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Oral History interview with Miyoko Ito, 1978
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Transcript

Preface

**ORAL HISTORY INTERVIEW WITH MYOKO ITO
AT THE OXBOW SUMMER SCHOOL OF PAINTING
SAUGATUCK, MICHIGAN
JULY 20, 1978**

Interview

DB: DENNIS BARRIE

MI: MYOKO ITO

[SIDE 1]

DB: This is Dennis Barrie and I'm here in the studio at Oxbow with Myoko Ito, a Chicago painter. The date is July 20, 1978. Today I'd like to talk to Myo about her life and career and her work. So I thought we'd just start out with some things about your background, your family. Now I understand you were born in Berkeley, California?

MI: Correct.

DB: Could you give us a little background about your family?

MI: My family - yes. My father is a very unique man. He came to this country from Japan sometime in the late nineteenth century as a very young child, something like ten years old. He came with a group of young men more into seventeen, eighteen, nineteen years old. In a way, he ran away from home. Fortunately, he found his way to Vallejo, California and he was taken in by a church. A church sheltered him. Of course, it wasn't all that nice; he was a houseboy in other words. But it was a safe place. He went to Vallejo High School. Again, that was not an easy thing to do because the language is totally different, especially in the nineteenth century. But he did graduate from Vallejo High School. By then, he had almost forgotten Japanese because he was among . . .

DB: Foreign-speaking people.

MI: Yes. And there was one Japanese restaurateur who took a liking to him. My father expressed a desire to go to the University of California at Berkeley. And this wonderful man said he would lend him the money to put him through Berkeley. Now Berkeley has tuition for non-nationals or even non-Californians but they put away the rule and let him enter Berkeley. I don't know exactly what year this was but it was going into the twentieth century. He majored in psychology and I think he graduated, oh, sometime . . . I think he got his master's degree around 1914, again in psychology. And around then I think he went back to Japan once in that long period and, of course, his language came back speaking. Of course they had marriage on their mind all this time but he was able to . . . no, that's not true. He was the oldest son and he had no right running away.

DB: Was that considered very bad . . . ?

MI: Yes. The oldest son takes the name of the family. And he met his cousin, my mother. In those days -- and it still is done now -- as in Greek families, in order to preserve . . . We come from a humble family, nevertheless they wanted to preserve whatever they had. It was arranged that they get married. In a way, it was my mother's choice, too. She was a schoolteacher and there was another schoolteacher who liked her but she preferred her cousin. My father was back in this country and my mother made the trip here. Now she was a courageous person to leave provincial Japan in that year 1914 and make the trip all the way across. Even going from the province where she grew up in Tokyo or Yokohama, a port of departure, is a tremendous thing. So in 1914, she joined my father. I'm probably getting all the years mixed up but 1914 somehow is very important. I have a feeling he did get his master's around 1914. Also, that was the beginning of the war of this country with Germany. They were married; the marriage record is in Japan. I was born in 1918 which, again, is very significant because that was the year when the Armistice was signed. I was born in April. somehow my earliest recollection is November 11 simply because my parents talked about it so much. And I do have a vague memory of being downtown in Berkeley and people shouting and celebrating the end of the war. My sister came along two years later. And I didn't know it then, but I think my mother was pregnant with a third child. They had trouble finding a place to live so my father said, "Why not go to Japan?" You see, in those days all Japanese, as well as other immigrants, thought they would make it big in this country and go back. But it wasn't possible with my father almost forgetting Japanese. But anyway, my sister and I were taken to Japan again to this provincial town. The nearest big city to it is Nagoya. 1923 again is a very significant year. We got to Yokohama just the day before the

biggest earthquake which was a disaster second to the atom bomb. We made friends on the boat and somehow we all stayed in the same inn. Fortunately, my uncle from the province came to get us one night before the earthquake and we escaped death. But I do remember in the country running outside because, you know, it shook all Japan. I have a very clear recollection of that.

DB: It must have been very scary.

MI: Yes. Then we were there to stay for the birth of the baby and the baby was stillborn. Everything was terribly traumatic for me. Going to school was very traumatic.

DB: Had you gone to an American school?

MI: No, no. You see, I was five years old. Although my language was entirely Japanese; I knew a few English words, so I had no trouble with that. but I was very, very ill, extremely ill, to the point that I couldn't walk any more. And, although my mother seems very educated because she's a reader -- she reads a great deal -- but when it comes to things like medicine, science Recently I asked her what was wrong with me and she said, "Oh, you had chicken pox that didn't heal right." Well, I couldn't accept that -- that's not the answer. Finally my psychiatrist, my present psychiatrist, said I probably ha a childhood nervous breakdown similar to the one Mishima had. I read his biography recently; the one written by that English journalist, and he also had something very similar to that when he was five years old and taken away from his mother to be raised by his grandmother. His grandmother never trusted his own mother.

DB: How long did you stay in Japan?

MI: For five years. The school was both traumatic and very good too. It was very wonderful. It was the beginning of the imperialistic era; it was very military and very athletic and all that. At the same time, it was very art-minded.

DB: Oh, it was!

MI: Yes, extremely so. It was both painful and very enjoyable. Those five years are the roots of what I am right now.

DB: Why do you say that? I mean . . . ?

MI: Because there was that running around the track for something like -- oh, I don't know how many miles -- which seemed so painful when you're sick. I couldn't keep up. At the same time there was that calligraphy going on and there was a great deal of creative writing, also a lot of art work. You know, even in first grade, second grade, we were taken outdoors to do landscape painting and I just really shone in that direction. Even though I was not very strong physically, I remember my calligraphy teacher saying, "Oh, you write like a man" which was a big compliment. I was very vigorous in my calligraphy. And then in my compositions I was the one who was always chosen to read my composition. So it was plus and minus all the way through.

DB: I think that's very interesting that they were doing such extensive art work in those early days.

MI: They were. In Japan schools are very excellent. Under the national government you get pretty much uniform education no matter where you are, whether you are in the country or in the city. In the city, rich people go to private schools. But this was public school, naturally. School is very important. Even though a village may be shabby, they build beautiful schools. It was the ear when they said they were going to change from their way of counting to the metric system. That's what we're talking about right now. And it was so efficient. I was in the third grade. In a matter of a month or two, that whole thing was switched. Instructors went to get instruction and everybody changed. When people went to shop, they no longer said this and that; they asked for things in centimeters just like when you shop in Mexico, you have to do that.

DB: Right.

MI: At home they might be counting in the old way but when they went to shop they had to use the metric system. Now in those days public school was six years. That was mandatory. And I remember that there were no really problem children, you know, really problem children. There were excellent students and average students.

DB: Education was very stressed in the family?

MI: Yes. D: Was education stressed for women too?

MI: Let's see, it was coeducational maybe in the first and second and at a certain point -- I think I went all the way with coeducation for me. I went up to the fourth grade; but after the fourth grade I think they probably separated. Sixth grade is a very important grade because people who are going on to secondary school really

get intensive training, private training, from the instructors.

DB: Would you say you became interested in art at that point.?

MI: It was going both ways. But the turning point was coming to this country. The doctor said, "If you don't take this child out of this country, she'll just have tuberculosis" even though I did not have tuberculosis; but that was the dread disease just as cancer is the dread disease in this country right now. so I was returned to Berkeley. And I saw my father. He had visited Japan within that period of five years. My father was never really my father in that, you know, he grew up all by himself and he didn't know how to treat a child; and I didn't know how to behave as a child. And in those five years that I was really sic, I was taken care of by my grandmother who was really a stepmother. She was illiterate. She was a very, very remarkable person. She did not want anyone to say that she was a stepmother. Even though she was illiterate, she had respect for reading, writing and schooling. And she had secretly saved money so that my mother could become a schoolteacher. And, humble as they were, she tried to make my mother a lady. So she did go to one of those schools which prepare one for teaching and my mother just loved teaching. So, in a way I learned to read very early, even before And here I am in bed and my grandmother is taking care of the reading literature that I'm not half being able to look at. It was very strange.

DB: When you came back to California, did your whole family come with you?

MI: Well, my grandmother could not come. Also, my mother had a terrible time coming because there was the gentlemen's agreement . . . something like

DB: Very famous, yes. I think it was 1924.

MI: Yes, you're right. It was 1924. My mother was able to come back because my father happened to be working for a Japanese firm; it was sort of a businessman transaction that she was allowed to come out. so, you know, in a way, if you think deeply, my parents were very irresponsible because that stillborn child, a boy, would not be an American national. You see, my sister and I were born nationals so there was no problem. The problem was with my mother. but that boy would be even more a problem.

DB: Yes, very much so. so how did

MI: That was 1918 [Noise interfering] 10 years old.

DB: 1928.

MI: [More noise] Eight is a magical number. And I was enrolled in school in Berkeley. My father, even though he had majored in psychology, was not much of a psychologist. Or maybe he was too protective. I was very small for my age and my sister, if anything, was big for her age. As a child, you hear grownups say things that children are not supposed to hear but I had always heard. "Oh, the big one is the younger one; the one that talks more is the younger one." And at the same time I made great friends with grownups because I didn't get in their way; I was grownup at the same time. I was not very talkative. Now I had trouble learning English. I was ten and not exactly going into uberty but I was much more self-conscious than an eight-year old. My sister learned English immediately, or it seemed almost immediately. I really did not digest English until I was fourteen. In order to do that I had to suppress Japanese altogether; I just simply stopped speaking Japanese. So out went the language part of my direction and I became a visual person.

DB: That's an interesting idea. Your natural language was kind of suppressed and

MI: Still I was very fond of reading and I was bilingual so far as reading was concerned. I read a great deal in Japanese all through high school, all through college. My mother kept an awful lot of classical, international, sort of French literature, also Russian. And I read many of those in English. I'm sure they were translated into English and then to Japanese so I read most of those in Japanese.

DB: That's interesting.

MI: And now Russian literature was very difficult because of the

DB: But you did read it?

MI: Yes, I did. I read The Count of Monte Cristo in Japanese.

DB: Now you say that you turned to the visual other than you kept your reading, but what happened when, as you say, you turned to the visual?

MI: Oh, well, I was a shining star in drawing and painting which was not as extensive as it was in Japan; you

know, in Japan it's very important. In Berkeley again I received a very good education even though I went to public school. We lived in a sort of segregated neighborhood. It was predominantly black.

DB: Oh!

MI: About a third Japanese and very few whites and the whites were Portuguese. Yet we had the most marvelous, dedicated, spinster schoolteachers. All of them had master's degrees from Berkeley. Very dedicated. So, in spite of everything, I have a very good education. Although we had so-called "visual art" maybe once or twice a week, it got less and less as the grades went on.

DB: It was sort of de-emphasized.

MI: Yes.

DB: Was anybody very influential in this period? Were there any teachers that visually were . . . ?

MI: Not really, except that I guess I was competitive; I guess from kicking ball I was so much better.

DB: You went to high school in Berkeley too?

MI: I went to junior high school. I think it's good to go to many schools. Against my daughter who went to Lass (?) School from what -- nursery school all the way through high school. I went to junior high school which again was really excellent. In junior high school I played the violin because my father played the violin. Oh, just terribly but I really enjoyed playing the violin in the orchestra. I remember progressing from the last seat in the first violins section all the way to being concertmaster simply by seniority; I wasn't any good at all. The girl who left before me was an excellent musician from a Jewish family. I had the first seat simply because she graduated.

DB: That is funny. Sometimes that works that way to our advantage.

MI: Even though the school was predominantly black and a few whites, the students -- and this was in the seventh grade -- had a choice of Latin, Greek and French. I took Latin, which was wrong. I simply took it because my father said it would help my English. Well, it made me understand English but in terms of painting I should have Well, I did have French, too; I had three years of French, but I was not very good at it. I should have continued with French. Then I went to Berkeley High School

DB: Berkeley had just one high school?

MI: One high school. And again it's very good. And in a way not very fair either because it's very much IQ-oriented. We were tested and we were tested and, like the French, by the time you get to high school your destiny is pretty much made up for you.

DB: So was yours made up for you?

MI: I think so. You're divided into X, Y, Z. X people all take college preparatory course. Y people take sort of secretarial. And Z would be industrial but then even in industrial they have extra laboratory, you know, machine shop and all that sort of thing. I still don't think -- I think it's right and it's wrong. I don't know; it's hard to tell, really. Your potential is never explored.

DB: Right. You're just categorized.

MI: And when you're categorized, you sort of remain in that category somehow.

DB: Yes, it affects your thinking too. You're supposed to be a factory worker so therefore

MI: Yes. It's too bad.

DB: So you were put in the X category, weren't you?

MI: Yes. I enjoyed Berkeley High School very much, not so much in a social way, but again I was a sort of achiever, over-achiever, I guess. I'm simply . . . I did in the IQ simply by working hard. I remember math and science were just really not very easy for me; I really had to work hard. There was an awful lot of painting.

DB: Was there a lot of painting?

MI: Yes, pretty much. I did all I could take. And music too. But these did not count as college preparatory so more and more I had to sort of cut down. And also I was trying to skip a year, and I could have skipped a year except for one stupid sort of social course, housekeeping course. For that I had to stay another six months. In

the meanwhile, one summer when i was in high school I went to the California College of Arts and Crafts in Oakland. I enjoyed it very much. I thought I would like to go to an art school instead of to a university. But my parents, being university-oriented, said, "Oh, you could go to all the art schools you want after you go to Berkeley." But, being in your teens, you don't think that way. So I applied for a scholarship at Oakland Arts and Crafts, now called the California College of Arts and Crafts. I was made an alternate and I did not get the scholarship. Which turned out to be just fine because Berkeley was not what I thought it was. It had a very small department. I was a sort of total transformation would be so ignored and such an achiever; to get attention in high school -- it was instant attention only in art .

DB: That's very good. So Berkeley had a very small department?

MI: Oh, yes. I understand it's still relatively small. And also my parents said, "Oh, you must go to Berkeley because it's a happy hunting ground," meaning I would find my potential husband. And that happened within three days.

DB: Did it? You met your husband within three days?

MI: Something like that; within a very short period.

DB: Then they were right; they were definitely right.

MI: Yes. It's not really as . . . I used to bring young men and we'd go dancing. One day I said, "This time I'll bring a man that you will approve of." They certainly were struck by him because he was bi-lingual, he was from San Francisco, like me he was behind in school, and he was much more mature and sophisticated in a social way. Well, because they had marriage in mind, they immediately started investigating. Now I'm going to tell everything because I really don't care.

DB: Okay.

MI: Well, they found out that his older brother had married a pariah, meaning untouchable. Now, as humble as we are, humble immigrants, that cannot be. They said, "Never see him again." Well, the heck with that, why did we come to this country, and who are we?

DB: Right.

MI: I left home. And I worked my way through college. I did agree, I said, "I'll never see him again," but I was seeing him all the time.

DB: so you left and you worked on your own?

MI: Yes. And it wasn't that difficult. That sounds like a big step but we all did that. Tuition was very low; there was something called incidental fees which was something like nineteen dollars which probably went for towel money if we went swimming. It was a wonderful art department. But English was my minor and that was too big for me. At Berkeley the classes were hundreds and you would have big name instructors. It was like a theatre. Every so many weeks you would meet with section leaders some of whom were working for a doctorate who would meet with small groups. But it was just inadequate. And there was just too much reading combined with painting. Now for painting you get the same credit as for gymnastics. You could paint for three hours and you would get very small credits.

DB: Was painting your major?

MI: Yes, painting was my major. And we did an awful lot of extra painting; any extra time we had we would go back and paint.

DB: Were there studio facilities?

MI: Oh, we just set up ourselves in the basement. A group of us got together -- the "Corps of Serious Painters" -- got in cahoots with the janitor and that sort of thing.

DB: How big was this Corps of Serious Painters?

MI: Not big, maybe ten, twelve. From that group there are very few left who survived in the sense of surviving to paint the rest of their lives. I don't know if you know Ynez Johnston or not; I've seen her name occasionally.

DB: Yes, I see it.

MI: And Leonard Edmondson; I see his name occasionally.

DB: I don't know him but I have seen her name. Who were the instructors at Berkeley then?

MI: Erie Loran, the Cezanne man. And Worth Ryder who is deceased. Now Worth Ryder was the man responsible for bringing Hans Hofmann to this country in the Thirties. Hans Hofmann did not settle on the West Coast; he settled in the East. But he had not ever forgotten Worth Ryder. Therefore he left his estate to Berkeley and therefore the Cezanne Museum. But Worth Ryder had died so it was Erie Loran who carried on and saw to it that the museum was built.

DB: Did you work with both of them?

MI: Yes. Worth Ryder taught art history in a very romantic way.

DB: Oh really?

MI: And he was such a charming man. When you're impressionable and young and when a teacher is romantic, you know, you swallow everything; it's not very difficult to swallow. It was a very swift course. He just started with the cave man and went all the way to Picasso in something like . . .

DB: Six weeks, eh?

MI: . . . in one semester.

DB: In one semester, say, three or four months.

MI: But it just has remained with me the rest of my life. It was taught in the manner of El Greco, Cezanne and cubism, which is very logical. He also taught . . . well, what was called laboratory work; he did teach painting and drawing, too. Everything done in a classroom is called laboratory work. But my greatest influence was a fellow called John Haley. Now I was born into . . . I went to school at the height of what was called the watercolor period. In Berkeley it was called the Berkeley School -- no, the Bay Region School of Water Color or the Berkeley School of Water Color. And in Los Angeles there was Millard Sheets doing sort of realistic rather slick watercolors. On the East Coast, New York and New England it was John Marin. And in Chicago it was Francis Chapin. So I was very water color oriented. At the same time I was trying to paint oils but then, in a way, all my instructors were turning up their noses on oils and that's what I have . . .

DB: They were?

MI: It gave me sort of, you know, insecurity against oil painting especially Cezanne who painted oils in a manner of water colors; you know, they are very . . .

DB: Yes, that's interesting. I didn't realize it was that extensive that they were really turning their backs on oil painting.

MI: Yes. And this man John Haley did water colors which on the surface looked very much like Dufy's but structured in a Hans Hofmann way, were very structural. People only saw the surface. They'd say, "Ah, Dufy!" But it was very structural.

DB: Did you watch him build this?

MI: Yes. They were done outdoors. We did an awful lot of outdoor painting in water color.

DB: How would you do it -- on canvas and things like that? Or . . . ?

MI: Mostly landscapes and also architectural.

DB: Now did you enjoy water colors -- did you enjoy this whole . . . ?

MI: I did then because it was probably group activity. Also, I think San Francisco was very fortunate. This is really ancient history to you. There was the first big Picasso show at The Museum of Modern Art. Do you know the year? 19??

DB: You mean the year in New York or in San Francisco?

MI: It was right after Guernica -- do you remember the year in . . . 1939 or 1940?

DB: I was going to say 1939.

MI: Yes, 1939. And Guernica was painted in 1938?

DB: Yes, I think that's right -- 1938.

MI: I remember . . . you see, I was not a graduate student and I was pretty young but then they allowed me, you see, simply because Well, that's another thing. You know, you cannot help but be race conscious when you're segregated, and it's a total opposite; you know. I'm more exotic because I am Japanese -- so it's a total contradiction. It's being elevated because of my race. So I was, you know, sort of like a spoiled brat. In the art department, I was always allowed to go wherever I wanted to, whereas other people were not allowed to. I happened to be in the faculty room -- and I had no business being there -- and I was riffling through some photographs and they were photographs of Guernica. I didn't know exactly what that was. You know, high school education is not that extensive. I remember one of the instructors coming back and saying, "Oh, Myo, don't they scare you" I didn't say yes or no and I didn't know exactly what they were. I did go to see the Picasso show and I really was taken . . . I am very much a Matisse and Picasso person. Some people could never accept that. With me it was a total acceptance in a very short period, within two weeks.

DB: That really is a short period. Did you begin then finding material on Picasso?

MI: Oh, very much so.

DB: Where did you see this Picasso show that you went to?

MI: At the San Francisco Memorial

DB: Oh, yes.

MI: There was a lady curator. I've forgotten her name. She was very famous. She's deceased now, I'm sure. Many of the shows at The Museum of Modern Art bypassed Chicago but came to San Francisco. So San Francisco was very fortunate. And also we saw the Paul Klee show within a few years after his death.

DB: Oh! That must have been . . . that was an impressive show.

MI: Yes. And, oh, the whole student body was taken by Paul Klee. I wasn't that taken by it; maybe because everyone was taken. It was a sort of reaction. And you must realize that it was at the height of a regional period.

DB: I was just going to mention that. It seems to me that in some ways Berkeley was getting more influences and more modern painters than, say, a place like Chicago which was just overwhelmed by Regionalism.

MI: Thomas Benton had the strength of de Kooning at that period. But the art department there was totally snobbish about all that. It was not the art department who invited Thomas Benton or Grant Wood to speak; it was probably the sociology department. And we would go and have a very sort of snobbish attitude toward it. Which I take back because I don't think that way any more at all; I don't really. But when you're young, everything is black and white.

DB: Yes, I know. So they were there. Was the faculty that way too? Would the faculty reject people like Grant Wood or Benton?

MI: Yes. It was totally French-oriented.

DB: I see.

MI: Now I don't know where Worth Ryder came from. But I know that John Haley and Erle Loran came from Minneapolis; they had their under-graduate work there. Erle Loran had a fellowship to go and live in Cezanne's house to write that book.

DB: That's interesting. So what was your work like as a student?

MI: It was pretty much like John Haley's work; Dufy on the outside, very structured on the interior, but my colors were not the same as John Haley's. Oh, similar but not quite the same. But I did emulate him very much.

DB: And this was water color?

MI: It was called gouache; it was gouache. I think I used clear water color and just added white.

DB: Of your Japanese experience, did you think there was any influence on your work at that point? Or was it basically . . . ?

MI: I wasn't conscious of it but I'm sure there was.

DB: Were you trying to emulate, say, the work of Picasso or Cezanne or anything like that?

MI: No. Cezanne and Picasso gave me understanding. But there always was Hofmann, which I wasn't conscious of but I think it was conscious on the part of my instructors. As old as I am, I'm a grandchild of Hofmann. Can you believe it? Not ever having met him but, you know, he has such tremendous far-reaching influence on almost everyone in this country.

DB: Oh, I can see that in your work. Yes, he was an amazing teacher. So you never ever worked with him?

MI: No, I never met him. And I don't particularly . . . I'm not attracted to his painting but he must have been a spectacular instructor.

DB: If you had to appraise your education at Berkeley, would you say that it was a pretty good one?

MI: It was very good. I am still what I was at Berkeley developed.

DB: And you had very little disappointment in what you took out of the art department? You feel it was good and valuable and that they were . . . ?

MI: I was oriented there and I remain in that direction.

DB: Again I think it is unusual because so many people were involved with the Regional School or in Social Realism during that period and to have a school with classes a little more avant-garde in methodology and so forth was fascinating. I didn't know Berkeley was like that.

MI: Then I finally came to my senior year and World War II broke out and we were to go to a camp.

DB: I was wondering if you had to.

MI: In the meanwhile, you know, I was sort of sneaking out with my husband all the time. I really blame my parents because they had really cheated me out of four years of normal courtship. But at the same time I was never lonely because I was socially accepted by the art department. At the same time it's different from acceptance for my daughter at Lass (?) School in Chicago. Even though I was totally accepted in school, I was never invited to their homes. And I understand that because, you know, they might have a Japanese gardener or Japanese servant waiting on us, a lack of sensitivity. So it was different. but my daughter is, if anything, I won't say totally -- she was always invited to their homes and the man she has lived with has always been Caucasian.

DB: Were you forced to leave?

MI: Yes -- well, we weren't really forced. There was given us so many days to leave the Coast. I very much understand the Jews in Germany; it's a sort of group thing.

DB: Did they say you had to go to the camp? Or could you just go anywhere away from the West Coast?

MI: Before we went to the camp, there were so many days that we could leave, pack up and just leave and go East or West. There was a territory that was off limits. But those people did not fare too well except those people that went to New York or some cosmopolitan area like that. We just didn't have the foresight, you see. Most of us -- the greatest number of people were my age, just out of school -- then there were parents who were going into middle age or old age.

DB: Had you finished school?

MI: No. I was in the middle of my senior year. When things like that happen, people become ever closer and I was sheltered even more. Lionel Venturi, the historian, was there as a visiting instructor. I didn't know how important he was then but, you know, we were all very social. Now here he was an Italian national free to go wherever he wanted; but limit was put on me. Eight o'clock was curfew; I could not travel so many distance. So, because of me, all the boys were held [not clear] . And somehow because of the war people became so much closer and there were more . . . than ever before and there were more contacts with these drug stores, sort of inner contacts, not only for me but for others, too, for just a short period. It was less than six months, really, but we were very close.

DB: Why did you decide to leave Berkeley?

MI: To go to camp?

DB: No. Didn't you go . . . ? When did you go to Chicago? Maybe I . . .

MI: Well, you're way ahead.

DB: I'm way ahead. I'm sorry, I don't want to rush it at all. I misunderstood; I thought you went to Chicago.

MI: As far as timing is concerned, you're right; but so many things got crammed in in that short time.

DB: Tell me.

MI: See here, April 1942 we had to leave. So I said, "Unless we get married, we might be sent to different camps." We went to my parents and said we were going to get married anyway. Okay, they gave their consent. What else could they say? So we did go to the same camp. We were married on April 11 and, by the end of April, we were in camp at Camp Rann, which is a race track.

DB: Where was it at?

MI: Just off San Francisco. It was the first camp we went to. At Berkeley our quarter was over -- No, I got married April 11 and I guess I had to go to Berkeley for a few more classes -- well, from the eleventh to the end of the month. I was commuting. I had to have a pass to commute. In that short period, I remember one picnic they held for us in Pismo [Pismo?] Beach. Isn't that beautiful?

DB: Yes.

MI: It was a most beautiful picnic. And I guess we had to cross the Bridge. We met in Berkeley and we went from Berkeley or something like that. Anyway, they had to sort of hide me because we had passed the hour, I remember. I mean, you'll risk everything when you're young, as I recall. So, in a way, it was very sad but it was very

DB: You have good memories of it, too, in certain ways.

MI: Yes. So we evacuated at the end of April to Camp Rann. And here all these instructors would bring gifts. Well, there were food shortages all over anyway. But, you know, beautiful fruit. Especially Erle Loran, who used to dress like a dandy. He used to wear spats in the winter; he looked like an undertaker. I hope he doesn't Erle Loran. He was the last person I would think would bring anything all the way to a dusty camp. Here he came -- I happened to be away on the other side of the track; they could not find me. And Erle Loran was the only one who took the war seriously. He wanted us to make war posters. We simply refused. But at the same time he was such a generous person at heart. And he remained that kind of person the rest of his life. Well, I thought I had graduated, but I didn't know -- my diploma didn't come. They said they would graduate anyway in liberal arts without going through the final examination. So I thought I had graduated. Of course, they couldn't take risks with engineers and doctors and people like that. Nevertheless my diploma didn't come. Finally it came. It was sent to the wrong place. I think it was sent to my friend's, oh, as late as July, or maybe it was August. Not only did I graduate but I graduated with highest honors. And here I had no place to go and cry but to the ladies' room, and even there it wasn't private because there were no doors. I was very encouraged by that because it had nothing to do with grades. By the time I went to Berkeley I was no longer an achiever. I was just sort of a gentle lady, see. I did get very good grades in the art department. It was something that the faculty voted on, and I'm sure there were others more deserving that I in terms of grades but they had chosen me simply to encourage me. So I really was encouraged. In the meantime, my husband brought me -- he was very active in camp; he's a kind of leader kind of personality -- some papers to fill out distributed by a Quaker society, Friends Society. So I just sort of automatically filled out -- all students and pretend you're going to graduate school. It gave a choice of schools where I might go. I don't remember exactly but I did put down New York University and I think I did put down Yale. But one day I heard that Smith College would like me to come. In those days communication was not that good. Also, I was in another class. Also, the Rockies was something way, way beyond. It was not just . . . I didn't even know what Smith College was. My husband's sister said, "Oh, that's another fancy school like Mills College." We knew Mills because my husband's sister went there on a scholarship. So she -- this is going in another direction -- this explains why my husband was behind this school. She had a taste for Mills; she wanted to remain at Mills. So my husband worked in a grocery store to support her going through Mills. Now Mills is totally out of our class from his background, but just the same, because she started there, so she finished at Mills. And when she finished she said she would put my husband through school. He wanted to go to a business school because he was business-minded. She said, as my parents had said, you could have all the art school after Berkeley. Well, she simply had to say; go to Berkeley anyway. She said she would put him through; she would see that he got through. Of course he had to work part-time, too. So there was that exchange.

DB: So you had an offer from Smith College?

MI: Yes. And I thought it was a way of getting out of the camp. And it was time for another change. You see, Camp Rann is in a strategic place by the coast anyway, so we all had to be evacuated to an inner land like Utah. The rest of the people were going to Utah. I was let out, thinking that my husband would follow me within two or

three months. Oh, no, and, you know, here I am. I wasn't too picked up. I thought it was safe to look as young as possible -- I did look young anyway, -- and equipped with papers from the State Department, the Army, the Navy -- I don't know who he was but some security man came to get me in a truck and he saw me as far as a Friends Society place in San Francisco. They greeted me warmly. I had some hours left before my train would leave. There was Erle Loran, so I went across to say goodbye to Erle Loran. That was in September 1942. And I also saw my friend Irene Labore. If anything, she should have gotten the highest honors. She was Phi Beet Kappa. She was very gracious about it. We were very friendly. She took me to Erle Loran's house up in the hills. And that evening I left for Northampton and Smith College. And it's a good thing I wore pictures.

DB: That's probably a good idea. So you went on your own all the way to Smith; all the way to the East Coast?

MI: Yes. And I was not -- I am fragile but then when it comes to something like that, I'm one-track minded. I had no fear. And because I had no fear very few people bothered me except that, oh, the police or the stationmaster would say, "Why don't you get in the ladies' car for safety?" But I didn't want to get in there because it would be full of crying babies.

DB: Oh, did they have a car for women?

MI: Well, wait a minute -- because they were changing diapers, and all that facility was crowded anyway. But I flirted with soldiers and they were pretty good. And there were a few students. I'll never forget there were, oh, upper-class students going back to Dartmouth or Yale or wherever, and they were very kind. I remember changing trains in Chicago. Oh, yes, in a few hours I did quickly go through the Art Institute.

DB: Oh, you did!

MI: Yes. I distinctly remember this one boy going out of his way to get me on the right train, you know, something called pomy transfer. I think I got a train to Hartford, Connecticut, and in the evening I reached Northampton. There was a contingent waiting for me. The first question I was asked was, "Are you the daughter of Professor Itchihashi, the Orientalist from Stanford University?" I had to say, "I am only Mrs. Itchi Ito." Then when I got their cordial welcome I found out that I was the graduate department, only one.

DB: Really?

MI: I should have investigated all that. I didn't know any better. But it was all right.

DB: Was the graduate department in art?

MI: I was the only one. There was another one, a librarian, doing one in history. But actually there was no master's degree in painting.

DB: So what were you going to study?

MI: I wasn't studying anything. I did paint under a very novice instructor. We became good friends. If anything we were learning from each other.

DB: Yes. Who was the instructor?

MI: His name was George Cohen. He always gets confused with the one in Chicago. I think he's about to retire now because he's having a retrospective.

DB: From where?

MI: At Northampton. Smith College has a very good museum. But the time was not wasted because I went to paint on my own pretty much to be left alone. But spending two years was just too much although they were so gracious they wanted me to get the master's degree. Now my French was junior high school and very inadequate. They said they would get me a tutor. But I'm not very language-oriented. I decided I was not going to get cooped up in a library doing research. It was impossible, I felt. In a way they were disappointed but very, very helpful. I had applied for another fellowship from Berkeley, a graduate fellowship and they gave me one with which I could go any place I wanted to. But I couldn't go back there anyway. The instructors at Smith gave me a very good recommendation. Well, in the meanwhile there was all this trouble trying to get my husband out. I went to the FBI: wherever I could go, I did go. There was very little communication. See, it all came out very clearly. His name came under a very good American citizen, a leader and on another list of suspicious Japanese-Americans. He was always very business-minded. He was recommended as a sales agent for Japanese beer.

DB: That's why he was on this list.

MI: Oh, yes, he was a beer salesman.

DB: Under the aegis of a foreign power. Oh, that's interesting, that really is. So that's what made it impossible or difficult to get him out.

MI: In the meanwhile there was a contradiction at Smith, too. It was very much Friends, the Quakers and Kathleen was a Quaker. I was introduced to Quaker meetings and all that. At the same time, it was a training center for the Waves and there were all these Waves marching and they were really high society girls just out marching. Well, Smith is very academically high but in a way I was a little too grown up for all that. It was too much. I said I would leave.

DB: With the idea of going where?

MI: Well, again I had a very good friend, a foreign student from Switzerland. I think she was much older than I. I couldn't tell ages -- I still can't tell -- I think she was toward the thirties. She did her masters in Gruchstein (?) at Smith and I did have conversations on that. I should have taken a pep pill; then I would remember names much better.

DB: Oh, that's all right.

MI: If I had it here, I would take it, but I don't have it with me. Yes, I do have it. Do you mind shutting that off?

DB: Well, you know, we could . . . why don't we do this: we're almost done, we could do another one in a little while. How's that? Do you want to break for a little while?

MI: No, it's all right. I'm perfectly well. I have one here. I can only take half anyway. And maybe it won't work.

DB: You're doing fine.

MI: Anyway, at Smith when the warm weather came I did a big set of water colors in the style of Berkeley and this director of the museum said he would give me a show in their museum which was a very nice little museum. I had my show. And also it was a very exciting year because Tamayo was there to do the mural in the library. I watched him do that. I didn't get to talk to him.

DB: You did not talk to him?

MI: No. A water color was bought by a museum in Northampton -- the Smith Museum. The director bought one for himself. But I wasn't going to stay another year. So, because of this friend from Switzerland -- Heidi Specker - - who was going to do . . . to continue with Gertrude Stein at the University of Chicago . . . I don't know why she came here

DB: Your friend Heidi was going to the University of Chicago?

MI: She got her master's at Smith -- or did she get her master's . . . ? Yes, they have a master's program, yes, that's right. I was there to get a masters. You see, I get all confused; some girls' schools only go up to four years.

DB: So he went to Chicago and you . . . ?

MI: Yes. So I sort of . . . because of the connecting link I came here but I hardly saw her, really. But the connecting link is still there; I still correspond with her.

DB: But what were you going to do in Chicago? Why did you . . . ?

MI: Oh, the Art Institute and Francis Chapin. I saw a catalogue. Francis Chapin was in a group show at The Museum of Modern Art and, just by seeing his reproduction, I was impressed.

DB: So you thought you would . . . ?

MI: I'll have to take that back pretty soon, but I was very impressed. I had written to Francis Chapin. He said he doesn't like to teach and he's about to quit. But he was always very nice to me and I liked him very much.

DB: He taught for a long time. He said he didn't like to teach but he did teach for a long time.

MI: Oh, yes, he had a tremendous influence on people around here. And I was really sorry that, for some reason, I was not able to come to Oxbow when Mr. Chapin was the director. Just when Ellen Lanyon came was the heyday of Oxbow. There was someone called Babushka(?) who took his Guggenheim right here. And Vera Berdich was here. And, oh, just about everyone. And Joan Mitchell was here. There's something interesting about Joan Mitchell. You see, she was at Smith. She was a freshman. She's much younger than I am. She was probably ahead and I was being. She remembered me because I used to model. I remember passing her on the read here

in, oh, something like 1944 -- I came with someone just to visit -- and we talked for a short while. Joan remembered me. [END OF SIDE 1] [SIDE 2]

DB: So you passed her on the road?

MI: Joan remembered me since Smith but I knew Joan's name through the Art Institute.

DB: You met her here?

MI: Yes, we had a little conversation. I think that's the last I saw of Joan; that's a long time ago.

DB: So you never came out to Oxbow in that period as a student? You just sort of visited?

MI: No. I came in 1948 -- again "8".

DB:

MI: It was Cranbrook oriented very much into arts and crafts. And this was the leading studio, as I remember.

DB: In 1948?

MI: Yes.

DB: But in 1944 it was very much Chicago-oriented?

MI: Oh, yes, very much. There are periods when it shifted from Chicago to Champaign or Cranbrook.

DB: I think it's back to the Chicago period now. So when you went to Chicago it was with the idea that you would get what degree -- get your master's with . . . ?

MI: Well, you know they count everything all different. I didn't even rate a B.F.A. there after I was At Smith actually I did everything except write a thesis. And that's what kept me from getting a master's degree. And all that tutoring was in preparation for writing that. They're very particular about how it's written, the English part. Well, here I come to the Art Institute. I'm not even a B.F.A.

DB: Berkeley doesn't count?

MI: No. And then, well, the director told me, oh, I need some English and this and that. Well, so I did enroll in English classes at Y.W.C.A. college at night. But, oh good heavens, after painting all day, how could I concentrate on English? The first paper we had to write was on the strategic this and that about the War. I was totally unable to put anything into words even if I knew about it -- which I didn't know -- though I did remember the invasion of Normandy. So that went out of the window. I said, "No more degrees." So I have a degree from Berkeley and that's all.

DB: So you did study with Chapin though?

MI: No, never.

DB: You did not study with him?

MI: No. I just talked to him. Which was enough. Oh, sure, you know, talking and being with him was I did meet him, that's about all.

DB: Did you take any courses at all at . . . ?

MI: No. He was no longer there. You see, he just shifted in that very year.

DB: Well, how did you find Chicago?

MI: Oh, it was simply dismal. All the good boys were away fighting away. And here I descend there and it was just full of nuns in their habits; they wore habits in those days. Just leftovers. I only went there a year and one summer school. Again it was very generous. I received a tuition scholarship. Also, some lady who heard about me gave me three hundred dollars just for spending money. Almost too much generosity.

DB: Almost too much generosity?

MI: In a way it gives you a feeling of obligation. And then I don't dismiss lightly not getting a master's degree. I have a recurring dream to this day counting my credits to see if I can get a master's. I've been supported by so

many people toward that degree, which really means very little to me. It would if I needed to teach.

DB: Did you husband join you in Chicago? Did you husband follow?

MI: No. They moved to a second camp which was in Utah in the middle of the desert. It was called a relocation camp. He was let out to farm, he and five boys, totally city boys -- architects, my husband a businessman, one worked in a bank. They needed farmers so they took over farms and they harvested; they did the planting too. But he was not officially let out. He was simply being let out to do some work.

DB: So he was still there. So who did you meet? I know you met Don Baum when you first came to Chicago? What sort of atmosphere did you find?

MI: Oh, I could only go by asking people where I could stay. Living quarters were very hard to find. I did find a place for a short period on East Walton. Then this lady was pushing a buggy, another lady was pushing a buggy and they said, "There's this Japanese girl," and so and so and they said, "Oh, there's a place at 645, a big house, it's very arty and all the artists stay there." So I moved there immediately.

DB: And it was very arty?

MI: Oh, extremely arty. And there were two factions. You see, Don Baum went to the Moholy-Nagy School and I went to the Art Institute. But it didn't keep us from being friendly.

DB: Those were the factions -- the New Bauhaus people and the Art Institute people.

MI: Yes. And it was very good for me to visit the Bauhaus because my history of architecture teacher was from the Bauhaus and he was a brilliant man. In a matter of something like six months he learned English well enough to give a lecture course.

DB: Was he a German?

MI: A German young man. At the same time he was teaching at Mills College. One summer there was something called -- I don't know what the name was -- a Bauhaus at Mills -- and it was such a big thing. They moved the whole school to Mills for one summer. I was full of Bauhaus in my head anyway. So it was interesting for me to visit Bauhaus. It was quartered in the Chez Paris night club which was no longer a night club.

DB: I didn't know that.

MI: And I did meet Moholy-Nagy and did talk with him. I remember visiting . . . Don Baum lived above me at 625 North Michigan and they would always come up to Moholy's there. It was a very short one year but it was such an interesting year. Don and I could just go over and over and over innumerable times the things that happened in that short one year; it was even less than a year. In the meanwhile Don sort of disappeared. He did not graduate from the Institute of Design. He could probably tell you more in detail. He went to the University of Chicago. Then in 1945 my husband joined me. There were periods of my visiting him on the farm and all that. And Utah is a beautiful place.

DB: Yes.

MI: It's extremely beautiful. Provo, Utah is where the university is.

DB: There's not much to do there, though.

MI: No, but again it was a good place to paint water colors outdoors. In 1948 when I came here -- 1948 and 1949 -- was the last of my water color period. Instead of its becoming easier and easier, it got harder and harder.

DB: Why?

MI: I really don't know. Maybe I was trying to do more than my capacity. Anyway, I would do a hundred and I would just get two or three that I would be willing to show. But I did do one major water color that pleased me which was accepted at the Metropolitan Museum. They had a juried water color show. And I still have that. I wish I had . . . I'm going to make a slide of that. It was painted here. I have to go back because, even though I was perfectly aware of Paul Klee, I didn't even know Vuillard and Bonnard. They were Impressionists but somehow they got stranded some place. When I went to Smith, I saw my first Bonnard and it's not a very good Bonnard but I just fell in love with it. I remember the instructor saying, "This is a bad Bonnard," and why and whyfor. But I still loved it. So when I came here, I was doing sort of structured Bonnard. I was still too historian to know kind of structured because all the exterior was very Bonnard. And this is very Bonnard; you can see Bonnard all over it. Especially these windows, French windows that open this way and I would set up a still life. There used to be a barn where we used to paint and there was a window like that. I remember setting up a still life with water

behind, a typical French

DB:

MI: Yes.

DB: So in 1948 it was toward the end of your water color period that you had one accepted?

MI: Yes. The show came much later though. I don't remember the year of the show.

DB: So what were you moving into? Were you moving into . . . ?

MI: Well, I was introduced to lithography here. I wasn't feeling up to painting that day. I said, "I'm not feeling well." Well, I guess if I'm going to tell everything, I'll tell this too. Actually I have the courage. Someone told me that the best thing for menstrual cramps is to do crank lithography.

DB: I have

MI: So I had the nerve to go into lithography.

DB: I'll have to tell my friends that.

MI: I said, "Teach me how to do lithographs; I've got the cramps." And they just laughed it off and they really taught me how to do it. And I became very entranced with doing lithography and I really enjoyed doing it. That was toward the end of 1948 and in 1949 I was much more interested. Now I think it was in 1948. A second lithograph I did turned out very well. I was the dishwasher and Betsy Rupprecht was the assistant dishwasher. One day I wanted to get off washing dishes. a payment in exchange was always giving prints in those days so I gave Betsy this print. She asked for The Stag. There are only three left so far as I know now. One is at the Art Institute, it was a Purchase Prize; Betsy has the other one and I have the last one. I can't find any others.

DB: This print was made here at Oxbow?

MI: Yes. And I was so excited about lithography that I even bought a press. And I kept on going to night school; I say "kept on" but I went for a very few years. I studied under Max Kahn. He's very good.

DB: Yes. I know Max Kahn.

MI: I tried doing color lithographs because my head is so full of Bonnard. I wanted to do Bonnard right away. But at the same time doing black and white lithographs made me more linear and sort of black and white-oriented, harder edge, not the soft edge of Bonnard. I was very frustrated while matching the colors. Anyway, it was too much for me. Also, in 1949 I became pregnant. I found out I was pregnant because I was in the print shop and the press just smelled so awful I couldn't stand it. I said, "oh, oh, something is wrong." so I immediately went back to Chicago to have it checked and, sure enough, I was pregnant. I did go back to night school when I was pregnant. Max Kahn said, "You're pregnant. You get out of here and go to etching class with Vera Berdich; it's easier." so I had a very short period of etching, too.

DB: What I was going to say Was your husband working while you were doing all this?

MI: Yes. In a way our marriage is sort of built on separation which is both good and bad. I gave him total independence and he gave me total independence. I was just telling Diane this morning there was certainly something wrong with me that I could stay at Oxbow; in those days it was much, much longer. If I remember correctly, it was almost from Memorial Day until Labor Day.

DB: Yes, the whole summer. You stayed here that whole summer.

MI: Yes. It was very comfortable.

DB: Did you have to work? I mean, did you have to earn a living, or did your husband support you financially?

MI: Uh, I think he was capable of supporting me by then. But after getting out of the Art Institute -- as did everyone else -- I did some work; I had to, pretty much. My husband had trouble getting positions. There was an ad in the newspaper by the Pullman Company which happened to be across the street from the Art Institute in those days. He went for an interview. They said, "Oh, it's already been taken." The next day that ad was there, so he knew the score. So he started working at International Harvester Company. He's able to take anything; he enjoys doing anything. Whatever he can do. So it was no problem. I did display work which wasn't so easy. I enjoy doing a display but then it was no problem except for the noise. There would be the carpenter shop next with that buzz saw going and that I could not take. Then I went into fashion and that lasted roughly from

Thanksgiving until Easter. That was the limit of my working for money. And the fashion too -- Oh, I had a terrific portfolio -- you know, that was a grand year for the display of commercial art. Those magazines were really something fantastic, just beautiful drawings, extremely sophisticated, not only in terms of fashion, but in terms of literature. The best literary people were introduced in both Harper's Bazaar and Vogue. And the drawings were -- well, almost like Toulouse-Lautrec, that level. I could make good samples but doing it is something else. I couldn't work. But it was all right.

DB: So you were then basically working in those years doing printmaking and doing sometimes your own . . . ?

MI: And then for a while I used to go out to the park and paint by myself but, again, it was getting harder and harder in terms of Myo, in terms of environment, bugs, sun, and so forth, and people. You know, it's very dangerous. Actually -- now this is very simple -- I was grounded when I had the baby. I had been trying to do all painting all those years. I could never finish anything. Occasionally I would finish one for a Chicago Show; that was about it. But it was so full of spinach that it grounded me so. The first time so today doing a professional painting day after day after day. And it wasn't easy painting oils. It still was difficult. And when I say it took me five years to really, so to say, digest the process of oil painting, nobody believes me. But it's true. At the same time I was developing through lithography into pretty much a closed kind of construction composition. But things were just flying all over the place, you know. It was the beginning of abstract -- of action painting. Well, I wasn't acting at all; I was getting stiff, very

DB: Getting stiffer . . . ?

MI: Yes. And it's very hard to take really when you're age thirty and you're sort of dismissed as an old lady painter. But then it wasn't so hard because I was raising children; I was pretty much isolated. I wasn't that social. But still I kept painting every day. When the sixties came, the children were old enough so I could pretty much join my friends again. I never lost my friends but I wasn't in that much close contact.

DB: You were at home quite a bit . . . ?

MI: I did participate in all the Momentum Shows. I was not active but I participated.

DB: You weren't active in developing the organization?

MI: No, no, but I did participate in all of them.

DB: What did you think about the idea? Was it in 1948 that the Chicago Art Institute decided they wouldn't allow students to show in the annual exhibition?

MI: I thought it was -- I was for them. I think they had a sort of protest that they would refuse. But I submitted to the Art Institute. I was sympathetic. But I think they did a terrific thing. But they could do that because they were mature enough; you see, they were not ordinary students, they were much, much older. They had been in the war.

DB: Yes.

MI: They were mature people. At the same time they had the GI Bill of Rights. Also, maybe they had families that had saved money to send their offspring to school so they had all the time and I won't say all the money but they had easy access, I think, so they were able to do that, I mean the marvelous things that they did.

DB: What do you think about the momentum Shows? I mean what impact did they have on the community?

MI: Oh, very, very exciting.

DB: In what way?

MI: Contact with New York.

DB: Bringing out . . . ?

MI: I remember that some of the jurors underestimated the enthusiasm of the people.

DB: Underestimated the enthusiasm?

MI: Well, they were condescending, especially . . . I was not there so I can't speak for myself. I think Kline was drunk all the time all the way through. Now Motherwell being a sophisticate was extremely sympathetic; he was all giving and he was very, very generous.

DB: But some of them felt they were kind of coming out and doing a favor for all these little young artists out in Chicago?

MI: Yes.

DB: Do you think they were impressed by what they saw out in Chicago?

MI: I would not know. DB; You didn't have a chance to talk to them?

MI: One way or the other Motherwell was sympathetic as one artist to another -- as more mature artists beginning artists. DB; Did he look at your work?

MI: He still is like that. But at the same time, he's the least of the group, the youngest. He would never reach the pitch of the others, no matter what, simply because of his background, I think. He comes from a very elegant background. He's from San Francisco went to Stanford. You see, Stanford was just beginning to have an art department.

DB: When he started.

MI: He majored in philosophy and he went to Harvard to go into upper degrees in philosophy. But he was always interested in painting. I guess he painted on his own. And I think Peggy Guggenheim became interested in him as well as the rest of the group.

DB: You didn't talk to him when he was in Chicago? You didn't follow up?

MI: I went to the lecture but I got the giggles just awful because . . . I don't know if you know someone called Tom Patsalis [Catsalis]?

DB: No.

MI: I knew Tom Casalis [Patsalis]. He was eighteen; he was still in high school but he painted well enough to come to adult, regular student classes. Pretty soon he went to Germany; he was taken prisoner of war -- he came back. He went through all that and when Motherwell came to something like Elegy to the Spanish -- what is it? How is that title? I should know.

DB: Spanish Republic?

MI: Yes.

MI: Yes. We just looked at each other and got terrible giggles. It's not very nice, but . . .

DB: Let's . . . can we take a break?

MI: Sure. [Machine turned off.]

[END OF SIDE 2]

[END OF INTERVIEW]