.

[00:26:07.85]

ESTHER GOTTLIEB: Yeah.

[00:26:08.18]

PHYLLIS TUCHMAN: And they didn't show in the same place.

[00:26:10.22]

ESTHER GOTTLIEB: Well, I think that what happened is that Mark went to Peggy, you see?

[00:26:16.13]

PHYLLIS TUCHMAN: Yeah.

[00:26:16.64]

ESTHER GOTTLIEB: He was with Peggy. And during that time, when Mark was with Peggy, that group that was with Peggy felt very superior to everybody else.

[00:26:23.95]

PHYLLIS TUCHMAN: Oh.

[00:26:24.20]

ESTHER GOTTLIEB: You see?

[00:26:24.65]

PHYLLIS TUCHMAN: Yeah.

[00:26:25.07]

ESTHER GOTTLIEB: And they were riding high. And they were close to Max Ernst and the other—And Adolph was plugging away at his own work. And he was showing with Nierendorff. And then he went to Kootz. And I remember when he was with Nierendorff—what's his name—Julian Levy, who had a gallery across the street and was interested in showing Surrealists, he wanted to buy from Nierendorff, a piece of Adolph's contract so much. [Laughs.] So they all—the point is just that I don't think that—it wasn't through The Ten that this manifesto was published in *The New York Times*.

[00:27:14.98]

PHYLLIS TUCHMAN: Oh, yeah, right.

[00:27:16.15]

ESTHER GOTTLIEB: It was with the Federation of American Painters and Sculptors, who were having a show. And so that—I don't know. Mark was married. He had a child. He was living on Sixth Avenue. He was in the museum all the time with Peggy. She was going to the Modern Museum.

[00:27:45.83]

And Adolph was kept aloof from that, because he was in Brooklyn. And he didn't feel it was important to make those kind of contacts. And I think it was important to Mark, partly, also, because he was married and had a child, and he didn't want his child to go to a public school in that area, which were so bad. So that I think he was trying to cultivate people who might help him. And they did help. Kate went to Dalton on the basis of that. He didn't have any money, but letters of recommendations and stuff that could help him.

[00:28:20.06]

So I think things are different when you're raising a family. But I remember going to their home, frequently, and I remember when—And Katie—they had no money, and we had very little money. And when Katie was a little girl, tiny, tiny, little girl, and she didn't have any—I shouldn't tell the story. I'll tell you the story later, after you shut it off.

[00:28:43.34]

PHYLLIS TUCHMAN: Okay.

[00:28:44.81]

ESTHER GOTTLIEB: But anyway, I think that was the difference. And I don't think—and Mark, I don't think, really liked the country as much as Adolph did. I mean, he was a man who liked to be in the city. And I remember that he did, later on—one year, he came to East Hampton. And he didn't like it. I think that was part of what it was. And the point is just that we both liked the outdoors. And we used to sail. We didn't have any money. We had a tiny little rowboat. And we used to take the subway and go to Sheepshead Bay, and then, if we had an extra nickel, we took the bus, and we actually walked to the water, where you could put your little boat in. You know, so I mean, it's different. He liked the city. And after all, we did, too, but I mean, we also liked to get away.

[00:29:43.56]

PHYLLIS TUCHMAN: Do you think there was anything shared between—Clement Greenberg once described Rothko's pictures, to me, as Jewish stain paintings.

[00:29:56.50]

ESTHER GOTTLIEB: Jewish stain painting?

[00:29:57.82]

PHYLLIS TUCHMAN: Whatever that meant.

[00:29:58.63]

ESTHER GOTTLIEB: Well, I mean, they were stain paintings, of course. But they weren't—

[00:30:03.37]

PHYLLIS TUCHMAN: Well, I think he was—it had something to do with—I don't know if he was trying to point out that a certain kind of art seemed to be made by Jewish artists.

[00:30:13.33]

ESTHER GOTTLIEB: Well, wait a minute.

[00:30:14.42]

PHYLLIS TUCHMAN: Does that [inaudible]?

[00:30:15.92]

ESTHER GOTTLIEB: No, I think that's nonsense, because I think that we used to talk about some of the painters, who were doing—using very garish color, looked like Italian pastry, or something like that, you would say. But I mean, I don't know why Clem should have said that. Because—

[END OF TRACK AAA_gottli81_4128_m]

[00:00:05.52]

ESTHER GOTTLIEB: [In progress:] Everybody was very unkind to her mother.

[00:00:07.77]

PHYLLIS TUCHMAN: Yeah.

[00:00:09.18]

ESTHER GOTTLIEB: And I remember when Mark first—when they were first married. And of course, she was considerably younger than we were. And how the artists' wives, including myself, and I don't know who else, sort of felt as if we were forming a circle around her, protecting her from anybody that might say anything harsh or unfriendly. So I'm surprised to hear that people were unfriendly. That's, of course, before her time. When you're young, you don't really—

[00:00:41.03]

PHYLLIS TUCHMAN: Twenty years from now, she'll have a better understanding. Did Gottlieb and Rothko trade paintings?

[00:00:49.21]

ESTHER GOTTLIEB: Not that I remember. This is the problem: that all the paintings that Adolph had, which he had traded with his associates, and all of his early paintings, which he loved so much, and all the books that he'd collected, and all his plates of the original prints we used to make, and all the prints and all the drawings and all the—in that big fire, when that building came down, everything was lost. So I don't know that he had it. I do remember his having a couple of John Graham's, who is another painter. But I don't remember any Rothko. He may have, but I don't remember.

[00:01:37.16]

PHYLLIS TUCHMAN: Well, I guess I don't know which question to ask first. When you would go out in the evenings with the Rothkos, what kind of—what would you do? Would you go to the movies or dancing or to a restaurant and talk?

[00:01:52.20]

ESTHER GOTTLIEB: No, we'd usually go to a Chinese restaurant. I never went dancing. Adolph didn't like to dance. I don't care about dancing. I don't if Mark did or not. But we'd just sit around and talk. I don't think we ever went to the movies together, not that I can remember.

[00:02:09.10]

PHYLLIS TUCHMAN: Yeah.

[00:02:10.34]

ESTHER GOTTLIEB: But it was a—they both liked to talk. [Laughs.]

[00:02:15.32]

PHYLLIS TUCHMAN: That's perfect. They weren't into baseball or boxing, watching boxing?

[00:02:22.27]

ESTHER GOTTLIEB: Well, I don't think Adolph was. I mean I—

[00:02:25.68]

PHYLLIS TUCHMAN: You were in Brooklyn, Ebbets Field. [They laugh.] I grew up in Ebbets Field.

[00:02:30.91]

ESTHER GOTTLIEB: No, I don't think—I don't know that either. I don't know. Adolph, the one sport he was interested in, which we participated in, from the very beginning, was sailing. And of course, that was not anybody else—nobody else in the art world, that we knew, was sailing. But we just—we sailed all our lives. And in fact, when Adolph had a stroke, just before he died, at that point, he had about five different kinds of boats.

[00:02:56.00]

PHYLLIS TUCHMAN: Five, really? Would you say that it's the way Bob Motherwell used to buy cars? Or maybe still does?

[00:03:02.84]

ESTHER GOTTLIEB: I don't know where he buys clothes or did buy clothes. No, it was—

[00:03:05.72]

PHYLLIS TUCHMAN: No, cars. I heard he loved to buy cars.

[00:03:08.24]

ESTHER GOTTLIEB: Did he have cars? Maybe. Maybe, I didn't know. No, it was the fact that, in the wintertime, you had to have a special kind of little boat, the kind of boats that they sail, you see? And the other extreme is, if you want to, when you get rich enough and you want to take your friends out sailing, and you are not sailors, you have to have a big boat.

[00:03:25.24]

PHYLLIS TUCHMAN: Yeah, right. That's true.

[00:03:26.39]

ESTHER GOTTLIEB: Those are the extremes. In between, it's something else. [Laughs.] We indulged ourselves. I don't know that anybody else did.

[00:03:36.09]

PHYLLIS TUCHMAN: Well, [inaudible]. Would you say that Mr. Gottlieb's studio and Rothko's studio were similar? I mean do you think they had similar kind of spaces that they worked in? I haven't seen any of the photographs, myself.

[00:03:57.64]

ESTHER GOTTLIEB: Well, I'm trying to remember when Mark—See, in the beginning, nobody really had a studio. We used part of an apartment, selecting the largest room with the best light, and that became the studio. But later on, I don't know, Mark had a big loft-type studio. And Adolph did, too. But in the beginning, I think nobody really had a studio. It wasn't like now. If a man doesn't have a studio or, I mean, a painter woman doesn't have a studio, she's not a painter. She's just using one of the bedrooms. [Laughs.]

Because I can remember some of those paintings that Adolph did that were 17-foot long were done in a room, which, absolutely, that's all the size that the room was. And that's such —and there was, fortunately, a little alcove, because those paintings had to be taken down. And if they were—you know, here he was painting [inaudible]. And later, when it's dry, and we got to take it down, what are you going to do with it?

[00:05:12.35]

So as a matter, I know Adolph used to just spread the paper out. And between the two of us, we'd get the painting down onto the floor. And I used to be able to be in the alcove. And he'd say, "You don't weigh very much. If you promise me you only make one step, lightly, from there to there, then we'll lift the painting up and put it face to the wall, so we can put the next one up." You see? But those are not the conditions today. Artists don't work that way anymore. [Laughs.]

[00:05:51.82]

PHYLLIS TUCHMAN: [Inaudible] It seems to be more than coincidental that there was a friendship between Barnett Newman, Adolph Gottlieb, and Mark Rothko in the '30s. And that by the late '50s, early '60s, their style of painting seemed to have more in common with one another than, say, with de Kooning or Guston, or whatever. Is there any accounting for it? Was it that they were always interested—they were interested in color and didn't know about it, that it was a matter of abstracting something?

[00:06:33.08]

ESTHER GOTTLIEB: Gee, that's a rough one. Well, all I would like to say first off is that Barney Newman hadn't been painting all the years that Mark and Adolph had. He'd come to it very late. And he really didn't know how to use his paint. And in fact, he accused Mark, who helped him get in, who coaxed him to have a show—see, all the whole group that was with Betty thought that, after all, here he is. All these years, he's been helping us and inviting us, and helping. And he had begun to do some little crayon drawings. Put a painting. So when the fall came—the first opening show, usually each painter puts up something he's done during the summer. So it can be something rather light. So he put up his drawing, and all the boys were very supportive. And then he started to paint. And he used to call various artists—please don't let Annalee hear any of this.

[00:07:51.06]

PHYLLIS TUCHMAN: Yeah. I'll—

[00:07:51.77]

ESTHER GOTTLIEB: —call artists—and if you remember Bill Baziotes' paintings, such beautifully delicate paintings. That one [inaudible] is so beautiful. Barney when he starts painting calls up Bill Baziotes. He says, "How do you paint?"

[00:08:10.93]

PHYLLIS TUCHMAN: [Inaudible].

[00:08:12.42]

ESTHER GOTTLIEB: Bill told me this. So I mean, Barney—let's see, Mark Rothko, the first show of the paintings, which he made his reputation with, his first show did not precede—It didn't precede Newman. Newman had a show first. Now whether—what the relationship was between—how close Barney and Mark were, I don't know. Whether Mark used to go to Barney's studio, that I don't know. I mean, Barney go to Mark's studio.

[00:09:09.63]

However, Barney—Mark helped Barney hang his show, the first show he had at Betty Parson's. And then there was an evening at this club, which was the thing to do. And Mark got up and introduced Barney, and talked about his work and was very supportive, as was everybody. Later on, a number of years later, when Barney became angry with Mark, he said to Adolph and myself, he said, "My paintings that I have, which I had in my first show, they were supposed to be horizontal lozenges." And Mark said, "Oh, no, that's not the way to hang them. We'll hang them vertically." You've heard this before?

[00:10:13.54]

PHYLLIS TUCHMAN: No. I'm picturing twelve years ago, when Newman showed me the horizontal paintings.

[00:10:21.07]

ESTHER GOTTLIEB: I didn't see them. I never saw any of his paintings. Anyway, so he said that Mark convinced him to show them vertically. Okay, I said, but everybody was very supportive. And Barney, at that time, didn't indicate. This is a number of years later when he told the story to Adolph and myself. And he said, "I was so distressed," he said, "when Mark hung his paintings horizontal. And I think he got the idea from me."

[00:10:59.68]

So, I don't know. See, Barney was not a painter. He was not trained as a man who could draw or a paint, anything. So at that time, Clyfford Still was doing these very large canvases with a lot of texture. So this is just something I think. I think that he wanted to do large paintings so that he could compete with those people. So the large paintings [inaudible].

[00:11:39.25]

PHYLLIS TUCHMAN: Yeah. Yeah.

[00:11:41.74]

ESTHER GOTTLIEB: But he felt that he didn't get complete support from everybody, even though there was whispered around, "let's wait and see what the show is like." So after the second show, he didn't show again. And he felt he wasn't getting support, and he retired. And that's when he [inaudible]. But then Mark, I don't know what happened to the relationship, what caused it to break. It was a very, very sharp break in the relationship between Mark and Barney. Because they were very close. They were—Now this, I'm talking about before he began painting.

[00:12:28.81]

PHYLLIS TUCHMAN: Yeah.

[00:12:31.30]

ESTHER GOTTLIEB: And he loved children. He was very fond of Katie. Something happened, I don't know what. There was great antagonism.

[00:12:48.23]

PHYLLIS TUCHMAN: They certainly were very different men.

[00:12:53.71]

ESTHER GOTTLIEB: Very different. Very different. Now, of course, Barney didn't show for years and years. And then when Tony, Tony Smith, who was up at—

[00:13:06.69]

PHYLLIS TUCHMAN: Bennington.

[00:13:07.17]

ESTHER GOTTLIEB: —Bennington, of course. But Barney was very interested to have a show, because Jackson Pollock had had a show there, Adolph had a show there, you know, years ago. He wanted that part of his career, too. I must say this is not fair. I don't know if that's why he did it. Anyway, he was a good friend of Tony's. He met Tony downtown for a drink when he was teaching [inaudible].

[00:13:33.92]

PHYLLIS TUCHMAN: Do you think, if all the people in that famous photograph, that was in *LIFE* magazine, of The Irascibles. If they could all talk, we'd suddenly see that they weren't one happy group together?

[00:13:43.37]

ESTHER GOTTLIEB: Oh, no, no, not at all. They weren't one happy group. It was just a matter of fact that they opposed this show. They just got together. But I thought the interesting thing is there's only one woman there, Hedda Sterne.

[00:13:58.55]

PHYLLIS TUCHMAN: Yeah. I'm supposed to talk to her as well.

[00:14:01.97]

ESTHER GOTTLIEB: She was an independent. And she was never influenced in her painting by her husband, Saul.

[00:14:08.28]

PHYLLIS TUCHMAN: I just saw her sculpture. She has some sculptures.

[00:14:11.82]

ESTHER GOTTLIEB: She's been doing some sculptures?

[00:14:12.75]

PHYLLIS TUCHMAN: No, back then, she made some sculptures. And I saw some. Do you think—was there ever any discussion about foundations, between the Gottlieb Foundation and the Rothko Foundation that you were both going to support older artists?

[00:14:31.28]

ESTHER GOTTLIEB: So, before, while both men were still alive and very active, and they were both friendly with Tom Hess. There was—the Longview Foundation existed. And Adolph was very active with the Longview Foundation, and I think Mark to the extent that he was just recommending people. But I don't think Mark went to all the meetings. Adolph was very, very close to it, very active.

[00:15:00.88]

Now, then the money had tapered off, and there wasn't any more money. And Adolph made a suggestion. He said, "I tell you what, Tom." He said, "I think that a few of us," he said—I think Bill de Kooning was closer to the Longview than Mark. Because Adolph said—I think it's not that—Bill didn't come very often. And Mark didn't make suggestions except for certain people who were needy, and so forth. Adolph said, "I think maybe we could swing something." He had an idea.

[00:15:40.06]

He said, "I'll donate a painting to Longview, and we'll give it to a museum. If they will—I'll donate things if they will buy paintings by these artists, who we are trying to promote. The say my painting is worth $30,000. And those boys only get $8 or $10 for theirs." They have to buy enough paintings to cover it.

[00:16:03.42]

PHYLLIS TUCHMAN: These were older men who had not—

[00:16:05.42]

ESTHER GOTTLIEB: It was people who hadn't made it.

[00:16:06.59]

PHYLLIS TUCHMAN: Yeah.

[00:16:06.95]

ESTHER GOTTLIEB: Yes. That was Adolph's idea. Now, whether Adolph gave a painting—whether they—then, of course, it took time to collect artists who were needy.

[00:16:17.45]

PHYLLIS TUCHMAN: Yeah.

[00:16:18.17]

ESTHER GOTTLIEB: I don't know whether what's-his-name came through with his painting—de Kooning. He thought de Kooning should do it. But whether de Kooning did or not, I don't know. Now, Adolph and Mark wrote their wills about the same time. And they had discussed it before.

[00:16:41.80]

PHYLLIS TUCHMAN: Did they have the same lawyer?

[00:16:43.79]

ESTHER GOTTLIEB: Dickler wrote both of their wills. Adolph's had to have [inaudible]. I don't know who. I think Mark had Dickler for their will. And they both were influenced in this

foundation idea through the fact that they helped with Longview. And Adolph's will stands and is being executed the way he specified. Mark's is not.

[00:17:14.29]

PHYLLIS TUCHMAN: Does that surprise you at all?

[00:17:16.12]

ESTHER GOTTLIEB: Yes, I was very upset, because I figured that somebody is just playing around, and it's just too much for me. It was not easy to set up a foundation. It's not easy. And I don't know how well this one was set up, because I know all the money that I spent to research this thing and set it up and preserve it. It's so involved. And of course, now, this is the time to prepare. But it's unfortunate that it didn't work. Because I remember shortly after Adolph died, fairly soon after Adolph died, I was—Mark had died. His foundation was supposedly functioning. Bernard Reis, Stamos—

[00:18:07.32]

PHYLLIS TUCHMAN: Yes.

[00:18:08.26]

ESTHER GOTTLIEB: I'd see them at the Marlborough trying to straighten out our records there. And Gwen Davies, who was a teacher at Dalton, a great friend of all the artists, an elderly lady, who, of course, it was [inaudible] has to retire. She was too old. The pension came through the [inaudible]. She had a house in Woodstock. And she had told me—I said, "What are you going to do?" And she said, "I'm going to live in Woodstock, because Mark said he's going to give me money to buy some big house." And I remember when she was living at Second Avenue, and we'd go see her. And [inaudible].

[00:18:59.94]

Adolph said, "I love that little painting. How much?" she said. And he'd always give her twice what she said. And then whenever she—I still have it in our studio, I have a little painting that he bought from her. And it used to be in the dressing room—it's still there. And then he bought—he started making sculpture out of found objects. And she had a piece of his sculpture, which was a gas jet, from a gas stove. And she had it on a piece of wood, this thick. I mean, it was amusing. Last time we saw it in the house when [inaudible].

[00:19:37.07]

Anyway, the winter was coming. She was living. And she was in [inaudible] out in Woodstock. She was desperate. So I said to Stamos, "What's happening? Why isn't money being given?" And he said, "Well, that's a terrible thing," he said. "Well, I don't know," he said. "I bring it up [inaudible], because you keep reminding me. And I'll bring it up at the meeting. And [inaudible] myself, all right, all right, all right. But it's up to—what happens? It never gets done, because [inaudible]." So after asking a few times, I then went to my own bank, took my own money out of [inaudible] and sent to her. I don't believe anybody sent it to her, because, when she died, a got a letter from her lawyer asking me for $1,000. So I don't know who was to blame for that not functioning.

[00:20:59.93]

PHYLLIS TUCHMAN: Yeah, but having known Mark Rothko all those years, are you surprised that something like that happened?

[00:21:07.28]

ESTHER GOTTLIEB: Yes. I'm surprised that it didn't function.

[00:21:10.13]

PHYLLIS TUCHMAN: Oh, okay.

[00:21:10.94]

ESTHER GOTTLIEB: That's my opinion.

[00:21:13.16]

PHYLLIS TUCHMAN: Yeah. That's interesting. And as I'm saying that, now, I could be—I suddenly remember Herbert Ferber, his role in it. Now, I've just realized that he wrote that piece and the eulogy in the *Times* when Mr. Gottlieb died. And I haven't asked you at all about Herbert and Rothko.

[00:21:35.35]

ESTHER GOTTLIEB: Well, yes, I mean, Herbert—we used to go to Herbert's house. That was very pleasant. I know he had some beautiful Rothkos. We had [inaudible].

[00:21:52.56]

PHYLLIS TUCHMAN: Oh, he had a wonderful rock. I loved it. It was beautiful rock. You know the one that was [inaudible] the painting?

[00:21:59.04]

ESTHER GOTTLIEB: No, well, [inaudible]. Anyway, now, the way they maligned Herbert, I mean people in the art world, all those people. I mean, I thought it was outrageous. I wonder if I hadn't—I don't [inaudible]. If there's any friendship between their children, I don't see it.

[00:22:39.47]

PHYLLIS TUCHMAN: When you hear the name, "Mark Rothko," or you see a painting by Mark Rothko, what comes to your mind? What kind of image?

[00:22:50.57]

ESTHER GOTTLIEB: What kind of an image? As far as the fact that I know his character and know what some of the problems that existed, it doesn't manifest itself in his painting. I mean the paintings are serene, I would say almost religious. Talking about religious paintings—I mean, this is all just—when Adolph was working with Kootz, and Kootz got these projects, and the first one, a synagogue was being built in Milburn, and Adolph did the curtain.

[00:23:27.35]

PHYLLIS TUCHMAN: Yeah.

[00:23:28.52]

ESTHER GOTTLIEB: And Herbert did a piece of sculpture. And Motherwell did a wall thing. Mark, he was furious. "The idea! I would never do anything for any religious—Anyway, what's that got to do with our—" Oh, he carried on so. And then, you know, then when he began spinning those—he spent over a year working on those paintings.

[00:23:57.54]

PHYLLIS TUCHMAN: Yeah.

[00:23:58.20]

ESTHER GOTTLIEB: I haven't seen the temple. Have you seen it? What we all said, all the people in the art world who knew Mark, and knew Barney, and knew the problems said, "Poor Mark. He would roll over in his grave if he knew they were putting that Newman in." Well, that thing is too bad, because I think, very likely, if the architect, Philip Johnson had been—continued to be connected with it, it would have been something. From what I've read about him, what photographs I've seen of it I don't think it's successful. It's too bad.

[00:24:36.07]

PHYLLIS TUCHMAN: Is there any one particular endearing quality of Mark Rothko's that you remember?

[00:24:49.67]

ESTHER GOTTLIEB: What surprises me—I mean, I'm trying to decide what it is. But to talk about his violence and his unpredictability. And I mean, I always thought he was a quiet and sweet man, never ever felt that he was violent or irascible.

[00:25:24.52]

PHYLLIS TUCHMAN: Yeah. Yeah.

[00:25:26.50]

ESTHER GOTTLIEB: But you see what happened is, as I understand—I didn't see him in his latter years, but he became very much disturbed at the younger painters, whose work was so isolated from what he interested in, were making it in the art world. And he felt that he was being superseded. And Adolph said, "We're not. We're not. We're on a different plane." But he was so—Adolph, he would tell me about how he would get so excited.

He was so angry because that junk, so to speak, was making it the art world. And Adolph said, "What you should do, Mark, is go downtown and meet some of those people. They have great admiration for us. You really don't know." And he went, but whether or not he was convinced, I don't know. I remember Adolph talked about how angry Mark was. But I was talking to this friend of mine, who said that she used to teach with Mark. She taught [inaudible]. Her impression of him is that he's very gentle, kind man. She used to work with him.

[00:26:48.35]

PHYLLIS TUCHMAN: And that was yours. And that was your impression, too.

[00:26:51.77]

ESTHER GOTTLIEB: Yeah. Yeah. Well, I mean, I didn't think it was—I mean, I was—how should I say—distressed when he and Mell weren't making it. Mell really tried. And Stamos was trying so much to get him to get to go to a sobriety clinic. But Mark went to live in the studio. And Mark had been very ill, and she had nursed him. And then when he took up with his new life, I began to lose my faith. I found it very distressing. [Inaudible]. I don't think—that he also had gotten—I don't know how I know about he and his brother. He idolized the—[inaudible]. It distressed him.

[00:28:12.94]

PHYLLIS TUCHMAN: If you could have written a novel about Mark Rothko in 1932—if you could have written a book about what would lie ahead of him, do you think you never could have imagined?

[00:28:27.77]

ESTHER GOTTLIEB: Well, no. I would not have anticipated any of these things. No, I mean, we sort of admired his independence. When he was told—he did the murals for the—

[00:28:44.20]

PHYLLIS TUCHMAN: The Four Seasons.

[00:28:45.18]

ESTHER GOTTLIEB: —Four Seasons, he was told it was to be a private dining room. Then when it wasn't a private dining room, and he took them, didn't let them hang them. And I thought that took real courage. And I was very pleased. And shortly thereafter, I went to Massachusetts, and I made a point of going to Harvard [inaudible]. And I was horrified that those paintings were allowed to be in that small room, and the chairs were pushed back. And I'm thinking, what happened to them?

[00:29:17.03]

PHYLLIS TUCHMAN: I think they were restored. I saw them, and they looked terribly

damaged. The chairs, the size of the room is just what you described.

[00:29:23.04]

ESTHER GOTTLIEB: Yes. And I was so distressed. I mean they are still paintings—

[00:29:26.58]

PHYLLIS TUCHMAN: No, I think they were in the show at the Guggenheim. They were restored.

[00:29:31.26]

ESTHER GOTTLIEB: Oh, yes, they were downstairs. That's right. I remember. I remember. That's right. That's right. But I remember how upset I was. He couldn't have seen these. He couldn't have seen the room and seen the setup. Perhaps, maybe he had seen it, and that's why he turned down the [inaudible], now that I'm talking about it.

[00:29:50.26]

PHYLLIS TUCHMAN: No, that was years later. That was several years later.

[00:29:55.48]

ESTHER GOTTLIEB: He just didn't see it. It's very—you know, artists, when they're working, they're working to express something they feel. And they can't think about what's going to be, where it's going to go, or that it's going be for a certain spot. That's why when Adolph did the work he did in stained glass, [inaudible], that he didn't do a painting in the studio and then try to sell it to that. Because he designed something, worked on [inaudible] that stained glass we saw. I took a leave from school, and we spent a few years doing that.

[00:30:39.50]

I say, "we," because I sat with him every place he went to get and to pick out the glass. I mean, I remember, he was at his drawing board, and I had a little board in front of him. And I was making the square, squaring off the paper, you know, where the windows were and how they were going to be.

[00:30:54.21]

PHYLLIS TUCHMAN: Yeah.

[00:30:56.15]

ESTHER GOTTLIEB: But I was so distressed when they tore the building down. [Inaudible].

[00:31:07.57]

PHYLLIS TUCHMAN: You know, now they've put them on the [inaudible].

[00:31:10.76]

ESTHER GOTTLIEB: I haven't seen the building since it's been finished, the building of that [inaudible]. When I heard about it, and I went there, they already had the downstairs chapel in. And I said, "That's not where a stained glass should be seen." And in addition—

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[END OF INTERVIEW.]