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Oral history interview with Vladimir Kagan, 2010 June 10-11

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Contact Information
Reference Department
Archives of American Art
Smithsonian Institution
Washington. D.C. 20560
www.aaa.si.edu/askus

Transcript

Preface

The following oral history transcript is the result of a recorded interview with Vladimir Kagan on June 10-11, 2010. The interview took place in the artist's studio and home in Nantucket, Massachusetts, and was conducted by Mija Riedel for the Archives of American Art, Smithsonian Institution. This interview is part of the Nanette L. Laitman Documentation Project for Craft and Decorative Arts in America.

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

Interview

MIJA RIEDEL: This Mija Riedel with Vladimir Kagan on June tenth at his studio and home in Nantucket, Massachusetts, for the Smithsonian Archives of American Art. And this is disc number one. Good morning.

VLADIMIR KAGAN: Good morning.

MIJA REIDEL: Let's start at the beginning, where and when were you born?

VLADIMIR KAGAN: I was born in Germany, a little town called Worms on the Rhine in 1927, August 29.

MIJA REIDEL: August 29, I see.

VLADIMIR KAGAN: I'm a Virgo.

MIJA REIDEL: Ah, that explains so much. [Laughs.]

VLADIMIR KAGAN: And I don't know what the hell that means. I'm not really into astrology.

MIJA REIDEL: Would you talk a little bit about your background, your childhood in Germany before you came to the States?

VLADIMIR KAGAN: In Germany I had a very nice life. My father was a cabinetmaker. He had a workshop behind where we lived. He had a store in front of where we lived.

MIJA REIDEL: What was his name?

VLADIMIR KAGAN: His name was Illi Kagan, I-DOUBLE L-I. And Dad was a Russian prisoner of war in Germany and was interned in Worms, where he became very friendly with the community, even during the wartime when he was a prisoner. He was a very good craftsman, and he kind of ran the Russian prison camp. To keep the prisoners occupied, he taught them all cabinetmaking and craft. And so he loved Worms. And the people in Worms were very nice to him, so he stayed. Didn't go back after the war. And when the Bolsheviks came, he didn't want to go back. My sister was called Ruth, but my father always wanted to call the children by Russian names. I became Vladimir. She was supposed to be Tanya. And my mother being German wanted to have a German name, so Ruth became her name. But eventually she very soon switched it back to Tanya.

MIJA REIDEL: Uh-huh. And what was your mother's name?

VLADIMIR KAGAN: My mother's name was Hildegard [ph], and my grandfather was—she was Hildegard Wallach. Was born in Munich. My grandfather was a very major collector of peasant art and had a wonderful store in Munich called Volkskunsthaus [ph] Wallach. He would travel all over Germany and Czechoslovakia, Hungary, and so on, collecting peasant art.

MIJA REIDEL: Paintings, sculpture?

VLADIMIR KAGAN: And textiles and furniture. And it became a world-famous landmark destination, this shop there. It was like five stories tall.

MIJA REIDEL: Really! What year was this?

VLADIMIR KAGAN: Well, I guess it was before the war.

MIJA REIDEL: Okay.

VLADIMIR KAGAN: Before the First World War, you know, when he started.

MIJA REIDEL: Do you remember it? Did you see it at the time?

VLADIMIR KAGAN: Oh, yes, we saw it. It was marvelous.

MIJA REIDEL: How extraordinary.

VLADIMIR KAGAN: And my dad was a dedicated Modernist. So there was a great big clash between my grandfather, who hated Modern, and my father, who hated the traditional.

MIJA REIDEL: Interesting.

VLADIMIR KAGAN: And it opened me up to both areas. I loved it. So the Munich place was amazing. And my mother came to Worms to visit an uncle of hers. And my dad met her at a party and fell in love with her. He was 20 years older than she.

MIJA REIDEL: Oh, my goodness.

VLADIMIR KAGAN: And she was a glamorous gal. She was a flapper in her days, very naughty. Went out to dances and was incredibly popular. A very beautiful woman—or girl. And Dad pursued her and kept going back and forth to Munich until she agreed to marry him. So my sister and I went first—I remember this as a very early memory—we went to a little Catholic school, kindergarten, and then next, first grade. And then Hitler came along, and that changed everything. But Dad had a store in Worms, and then he had a store in Heidelberg. And they would commute back and forth. And what he sold was very avant-garde German art, prints, [Max] Beckmann, [Max] Liebermann, all the old—Käthe Kollwitz. And he collected crafts, ceramics, and silver from Deutscher Werkstätte—Wiener Werkstätte. And so there was a lot of exposure very early on to art and culture in our household.

Also I remembered going with them to Heidelberg. That was a very early memory. Heidelberg was a very beautiful city. The store was on the main street. And I would go down to the River Neckar. And I became friendly with the boatmen. In those days—I don't think— There were ferries across. There weren't many bridges, and I think they had these little boat ferries. And I would go across with the boatmen back and forth over the Neckar. That was a very lovely, sweet, bucolic memory. It looks to me like a painting, you know, an 18th-century painting. I also remember on Main Street in Heidelberg a parade that they were screaming or chanting. It was a protest parade: *ohne eier, ohne butter, ohne brot* no eggs, no butter, no bread, etc.

MIJA REIDEL: Right.

VLADIMIR KAGAN: And they were communists, so they were early, you know, socialists. And a few years later these same guys all became the Nazis. And they were parading in the goose step. And became Hitler's forerunners. So it was a very quick transition. So I guess it must have been 1930 when I was first in Heidelberg. Maybe '32. But by '33 Hitler came in. And that changed our lifestyle. We couldn't go to German schools. We were forced to go to Jewish schools. Worms had a—

MIJA REIDEL: But you said you'd started out in a little Catholic school?

VLADIMIR KAGAN: Yes, yes.

MIJA REIDEL: That's interesting.

VLADIMIR KAGAN: Yes, with nuns.

MIJA REIDEL: Yes.

VLADIMIR KAGAN: My mother was educated in a Catholic school also. So we'd never been religiously oriented. It was more or less forced on us when the Nazis came. And Worms had a very ancient Jewish community. It was one of the first synagogues. A Jewish philosopher by the name of Rashi lived there; I don't know the time frame of it. But there was a Rashi chapel over there, it was called, in the synagogue. And it was on a little square in the old village. It was called Judengasse, which is "the Jew Street." So there was a Jewish community there for years and years and years. We went back to Germany about five or six years ago, and went there, and it's still there. And while the synagogue was completely destroyed by the Nazis, it was lovingly rebuilt by the Germans afterwards. So it's there. But at the time they didn't even have a big Jewish community, but the synagogue was restructured. But in any case, we went to school there. I remember walking there with our backpack with my sister. And while it seemed like such a huge distance of walking, when you go back 50 years later, 60 years later, 70 years later, those distances became much shorter.

MIJA REIDEL: Sure. Yes.

VLADIMIR KAGAN: And when we had, back to Dad's operation, we had the store in the front and the woodworking shop in the back and a courtyard.

MIJA REIDEL: Okay.

VLADIMIR KAGAN: Where my sister and I played. It was a very nice, cozy thing.

MIJA REIDEL: So he sold cutting-edge art. He also worked in wood himself. He was a cabinetmaker?

VLADIMIR KAGAN: He was a cabinetmaker and a woodworker, wonderful woodworker. And he started actually—going back to Dad's history a little bit—he came from a little town, I guess in the Ukraine, called Chedrin. Wouldn't know how to spell it. But he was an—it was very much of a ghetto Jewish township. I guess the Jews were herded into these townships and weren't allowed to spread out. And his father was a fur trader. And of course the only education they could get was the Jewish education there. And Dad was destined to become—they wanted him to become a rabbi. And my father was much more rabble than a rabbi. And he ran away from home at age 14, apprenticed himself to a cabinetmaker.

MIJA REIDEL: Really!

VLADIMIR KAGAN: Because, while he wanted to be a sculptor, it was sacrilege in the Jewish religion to do images of the human face or body, I think. So he learned woodworking. He was also very heavily involved in those days in the pogroms. And in the early revolutionary times, he was wounded in one of these revolutionary events by a Cossack with a shot in his back. There was always a big bullet hole in his back where he was wounded. He was a prisoner when he was about 16 years old. And every year on the czar's birthday the prison warden was given the right to pardon a prisoner, and he chose my father. And he said, "Illi, if you promise to not get politically involved, I will release you."

And he kept that promise. He really never became revolutionary or politically involved in active politics. Then he, in gratitude, actually he joined the Russian Army, which is quite rare for a Jewish boy, to voluntarily go into the Russian Army. I don't know what his tour of duty was, two or three years, whatever it was. But by that time he was stationed in Warsaw. And when he came out of the army, he set up a shop that became a contractor for the Russian Army and built barracks. He had about 50 people working for him there. He also told us how he remembered that when the first airplanes would fly, he would repair the wings of the planes when they crashed.

MIJA REIDEL: That's interesting.

VLADIMIR KAGAN: It was very, very interesting. So then from there he stayed in Warsaw for I don't know how many years.

MIJA REIDEL: So clearly he had a real strong sense of structure and engineering besides cabinetry and woodworking.

VLADIMIR KAGAN: He was amazing. And when the Second [World] War started, he went back into the army, volunteered, and then became a prisoner in one of the first skirmishes with the Germans. And that sort of catches us up to date how he ended up in Worms.

MIJA REIDEL: Mm-hmm. [Affirmative.] So were you in and out of his workshop as a child?

VLADIMIR KAGAN: Oh, I was always in and out of the workshop. And in those days we used animal glue, which is wonderful. You have to heat it up. It coagulates. And I remember we used to take the drips of the animal glue and suck on them like a lollipop.

MIJA REIDEL: Really!

VLADIMIR KAGAN: They weren't delicious, and they weren't bad. [Ms. Riedel laughs.] It was probably full of protein and vitamins. [Laughs] It's always a memory, but I always loved the smell of that animal glue.

MIJA REIDEL: Interesting.

VLADIMIR KAGAN: And every day we had—

MIJA REIDEL: What did it smell like?

VLADIMIR KAGAN: Well, I can't really describe it. Little bit pungent, probably a little—not like rotten meat, though.

MIJA REIDEL: Maybe like roasting meat.

VLADIMIR KAGAN: Yes, it wasn't really bad.

MIJA REIDEL: Interesting.

VLADIMIR KAGAN: But in order to do gluing in those days, I remember that also, he had warming ovens, heating ovens, so you had to preheat the wood. And then you could—then the glue would adhere, because it was hot glue and warm wood.

MIJA REIDEL: I see.

VLADIMIR KAGAN: So that was a sort of early, early memory of the shop. Then when Hitler came in, within a couple of years or so, Jews were not allowed to have stores.

MIJA REIDEL: Right.

VLADIMIR KAGAN: And so we had to close the stores. But he kept the shop in the back. And he did work for everybody in Worms, restoration work and so on. And the aristocracy of Worms were his friends, Baron Heil, and the people who owned the wineries. And one thing I remember with great relish [laughs], Dad would take—every October we had wine-tasting fests, because Worms was a great, great wine-growing area. And we'd go into the caves. And I remember they siphoned the wine out of the casks. And for some reason, for the pleasure of everybody's company, they got me drunk on the wine. [Laughs.]

MIJA REIDEL: When you were a child!

VLADIMIR KAGAN: When I was a child. [Laughs.]

MIJA REIDEL: Oh, my gosh!

VLADIMIR KAGAN: But I remember that as kind of a fun background thing. We also—we'd go do excursions on weekends, Dad—on the bicycle. The kids were on the back of the bike, and Mother and Dad would go across the Rhine bridges, which are very beautiful. One of them was destroyed in the war. The other one was restored, so it's still there. Quite Gothic-looking. And we'd go to a little restaurant out in the country. And I remember very much that we had a thing called *Handkäse mit Musik*, Hand cheese with music. But hand cheese, the Germans love smelly cheeses.

MIJA REIDEL: Yes, yes.

VLADIMIR KAGAN: Liptauer, and Lindauer, all of them. And I love smelly cheeses. It goes with my inheritance. And *Handkäse* is made from cottage cheese that's put into patties, left out in the air, and in an enclosed thing so the flies wouldn't get at it, until it started to run. And *Handkäse mit Musik* was that cheese and raw onions. And I guess the men drank beer with it.

MIJA REIDEL: Uh-huh.

VLADIMIR KAGAN: And it was a wonderful weekend. And still when I went back to Germany, that's the first thing I wanted to have.

MIJA REIDEL: Interesting.

VLADIMIR KAGAN: Those *Handkäse mit Musik*.

MIJA REIDEL: Yes, yes.

VLADIMIR KAGAN: And the Rhine, it was where the legend of the Rheingold came from, from Worms. And there's a beautiful statue that showed whoever the hero was throwing the gold into the Rhine. We also learned to swim in the Rhine. They were swimming. It was a [German word for "swimming area"], which is a swimming area. And I remember they would teach us swimming. Then we were held up by fishing lines. They would walk along the pier [interviewer laughs] as we swam up and down in an enclosed space. But in the wintertime the Rhine froze. And we have photographs of my father and I walking on the Rhine—I must have been three years old—on the frozen Rhine.

MIJA REIDEL: It sounds pretty like an idyllic childhood in many ways.

VLADIMIR KAGAN: Yes, it was a very nice childhood. And we had so many good friends. They were all kind. We were not involved very much in any Jewish community. We were always educated—When Hitler started to really

get rough on the Jews, they all said, "Illi, they're not looking for you. You can stay with us. We'll look after you." And they took a lot of chances by being friends with us and would come and eat in our house. We'd come to their house, and they really defied. It was McCarthyism, obviously, but much worse is Nazism.

MIJA REIDEL: Right.

VLADIMIR KAGAN: Then came *Kristallnacht*, Crystal Night, and they really were—they smashed everything, any Jewish properties were. The synagogues were smashed. God knows what.

MIJA REIDEL: When was that? Do you remember?

VLADIMIR KAGAN: Probably in 1938, '37. That must have been about '38. We left in, I believe, in 1939, if I'm not mistaken. But in any event, then it got terrible. And they came and arrested my dad, threw him in jail overnight or something like that. Then they said, "Okay, Illi, it's time to go." And while we—and one of Father's businesses was building what now are the containers. You know, you get ready-made, the container ships with all the containers. Well, in those days we built them out of wood. They didn't have prefab containers. And when you were emigrating, you'd build a container and put all your furnishings into it, and then ship it off to the United States. We had—my father had—two sisters who lived in America, Aunt Mary and Aunt Rebecca. And the only way you could leave Germany or get into the United States was by having an immigration number. It was by number. And it meant you had to have a sponsor in the States who would look after you. I guess it's still the same way today, in a way you have to sponsor people. But the sisters were terribly afraid of this German family; they wanted no part of it. They were very provincial. And so they gave one visa to my father but not to us.

MIJA REIDEL: His sisters?

VLADIMIR KAGAN: His sisters.

MIJA REIDEL: Oh.

VLADIMIR KAGAN: And so Dad never wanted to leave. I mean, we had that, it's called a quota—I think it was called a quota. And Dad had his quota number but never left. After that situation, when things came to a real head, everybody said, "Illi, you have to leave," and he did leave and came to the States. And once he was in America, then he could get quotas for us, because the rest of the family could come.

MIJA REIDEL: So you and your mother and your sister stayed?

VLADIMIR KAGAN: We all stayed, and we stayed together in Worms.

MIJA REIDEL: For how long?

VLADIMIR KAGAN: I would think it must have been a couple of months, because he crossed over by boat.

MIJA REIDEL: Right.

VLADIMIR KAGAN: So it didn't happen overnight.

MIJA REIDEL: Right.

VLADIMIR KAGAN: And then we got an *Ausweis Schein*, meaning an expulsion paper. And we got an expulsion paper, why? Because we were Russian citizens. When Dad remained in Germany, he never took German citizenship.

MIJA REIDEL: Oh, I see.

VLADIMIR KAGAN: And he remained a Russian citizen, which, of course, we had the USSR passport.

MIJA REIDEL: Right.

VLADIMIR KAGAN: So during that period of time, Stalin and Hitler were palsy-walsy. And they had exchanged cultural things, engineering. But the Russians then expelled something like 70 German engineers. And the Germans in retaliation expelled umpteen number of Russian citizens, and we were among those. It wasn't really a Jewish thing; it was a Russian thing.

MIJA REIDEL: Interesting.

VLADIMIR KAGAN: And then by that time we had no visa to come to the States yet. So it was really quite devastating. We moved—

MIJA REIDEL: So you were sent, with your mother and your sister, you had to move to Russia.

VLADIMIR KAGAN: Yes, yes.

MIJA REIDEL: [Inaudible.]

VLADIMIR KAGAN: The upshot was that we had to get out within ten days.

MIJA REIDEL: Oh, my goodness!

VLADIMIR KAGAN: And we needed to have an exit visa, and no country would take us in. We tried to get into anyplace to get out of. And finally France gave us a permit to come into France. In the meantime we had moved to my grandmother's house in Munich, who was subsequently arrested, put into a concentration camp, and killed.

MIJA REIDEL: Oh, gee.

VLADIMIR KAGAN: But that was the last time we were in Germany. We stayed in her house. And I remember it must have been something like January. And it was one of these very rare thunderstorms, winter thunderstorms with snow and thunder. And it was ferocious. I've always been scared of thunder. Still have a dislike for thunder and lightning. Great respect for them. I've been in thunderstorms subsequently with lightning coming into the houses. It's been sort of nice to look at from inside but horrible to be outside. And even when I went jogging in Central Park, a friend of mine and I were stuck in Central Park running with the lightning coming right down on either side of us. So you develop a healthy respect.

But in any case, I can remember crawling under the pillows, under the bed. But more significantly, we had to leave quickly. And we got on a train to go to France via Saarbrücken, which is where the border town is. And we didn't have the proper exit stamps. And on our expulsion paper, there was a date. We had to leave by such-and-such date. We had overstayed that date. So my mother, sagacious as she was, took the bull by the horn, took that expulsion paper and tore it into little shreds and threw it out of the window of the train. Because there was no electronic documentation of those things.

MIJA REIDEL: I see.

VLADIMIR KAGAN: So then we arrived in Saarbrücken late at night. Had no money, no cash. And because we were actually already on the train to go to France, and the Nazis—the Gestapo—pulled us off and made us sit in the waiting room. And a very kind policeman in uniform took pity. And my mother right away said, "Look, this is a terrible thing. I'm very sorry this is happening to you." She called up the Jewish community there to see if somebody would take us in for the night and so we could leave the next day. And this man really was amazing. And my sister, who is much more historically family oriented, was trying to find this person after the war. And of course we never could find him again. But a very interesting thing: I used to play accordion—I still play the accordion. And all the songs I knew, of course, were the German songs, [name of German song], all the Nazi songs. And so I actually entertained the Nazis playing the accordion for them.

MIJA REIDEL: Oh, my gosh!

VLADIMIR KAGAN: And that kind of softened the departure thing.

MIJA REIDEL: Right.

VLADIMIR KAGAN: We arrived in France.

MIJA REIDEL: So they made you get off the train, but they didn't stop you entirely from going?

VLADIMIR KAGAN: No. Then the next day—we needed a rubber stamp, you know, how it is: bureaucratic stamp on our exit that we were leaving.

MIJA REIDEL: Okay.

VLADIMIR KAGAN: And we couldn't get it; that's why we had to spend the night.

MIJA REIDEL: I see.

VLADIMIR KAGAN: Mother got the stamp, and the next day we got on the train to go to Saarbrücken. No, Saarbrücken is the German part. We went to Metz in France, which is right on the border. And we stayed with, I guess, friends, refugee friends, whom my parents knew from Worms. We stayed with them for a week or two; I don't remember. But I also do remember that they took us for a little car trip to show us the impregnable

Maginot Line. And we said, "Oh, France is safe." And here were all these beautiful cannons pointing towards Germany. And in fact all the Germans did was make a pincer movement around the outside, and those guns couldn't be reversed. And took it all. So that was the end of that. Then from there we took the train to Le Havre. And there loomed out of the window this huge ship. I'd never seen a ship that size. And it was just overwhelming to see this amazing ship. We came on the US line *Manhattan*.

MIJA REIDEL: Before we leave Germany, though, a couple of quick questions.

VLADIMIR KAGAN: Yes.

MIJA REIDEL: Were you taking art classes, or were you making drawings, were you working in the shop?

VLADIMIR KAGAN: I must have been ten years old. I'm not sure that I had a tremendous amount of specified—I did a lot of drawing. I was a magpie always, and I saved—either my parents saved the drawings or I had them. We had my sketchbooks from Germany, some of which we reproduced in my book, *The Complete Kagan [: Vladimir Kagan—A Lifetime of Avant-Garde Art.* Pointed Leaf Press, 2006], you know. And we showed them. But that sketchbook still exists.

MIJA REIDEL: So that either came with you, or someone saved it for you in Germany.

VLADIMIR KAGAN: It came with us.

MIJA REIDEL: That's extraordinary.

VLADIMIR KAGAN: Yes, when we came out.

MIJA REIDEL: The sketchbook.

VLADIMIR KAGAN: Yes, the sketchbook.

MIJA REIDEL: Of all the things to bring; and that must have been important to you.

VLADIMIR KAGAN: Yes.

MIJA REIDEL: Yes.

VLADIMIR KAGAN: I mean, looking back on them, I don't think they were significant. They showed—I think my ten-year-old grandchild is more artistic today than I was when I was ten years old. But it was imaginative, and it was documentary. I drew the Nazi soldiers doing goose steps. So there's a lot of—you know, I lived under that culture. And I would draw imaginary cars. I always liked cars. And what I really loved—and still do—I love railroads.

As a child, you know, everybody, "What do you want to be as a grownup?" "I want to be a fireman, I want to be a policeman" Well, I wanted to be an engineer on a railroad train. I always loved the idea. I like the machinery and loved the functioning of the pistons and so on. So those are early, early memories. But then we got on the ship. We're now crossing the Atlantic. Wintertime, pretty rough. Very rough. Seasick. And my mother became quite ill with pneumonia.

MIJA REIDEL: Oh.

VLADIMIR KAGAN: So she never left the cabin, while Tanya and I would cruise all over the boat and had the run of the boat. It was really lovely. When we arrived in America, the risk—In those days you had to go through—there was a health inspector that came on board before you could get off the ship. The problem was to try to sneak Mother through—

MIJA REIDEL: With her pneumonia.

VLADIMIR KAGAN: With her pneumonia. Otherwise she would have ended up at Ellis Island. And the dread and fear of Ellis Island, it was like a Nazi concentration camp when you heard about it. Somehow we managed to disguise her illness as a cold, as a cough, or something like that. And we got off the boat. There was little old Aunt Mary waiting for us, and her son Alan [ph], who was a nice tall American boy. And we went by car. They lived in East Orange, New Jersey, okay? We went by car through the Holland Tunnel. Oh, my God! I'd never been in a tunnel. I remember that extraordinary experience [laughs]. And then we ended up driving through Newark. Well, Newark and New York sounds pretty much the same. So here we were looking for skyscrapers of New York. And all we could see were a few tall buildings in Newark. And we said, "Well, where is it?"

My Aunt Mary and her husband Max owned a grocery store in East Orange in a black neighborhood. And when

we got there, there were all these little black picaninny kids running around. And all I knew about were Indians. I'd never heard of Negroes. And we were so disappointed they weren't wearing feathers. [Laughs] These kids became our playmates. We had a good time together. And we lived with my aunt—so we lived there, I don't know, for two, three months with my aunt. Maybe four months. I don't remember the exact time frame. Dad in the meantime got a job as a cabinetmaker in New York City with a rather well-known cabinetmaker, designer, called James Mont. And actually he started to build all of James Mont's prototypes and models. He was earning $12 a week. We came penniless to America because we weren't allowed to take money out of Germany. So all we could take with us were our personal possessions and my father's tools and a lot of our artwork. And for the first—

MIJA REIDEL: Did your father take this with him or did you? How did he carry all that?

VLADIMIR KAGAN: Well, we packed, prepacked it all into one of those containers.

MIJA REIDEL: Mm-hmm. [Affirmative.] And shipped it. Okay. So there was no [inaudible].

VLADIMIR KAGAN: To ship it. That was all done and prearranged before he left.

MIJA REIDEL: Mm-hmm. [Affirmative.] How wonderful he could take his tools.

VLADIMIR KAGAN: Yes. And I have them still. I have his tools in my library in New York. And I always saved some of the pieces, the wooden planes and the chisels.

MIJA REIDEL: Some of them are just spectacularly beautiful.

VLADIMIR KAGAN: And they're lovely. And he liked tools. But he'd have to, I guess, commute in to the city. Or in actual fact, Aunt Rebecca, the other sister, lived in the Bronx. The Montessori Bronx. And maybe he lived with her while we were living in New Jersey. But it became untenable. And so we moved from New Jersey to my aunt in the Bronx. She was a rabid Communist and hated the bourgeois. She hated her sister who had a sort of a little bourgeois life in New Jersey. And she was married to a Greek sailor, who was a lovely guy; when he stopped going to sea, he became superintendent of the building. It was a very primitive, impoverished life. And we lived there for a while until we got our first apartment in New York on 111th Street. And those were what we called in those days—they were called railroad flats, because we had a huge long corridor and off the corridor were all the various bedrooms. So Mother rented rooms. And this was a way of making a living.

MIJA REIDEL: Right.

VLADIMIR KAGAN: And I would shine shoes for three cents a pair of shoes [laughs]. So we lived on 111th Street for, I guess, a number of years. But my parents always—Mother and Dad always loved a view.

MIJA REIDEL: Yes.

VLADIMIR KAGAN: And certainly this was a tenement environment. And so as soon as they could afford to, we got a beautiful apartment on Riverside Drive with a view towards the Hudson River. So the view always meant so much to them, and it always meant so much to me, too. Wherever I lived, we have to have open space and a view. But I went—we went to public school, P.S. 116, I believe, in the city.

MIJA REIDEL: Now were you taking art classes in school? What were you interested in?

VLADIMIR KAGAN: In the very beginning I think [inaudible] we went there, you know, speaking no English, so I think we were in special language sections. And this was still in the preliminary to—not junior high school. At one point we went from the regular public school to junior high school. And that became the environment in which I developed more taste for the arts.

MIJA REIDEL: Okay.

VLADIMIR KAGAN: In junior high school was called the Joan of Arc Junior High School. And there I started to really draw very intensely. And we had specialized teachers, and my art teacher took a great interest in me. And my sister, who is also very talented. Tanya was great at fashion. We'll talk about her in a minute. This was—I think, Joan of Arc was on 93rd Street. We lived on 97th Street. It wasn't a big haul.

MIJA REIDEL: And you'd arrived in New York. So were you dazzled and excited by the skyscrapers? Was this having a big impression on you?

VLADIMIR KAGAN: New York City? Well, of course, yes. All of a sudden we realized it was the difference. Newark was not New York.

MIJA REIDEL: Right.

VLADIMIR KAGAN: And I guess Dad started very quickly afterwards to have his own shop on 53rd Street between, I think, First and Second or Second and Third, in a little basement shop below—in a brownstone. Where he would restore—primarily restore—other refugees' furniture, people that he knew, friends that he had over the years. And that kept us going. Plus the fact my father's art collection, which he sold to galleries, and that's what really became the mainstay of our existence when things were very tough.

MIJA REIDEL: The painting and the sculptures he'd collected—he'd sold in Germany, he brought with him, and now was selling here.

VLADIMIR KAGAN: These were limited-edition prints, which was one of the things he specialized in. And so we sold those, and they ended up in a lot of the museums then. So Mother did the renting of rooms. Dad had the repair shop and the cabinet shop. And I would go after school, help out. We all had to; I mean, that's what you did in a family way.

MIJA REIDEL: So were you learning any skills, or were you primarily just helping clean up and run errands?

VLADIMIR KAGAN: Oh, it was very primitive, nothing I could much do with him. He had a partner in those days called Kerr, Walter Kerr, K-E-DOUBLE R. So it was Kerr, Kagan and Kerr or something, or Kagan and Kerr or Kerr and Kagan. That lasted for, I don't think very long, a couple of years. And then he got a beautiful workshop on 44th Street and First Avenue. And on the top floor—I think it was the sixth floor; you can see it now still—with windows all around. And we had three or four wonderful workers by that time. And Father had established the business.

MIJA REIDEL: Primarily custom cabinetry at this point?

VLADIMIR KAGAN: All custom cabinet work. And that's when I started to work. They needed to make drawings, and I would make drawings for him. And that's when he said, "You've got to learn to draw well." Because that's one thing he didn't have, the skill of communication. And so that started me off very much in the direction of art and drawing. And my junior high school teacher, who became very interested in my work and in me, recommended I should go to the—when I graduated from junior high school—go to the School of Industrial Arts, High School of Industrial Arts, New York public school. A wonderful school, because it catered to all disciplines in the art world. And it involved—the curriculum meant—First of all you had to qualify, so you had to submit—you can't do that in the public school system today any longer—but in those days the public schools could have testing.

MIJA REIDEL: Mm-hmm. [Affirmative.]

VLADIMIR KAGAN: And be selective. And so the kids that got into that school were creatively talented. Not all of them brilliant academically, but had great artistic skills. One of my classmates was Tony Bennett.

MIJA REIDEL: That's interesting.

VLADIMIR KAGAN: That's funny.

MIJA REIDEL: Yes. So it had music and sculpture.

VLADIMIR KAGAN: No, we didn't have music. Tony did that music stuff separately.

MIJA REIDEL: Interesting.

VLADIMIR KAGAN: But the curriculum included, as I remember, we had cartooning, illustration, photography, ceramics, workshops where we made generators, electric things. And among other things, drafting and architecture. And my teacher, my architectural teacher, was a man I really loved very much. His name was Erwin Mueller. And as a professional career, he designed the bridges—all or most of the bridges—for the Merritt Parkway in New York. And all of the teachers in those days had really significant professional jobs. The illustrator made illustrations. The photographer was of importance. And as a result, the kids in our school were incredibly motivated and ended up with very good career tracks. When I go to some of the class reunions, and I go infrequently, but they remained in the art world. Few of them drifted outside of it, which is wonderful.

MIJA REIDEL: Well, they had a real experience of a teacher actually working on projects that he was teaching.

VLADIMIR KAGAN: Right.

MIJA REIDEL: And what about architecture was inspiring to you?

VLADIMIR KAGAN: What I loved about the architectural program was it taught me a lot of discipline. Probably my German background liked that structured approach to things. And I remember the architect—We were graded not only on what we were drawing, we were not doing architectural drawings, we were doing drafting; but the organization of the page, the lettering, the neatness, the erasure marks, the ink work. And you learned to work in confinement of disciplines rather than slapdash.

MIJA REIDEL: Right.

VLADIMIR KAGAN: And so that was a very interesting—what I called it—discipline versus the freedom of artistry which you also had. But you also had a chance [inaudible] that into a digestible, workable presentation.

MIJA REIDEL: So this was one that was very helpful in terms of allowing you to be creative [inaudible].

VLADIMIR KAGAN: But also I spent a lot of time learning anatomy. And I still have my portfolio books with my anatomy drawings. I think because of the anatomy, that influenced me in my design work. Because I realized a chair that becomes a vessel for the human body. And so I became very—way before the concept of ergonomic became a buzzword, it was what I was working toward in my designs.

MIJA REIDEL: Very fluid, very curving there.

VLADIMIR KAGAN: Really not thinking in terms directly like that. But it was obviously there. The other disciplines that we had in those first two years at school, like working with ceramics, making molds, these are trades and skills that have stayed with me all of my life. And every course that I've ever taken has had its benefits down the pike, even though at one point you said, "Why do I need to do this?" And I've always, in my working now with younger people in my teaching and lecturing, I always emphasize this: every experience is a good experience. Even if it's failure, it's a road to something.

MIJA REIDEL: Right. What about ceramics in particular was influential?

VLADIMIR KAGAN: Well, because I was working with form. And I was working free-form. And the very first piece of ceramic I ever did—and I still have that at home—was a kidney-shaped bowl. And the reason I did that was, I thought it offered the biggest challenge in making a mold, because you had to find breaking points for the mold.

MIJA REIDEL: Right.

VLADIMIR KAGAN: You pull it apart. So that was very interesting. Then other courses taught me how to do soldering and work with metal. And actually I did very early on make very cute metal jewelry, mostly for my mother. And I still have them. And they were rather primitive. But I guess it was at a time when this copper jewelry was very popular. So the things I did had that same kind of flavor. Worked with graphics. And all of this kind of was a very good blend. In the meantime, I worked after school, and even while I was still in junior high or before. I used to sell, I remember, *Ladies' Home Journal* at the subway station. I would go out. Then I did grocery deliveries. And we had these big pushcart things where all the groceries fitted into a big bucket, a pushcart affair, that you locked it up with a padlock. And I had to drag these groceries through the basements of the tenement buildings to deliver them. It was quite an experience.

MIJA REIDEL: It sounds it.

VLADIMIR KAGAN: And in those days, we lived in a rather Italian and Irish neighborhood, and anti-Semitism was pretty strong. And the kids would chase me and say, "Hey, are you a Jew or Italian?" And I could never get myself to say "I'm an Italian." I would say, "I'm a Jew," and I had to run like hell.

MIJA REIDEL: [Laughs] Oh, dear.

VLADIMIR KAGAN: But as a result of this, I sort of developed, "Hey, I'm not going to live like that."

MIJA REIDEL: Yes.

VLADIMIR KAGAN: And I became—my whole life has been a very ecumenical life, where I've been accepted; I've never been turned down anywhere. And I made that a cause célèbre for me to—I said, "Look, we lived in Germany under the pressure of Nazism. I won't let that happen to me in America." And so we've been very integrated into all society, non-secular.

MIJA REIDEL: Right. And that must have been an extraordinary experience from your father's position of having to—leaving Russia and then having all this experience in Germany [inaudible] again.

VLADIMIR KAGAN: Yes. And he never took religion seriously, although he knew all the prayers in Hebrew, which he never forced me to do; that was never bar mitavahed, I wasn't even circumcised. I mean, this is how, you

know, un-religious he felt or how free from religious tradition.

MIJA REIDEL: Yes.

VLADIMIR KAGAN: Where do we go back to?

MIJA REIDEL: Well, you were talking about living in a neighborhood that was primarily Italian and Irish.

VLADIMIR KAGAN: Yes, I remember these kids chasing me down. I remember once venturing with a very nice friend of mine who was my buddy, Peter Stern, I think. into Morningside Park, which was a very black neighborhood in the city. And I didn't want to go there. I was a little bit cautious, cowardly, or at least protective. And we walked into this park, and there was this group of young black boys, you know, teenagers, and I said to my friend Peter, "We don't want to go that way." He said, "Oh, don't worry. Look, they're so well dressed." And he walked right into the middle of the thing, and boy, did we get pummeled. And we just ran for our lives to get out of there. Still is sort of a little memory that sticks. So these little things.

MIJA REIDEL: You made a decision to have a different sort of life.

VLADIMIR KAGAN: But then good things happened. My parents had wonderful friends who lived in Woodstock, New York. These were Kurt and Esther Schleuter [ph]. He was a Dutch painter. Esther was Swedish and had two sons from a previous marriage. And she had been all over the world. She'd lived in—she was a nurse—lived in Turkey, lived in Istanbul, and had a wonderful worldview. And of course Woodstock, a great artists' colony. And this was a place where we'd go to on weekends. We at that time had no car. So every weekend, whenever I had a chance to, I would go down to the Henry Hudson Parkway and hitchhike to Woodstock.

MIJA REIDEL: How old were you?

VLADIMIR KAGAN: I couldn't have been—

MIJA REIDEL: Sixteen? Eighteen?

VLADIMIR KAGAN: Yes, in that neighborhood, that range. Yes, yes. Maybe I was 18, you know. I guess it was more towards the 18-year-old stage. And I would hitchhike to Woodstock. Sometimes it would take five hours, sometimes it would take longer. And nobody worried. It was such a different lifestyle, and you trusted people. People were kinder on the roads—Occasionally I'd be very lucky and get a ride almost there.

MIJA REIDEL: And why did you want to go there?

VLADIMIR KAGAN: Esther's son Gunnar [Seterstrand] was my very best friend. And then we had another friend by the name of—I forget his name; a Dutch boy—whom I remember as being incredibly tall. He must have been six-foot tall, you know, when I was still five-foot something or other. Wim Kammer [he means Wim's son, Chico Kammer] was his name. Wim. And the three of us were like Three Musketeers. We'd go mountain climbing and exploring. We had .22 caliber guns.

MIJA REIDEL: Really!

VLADIMIR KAGAN: And we'd go shooting at—hunting—for squirrels, or we'd shoot rattlesnakes. Go up on the mountain. And then Esther, who was a real sport, would take these animals, these things we brought back, and prepare them for food for us.

MIJA REIDEL: Oh, my gosh.

VLADIMIR KAGAN: And a squirrel tastes like a rabbit with a little less meat.

MIJA REIDEL: Uh-huh.

VLADIMIR KAGAN: And the rattlesnake is pretty damned good white meat. But we had great times together. And that lasted for quite a number of years. Then we became part of the artistic fiber of Woodstock. And eventually my parents bought a little house in Bearsville, which was really like a very small weekend cottage, that Dad restored. And ultimately we added and added on. It was really what you'd consider a teardown. But we went to Woodstock two weeks ago. And we went up to the house, and it's still standing there. It's been sold and resold and into dilapidation. But now this time it looked like somebody had bought it and painted it and has freshened it up. Kind of very nostalgic.

MIJA REIDEL: Yes.

VLADIMIR KAGAN: And then Woodstock became a place that meant a lot to me. And so ultimately where Erica

and I got married.

MIJA REIDEL: Aha. And when you say you became part of the artistic community there, what did that involve?

VLADIMIR KAGAN: The sculptor Raoul Hague became a good friend of ours. There was a wonderful painter by the name of [Brackenshaw?], an English artist, whom we loved and we visited with. And his work was very beautiful floral and landscape art. His wife was a ceramist. And Alexander Archipenko became—was a very good friend of my father's. And actually Alexander Archipenko and his wife, who at that time was only his student, Frances Gray, were the only people at Erica and my wedding. And we've been good friends ever since. We went up to visit Frances now, and she still looks wonderful and runs the Archipenko Foundation.

MIJA REIDEL: Aha.

VLADIMIR KAGAN: So it was more the kind of the total immersion into art scene. My friends, of course, they all did—we worked with kinetic lighting and funky things.

MIJA REIDEL: What were you working on, installations? Were you working on lighting for fixtures?

VLADIMIR KAGAN: At that time it was more the atmosphere and the flavor of Woodstock. The art galleries. We'd go square dancing every weekend.

MIJA REIDEL: Yes.

VLADIMIR KAGAN: There was a lot of boozing. There was a lot of drugs that I never, ever got around to drugs, though; I was very lucky. A lot of my friends did. And I would watch them get stupid and silly smoking their pot. And I would go away. I didn't like the smell of it even. So I'm one of the few people who managed to escape that entire thing and yet lived right within it.

MIJA REIDEL: Yes.

VLADIMIR KAGAN: It was amazing.

MIJA REIDEL: So you were experimenting with light fixtures, light [inaudible].

VLADIMIR KAGAN: They were making—David Ballantine was making light boxes. Unfortunately I have none of them left. I even sold them in my store for a while. This goes back, now. We're moving fast-forward to ten, 20 years down the pike. So in that way we were specifically working out. But David was doing that.

MIJA REIDEL: Right.

VLADIMIR KAGAN: And those were the lights that kind of flashed and moved and went with the music scene and probably fused into the marijuana smoke. And it was all the hippie movement.

MIJA REIDEL: Yes.

VLADIMIR KAGAN: And in those days they weren't hippies; they were beatniks.

MIJA REIDEL: Mm-hmm. [Affirmative.] Right.

VLADIMIR KAGAN: And we were part of it. One of the people that I became friendly with was a very interesting man. He was a priest. He had a church in Woodstock called the Church on the Mount. And he was the archbishop of the Old Catholic Church of America, which was a kind of a—the Riverdale of the Orthodox Polish Church, or something like that. And he was an interesting man, and I loved him dearly. He was actually an Englishman, and he used to be an Anglican minister or something, and became involved in that. He built this church by hand on the top of a mountain, part of that whole artistic community. And he became a real destination. Very famous people went and got married there. One person I remember was Celeste [Holm] got married there, who's still alive today. But Father Francis, he became a mentor to me in many ways.

MIJA REIDEL: How so?

VLADIMIR KAGAN: Well, he was very intelligent, and we'd sit and talk. And I'd actually go up there for weekends and spend the weekend with him. And we were going to go off to Trappist monasteries. I became aesthetically involved in that. And then to my great dismay, I found out that he was really gay and was interested in me. And that kind of soured my love affair. Not really. I loved the man anyhow, because he was a terrific guy. And I always said, "Father Francis, when I get married, you're going to marry us." And he did. And it was great fun. It was just part of the experience. And in those days you didn't know what "gay" meant even. It was a closeted affair. And of course many of my friends up in Woodstock were really gay. I had no idea that they were. So that

is just a phase of my life.

In between, going back to my high school time, one of my mother's tenants, when she was renting rooms, was a man by the name of Richard Wright. Not the auction host. But an Austrian playwright. And in order to make a living, he became stage manager of the 44th Street Theater. And occasionally I would go down and visit backstage. It was a great thrill to go backstage. And at one point they had a play called *Die Fledermaus*. *Die Fledermaus*—no, it was called *Rosalinda*.

MIJA REIDEL: Okay.

VLADIMIR KAGAN: *Rosalinda* is the Strauss *Fledermaus*.

MIJA REIDEL: Without the singing—without the opera.

VLADIMIR KAGAN: Oh, with everything.

MIJA REIDEL: Oh, with everything.

VLADIMIR KAGAN: Oh, fabulous. Dorothy [Sarnoff.] sang in it, and was a major singer. And I got a part as a walk-on. Oh, it was a big thrill. [Riedel laughs.] And that lasted for two years about.

MIJA REIDEL: Really!

VLADIMIR KAGAN: And I became very friendly with all the cast. And I would draw pictures of them, portraits of them all, which I still have. They would pose for me. Of course, I was the high school hero, because I was given permission to go out for matinees on Wednesday, do the matinee thing. So I became enamored with theater.

MIJA REIDEL: Yes.

VLADIMIR KAGAN: And I was a cute-looking boy in those days. And I thought maybe theater would be a career for me. And I pursued that for a number of years in an amateur type of way. We met—what do they call them?—an agent whom I met, you know, through all the theater people. And he was going to get me to Hollywood and God knows what. It turned out he was also very gay, and he just wanted boys to play with. And thankfully—

[END DISC 1, TRACK 1.]

VLADIMIR KAGAN: My mother was with us [laughs], and so that was kind of an abrupt thing. "Hey, it's not for me."

MIJA REIDEL: Yes.

VLADIMIR KAGAN: And it helped me to focus on the work that I really ultimately had to do, which was, you know, working, concentrating on design. This was still when I was roughly 16 years old. But the fun part of it was, I had this whole history of that little theater thing. I would go to—be invited as the youngest member of the cast to all the theater parties. And the next morning I'd go back to school.

MIJA REIDEL: What an extraordinary experience. You were a sophomore or junior. [Inaudible] years.

VLADIMIR KAGAN: Well, my parents were very tolerant of that. You know, they were very nice. They allowed me to do it. And it didn't affect—I had very good grades in school. I was a good student, an easy student. I didn't have to work my butt off to be successful. But I got good grades. And even went then to night school to make up for what I couldn't learn for college admissions—what I couldn't learn in my trade school. What is it called? A vocational school. I had to get the courses separately. I think I went to Juilliard—not Juilliard, Julia Richmond or something for night school to catch up. And ultimately I went to Columbia University in the extension program.

MIJA REIDEL: Let's take a break.

[END DISC 1, TRACK 2.]

MIJA REIDEL: When we paused, you had a final thought about Woodstock and what had been most memorable about that time. We're on. So whenever you'd like to proceed.

VLADIMIR KAGAN: What was really most memorable about my Woodstock experience was Woodstock is a small, little, very rural community. It's not full of large spaces; it's small spaces. And we have little brooks; we don't have rivers running through it. And we had swimming holes. There was no pool. There was nothing but—the swimming holes were secret. You had to sort of go through the woods, frequently trespass through other people's property to get to the swimming holes. And when you got to the swimming hole, there were wonderful

big boulders there. You could sit on one. There was a next one on the next height, and another one on the third height. And we'd all sit there and shoot the breeze and then go swimming. And that sitting on those boulders became really the philosophy years later for my Omnibus upholstery series. Where I said, "Hey, you don't have to sit at one level like birds on a telephone wire—

MIJA REIDEL: Right.

VLADIMIR KAGAN: —you could sit at multi levels."

MIJA REIDEL: Interesting.

VLADIMIR KAGAN: And it developed that whole concept of multi-level seating.

MIJA REIDEL: Really!

VLADIMIR KAGAN: And so that was a byproduct. What is interesting—

MIJA REIDEL: Very interesting!

VLADIMIR KAGAN: I never was hit by a bolt of lightning with anything that this was the nirvana, this was the design that launched me. It was more like total immersion and swimming in a pond of ideas. I was always exposed to art. I was always—I understood the controversy between my father's Modernism and my grandfather's traditionalism. That kind of washed off on me. As you know from having seen my homes, I have a lot of antiques; I have a lot of respect for antiques. I'm inspired by antiques. I never deny the past in order to create the future. My mission really as a designer is to try to express the 21st century, the 20th century, in contemporary design. But, boy, do I admire traditional design. I think in a way I have a huge respect for them.

But getting back to my swimming in the pond, it really is that these influences kind of work into your system by osmosis. And somehow they find a birth and a vocabulary years later. Anything that I've been exposed to has never been wasted and has always somehow floated to the surface as a new idea. So that's kind of a design philosophy and a living philosophy. I'm also a very happy guy.

MIJA REIDEL: Yes. [They laugh.]

VLADIMIR KAGAN: You know, life for me, it's a barrel of monkeys.

MIJA REIDEL: Yes.

VLADIMIR KAGAN: And it's got to be fun. And whatever you do has to be fun. And perhaps one the greatest assets and one of the greatest liabilities in my life is I've never had to work for anybody. I've been on my own, except as a youngster. Among other things, one of my many jobs that I had after high school was doing finger painting on glass furniture.

MIJA REIDEL: Finger painting on glass furniture.

VLADIMIR KAGAN: Well, what it is, is there was a tradition of painting on glass. And I worked for a company that, we painted cabbage roses on glass that then was mirrored and then became embedded into furniture. And one of the pieces that I worked on was for Sonja Henie, who was at that time *the* leading star skater.

MIJA REIDEL: Ice skater?

VLADIMIR KAGAN: Ice skater.

MIJA REIDEL: Sonja what was her name?

VLADIMIR KAGAN: Henie. It must have been Swedish. So I worked in that job for a couple of years.

MIJA REIDEL: This was when you were in high school or after?

VLADIMIR KAGAN: In high school, right after, you know, my afternoon job. It was kind of a fun experience.

MIJA REIDEL: I can imagine.

VLADIMIR KAGAN: And you know something? What you learn, you learn the anatomy of flowers. You learn shading, you learn all kinds of stuff. It's something I haven't used; I don't think I ever would do it again. But by God, it was an experience.

MIJA REIDEL: Were you interested in painting as well? We talked about your drawing [inaudible].

VLADIMIR KAGAN: Well, I'll tell you. During my early time I really never thought in terms of designing or being a designer. I liked drawing; I liked drawing from life. I would go out and draw trees. And a lot of my early drawings are of flowers and trees, which in turn taught me the anatomy of growth of natural things, which eventually became embedded as one of my early styles. But I certainly had no intention when I went out to draw a tree, to draw a piece of furniture.

MIJA REIDEL: That's interesting. [Inaudible.]

VLADIMIR KAGAN: But I learned how branches come out of a tree. They never come out of the same section. Out of the stem of a tree, no two branches come out parallel to each other.

MIJA REIDEL: Right.

VLADIMIR KAGAN: The tree shoots them up higher, on a different level for its strength. They also, the way they develop their—The architecture of a tree is fascinating. And that became really a significant part of my early designs. From the fifties to the sixties, the organic pieces—the pieces that have become the most iconic designs of my life—started out perhaps in the woods of Woodstock for all we know. But it was cause and effect, but never a deliberate concept. I painted. But I had never visions of being a painter.

MIJA REIDEL: Okay.

VLADIMIR KAGAN: I enjoyed drawing. And drawing was really my—And then I guess maybe subliminally it's because my dad said, "Learn to draw."

MIJA REIDEL: Right.

VLADIMIR KAGAN: And so drawing from life gave me the ability to represent reality in my designs. I did one of the worst—there's a difference between an illustrator and being able to design and draw something. An illustrator will glamourize. I learned that when I was in school. When you draw the human body, I believe, if I remember correctly, the head divides approximately seven time or eight times into the body for proportion.

MIJA REIDEL: Right, right. That sounds right.

VLADIMIR KAGAN: But a fashion designer will make the body ten times the head size in order to glamourize the fashion. Illustrators will make an eight-foot-high ceiling look like a 12-foot-high ceiling in order to glamourize that room. But when I learned to draw furniture or when I had to draw furniture, the most important thing I could do was make my drawing look like the end product. And my very early sketches became the prototype for what the end product had to be. One of the things I learned out of my theatrical career, beyond having worked as an extra, for years I would work the theater circuit at night selling lemonade at matinees. It was a tough job to get. It was a very tough job to do. We had to make the lemonade in a loft on Eighth Avenue because it wasn't bottled; it came in paper cups.

MIJA REIDEL: Right.

VLADIMIR KAGAN: And so you had the lemonade extract, and then you took a water hose and you ran it over the cups. You had to shoo away the cockroaches. And then you'd end up at the theaters selling them for, I think, 75 cents or 50 cents or 25 cents a drink. And you'd hawk them. But as a result I got to see an awful lot of theater.

MIJA REIDEL: And you'd do this at night or at the afternoon performances?

VLADIMIR KAGAN: At night. At night, yes. That was a night job I had. You wore a tuxedo, and you went from theater to theater. And we saw the [inaudible]. I saw *Pacific* probably ten times. Was it called *Pacific*?

MIJA REIDEL: Yes, I know what you mean—*South Pacific*?

VLADIMIR KAGAN: *South Pacific*.

MIJA REIDEL: Right.

VLADIMIR KAGAN: You know, I saw a lot of theater. That gave me a flavor for theater. And it was a cheap way to go and do it and get paid for it. So all these little fun experiences add to the flavor of your life.

MIJA REIDEL: I think that's true. And the sense of drama and theatricality and beauty.

VLADIMIR KAGAN: Yes, it was terribly nice. But I guess we're going back to the drawing. And the theater, I would go between, while the play was on, I would do sketches of the performers. Especially when I went to concerts. I always loved jazz—still love jazz. And I would draw the musicians. And I learned to draw with one line; I never

scribbled.

MIJA REIDEL: Interesting.

VLADIMIR KAGAN: And I was able to draw without looking on the paper because you couldn't see; it was in the dark. And what did it do? It gave you another discipline.

MIJA REIDEL: Yes.

VLADIMIR KAGAN: To draw well and to get your lines right. And so these little theatrical drawings, which I only discovered about within the last month that we had a whole suitcase full of them, in my warehouse, where I keep my archives. So it was a thrill to see them. I knew I'd made them; I hadn't seen them for 60 years, or 70 years. So this kind of drawing became the backbone. When I had to make furniture drawings, they had to be realistic, and the client—Because we did fairly complex jobs, compound complexity. And the ability to make the furniture look like what it had to look like, that was incredibly good. I also had, in my early career, going now more into my furniture career, I had some very good breaks.

MIJA REIDEL: Quick question before we start there.

VLADIMIR KAGAN: Yes.

MIJA REIDEL: You were at one point interested in studying architecture.

VLADIMIR KAGAN: Yes, oh, yes.

MIJA REIDEL: You took some classes at Columbia, right?

VLADIMIR KAGAN: Yes. Right.

MIJA REIDEL: And how did you decide not to follow that path?

VLADIMIR KAGAN: I'll tell you something. When I went to college, I did it in night courses. I worked full time for my dad and would go to Columbia at night. I felt—there was no question that at that time, in the forties, late forties, I had to work for my father. It was the obligation of a refugee boy to work with your parents and help. So it was never really disputed. My father said to me, "Son, you can become a painter on the weekend. But you never will make a living doing painting." So that was a kind of an admonition. A little tough, because my son, who's now following my kind of footsteps, he became a painter and is making a living. Never going to be a millionaire, but he's a making a living doing what he likes to do. But, you know, even painting as an art form ultimately is a business also. You have to sell it; you have to know your markets. So in any case—

MIJA REIDEL: But architecture's quite different.

VLADIMIR KAGAN: Architecture was the way, I felt, I could learn the most to apply to furniture.

MIJA REIDEL: I see.

VLADIMIR KAGAN: So the architecture became a stepping stone. I really never had, at that time, an ambition to become an active, working architect.

MIJA REIDEL: I see.

VLADIMIR KAGAN: But it gave me a really head start on—obviously, again, the word *discipline* comes in in the drawing form. And the constructions. What is the engineering of a piece of furniture, the engineering of a house. And you learn a lot.

MIJA REIDEL: Yes.

VLADIMIR KAGAN: I've done very little with architecture. I did renovations and add-ons, and you've seen my add-on here in the kitchen, which I did the architecture for. The most interesting thing is, about 50 years ago, when we first got this house, I built a little teahouse for my children in the backyard.

MIJA REIDEL: Okay.

VLADIMIR KAGAN: And I did it on a piece of four-by-eight. And, by God! The things I learned doing that little piece of architecture. What you learn about construction and joinery. And you gain a tremendous respect for a good carpenter that does this thing.

MIJA REIDEL: Right.

VLADIMIR KAGAN: And you learn it by doing it. I'm a great believer in hands-on.

MIJA REIDEL: Right. That, yes.

VLADIMIR KAGAN: I've always worked in the shop. I was disciplined in the shop. You asked me earlier, have I made furniture? Well, the truth of the matter is I was a lousy cabinetmaker and became a good designer. Why was I a lousy cabinetmaker? Because I was impatient. And my father's motto always was: "Measure three times and cut once." And I would cut three times and never bother to measure. I mean if not literally, that was much more my style of working. I wanted to see progress. And so I worked in the factory with some wonderful craftsmen that we had. Alongside of them. Learning their skills. But then taking their skills and moving them into my kind of design which they had no clue of making.

MIJA REIDEL: Right.

VLADIMIR KAGAN: And so I pushed the envelope a lot. And my father was very supportive in letting me do the things that were really not his style. He came out of the Bauhaus philosophy of singular line, you know, linear furniture, and I started to do sculptured furniture. But the fact that we worked together, the fact that I had the encouragement, helped. Then we had in the early stages of our business when we were still on 44th Street, we were introduced to John Wanamaker, which is a big furniture company. And at that time they had a contract department; all the stores had contract departments. And the contract departments I guess still do so—and did then—handle major projects. And we got tail ends of some important jobs. And one of the jobs that flew our way was the cocktail lounges for the United Nations. The first United Nations in Lake Success. And the cocktail lounges were supposed to be done with Eero Saarinen furniture. [Laughs.] Today I marvel because that Saarinen furniture is iconic and wonderful. They thought it was too light and flimsy somehow or other. And I ended up designing all the furniture for that. Totally, I have no designs left of it; I have no idea what it looks like. Obviously those lounges were early on destroyed. There may be some archival photographs. But they were probably awful.

MIJA REIDEL: And this would have been relatively right after you got out of high school. So this would have been in the late forties?

VLADIMIR KAGAN: 1946.

MIJA REIDEL: Okay.

VLADIMIR KAGAN: Like '45, '46 when I was working there. And one of the admonitions for this job was, you've got to do it in, I don't know, four weeks, six weeks? It had to be done for the opening of the United Nations, and we were able to do it.

MIJA REIDEL: And what did it entail? A number of tables, a number of chairs?

VLADIMIR KAGAN: Tables. I don't think I did chairs. I think we did tables. We weren't in the upholstery business. I put the company into the upholstery business later on.

MIJA REIDEL: Okay.

VLADIMIR KAGAN: We were cabinetmakers. So it was a lot of stuff like that. And we did it, and it was successful. It was well liked. And sort of one job led to the other. And the next project I started to get involved with was Raymond Loewy.

MIJA REIDEL: And what was that?

VLADIMIR KAGAN: I worked—Well, they did a lot of store designs. And so we made a lot of the furniture for the store designs. I worked with the design department at Loewy. Met some wonderful people. Again, my ability to communicate with them and able to read the blueprints and drawings was terrific.

MIJA REIDEL: Right. Got you.

VLADIMIR KAGAN: One of the things I hated to do, but learned to do, was to estimate costs.

MIJA REIDEL: Ah.

VLADIMIR KAGAN: Most designers, craftsmen don't know what cost is all about. And it was such an important discipline. The word *discipline* comes in again. And my father was good at this. He had a good mind and a good mathematical mind. And you had to figure in—and he made me do these things. And in those days we used slide rulers. Have you ever heard of a slide ruler?

MIJA REIDEL: Yes, I have.

VLADIMIR KAGAN: I still have my slide ruler—

MIJA REIDEL: Do you really?

VLADIMIR KAGAN: —because it's a beautiful instrument.

MIJA REIDEL: I bet.

VLADIMIR KAGAN: We had no calculators [laughs]. But we had to figure out how much wood, how many square feet of wood, in solid wood, in plywood. And then you had to estimate how much time it would take. And this is where most craftsmen go off the deep end.

MIJA REIDEL: Right.

VLADIMIR KAGAN: They don't think—they never figure it'd take as long as it does. And they end up only earning $2 an hour and not estimating it correctly. And also the hunger for a job makes you want to cut corners. "Oh, I can do this in 40 hours." It takes 80 hours.

MIJA REIDEL: Right.

VLADIMIR KAGAN: So I learned how to do that. And that's something that's stuck with me, you know, right along. It's been good. And you also have to understand what markup is all about, because you've got to make a profit, and you've got to cut in the cost of your operation, the nonproductive part. And, I mean, eventually I had 40 people working for me. And then it became very significant to understand where costs were and what is overhead. And we managed to stay afloat doing that. But we also became very expensive. So early in the—Well, I'm jumping into the fifties.

MIJA REIDEL: Right.

VLADIMIR KAGAN: That's okay.

MIJA REIDEL: Yes.

VLADIMIR KAGAN: I'll go back historically. In 1947, I said, "Dad, we really need to have a visual outlet for our product." And they agreed, the family agreed. We opened the shop on 65th Street between Madison and Park Avenue.

MIJA REIDEL: And this was strictly a shop, no longer a factory.

VLADIMIR KAGAN: A store. We owned the factory. The factory was still on 44th Street. And we had this lovely store, which was really a converted dining room or living room with a window broken in at the ground floor level.

MIJA REIDEL: And what was it called?

VLADIMIR KAGAN: It was called Kagan Design.

MIJA REIDEL: Okay.

VLADIMIR KAGAN: Kagan Design.

MIJA REIDEL: This was—sorry—you said '47, '48?

VLADIMIR KAGAN: 1947. And I have photographs even in my book. I think I showed pictures of the very early designs, which were very architectural. I mean, geez, I was doing my architectural school at night and ran the shop in the day. And these things really reflected the architecture. A lot of cantilevers, linear stuff.

MIJA REIDEL: And what an exciting time in New York for architecture and design. It must have been a very heady time.

VLADIMIR KAGAN: It was really terrific fun.

MIJA REIDEL: Yes. What were you seeing that was inspiring to you, anything in particular at the time?

VLADIMIR KAGAN: No. I made the furniture that I liked to do. The truth of the matter is, that for years and years—and probably right into the present—I was reactive rather than proactive. Meaning to say, a client would come to me and say, "I need a Nestor table." And I'd design the Nestor table. "I want a chess table." Design a chess table. It was always the relationship with people. And it was the need of my client that inspired my design work. And the more complex the need, the more exciting the project turned out for me.

MIJA REIDEL: Interesting.

VLADIMIR KAGAN: And I became a problem-solver. And I would have clients. I must say that my clientele over the years had always remained my friends. I've never had a bad client, bad client relationship. And they became the reservoir of ideas. Because somebody needed at one time—but this is now I'm jumping into the sixties—wanted a glass-topped table, a dining table, for their living room, because they had a gorgeous Oriental rug and they didn't want it covered with a traditional table. So I designed the first—for me—the first glass-topped extension dining table that was so unique that I was able to get design patents on it. And it's still one of the major pieces of my furniture [inaudible]. Almost every auction that comes on by Sotheby's and Christie's and Orego [ph] has one of those tables in there bringing reasonably good prices. But what really brings the real prices are my seating and my upholstery designs.

MIJA REIDEL: Right, right.

VLADIMIR KAGAN: Because they were terribly inspired designs. And they are, again, reflective, if you want to go back in time, to Woodstock.

MIJA REIDEL: Hmm.

VLADIMIR KAGAN: And design philosophy that was handed down from my parents' house. Because I loved the idea of Bauhaus, and I liked the idea of Bauhaus philosophically, because there were two mottos that stuck: One is "form follows function." And the other one is "less is more."

MIJA REIDEL: Right.

VLADIMIR KAGAN: And those were buzzwords that inspired me in the same way that a client would inspire me that they need such-and-such. So how do I relate to "form follows function"? A seating piece, the function is to sit. It's primarily a vessel to rest your tush on and have a good support for your back. The rest becomes style. But within that discipline you have a lot of latitude. And so the form—I interpret it, my forms, to be organic in shape, more to the human body, as opposed to linear.

MIJA REIDEL: Yes. That seems true from the very start.

VLADIMIR KAGAN: Yes. That was my response to "form follows function." The next thing was, how do you create "less is more"? And so I said—and I worked with clients, mostly in apartments, because we were in a New York City kind of involvement. I said, "Well, if I make a big sofa that can seat eight people, I eliminated furniture." And very interestingly, from the very beginning, my major clients were always art collectors.

MIJA REIDEL: Interesting.

VLADIMIR KAGAN: And their need was to empty the walls for artwork as opposed to sticking furniture against the wall.

MIJA REIDEL: Right.

VLADIMIR KAGAN: So I started to build furniture that could sit in the middle of the room. Then I took that philosophy further. And I said, you know, we don't just have a single focus in a room. A room has four walls. And so I developed these serpentine sofas that meandered.

MIJA REIDEL: Yes.

VLADIMIR KAGAN: And they would—they could turn circles. They could go S-shaped. And so you could really enjoy the artwork. The artwork became the focus.

MIJA REIDEL: Right.

VLADIMIR KAGAN: And the furniture took up the middle.

MIJA REIDEL: And that was right around 1950, I think.

VLADIMIR KAGAN: That was the fifties, yes.

MIJA REIDEL: That first serpentine sofa.

VLADIMIR KAGAN: And so they became, over the years, the most iconic pieces of my designs which are still today hot sellers.

MIJA REIDEL: Yes.

VLADIMIR KAGAN: And one of my sofas last year, two years ago, sold at Christie's for $192,000.

MIJA REIDEL: Which one was that?

VLADIMIR KAGAN: And that was the one—Well, I'll tell you the history of that. It's a fascinating history.

MIJA REIDEL: Please.

VLADIMIR KAGAN: In the fifties we moved our store from 65th Street to 57th Street. Fifty-seventh Street was the arts center—the epicenter for art in New York.

MIJA REIDEL: Okay.

VLADIMIR KAGAN: And I thought that's where I wanted to be. In order to do that, we took on a partner called Hugo Dreyfuss.

MIJA REIDEL: Right.

VLADIMIR KAGAN: The company became Kagan Dreyfuss for a period of ten years.

MIJA REIDEL: This is the late forties, yes?

VLADIMIR KAGAN: This is '50.

MIJA REIDEL: '50?

VLADIMIR KAGAN: Yes, late '49, 1949 or so. Hugo was an interesting character. He was much older than I was. He had been in the textile business in Switzerland. He was a Swiss, and he'd made a lot of money; he retired young, meaning to say he was probably 40, 50, when I was 18. But he married into a very artistic family that were painters. And he himself was totally immersed in the art of his family. And he was looking for a showcase for his family's art. So I used to show his lamps, and that's how we met.

MIJA REIDEL: He made lamps?

VLADIMIR KAGAN: He made lamps, or his brother-in-law made lamps with graffiti scratched into it. And we got to like each other. Nice guy. And he said, "You know one day, if you ever want an investor in your business, I'd love to invest in it." And so here was the opportunity to move to 57th Street. He put 20,000 bucks into the company, which was a fortune for us at the time.

MIJA REIDEL: Sure.

VLADIMIR KAGAN: Today you can't buy a pack of cigarettes. And we moved to 57th Street. And I designed this whole space; it was a wonderful store with two windows. The serpentine sofa was the opening showpiece that I had in there. From that showcase that I had—

MIJA REIDEL: One quick question—sorry.

VLADIMIR KAGAN: Yes.

MIJA REIDEL: This was one of the very first upholstered pieces, yes?

VLADIMIR KAGAN: Yes, yes. Well I tell you, I did the barrel chairs.

MIJA REIDEL: The barrel chairs, right.

VLADIMIR KAGAN: And the serpentine. That whole design came out of the late forties.

MIJA REIDEL: Yes, yes.

VLADIMIR KAGAN: And I remember doing the barrel chair in our factory on 44th Street.

MIJA REIDEL: What was the inspiration to move into the upholstery?

VLADIMIR KAGAN: We were doing work—my father was doing contract work for a very good Viennese architect by the name of Ernst Schwadron. Ernst Schwadron—we made all of Schwadron's furniture. He also made the furniture for a sweet, old cantankerous lady called Irna Rosenblatt [he means Rena Rosenthal].

MIJA REIDEL: Okay.

VLADIMIR KAGAN: Irma Rosenblatt with an R. And she had a store on 57th Street; that's what inspired me to want to be on 57th Street.

MIJA REIDEL: Ah, yes, you mentioned her.

VLADIMIR KAGAN: Because she said that's where you wanted to be.

MIJA REIDEL: Right.

VLADIMIR KAGAN: And Schwadron first was her designer.

MIJA REIDEL: Yes.

VLADIMIR KAGAN: Then he opened a little storefront on Madison Avenue and went into business for himself. And both these people were there. And I said, "I can add to that vocabulary by doing different things than they do." So I started to get into the upholstery aspect of things.

MIJA REIDEL: Okay.

VLADIMIR KAGAN: But I must say, you know, the inspiration was having worked for them, doing their designs, became a mentor artistically for what I wanted to do. And when I did the 57th Street store, I put in a brick wall. There was no theatrics there. I mean, I built [inaudible] things. And the brick wall with a floating fireplace, which was unheard of at the time, in marble. And then I created room settings that became galleries. And we were the first store really to sort of incorporate artwork. And I cultivated it. This was the philosophy I went into when I opened up the store on 65th Street. I wanted to incorporate art into practical furnishings. And I solicited artists: ceramists and metalworkers. And they kind of flocked to me as a vehicle. In those days there were not many opportunities for craftsmen.

MIJA REIDEL: Was America House open yet?

VLADIMIR KAGAN: Not yet.

MIJA REIDEL: Okay.

VLADIMIR KAGAN: We were before America House. And so I had some very good—Mark Kiram was a beautiful ceramist, and I sold his lamps like hotcakes. And I used to make lampshades for those lamps out of fiberglass but pigmented. Each lamp I pigmented myself to reflect the pedestal. It was quite fun to do. And I guess that's from the days of finger painting became a natural transition into those lampshades.

MIJA REIDEL: Yes.

VLADIMIR KAGAN: Then we had—people would give us things, and we had [Amedeo] Modigliani.

MIJA REIDEL: Really!

VLADIMIR KAGAN: If I had only bought that stuff, you know. We had the Natzlers [Gertrud and Otto Natzler], and Natzler Family, we sold their ceramics.

MIJA REIDEL: Yes. Really!

VLADIMIR KAGAN: And we became of course the showcase for Hugo Dreyfuss's brother-in-law, Emanuel Romano, who painted a big mural as well as the room dividers. And in each segment we had furniture mixed with art, because I wanted to show art in an environment rather than in a gallery setting. And that worked.

MIJA REIDEL: I bet.

VLADIMIR KAGAN: And that was ten years on 57th Street was a very, very fruitful time. My first catalog that I came out with, a primitive thing, black and white, didn't have all the furniture ready, so half the catalog was done with sketches.

MIJA REIDEL: And was the serpentine sofa on in the catalog?

VLADIMIR KAGAN: The serpentine sofa was on the cover.

MIJA REIDEL: Okay.

VLADIMIR KAGAN: Yes. But there were sketches of some of the organic shapes that then became—like the Nestor table was sitting out here; those things were just—a lot of it still figments of the mind, and I drew them.

MIJA REIDEL: Right.

VLADIMIR KAGAN: And then subsequently the furniture became what the drawings were like. Again, it was an ability to draw, to make it realistic.

MIJA REIDEL: Yes.

VLADIMIR KAGAN: Today of course we have computers. We can really do that. But in those days we drew it. This is how the store evolved. And as a result of that store on 57th Street, one day the Vollmer Family came in from Venezuela. I had no idea who the Vollmers were. But they were the leading political family in Venezuela. And as a byproduct, I designed the headquarters for the Ministry of Commerce and the Ministry of Defense—huge projects—for the Vollmers, and I did their homes for them. They had a beautiful daughter that I was able to date. In those days I became quite a roué.

MIJA REIDEL: Aha!

VLADIMIR KAGAN: I spent every night at the Stork Club, dancing 'til it closed. And then was working the next morning. So it was really—life became very interesting, a bowl of cherries.

MIJA REIDEL: Yes, it sounds like it.

VLADIMIR KAGAN: But in the shop, one of the clients who came in was—I can't think of their name now. They were a Dutch family living in Boston. I think their name was Vollmer. No, Vollmer were the Argentinian ones.

MIJA REIDEL: Venezuelans?

VLADIMIR KAGAN: It'll come in.

MIJA REIDEL: They were following the serpentine sofa through, right, through the auctions?

VLADIMIR KAGAN: Yes, I'm getting into the serpentine sofa thing.

MIJA REIDEL: Yes.

VLADIMIR KAGAN: They had a home in Boston. They were in the wool business. I guess, I don't know, the Dutch were involved in wool. Reiser, Robert Reiser, was his name. R-E-I-S-E-R. And as it turned out, they had Gropius [Walter Gropius]'s house—

MIJA REIDEL: Oh!

VLADIMIR KAGAN: The house that Gropius lived in. I don't think he built it; maybe he did some renovations. It was Modern on the inside. In Boston.

MIJA REIDEL: How wonderful.

VLADIMIR KAGAN: In Newton or something like that. And they invited me to design the furniture in the interior. They fell in love with my brick wall, my floating fireplace, and I designed it. This was a really wonderful feather in my cap.

MIJA REIDEL: Absolutely.

VLADIMIR KAGAN: Beautiful design opportunity. And I built at that time for me the largest of these Omnibus, maybe a 20-foot Omnibus. Again, "less is more" philosophy.

MIJA REIDEL: Right. Now was that one of the first Omnibus?

VLADIMIR KAGAN: Not—The first one was on the cover of my catalog, so I must have done that in the forties already. And it was ready; when I moved into the showroom, I had it. But this was a commission based on the first Omnibuses. And it was expanding it into a total interior where I had design control.

MIJA REIDEL: This would have been nineteen, early fifties?

VLADIMIR KAGAN: '51, '52, '53, in that range. And so the Reisers became very significant clients. And they eventually—Mr. Reiser died. Mrs. Reiser then sold the apartment.

MIJA REIDEL: That house are we talking about, the Gropius house?

VLADIMIR KAGAN: It was a house, yes. Sold the house, you know. And it was sold to a man—I really hardly met him at all, if I met him. I think maybe his name was Christianson; I'm not quite sure. He was the—became the art director or the curator of fine arts at Boston Museum of Fine Arts.

MIJA REIDEL: Okay.

VLADIMIR KAGAN: And of course he had no use for Modern. So I bought all the furniture back out of the house. I don't know if I bought it from the Reisers or if I bought it from this guy. I think I bought it from this man. And I put it into my warehouse. And then perhaps 20 years later, Barbara Jacobson of the Museum of Modern Art came to me, and said, "Vladimir, do you have anything of your classic furniture?" And I showed her that sofa. And she loved it and bought it for her house on 74th Street. And it stayed there for 30 years or so.

MIJA REIDEL: Robert Jacobson?

VLADIMIR KAGAN: No, Barbara Jacobson.

MIJA REIDEL: Barbara Jacobson.

VLADIMIR KAGAN: And she is one of the directors of the Museum of Modern Art, very influential person, wealthy woman. Big benefactor and so on. And she loved forties and fifties, and furnished the entire house with those things. Not all mine. My sofa was the focal point of her living room, which was a two-story living room. Then one day she decided—a couple of years ago—"Hey, I want a new lease on life. I want a change." And she sold everything at Christie's, the whole works, to start over again. Which was a delightful way of—you know, when you collect, you become a victim of your own collection.

MIJA REIDEL: Sure.

VLADIMIR KAGAN: And she wanted to break loose out of that. Sold it extremely well, and that's when that sofa sold again to Ronald Lauder of what is the name of the cosmetic—?

MIJA REIDEL: Estee Lauder?

VLADIMIR KAGAN: Estee Lauder, yes. And he paid $192,000 for it. [Laughs.]

MIJA REIDEL: That's a wonderful provenance for that [inaudible].

VLADIMIR KAGAN: That's the history, that's the provenance of this particular piece of furniture.

MIJA REIDEL: Extraordinary. And one of the early ones. It's still very much [inaudible].

VLADIMIR KAGAN: Yes, yes. And it's hot and lively. And that sofa has had a tremendous influence on my career right along, because every time nowadays that I work with manufacturers and licensing my designs, they all want that sofa.

MIJA REIDEL: Sure.

VLADIMIR KAGAN: And I have to reinvent it in a way that, yes, you can have this one with an E end [ph], and the other one can have this one with a bumper. But it's a lively, active piece of furniture that's much sought after today. And it's still the backbone of our manufacturing today. I don't know how many we sell. Maybe 50 of them a year.

MIJA REIDEL: Really!

VLADIMIR KAGAN: I don't have the total statistics. Probably we do.

MIJA REIDEL: Mm-hmm. [Affirmative.] And that's extraordinary when you think that that was designed really 50 years ago, the first one, and you're still—

VLADIMIR KAGAN: Yes. And more—60 years ago.

MIJA REIDEL: Yes. Working with variations on that, and it's still so—

VLADIMIR KAGAN: It's the philosophy of the design.

MIJA REIDEL: Yes.

VLADIMIR KAGAN: And the simplicity of the design.

MIJA REIDEL: Yes.

VLADIMIR KAGAN: One of the other features that was very much an inspiration for me—less inspiration than admonition—following the "less is more." In those days, your typical sofa had nice spring platform and then a down cushion on top and then a back with some more cushions thrown into it. Very cozy and comfortable. As a matter of fact, I like them today very much. But in those days, I said, "God, what a stupid surplus of things. Why don't we incorporate the down into the seat and make a tight-seat sofa." Now, tight-seat sofas just didn't exist. I mean, they didn't happen. So I did the springs and the horsehair and the whole thing, covered it with a down topping, and that was the first serpentine. And the spring-loaded back. And so I eliminated all those loose cushions that you forever had to prop up.

MIJA REIDEL: Right.

VLADIMIR KAGAN: And created, I think, the beginning of the tight-seat upholstery concept. And of course that still functions today, although nowadays we're going back to some of the designs that had loose cushions that I made. But you know, things go in cyclical. In my life everything happened in a kind of a cyclical ten-year period of time. Very interesting. Because the store on 57th Street, we opened it in 1950. And by 1960 times got very bad. It was called the Eisenhower Recession because Eisenhower was president at the time. Recessions always get named after the reigning president. And business became bad enough that we couldn't afford to keep the showroom going, pay two families' living, Dreyfuss and ourselves. And so we decided to split up, and we bought Dreyfuss out of the partnership. He was quite happy to resign and go back to getting more artistically involved in things. Hugo and I, we remained friends until he died. And as a matter of fact, I gave the speech at his funeral, memorial service. He was a good influence on me, and we worked well together. Parenthetically speaking, because of Hugo's textile background, we brought fabrics into the Kagan Company.

MIJA REIDEL: Okay.

VLADIMIR KAGAN: And we did both printed fabrics and woven fabrics before Jack Larsen existed. And not only that, we had hired a weaver.

MIJA REIDEL: Oh, right! Wasn't that Dorothy Liebes?

VLADIMIR KAGAN: No, Dorothy Liebes we worked with later on. Her name was Cheripov [Nadia Cheripov]. And she was a Russian weaver. And I put her into one of the showroom windows. And she was actually weaving fabric in the store. Eventually that became too much of a distraction, and we wanted to have more products to show. And we moved her into our factory. Our factory in that period of time had to move from 44th Street, because it became—our view out of our window, which used to be abattoirs, you know, slaughterhouses, became the United Nations.

MIJA REIDEL: Really!

VLADIMIR KAGAN: And then our building was of course sold as a byproduct to the UN and became one of the office buildings for the U.S. embassies and so on. And so we had to move from 44th Street, and we found—

MIJA REIDEL: Is this 1960 when the partnership ended?

VLADIMIR KAGAN: In '60 the partnership ended. But this was in the fifties still.

MIJA REIDEL: It was before.

VLADIMIR KAGAN: We had to move, and we moved to East 80th Street, East End Avenue and 80th Street. Now, everything in life has its purpose. We never know how things will evolve. But this was a very nice brick building, wood construction on the inside with lots of windows. Again my dad liked the idea of light and open views. So we moved the factory up there. And with that factory, eventually we grew from one floor to two floors and three floors, because we had our own upholstery shop. We were one of the few facilities. We're still okay?

MIJA REIDEL: We're fine.

VLADIMIR KAGAN: We were one of the few facilities that had both upholstery and cabinet working and a store to sell it from, and a designer who oversaw the whole thing, which was me.

MIJA REIDEL: Yes.

VLADIMIR KAGAN: So we were quite a unique vertical operation.

MIJA REIDEL: Absolutely.

VLADIMIR KAGAN: Because we had the shop on East End Avenue. At that time, across the street, there were still gas tanks, huge gas tanks, which were eventually demolished, and East End Avenue is what it is today, a very nice residential neighborhood.

MIJA REIDEL: Yes.

VLADIMIR KAGAN: But we moved from Riverside Drive to East End Avenue on 83rd Street, so it was walking distance for Dad to go to the factory. I would go to the factory in the mornings, go down to the showroom in the afternoon, to the store on 57th Street. And then by 1960, when business had taken this downturn, we decided—my father decided—we can't keep both the showroom and the factory. And he said, "Son, I want to get rid of the factory and keep the showroom because I like that as my window to the world." So it was very, very good for me. He was a hands-on craftsman. He said, "You make your living and you make your money when you produce, and you keep the factory."

MIJA REIDEL: Right.

VLADIMIR KAGAN: I was very, very upset about that. But it was a good move. And what happened was, because we were in this building, we took another floor. We only had one floor at the time. We took a second floor and made that into the showroom.

MIJA REIDEL: Aha!

VLADIMIR KAGAN: So we had a factory showroom.

MIJA REIDEL: Ah!

VLADIMIR KAGAN: Which in turn worked out very nicely.

MIJA REIDEL: Yes.

VLADIMIR KAGAN: I guess we were one of the first people to kind of move away from the open scene into a closed environment and succeeded with it. Because we didn't have the window to the world, but we brought people up there. And the plus was that I could take people through the factory to see their work in progress.

MIJA REIDEL: Right.

VLADIMIR KAGAN: And so now it—

MIJA REIDEL: And they loved that, I would imagine.

VLADIMIR KAGAN: Oh, they loved it. It was terrific.

MIJA REIDEL: Yes. Absolutely.

VLADIMIR KAGAN: We're now into the second ten years of my career, 1960 to 1970. Okay?

MIJA REIDEL: Mm-hmm. [Affirmative.] One quick question before we move there. In 1952, I think, one of your chairs was selected for a MoMA Design Award, correct?

VLADIMIR KAGAN: I think it was in the fifties.

MIJA REIDEL: Okay. And did that have a—was that enormously significant work?

VLADIMIR KAGAN: You know something? It was to me a terrible disappointment.

MIJA REIDEL: Really!

VLADIMIR KAGAN: And I tell you why: It was, Edgar Kaufmann was the director of that program. He conceived that program.

MIJA REIDEL: Right.

VLADIMIR KAGAN: And I was doing some what I thought—I was already doing some really cutting-edge design. And what he chose was one of my wrought-iron chairs that looked like a Savonarola chair. I have it in the garden here. The original models are sitting in the garden right outside now.

MIJA REIDEL: Really! Okay.

VLADIMIR KAGAN: And I thought that was the least-inspired piece of my designs. It was a retro design merely picked up from a classic shape into a Modern shape. But not the design I was most proud of.

MIJA REIDEL: Interesting.

VLADIMIR KAGAN: Did it do anything for me? I suppose years later it gave me bragging rights. And I was very honored and happy to be part of that program.

MIJA REIDEL: Sure.

VLADIMIR KAGAN: But it was not a significant breakthrough. Very few things are.

MIJA REIDEL: Okay.

VLADIMIR KAGAN: It was a stepping stone.

MIJA REIDEL: Interesting.

VLADIMIR KAGAN: But now we're on East End Avenue. We're living there. I was in my twenties—20.

MIJA REIDEL: So you're living in a space—

VLADIMIR KAGAN: No, on 83rd, and this was on 80th Street. I think I must have been 20, maybe 21 years old. And at that time I felt okay, let's, even though—

MIJA REIDEL: Wait a minute, hang on. This is '47?

VLADIMIR KAGAN: No, 1960.

MIJA REIDEL: Okay. So then you have to be closer to 30, right?

VLADIMIR KAGAN: Yes, I was in my—Yes, but before we did that move, I moved out of my parents' house.

MIJA REIDEL: Right.

VLADIMIR KAGAN: And got my own apartment. Okay?

MIJA REIDEL: Yes, yes.

VLADIMIR KAGAN: And I had beautiful bachelor's digs on East 78th Street, 12 East 78th Street. They ought to put a bronze plaque on it. [They laugh.] Between Fifth Avenue and Madison Avenue. And it was a one-room apartment in a townhouse. Nice big room, probably 16-by-16, with a little kitchenette that I had to put behind a screen. But it was bachelor digs, and it was great fun, let me tell you. My life was very amusing in those days.

MIJA REIDEL: Yes.

VLADIMIR KAGAN: And of course that's when I had my nightclub days.

MIJA REIDEL: Yes.

VLADIMIR KAGAN: So that was when I was 21, you see.

MIJA REIDEL: Okay.

VLADIMIR KAGAN: And so I had my bachelor digs. It was also my seduction chamber.

MIJA REIDEL: I see.

VLADIMIR KAGAN: Brought my darling wife up there.

MIJA REIDEL: Apparently it worked.

VLADIMIR KAGAN: It worked beautifully. It was not easy to get laid in those days. [They laugh.] It was a campaign.

MIJA REIDEL: I see.

VLADIMIR KAGAN: Let me tell you. The kids nowadays go to, you know, wham, bang, thank you ma'am. And do you or don't you? But in those days you had to work hard for anything that came your way. [They laugh.] And as a result, I became a good cook.

MIJA REIDEL: Aha!

VLADIMIR KAGAN: Why? Because it was very hard to get a nice girl to come up to your apartment. But if you had a dinner party for your friends, she would come and help you cook. Then she stayed and cleaned up after the guests left. Then if you worked it really right, you scored. [They laugh.] I told you we'd get raunchy sooner or later.

MIJA REIDEL: There you go. Exactly. So you made a beautiful location [inaudible].

VLADIMIR KAGAN: And it was a lovely place. My bachelor bed—Erica still dreams about it—and we have it here, and I'm going to show it to you, in our attic.

MIJA REIDEL: Yes.

VLADIMIR KAGAN: And our son's babysitter lives there now, uses the bed. But the bed had lighting. It had a bar; it had rheostats.

MIJA REIDEL: [Laughs] It sounds like James Bond.

VLADIMIR KAGAN: Now, it was James Bond before Bond. And nowadays, you know, you can get a rheostat on the light switch. In those days I had to go get theatrical rheostats. It just didn't exist as a residential—for residential use. And I built this huge rheostat into the bed, which I could twiggle with my toes. And, you know, I could dim the lights quietly, and it was quite romantic.

MIJA REIDEL: [Laughs] This is great.

VLADIMIR KAGAN: Do you want to get more of the seduction scene, or have you got enough of that?

MIJA REIDEL: I think that's enough.

VLADIMIR KAGAN: Okay.

MIJA REIDEL: Unless there's anything specifically significant other than planning [inaudible].

VLADIMIR KAGAN: No. Just that whole bedroom was quite—

[END DISC 2.]

MIJA REIDEL: This is Mija Riedel with Vladimir Kagan on June 10, 2010, at his studio and home in Nantucket, Massachusetts, for the Smithsonian Archives of American Art. Disc number [three]. So let's talk a little bit about the work in the fifties, the designs in particular.

VLADIMIR KAGAN: All right. My work in the fifties really—my work in the fifties really started in the late forties, when I started to evolve a new design philosophy for myself, moving away from the rigidness of architectural designs and pure structures, which were probably still based a lot on my father's own design tastes and philosophy, because he made square furniture and square bookcases. I moved into a much more organic mode. And where did that come from? There wasn't anything really happening in America. America was a no-man's-land, a desert design-wise after the war. There was the Depression and then came the war years. And so it started all of a sudden a rebirth. And the fifties became really exciting. They became exciting in a different way than I saw the excitement. And the fifties gave us Eames [Charles and Ray Eames].

MIJA REIDEL: Right.

VLADIMIR KAGAN: And they gave us George Nelson.

MIJA REIDEL: George Nelson. Mm-hmm. [Affirmative.]

VLADIMIR KAGAN: And all the people that were driven by the industrial age. And their concept was: use machinery to make furniture for the masses. And to that end they developed a very interesting vocabulary. That didn't suit my own background, education, and upbringing. My father always [inaudible, in German]; translated it means: Honor the handcraft.

And so I thought more in terms of furniture not as a mass-produced item but as a handmade item that always

had the earmark of a craftsman having made it. I didn't want to do things that could readily be done by machinery. And so I came up with a vocabulary of a much more sculptural, organic shapes.

MIJA REIDEL: Were you interested in Danish designs?

VLADIMIR KAGAN: I didn't get into that. I mean, I looked at—there's nothing in America. The Danes certainly had produced some very nice, lovely shapes: Hansen, Finn Juhl. They were very aesthetic, very sparse, very Scandinavian. And it was an interesting breakaway from boxy stuff.

MIJA REIDEL: Yes.

VLADIMIR KAGAN: But didn't entirely talk to me. It was certainly an inspiration. Then there were the Italians, who were amazingly creative, always have been. And their stuff became much too baroque for my taste. You're talking about Gio Ponti and people like that. Beautiful work, lots of elegant woodwork, details. But elaborately over-designed that became almost decorations in themselves rather than functional. I wanted to still maintain the element of function with a sculptural motif.

MIJA REIDEL: Okay.

VLADIMIR KAGAN: And there were a number of things that inspired me or drove me toward some of the end products. I used to—again, we go back to my days at Woodstock, you know what I mean? No lightning struck.

MIJA REIDEL: Right.

VLADIMIR KAGAN: But there was always the wild animals. And I would see a young fawn or a young filly, a horse, standing there in the fields, strutting itself on four legs, widespread for balance. All of a sudden that theme became part of my underpinnings for my furniture. That firm stance. And it became evident in some of the high pieces of furniture that I made in the very early fifties and late forties. Where in actual fact I took the first little itty-bitty 12-inch television set and moved it into a tall, high cabinet that stood on 30-inch-high legs or 32-inch-high legs. Very much like the little fawns: standing their heavy body on top, standing on these very spindly, thin legs. In those days I was also more interested in actually decorating those legs so they had either carved profiles. And one of them had—it was almost like a Narwhal whale tusk, wood turnings, yes, turning curves. And there are just a few of those examples that I made. I also made bars like that, bar cabinets that stood up high. So that they were easy access; why be on the ground? After a while I said, "Why should the television and everything be up high? Why not put it into a low cabinet?" After all, when you're sitting down and reading a newspaper, you're not holding it out in front of you; you're holding it in your lap. So why not put the television low, tilted so you'd face up in the same relationship that your newspaper faced up. Which kind of liberated the cabinetry from clumsy to a more elegant line. That was also a byproduct of the fifties.

Another byproduct of the fifties, very strongly, was the trees that I used to draw in abstraction as a tree. All of a sudden that lesson came back to me, to develop the bone structure of a tree, how the branches come out and became slender. My lessons in anatomy, of bones, how they became knuckles, thick, looking at a human body, what do you call it? The bone that goes from the shoulder becomes thin until it becomes the elbow and it gets thick again. And those organic shapes of the human structure, combined with nature's influence, gave me a very distinct handwriting of my own. And I evolved that over a ten-year period in the fifties. I kept trying to simplify the elements that created that furniture. I first was a little bit more ornate and tried to refine, chisel away the surplus until I came up to very slender, elegant forms that just had function. And we're back to the Bauhaus philosophy: in essence, less is more; form follows function. But it interpreted itself in my creations much differently than the Bauhaus products ended up being, you know. But the same thing, design philosophy, drove me.

MIJA REIDEL: And were these then—there was something like the Capricorn Series that resulted from the Unicorn Series?

VLADIMIR KAGAN: That was a little—that's a tangent.

MIJA REIDEL: Okay.

VLADIMIR KAGAN: Essentially what I started off was with a very simple little club chair, which I guess could be like a pull-up chair, rather à la Finn Juhl in its spirit. Lightweight, easy to move.

MIJA REIDEL: Did you have any sort of floating backs or seats?

VLADIMIR KAGAN: Floating back and seat.

MIJA REIDEL: Yes. Okay.

VLADIMIR KAGAN: And that became the core. From that I made a dining chair series, also with floating back and seats. And oddly enough, those designs, number one, became rather involved in manufacturing. And from there I moved out from the rather floaty look to the more contour shapes, to create that vessel, the negative form of the human body in which the human body could float into and be comfortable. So those chairs, about a series of four or five of them, became the core and became very iconic. And we're still today manufacturing them again. Big demand for them.

MIJA REIDEL: Did they have names, those particular chairs?

VLADIMIR KAGAN: Ah, in those days I gave them numbers. I was very prosaic. And they were the 100 series or 150, 175A, B, C. So I could tell 175A, B, C came out of one design group; 176 was another design group. So the numbers gave me a guide. But it was very uninspired naming. And it took me 30, 40 years until—maybe until I closed my whole operation down that I started really give things names. And remembered them by names. But the numbers in the beginning were serial numbers. A design had a certain number series.

MIJA REIDEL: What about materials—

VLADIMIR KAGAN: Let me finish on this number thing for you.

MIJA REIDEL: Sorry.

VLADIMIR KAGAN: Then someplace down the line, probably in the sixties, I all of a sudden became conscious of the fact that I needed to date these things. I needed to quantify when they were designed. So then I started naming them with the year. So anything that started 1601, 1602 came from the 1960s. It wasn't 16; it was 601, 602, and so on. And so any year I started a new calendar year as a preface to the designs. They still were not named by name, still known by number, but now all of a sudden you could identify by the number when they were designed or introduced. And so that was an interesting feature. I kept going until we started to revive them now in the nineties and 2000s. And we needed names. So now they became the "contour sculptured rocking chair."

MIJA REIDEL: Right.

VLADIMIR KAGAN: And the "contour easy chair, sculptured wood arms" and so on. I gave them more of a visual identification as opposed to number identification. But what did you—You were—

MIJA REIDEL: I was wondering, as the forms were evolving, if you were also experimenting with materials, too?

VLADIMIR KAGAN: Actually we found the most grateful material that we could use was American walnut. It was a wood grain that was kind to work with. It was consistent. It could be sculpted down to very elegant shapes. It was a hard wood. It was a wood that was plentifully available. It wasn't extravagantly expensive. We also—I worked in oak. Originally I worked in oak. I love the texture of oak. But it became not the material to use for the sculptured forms. And so the fifties stuff was all in walnut. And what we're doing today in 2010 is still in walnut.

MIJA REIDEL: Interesting.

VLADIMIR KAGAN: Yes. Then again my case goods—now we're talking about upholstery, the case goods I became a little more flamboyant in the use of materials because we were using veneers. We weren't using solid woods, so you could go to rosewood and Macassar ebony, and exotic woods. And my father and I would yearly—or even in those days just go as need be—to the lumber yards and pick out the veneers. You had to buy a whole tree. You bought what's called the flitch. The veneers were cut—the tree was cut—thin.

MIJA REIDEL: Really.

VLADIMIR KAGAN: And you looked at the veneers, and you bought that tree.

MIJA REIDEL: Interesting.

VLADIMIR KAGAN: And so we also developed a certain consistency in the material used. We didn't run out and couldn't reproduce it for the next client. So that was the material used. But then, going back to my sculptured furniture, which was really the stuff that drove me at the time, I always felt that a leg on a piece of furniture, whether chair of cabinet, there shouldn't be four sticks attached to it. So these legs, these underpinnings, became sculpture. And they were the roots of a tree; and what grew above that, the seating and the arms and so on, became the branches of the tree. At least that is philosophically how it evolved. And I always wanted to make these leg underpinnings more and more elegant and thinner. And I discovered I could do them in cast material. So I started to work with cast aluminum and cast bronze. And then it became really exciting for me because I could make these joints so thin and so graceful like a deer's leg. You know how beautiful a deer is with its slender legs. These were inspired by the deer. And for the first ten years I moved into this cast aluminum; it

was also a nice mix of materials.

MIJA REIDEL: Yes.

VLADIMIR KAGAN: I loved mixing materials. I used leather. I used ceramic tiles.

MIJA REIDEL: Right.

VLADIMIR KAGAN: I used bronze. I found one artist that together we developed an etching process for doing brass, then etching it, and patinaing it, antiquing it, like a bronze sculpture. And those things became very wonderful. The artist was George Greenamyer. I looked him up because I really had a very strong interest in reviving those designs. I found that he's still alive doing sculpture. But he refused to go back to doing the etching; it was much too toxic. In those days we didn't think about toxic.

MIJA REIDEL: Exactly.

VLADIMIR KAGAN: [Laughs] So I haven't so far gotten back to my etched brass. But we went to the aluminum and to the metal. And then my foundry—hard to find a foundry that did artwork because that foundry did artistic casting.

MIJA REIDEL: Which foundry was that, where was it?

VLADIMIR KAGAN: It didn't have a [inaudible]—It was in Brooklyn. Not a name foundry. And he closed up. And he actually [inaudible] went completely out of the foundry business and did some other work. So I all of a sudden had no more ability to do these castings. And then I started to think in terms of doing them in iron, in wrought iron. And interpreted the same design elements into rod steel—sometimes stainless steel and blackened steel. And so in the late fifties, what was aluminum casting in the mid-fifties became wrought iron. And that wrought iron evolved into a nice outdoor furniture collection called Capricorn.

MIJA REIDEL: All right.

VLADIMIR KAGAN: Capricorn had about a dozen items in that line, very nice. And I had to order in minimum quantities which were not for vendors but too big for my own stores. So I decided why not try to sell them through a department store, where there'd be a bigger market. And I sold them through W. & J. Sloane. And they did extremely well. They took full-page ads in the *New York Times* and so on. And it was very well received. Unfortunately, every time we ran out of inventory, I'd have to go back to my ironworkers to make a new 50 batch of any design, the price went up 5 percent, 10 percent. And within five years we priced ourselves out of the market because Sloane's couldn't increase their price with each shot.

MIJA REIDEL: Right.

VLADIMIR KAGAN: And I had to take and less and less of a markup.

MIJA REIDEL: And why did it increase so much each time?

VLADIMIR KAGAN: I suppose labor costs kept going up. Perhaps some aspect of miscalculation in the original production. Perhaps an element of greed that, "Hey, this guy needs us, and we can get whatever it costs to make it." So we finally stopped producing. I think by 1960 we were out of that phase of the business. But in the fifties I also did straight wrought-iron work. And that is the piece that was chosen by Edgar Kaufmann for the—

MIJA REIDEL: Ah, for that MoMA collection.

VLADIMIR KAGAN: For the MoMA.

MIJA REIDEL: That's the [inaudible] chair.

VLADIMIR KAGAN: A lot of my early wrought iron, there's a fairly good collection including chandeliers and lamps and God knows what, done in pure wrought iron. The Capricorn collection took a lot of research and a lot of disappointments in trying to manufacture it. I thought, "Here I had a nice wire collection." And by the way, I was very much inspired by [Harry] Bertoia and his chairs. I have a set of his original chairs out here. Because he did this beautiful wire work. So I thought, "Well, who can make my wire—my shapes—totally different?" But certainly the inspiration was how he handled the wire. So looking around, I first went to a manufacturer of shopping carts; they're wire. But, no they needed a thousand quantity. They couldn't do anything like what I had in mind. Then I tried to go to a display company that makes magazine display racks that you see in stores. That wasn't their kind of bag either. I eventually found a manufacturer who made fire escapes.

MIJA REIDEL: Hmm!

VLADIMIR KAGAN: And he had that capability and interest in making the collection. It took a lot of jigs. You needed gang welding, which is a real technical term. And as you couldn't weld each joint, hundreds of joints, so we had to create mold patterns to which we laid the wire. And then you could come down with one machine and weld ten theoretically—

MIJA REIDEL: At once.

VLADIMIR KAGAN: Ten at one time. So that sort of thing. So there was a lot of tooling. And when we stopped manufacturing the collection, I got all the tools back. Which sounds wonderful, okay?

MIJA REIDEL: Yes, it does.

VLADIMIR KAGAN: For 40 years I stored them in my factories, moved them from one factory to the other. When we finally closed the factory in 1987, when I got very bored and fed up with it—I'm moving ahead, I'll talk about them. I was so fed up with the whole business, I threw the whole stuff into the dumpster.

MIJA REIDEL: No!

VLADIMIR KAGAN: We had a whole dumpster full.

MIJA REIDEL: Oh! You didn't want to give it to anyone to get rid of it?

VLADIMIR KAGAN: I didn't want to warehouse it. I had nobody to manufacture it. So now it is those 60 years fast forward. And we're reproducing it now in Thailand, from prototypes that I've kept and had and acquired over the years. In the early years I would buy things back from my clients, buy them at auction. And could find them in thrift shops. [They laugh.] And then of course now I can't afford to buy any of my furniture anymore.

MIJA REIDEL: Right, right.

VLADIMIR KAGAN: But going back into the fifties, that was kind of the evolution of the design process. And by the end of the fifties—and it also coordinates with that ten-year cycle of having to move the factory. And I decided that, you know, I am pricing myself out of business with this very expensive, elaborate furniture, and I needed to find a new handwriting. I was also bored, because I felt I had taken the sculpture motif to its ultimate refinement by making it more simple, more simple. And there was a point beyond which I couldn't simplify it. Not for the production costs but from an aesthetic point of view. The fact that it helped manufacturing was probably an underlying motivation, but it was really an aesthetic and economic motivation to simplify it. So I started looking for new expressions. And I somewhat went back to my earlier roots of architectural designs. And the next ten years became structural again. And I developed some of the best structural furniture like the glass-topped dining table we talked about earlier: a huge, ten-foot cantilever table on a single pedestal.

MIJA REIDEL: Who was that designed for?

VLADIMIR KAGAN: Inspired by one client and became part of my collection. Because every time I had to do a special design, it became part of my collection, but it was inspired by a client's need.

MIJA REIDEL: It's just, this is an interesting time, I think, to mention, too, that this commissioning experience really worked out extremely well in your career. It was—yes.

VLADIMIR KAGAN: Yes. It was the catalyst. As a matter of fact, eventually, when I closed my factory and I started to work with mass-produce manufacturers in High Point, North Carolina—this is in the late nineties or mid-nineties—it was a really interesting transition. Because I didn't sit face to face with a client who needed a funky chair or an interesting office. I sat with the manufacturer and said, "What can we do that's different in this market?" And then you have to sit down without a customer in front of you, with a paper, and start drawing and drawing and drawing. This is when I started using the scrolls of paper, which I affectionately called my Dead Sea Scrolls. [Laughs] And I have tons of those now in my archives. But these sketches were the process towards collections. But let's go back into the sixties now.

MIJA REIDEL: Because really the commissions were part of the process.

VLADIMIR KAGAN: That's right, yes.

MIJA REIDEL: Yes, yes.

VLADIMIR KAGAN: So in the sixties we became architectural. We had moved the company into the factory. We had made a decision—and this was my determination—that as long as I worked with private clients, they would order a home, became my friends for life, but never needed another piece of furniture. And so I looked: "Why aren't I working with an interior decorators and architects?" If you get an architect that likes a chair, he'll order it

for ten clients, and you get a better volume of business. So when we moved up to the sixties, to the East End Avenue in the sixties, we changed the complexion of our business, gearing it towards the interior design market. As a result of that, I took myself out of the design business, the decorating business, because I didn't want to appear as a competitor to my clientele. And I kind of withheld my own design activity.

MIJA REIDEL: I see. I see.

VLADIMIR KAGAN: It was interesting. By the way, just for fun, you might ask about my fifties' clients. We had that wonderful open store on 57th Street. So I had Marilyn Monroe as a client. I had Douglas Fairbanks, I had Fairchild Aviation. A wonderful mix of celebrity clients. It was a very good period of creativity. But when I moved uptown, that open window was no longer there. But then, fortunately, I managed to drift into a more—"industrial" is the wrong word—but my clients became corporations. And I worked with Chemstrand [Chemstrand, Room for Total Living, 1963], which was a division of Monsanto. They made rugs, rug fibers, and they were the first—not nylon. What is it called, the other? Acrylic—acrylic rug fibers. And so I did exhibits for them, very beautiful exhibitions at the Armory, because every year the Armory had a big design show.

MIJA REIDEL: The Park Avenue Armory?

VLADIMIR KAGAN: The Park Avenue Armory. Yes. I did about three or four of those and built some very extensive sets. I worked for a company called US Plywood and did wonderful exhibits using their plywood. I worked—through the Chemstrand connection and Monsanto, Monsanto had at Disneyland the Plastic House of the Future [1964].

MIJA REIDEL: What year was that?

VLADIMIR KAGAN: For me it was the sixties.

MIJA REIDEL: Okay.

VLADIMIR KAGAN: I don't know when the original Plastic House was built. But they asked me to go out there and redesign the interiors, because the interiors had become a little bit dated. And so I worked with Disney on that. I would commute every week to Disneyland and work on that—on redesigning the interiors of that house.

MIJA REIDEL: And Disneyland in LA?

VLADIMIR KAGAN: In LA, yes. Well, my designs on paper were, of course, much more inspired than the end product, which were tempered down by economy and, you know, they didn't want to spend the money. But still it was an interesting feather in my cap and amazingly good for my reputation. And as a result of that, I worked with Walt Disney on designing the World's Fair pavilion.

MIJA REIDEL: Which one?

VLADIMIR KAGAN: For General Electric.

MIJA REIDEL: Okay. Do you remember the year?

VLADIMIR KAGAN: 1965, I believe; '65 or '67, I'm not sure. But for GE. And that took a year, to go with the management team to all the various subsidiaries of General Electric for the home, their home products, and incorporate them into a show, a Disney-type show, at the World's Fair.

MIJA REIDEL: So what exactly did you design? What did you do?

VLADIMIR KAGAN: Well, it became a very Disney-inspired thing, because Disney had a division called Imagineering. And Imagineering was a very forward-thinking subdivision. And what we did was create a carousel. And instead of the carousel revolving, we actually had a round center core of rooms that illustrated the GE products from 1900, 1910, 1950, and so on, right up to the current time. And each room authenticated to that process.

MIJA REIDEL: Era.

VLADIMIR KAGAN: And the carousel part was that you sat on lounge chairs like I'm sitting in now that went on a track and revolved around the center core. It was really cool and lots of fun.

MIJA REIDEL: And so you designed this overall installation?

VLADIMIR KAGAN: Well, I would—ultimately it became much more Disney than Kagan. But I was sort of the coordinator, the catalyst of the materials. And it was an interesting—very interesting—process.

MIJA REIDEL: And the actual infrastructure that would hold all the different GE appliances.

VLADIMIR KAGAN: Yes. Exactly.

MIJA REIDEL: And for the Plastic House of the Future, were you designing the interior? Was that interior design?

VLADIMIR KAGAN: For the Plastic House of the Future, I designed interiors. And the Plastic House of the Future was really a brilliant idea that is really valid today. I don't know why—it would have needed some tweaking. But the concept was to create eggshells of components.

MIJA REIDEL: Eggshells! Like egg cartons?

VLADIMIR KAGAN: In a way, you know. I think there were two essential elements. One was the roof, one was the bottom. They would snap together, and they would come out of a core into three or four different directions; it created a crucifix of rooms with windows in between. And all the wiring and all the plumbing included. And the center core became the staircase, whatever. Kitchens.

MIJA REIDEL: Interesting!

VLADIMIR KAGAN: So it was a very good design. And I think, revisited, would have great application for prefab buildings today.

MIJA REIDEL: Mm-hmm. [Affirmative.] And would you design the interiors for that, the furniture?

VLADIMIR KAGAN: Yes. I did the furniture. And I used a lot of my furniture that was part of my sixties design elements in that. I did the Room for Total Living at one of the Armory shows for Chemstrand. And there I tried to show—I took the premise that residential space becomes very expensive. That we can't waste it. That certain traditional rooms can't be unaffordable for a young family or for a modern house. Nobody can afford really to have a separate dining room, because that takes up space and gets used 20 percent of the time. And so I incorporated the dining room into a living room function into a home study function. And it served a lot of purposes, that particular room. I developed movable wall panels that moved—they were triangular in shape, wedge-shaped. And so they could either open up, have function into part of it, lighting. One side would be beautiful wood, the other side was acoustic fabric. And you could change the mood,and the atmosphere and the function of the room. It was quite an interesting, spectacular space within a very limited exhibit space that was given to me.

MIJA REIDEL: So very modular in concept.

VLADIMIR KAGAN: Yes.

MIJA REIDEL: That you can transition from one to another, to another, to suit the needs of the particular time.

VLADIMIR KAGAN: And it became a very good think tank operation.

MIJA REIDEL: Were these also retractable beds? [Inaudible.]

VLADIMIR KAGAN: I didn't get into the bed aspect of that. It was really a living room, kitchen, dining area cum study area. And I in it predicted really what we're now doing with computers. Computers were really not an element. I faked computers by using the disc-to-disc tapes to envision what a computer might do.

MIJA REIDEL: How so? In terms of designing or in terms of—

VLADIMIR KAGAN: The home computer wasn't invented.

MIJA REIDEL: Right.

VLADIMIR KAGAN: So this was sort of the home vision; it became the home computer where you did your work on it.

MIJA REIDEL: I see. I see. The home office space.

VLADIMIR KAGAN: Yes, yes.

MIJA REIDEL: Yes.

VLADIMIR KAGAN: One other project I did was a film set for General Electric—was it General Electric? No, for RCA.

MIJA REIDEL: When and where was this?

VLADIMIR KAGAN: That was a movie set in the sixties someplace. I have the prototypes of it. And it was to create a—the script was to show a cashless society. I mean, it wasn't heard of; nobody would ever believe that that would happen.

MIJA REIDEL: Right.

VLADIMIR KAGAN: Of course today it's the credit card. But this was the precursor to the credit card, that everything could be done by credit card, by interactive television. And in that set, which was probably organic [inaudible].

MIJA REIDEL: Oh, was this the white set?

VLADIMIR KAGAN: Yes.

MIJA REIDEL: Yes, yes. That's American Express, was it, maybe?

VLADIMIR KAGAN: American Express, yes.

MIJA REIDEL: Yes, yes.

VLADIMIR KAGAN: Yes. And one of the things I predicted that didn't exist were the cooktops. You know the glass cooktops now they heat up from under a piece of glass.

MIJA REIDEL: Yes.

VLADIMIR KAGAN: And that didn't exist. I envisioned that as a concept and faked it with sheets of glass and colored Plexiglas underneath to give the illusion of where the heat was. And it's precisely what happened.

MIJA REIDEL: That happened.

VLADIMIR KAGAN: So I was in those days very much thinking forward towards product development. Another time I was invited or asked to—commissioned—to develop some residential uses of Styrofoam. Styrofoam in its early stages was used partly in coal mines or mines to seal off spaces. Styrofoam could be blown through compressed guns. And they would put up a scrim in a mine, blow the stuff on, which would seal off that mine from dangerous gases. That was one of its original uses.

MIJA REIDEL: Interesting.

VLADIMIR KAGAN: The other use of it was in making heels for women's shoes.

MIJA REIDEL: Really! Huh!

VLADIMIR KAGAN: Rigid Styrofoam. And so I spent a week in Pittsburgh.

MIJA REIDEL: Was this in the sixties as well?

VLADIMIR KAGAN: All sixties now.

MIJA REIDEL: Okay.

VLADIMIR KAGAN: This is all sixties. I spent a week in Pittsburgh at the Mobay Chemical Company. Mobay was a combination of Monsanto and Bayer Chemicals from Germany. You know, the Bayer aspirin people.

MIJA REIDEL: Oh, right.

VLADIMIR KAGAN: And I spent a week in the lab. It was spectacular fun to really experiment—

MIJA REIDEL: I can imagine.

VLADIMIR KAGAN: —with it. And I was seeing what is going on. I predicted one could make Styrofoam. And the skin of the Styrofoam could become already the upholstered product. So you could create a cushion with its own covering for outdoor use.

MIJA REIDEL: Mm-hmm! [Affirmative.]

VLADIMIR KAGAN: There was a lot of creative stuff that came out of that session. Unfortunately, it was done for

the PR department. I did a beautiful book for them—I still have some at home—of all the ideas I envisioned Styrofoam could do. But I never could license them. I had the idea of making furniture, modular furniture, that could be done by a company like—not Revlon, Revere? You know, the people who make luggage. I forget the name; it's not important.

MIJA REIDEL: Not Samsonite, do you mean Samsonite.

VLADIMIR KAGAN: You just mentioned it.

MIJA REIDEL: Samsonite?

VLADIMIR KAGAN: Samsonite.

MIJA REIDEL: Samsonite?

VLADIMIR KAGAN: Yes. But the ideas were great. After Mobay got through doing its promotional book, I never found anybody to license the ideas. They were given away as a part of a promotion. And the engineering department wasn't really interested. It was a PR stunt, you know.

MIJA REIDEL: "How to Use Styrofoam."

VLADIMIR KAGAN: Those were good ideas that didn't go wasted because everybody picked up on it. But I never got any benefit in doing it. I had a lot of fun doing it.

MIJA REIDEL: Did it inspire any new designs for you that you were able to make?

VLADIMIR KAGAN: No, because I didn't have the capability. That needed production.

MIJA REIDEL: Yes.

VLADIMIR KAGAN: So it didn't have any direct function for me. Another time we did an Armory show. And that was one of the few times, I think, I worked with Jack Larsen. Jack Larsen was—is—a very creative guy.

MIJA REIDEL: Yes.

VLADIMIR KAGAN: And very aesthetic. He was not—He had a huge amount of success, financially as well as, you know, product-wise. And he was a good merchant. And we worked as sort of a loose team of a few designers. Once a week we met down in his studio, and we kind of tried to figure out where's the future.

MIJA REIDEL: Huh!

VLADIMIR KAGAN: And one of the things I developed—

MIJA REIDEL: Who else was there? Do you remember?

VLADIMIR KAGAN: Huh?

MIJA REIDEL: Who else was there? Do you remember?

VLADIMIR KAGAN: Mort Bennett, who isn't with us anymore. And I can't remember the other names.

MIJA REIDEL: Half a dozen of you or so?

VLADIMIR KAGAN: Yes, about a half a dozen of us.

MIJA REIDEL: Sit around and brainstorming about it?

VLADIMIR KAGAN: Yes, we'd work—Jack worked a lot with paper patterns and so on. And it was a fun, inspirational kind of designers getting together, which is a European thing and not an American thing. You know, in Europe we had the guild thing, and you had the schools, and people really—we never actually had a [inaudible], it was a collaborative. And there was not much collaboration with American designers. This was a highlight of that spirit. It was lovely.

MIJA REIDEL: And how long did that go on?

VLADIMIR KAGAN: Probably a year's time, something like that. And it culminated in an exhibit that we did at the—it was sponsored, I think, by the then *Herald Tribune*. And again at the Armory. The Armory was a wonderful vehicle. But that was something to work toward. And my concept was people—I had statistics, that 20 percent of

the American population is always on the move.

MIJA REIDEL: Right.

VLADIMIR KAGAN: That the typical time of any one person staying in a residence was a very short period of time. People are always upward mobile or transferred in a corporate way. And it wasn't like we, the Kagan family [laughs], living in one apartment for 40 years in the same house, or 50 years.

MIJA REIDEL: Right.

VLADIMIR KAGAN: The American habit was mobility. And so I said, "We should design furniture that applies to that mobility." So I came up with the idea of—you know what a Dixie cup is like?

MIJA REIDEL: Mm-hmm. [Affirmative.]

VLADIMIR KAGAN: Make furniture like Dixie cups that could collapse. You just snapped it open and it becomes a table or a chair.

MIJA REIDEL: Oh, those plastic cups, those transparent cups that flatten to a disk.

VLADIMIR KAGAN: Yes. And then you condense, and it's flat, and it's easy to move. I designed cabinetry that became shipping crates. So that you could take your china, and it was like my—downstairs in my kitchen we have these racks for the—plate racks—but every piece of china fitted into a rack space that was Styrofoam product or something like that. And when you're moving, you just close it up and you move it intact.

MIJA REIDEL: Oh, I see.

VLADIMIR KAGAN: It was really cute ideas. And it should have been picked up by a manufacturer, but it wasn't. So, you know, this is, we were talking about earlier in our private conversation about life moving sideways.

MIJA REIDEL: Right.

VLADIMIR KAGAN: It was one of the ways of moving sideways. A lot of creativity with not that huge a byproduct that made me rich and famous.

MIJA REIDEL: And something you weren't able to manufacture yourself because it was too big an operation.

VLADIMIR KAGAN: Yes. It was ideas.

MIJA REIDEL: Right, right.

VLADIMIR KAGAN: So I spent ten years evolving these ideas.

[END DISC 3.]

MIJA REIDEL: We were talking about the designs for a mobile society when we paused.

VLADIMIR KAGAN: Okay. All right. My mobile society furniture. Are we ready?

MIJA REIDEL: Yes.

VLADIMIR KAGAN: Mobile society furniture really—that was a very cool idea. And this is where I thought Samsonite could step in.

MIJA REIDEL: Okay.

VLADIMIR KAGAN: Because they were the ones that were making these plastic suitcases.

MIJA REIDEL: That's right. Mm-hmm. [Affirmative.]

VLADIMIR KAGAN: And this was a suitcase concept.

MIJA REIDEL: Yes.

VLADIMIR KAGAN: And you could move the whole house in a station wagon.

MIJA REIDEL: Yes.

VLADIMIR KAGAN: But I never had the marketing capability, the marketing time. I was always shorthanded. I

didn't have a large organization. And in the meantime we were running the furniture factory. My dad was there. But, you know, I had to be hands-on, and I had to wear a lot of hats.

MIJA REIDEL: Yes.

VLADIMIR KAGAN: I did another thing in that same period of time, a couple of more things that I think were very significant. General Electric asked me to design an exhibit for them. I think again either at the Armory or some other exhibit space—

MIJA REIDEL: Was this many years after the first one?

VLADIMIR KAGAN: This was all sequential.

MIJA REIDEL: Okay.

VLADIMIR KAGAN: And I don't know which one came first. I think the room that I'm describing now came before the World's Fair.

MIJA REIDEL: Okay.

VLADIMIR KAGAN: And as a result of the room, it became the World's Fair.

MIJA REIDEL: I see.

VLADIMIR KAGAN: You see. But they had just come out with component products. Component products were really the baby of Fisher, Fisher Radio.

MIJA REIDEL: Okay.

VLADIMIR KAGAN: [Side conversation.] Erica! No, she's not here. What was his name? Avery Fisher. Avery Fisher also happened to be my neighbor in our building. He lived on the second floor; we lived on the 14th floor. So I became very friendly with him. But General Electric followed through on this concept of hi-fi componentry. And they needed to have a vehicle to demonstrate their hi-fi componentry. It included—they had a little hand-held, not hand-held but very portable little eight-inch television set.

MIJA REIDEL: Yes.

VLADIMIR KAGAN: They had all of the component parts. And so I designed a very interesting room for these componentry things. And among other things, this is what I did: I had as a backdrop very sculptural walls that could be turned. They either formed a flat wall and became a graphic mural, because I changed colors from purple to blue to green. And they just created a very beautiful painted wall. If you took those panels and spun them individually, you could change the acoustic quality of the room.

MIJA REIDEL: Interesting.

VLADIMIR KAGAN: One became reflective; the other one became more absorbent. And it was a really good idea just from the sound point of view. Then I created—

MIJA REIDEL: This must have been—Let's see, the World's Fair was '67 in Montreal. And this was probably before then?

VLADIMIR KAGAN: Well, this was not the Montreal thing.

MIJA REIDEL: No, this was GE, the Park Avenue Armory, right?

VLADIMIR KAGAN: Well, this was GE, the Park Avenue Armory.

MIJA REIDEL: 'Sixty-four, I think.

VLADIMIR KAGAN: I actually have the brochures.

MIJA REIDEL: Okay.

VLADIMIR KAGAN: And so they're probably '60—We can identify that also in my book. There are illustrations of those things. So probably the chronology is in my book. And to me it's uninteresting. But I mean, yes. One thing —

MIJA REIDEL: Well, people listening [inaudible].

VLADIMIR KAGAN: One thing [inaudible] begat the other. That's for sure.

MIJA REIDEL: Yes. That's for sure.

VLADIMIR KAGAN: But getting back to this room, I wanted to demonstrate stereophonic sound. Didn't exist really. And so I took two speakers and made a loveseat, very sexy, very organic loveseat. The photographs of it are in the book.

MIJA REIDEL: Yes, with these big ears.

VLADIMIR KAGAN: And I made these big rabbit ears. And I put the speakers in the ears. And I did these rabbit ears so deliberately, because I wanted people who were walking in this space to say, "What the hell is that?" And say "Those are speakers."

MIJA REIDEL: Yes.

VLADIMIR KAGAN: And out of that, those speakers, whether I inspired it or not, those speakers are the elements that became part of the General Electric Pavilion.

MIJA REIDEL: Really!

VLADIMIR KAGAN: We put stereophonic speakers in each of those. You sat in little armchairs, wing armchairs with the speakers. And so you had stereophonic sound as you passed in the circle on the carousel, and you got descriptions of those areas that would come out on your stereophonic speakers. But that was the element. I also did a cute little coffee table. And I've never been a great fan of television staring you in the face. So I mounted the portable television set on the table top that could flip and disappear underneath [laughs].

MIJA REIDEL: Sort of like an old sewing machine table.

VLADIMIR KAGAN: Yes. Exactly. So it was a very interesting room.

MIJA REIDEL: Mm-hmm! [Affirmative.]

VLADIMIR KAGAN: I never made a second stereo chair. And I wish I only knew where that chair is. That was sold someplace, somehow, and I don't have it. I'm so sorry for every single prototype that I ever sold, I regret now.

MIJA REIDEL: Really.

VLADIMIR KAGAN: And even back now into the 21st century, my showroom, Pucci, one year, in order to create dynamic interest in products, said, "Can't we do a show of your vintage furniture?" And I gave them half a dozen pieces of vintage furniture that he sold at what at that time we thought was a pretty extravagant price. Today it's peanuts. But he sold them, and I don't have them anymore. And I'm so sad. Because the money is blown off. It vanishes, evaporates. And the designs are gone for me forever. So I'm very—

MIJA REIDEL: And they couldn't be reproduced?

VLADIMIR KAGAN: Oh, I can reproduce anything. But I don't have the design, and now to reproduce anything—

MIJA REIDEL: There's no sketches?

VLADIMIR KAGAN: Huh?

MIJA REIDEL: No sketches?

VLADIMIR KAGAN: In those days it was from a piece of wrapping paper into the end product. We never documented it. I didn't have draftsmen. I did my own drafting. We did it on a piece of paper, on the back of a piece of plywood.

MIJA REIDEL: Right.

VLADIMIR KAGAN: Built it. And there was no sense of history. In the sixties I didn't have that sense of preservation.

MIJA REIDEL: Sure.

VLADIMIR KAGAN: That evolved now in the last 20 years. Yes, I'm very conscious of preservation. But in those days a lot of these things went. And when I lost the—when I sold—the originals, they're hard to reproduce. And oddly enough, the only way I could often reproduce them is when they show up at auction. And I'm friendly with

the auction houses, and they let me do some drafting of the pieces that were unique and I don't have a copy of it.

MIJA REIDEL: That's great.

VLADIMIR KAGAN: And what I do with the auction houses essentially is trade off provenance for that cooperative spirit. Because they need to know— So frequently they get furniture à la Kagan. Could be a Kagan. Wasn't a Kagan at all.

MIJA REIDEL: Right.

VLADIMIR KAGAN: And not to embarrass them and not to go to ruin my name, I would always say, "This is not a Kagan." Or "This is a wannabe of this. It could be, but I don't remember having done it." Because I never—we didn't sign them, we didn't brand them. Things were just what I remember as being an original piece. I can always tell by the construction.

MIJA REIDEL: Aha.

VLADIMIR KAGAN: And by the wood. There were things that I can identify.

MIJA REIDEL: What can you identify? Can you give a couple of examples?

VLADIMIR KAGAN: The detailing of the shaping. The curvatures. The way they ended up on the ground. And people who knock me off, it was so apparent to me, but not to the consumer, that this is not how I did furniture. Even there's a difference between carving a piece of wood with a spoke shave and making it elegant, or taking it with a router or shaper and just rounding off the edges. And the knockoff pieces would do that. Here you can see these lines, the delightfully elegant lines, are tapered down. And that was a tremendous amount of handwork. The knockoffs eliminated that.

MIJA REIDEL: I see.

VLADIMIR KAGAN: So I can see that. I can see it by the shapes on the free-form table. There was an aesthetic—and is an aesthetic—to my line that I can recognize. But to a consumer, the wannabe looks like a Kagan.

MIJA REIDEL: Now have you had to deal with that frequently?

VLADIMIR KAGAN: Well, nowadays, I tell you what I do now: I offer a service. I charge 500 bucks for it. And if they have a design that they want to authenticate, if it's not a Kagan, I send them back the money and say it's not a Kagan. But if it is a Kagan, I will then register it and give them a plaque with a number on it, so it is in a registry book that authenticates the piece and where they can put the plaque on that never existed when I made it. I don't get many of those things. But at least I'm not doing it as a freebie. And it's a secondary business. But going back into the sixties, well, those sixties went fairly quickly. We also during that time—

MIJA REIDEL: You started working with Plexi in that time, too, didn't you?

VLADIMIR KAGAN: Plexiglas came in in the late sixties. I was very inspired. Plexiglas gave me a liberalization—is that a proper English word?

MIJA REIDEL: Sure.

VLADIMIR KAGAN: Of making things float.

MIJA REIDEL: Yes.

VLADIMIR KAGAN: I liked the idea of spaciousness. I'm still working in the apartment. I wanted things to float off the ground. I made Plexiglas chairs, and I made Plexiglas tables. But I also used Plexiglas as a component to create illusions.

MIJA REIDEL: Yes.

VLADIMIR KAGAN: It was only magical—you knew this wasn't floating, but it looked like it's floating—aspects. So it became, in the late sixties, became part of my handwriting. And when we opened our showroom on 59th Street, Plexiglas became a significant component. The factory expanded. By that time we had moved to three floors. And I gave my darling wife, Erica, a showroom for her needlework.

MIJA REIDEL: Aha.

VLADIMIR KAGAN: So it was the first time that she had a place to show her work. And everything was rosy and wonderful until one day the factory burned down.

MIJA REIDEL: That was '72?

VLADIMIR KAGAN: No, in 1969, I think as early as that. I think the date is in the book. And what happened was, we came home from the opera late one night. And we get a telephone call.

MIJA REIDEL: 'Seventy-two, I think, yes.

VLADIMIR KAGAN: And we get a telephone call. We get a telephone call, and they said—was it '72?

MIJA REIDEL: Mm-hmm. [Affirmative.]

VLADIMIR KAGAN: Yes, okay. A telephone call: "Mr. Kagan, you don't know who I am. But your factory's on fire." And we looked out of our window. We lived on the 14th floor on Carnegie Hill, which is the highest part of New York City in that part of the world, and there was huge billows of smoke coming up. And we got out of bed and went down there. And the whole building—it was a five-alarm fire.

MIJA REIDEL: Oh, my God!

VLADIMIR KAGAN: It was disastrous! And Mayor [John] Lindsay, who was a friend of ours, came along and said, "Well, Vladimir, I hope you're well insured." [Laughs.] In fact we weren't. And I'll tell you what happened there. The upshot was after much deliberation, all my furniture was all finished. We used linseed oil and solvents to finish the furniture. And with it we used a lot of rags. They were thrown into a garbage pail without a lid, and ignited over the weekend. And so it was a colossal horror story. Also the experience of having a major fire is an education. But in there was everything I had ever done. It was terrible. There was my father's sculpture, because he had by that time already retired and lived in Woodstock doing sculpture. There was all of Erica's work, and amongst them the needles for a church that she had designed; I don't remember where, in Ohio someplace. A major church, because Erica did a lot of church embroidery. And so we were there helpless.

MIJA REIDEL: Were your sketches there as well?

VLADIMIR KAGAN: There were drawings. There was—everything was there. So Erica convinced me—of course, we couldn't enter the building. They put out the fire. It's a wooden building, you know, the structure is wood. The exterior was stone. And the wood burned very beautifully. The verdict at the beginning time was that one of the firemen said the sprinkler system didn't go off. When we came to want to get a testify documentation of that, nobody ever would repeat that. And we could swear that was what we were told had happened. Because that's why it went so ravaging and passed through the building. But I guess the insurance adjusters and everybody kind of got into the act. And someplace that piece of news was hushed up, and nobody would stick their neck out for it. Which changed the whole complexity of who's at fault and blah blah blah.

MIJA REIDEL: Right.

VLADIMIR KAGAN: The fire inspectors came along immediately that night and held us responsible. I mean, their first suspicion was arson: "Hey, you're trying to make money." It's called—I forget what it was called, those things. But, you know, people would set their place on fire and make money with it. So until proven otherwise, we were—with all of our horror and losses—we had to defend ourselves that that was not our work at all.

MIJA REIDEL: Truly awful.

VLADIMIR KAGAN: But we convinced the firemen to go up to the second floor, where Erica's things were, and they were stored under a huge, long worktable. Because they were under that worktable, the water that dripped down from the third floor only went on the table and not underneath. And they threw out the windows all of the needles. And so they were rescued and saved.

MIJA REIDEL: Oh! They hadn't burned.

VLADIMIR KAGAN: They didn't burn. But what we did lose—what did happen—was we had a huge installation for an office that I designed for an insurance company, a German insurance company, in New Jersey. I forget the name; it'll come to me. But it was a beautiful office space that I did completely, all the interiors. Also designed even the office stations where we brought up regular furniture, but it was a full project for me. And because of that we weren't adequately insured, because this was hundreds of thousands of dollars' worth of furniture that should have been delivered. And we were holding it until the building was complete, and that burned up. And as a result, once they consider that you're not properly insured, you only get a percentage recovery of the total loss. So they came up with the conclusion that we were 80 percent underinsured.

MIJA REIDEL: Eighty percent!

VLADIMIR KAGAN: So we only got eight dollars on a hundred [dollars] back for losses.

MIJA REIDEL: Eighty or 20?

VLADIMIR KAGAN: We got the 80 out of the 100. Otherwise we should have gotten 100, we got 80 bucks out of it as a separate subrogation. And what happens is before you're even through, all the shysters are there, the insurance adjusters. And you need them to work with the insurance company. You can't defend yourself. You need somebody like an ambulance chaser lawyer. These guys work in collusion with the insurance company, and they work for you. So they work both sides of the fence, and eventually you try to get the best deal you can. And I think our guy was a client of mine or became a client of mine. I don't quite remember that. He became a rather good client.

MIJA REIDEL: The insurance adjuster?

VLADIMIR KAGAN: The insurance adjuster. [They laugh.] They're rich. They make a percentage of the take, you know. So they come out very well. At that time I said, "You know, if I ever have to do it over again, I wouldn't." 1970 or '72, the fire. And after the fire was out, and we crept into the space with all the smoldering smoke, we found to our great amazement a lot of the things weren't destroyed.

MIJA REIDEL: Really!

VLADIMIR KAGAN: The machinery, which I thought had gone completely bad, was all rusted. But we found a Hungarian refugee who said, "I can fix this." It was just a question of taking it apart, lubricating it. And all of a sudden some of the machines that we thought were entirely lost became usable. I found my office intact, a lot of my design stuff. Water damage, but there. So we crept through this thing. And actually there was a major decision to do. Either I could give back the deposit to the insurance company the people for whom I had the furniture. I'm trying to think what the company was called. I always remembered. Probably it's in the book even. I could either give the deposit back to the insurance company, which meant all the money I got from the insurance settlement would be blown on that. Or I could rebuild the furniture and start over. And my clients said, "We'll wait." And so all of a sudden I was forced back into business when I thought I was not going to do it ever again. And we started to look around for factory space.

Victor Medina, who was my foreman, Victor is a wonderful man. Victor came to work for my father back in the forties as an apprentice. He came out of the Navy; he was a young Puerto Rican boy, and he was 21 years old. He was probably a year, maybe a couple of, two or three years older than I. And my father trained him, and he became a wonderful craftsman. And ultimately became the foreman of my factory. He ran the factory, and he ran all the German employees; we had a lot of German guys working for us. And they are very prejudiced, you know, white supremacy kind of guys, even if they were decent folks. It was tough to be told by a Puerto Rican how to do things. But they respected him, and it developed into a very good relationship. That was over the years. So when my dad retired, Victor became the head of the whole company. And he remained with me for 50 years.

MIJA REIDEL: Fifty!

VLADIMIR KAGAN: Fifty years, yes. We're still friends today. So Victor and I started to cruise around to relocate our factory. We found a lovely space in Long Island City in a fireproof building, because once you've been burned, you don't look for wooden buildings.

MIJA REIDEL: [Laughs] You learned from that mistake the first time. Right.

VLADIMIR KAGAN: And lots of light. And we took a floor there. It was 15,000 feet, which was bigger than what we had, all on one floor. Big freight elevator. And with the insurance money we bought some very sexy machinery, and we went back into business. It took us six months, but over that period of time we subcontracted a lot of the work, including that office replacement job through colleagues that we knew in the business that made the furniture. Then Victor would go to the factories and supervise. So we managed to creep back in the business. And one other reason for going back in: Back in the sixties, late sixties, 1968, there was a very good, talented young man by the name of Seth Levin, who came to me. He was young, in his twenties. And he said, "I'm a salesman. I love your furniture. I want to work for you." I said, "I don't need a salesman." "Yes, you do." [They laugh.] And he sold himself on the fact that I would hire him. And it was through his insistence that I took a showroom on 59th Street.

MIJA REIDEL: Ah.

VLADIMIR KAGAN: And we took that showroom before the fire. So we were already in business with a showroom

operation, quite substantial, about 10,000 feet of showroom space, which we had beautifully designed and furnished with the Plexiglas furniture and so on. And that was another reason for—it weighed in favor of reopening the factory and starting again. I would have been quite happy to work with subcontractors. But you never have control.

MIJA REIDEL: Right.

VLADIMIR KAGAN: So we went back into business. And that became very exciting. Loved working in the factory. And I would spend every morning in the factory and every afternoon in the showroom.

MIJA REIDEL: Mm-hmm. [Affirmative.] What an unusual perspective that gave you.

VLADIMIR KAGAN: Yes.

MIJA REIDEL: Yes.

VLADIMIR KAGAN: So that was the sort of second—or the third—ten-year trimester. By the way, back in the sixties, because it was a huge factory showroom, I developed some very interesting furniture. Cantilevered furniture, furniture with lighting built into it.

MIJA REIDEL: Right.

VLADIMIR KAGAN: Lovely wood details. Very architectural things. A Cubist—a lot of the things were called Cubist. By that time I started to give them names.

MIJA REIDEL: Right.

VLADIMIR KAGAN: It became the "Cubist chair." And those designs are still with me today. And actually in 2002 or something like that, I worked with Michael Gabellini, who was an architect. I did the Nobu Restaurant for Armani in Milan with my furniture. And it was using those designs from the sixties to do the restaurant in the 21st century.

MIJA REIDEL: Yes, yes.

VLADIMIR KAGAN: And it wasn't done because they were looking for a retro look.

MIJA REIDEL: No.

VLADIMIR KAGAN: It was done because they liked that architectural style that I had evolved at that time. Whatever else happened.

MIJA REIDEL: Modern's definitely had a resurgence, right?

VLADIMIR KAGAN: Yes. And so the sixties were incredibly fertile times for me. And then, largely because of Seth's insistence, we said "Okay. We'll take that showroom on 57th Street"—I mean 59th Street. I beg your pardon. A big beautiful space, and I developed some very exciting—

MIJA REIDEL: Fifty-ninth? Where on 59th?

VLADIMIR KAGAN: Between Second and Third.

MIJA REIDEL: Okay.

VLADIMIR KAGAN: In a very good decorated—the building was called the Fine Arts Building. Jack Larsen had a showroom there and all the very top people. It was a very exclusive showroom building. And so we eventually, we got a sales manager who used to work for another company. And we grew. And the sales manager loved going selling. So he would go around the country and open up showrooms in San Francisco, in Los Angeles, in Atlanta, Georgia.

MIJA REIDEL: So you had Kagan showrooms in all—

VLADIMIR KAGAN: Around the country, yes. And he liked that because, in a way, he liked traveling. [They laugh.] He also liked the girls he could find on the travels.

MIJA REIDEL: I see.

VLADIMIR KAGAN: So he was a bit of a roué. And it went on the expense account. But it was a growth time. It was when my father called me, he said, "Son, you have *Riesen Wahn*," which means—"*Riesen Wahn*" translated

means "you have illusions of being a giant." Because I had all these showrooms, it looked very good on my advertisement. Showroom in Dallas, Houston, God knows what. And that coasted along very nicely from 1970 into the eighties, when historically the economy again hit the wall.

MIJA REIDEL: Let's talk about that period before we hit the wall. Let's talk about that expansive time.

VLADIMIR KAGAN: Yes, let's go through that. Having a new showroom of course forced me into coming up with new design products. I went from what was very structural, linear furniture in the seventies—in the sixties—to softer lines. I called them Waterfalls, because their tops would evolve down. And the seventies were also an interesting period: a lot of offices, executive offices. We got a lot into that market. And I would design offices for American Express Company, for the vice president. And a lot of corporate offices, a lot of legal offices. And they all wanted individual things. And I became very strong in desks. Big feature.

MIJA REIDEL: For each season or each year, every so often, would up update the entire collection in the showroom? Or were there always classics that were available?

VLADIMIR KAGAN: Well, actually the fifties classics were totally eliminated; they didn't exist in the showroom.

MIJA REIDEL: Okay.

VLADIMIR KAGAN: I wanted new product. And so there was very little, if any, throwback from the classic period.

MIJA REIDEL: Okay.

VLADIMIR KAGAN: There were new designs. There was a lot of wood, a lot of veneers. Yes, we had sofas. And that was when I developed Omnibus.

MIJA REIDEL: Okay.

VLADIMIR KAGAN: This was the major seating piece, and that throws right back to Woodstock.

MIJA REIDEL: Yes.

VLADIMIR KAGAN: Sitting on the boulders at the swimming holes on the various levels. That became the inspiration. And what motivated that design was, again, flexibility in an apartment environment from art collectors who needed to have flexibility of the walls. I moved things away from the wall with all of my furniture. The Omnibus sofa was a sectional concept: small componentry could easily be delivered without having to hoist it. The Serpentine was so big, you used to have to hoist them, like pianos.

MIJA REIDEL: Ah, I see. I see.

VLADIMIR KAGAN: And either that or assemble them in the client's apartment. And this group—and I didn't have a Serpentine in the showroom in 1970. I had the Omnibus concept. So the modular designs even started off crisp with tight seat, tight back, ended up in three different variations. One with loose cushions and loose cushion backs, because the decorators liked that sort touch. So we made the soft one and the hard-edge one. And I did stainless steel items. I liked the crispness of the steel. We did the foam—the acrylic furniture, which was again very exciting to work with. Had bedrooms with cantilevers. Did a lot of interesting bedroom furniture with cantilevered componentry of night tables. Because I always felt the night table next to the bed is behind you when you're lying in bed. You want one that's in front of you, so I made them movable and all kinds of interesting innovations.

MIJA REIDEL: Lighting, too, as I recall.

VLADIMIR KAGAN: Lighting always became an integral part of my designs.

MIJA REIDEL: Right.

VLADIMIR KAGAN: I couldn't get the lights I wanted to have; I went to the people who manufactured lighting for airplanes. You know, the little overhead lights.

MIJA REIDEL: Yes.

VLADIMIR KAGAN: And I got those lights and built them into my furniture. So it was an interesting period of time. Coming up with innovations that didn't exist, but utilizing technology that was around in other areas.

MIJA REIDEL: That's interesting.

VLADIMIR KAGAN: Yes.

MIJA REIDEL: Yes.

VLADIMIR KAGAN: I also—at that time there was a product called Flexwood, which was veneer on a linen background, on a fabric background. And you could use it like wallpaper. And so that whole showroom had curved walls and a lot of interesting curvatures. I also built installation things that were sitting, and they moved off the floor to become seats. A concept that's now in the 21st century there but didn't exist then. So there was a very interesting innovation in that period of time. Then, because of the office work, I did a lot of interesting conference desks, partner's desks, all kinds of interesting innovations. And we grew. And, you know, the factory moved from one floor to two floors to three floors. And it was a very exciting period of time.

MIJA REIDEL: Was this the pinnacle of production?

VLADIMIR KAGAN: Beg your pardon?

MIJA REIDEL: Was this the pinnacle of production?

VLADIMIR KAGAN: Yes, yes. We had about 40 employees. Towards the mid-eighties, though, beginning with the eighties, I think I hit—I think I essentially hit the wall, like runners, you know, when you do the marathon, you hit the wall. I kind of dried up with ideas. I mean, I didn't know where to go next. Then came Memphis. And I didn't like Memphis at all. I mean, I always considered Memphis to be a media hype because the magazines, the shelter magazines, needed something to write about, and they latched on to that. It wasn't practical. But it was innovative.

MIJA REIDEL: Yes.

VLADIMIR KAGAN: And it gave birth to a lot of great designers. I mean, like what's his name? Michael Graves, [inaudible] and so on. Really great people. And they worked in that wonderful team like—I was envious that I wasn't part of that group. Not that I might have contributed to it because maybe it was beyond my kind of rationale. The stuff they made, which was not practical—I was so deeply rooted in practical, functional.

MIJA REIDEL: But that collaborative aspect of working at something you seem to have enjoyed throughout, yes.

VLADIMIR KAGAN: That was really cool. Very cool. It was European, and we didn't do it. But it helped to break the ice. And I started to look at retro design and made a number of things that were—You wouldn't—I mean, the dining table in my apartment is a byproduct of that period, which is very classic, very neoclassic designs.

MIJA REIDEL: Yes, it is.

VLADIMIR KAGAN: With columns and brass inlays. And it really wasn't my cup of tea. I did it; I played with it. I did it for some important clients. I did it for the du Pont family. It fitted their needs in Wilmington for a wonderful house of theirs. And I built two tables, and the other one is in my apartment. But from that I was able to break out of the restraint of where I had been and couldn't find a way out.

MIJA REIDEL: Interesting.

VLADIMIR KAGAN: I think it's more like an artist really needing to find new expressions. And I always felt what I'm doing is not—I never thought of myself as an artist. But I could see the motivation, how an artist would get bored doing the same things and needed a new thing.

MIJA REIDEL: So this pushed you so far in one direction it gave you a new direction.

VLADIMIR KAGAN: Yes, yes. But then external circumstances took control. Victor Medina, my factory manager, wanted to retire at age 65—much too young to retire. But that was his age to retire, and he would get his pension. And he moved to Orangeburg, New York, upstate. And I had to find a new factory manager. And I went through a number of people; some were better than others. Some were giving me a rough—weren't able to do what had to be done. I lost that wonderful interrelationship with the factory that I could trust and have confidence in, to a situation where I had to become the factory manager; that was one face of it. At the same time it turned into an economic downturn period, the recession of the mid-eighties. And everybody was going bankrupt around us. And my showrooms around the country started to go bankrupt. And we were naïvely giving them furniture on what is called consignment.

MIJA REIDEL: Right.

VLADIMIR KAGAN: Consignment is you give the furniture to them, you write a bill that they don't have to pay; it remains my property.

MIJA REIDEL: Yes. Right. Yes.

VLADIMIR KAGAN: That's at least what we thought. But the truth of it technically and legally, once you bill it to the client, it belongs to them. The fact they didn't pay it to you means that you are a creditor.

MIJA REIDEL: It probably mattered too that it was a Kagan showroom.

VLADIMIR KAGAN: No, it never had my name on it. It was always the name of the showroom. The showroom name was the owner of the showroom.

MIJA REIDEL: Oh, okay.

VLADIMIR KAGAN: I was just a rep showroom. I was a multi-rep. You dealt with multi-reps because multi-reps were the good way to go. When a showroom had more than one product, it also meant there would be a lot more clientele walking through, looking for other products.

MIJA REIDEL: Right. That's right. Sure.

VLADIMIR KAGAN: So it was a good concept.

MIJA REIDEL: Okay.

VLADIMIR KAGAN: But once they went bankrupt, my furniture belonged to the bankruptcy. And I had to fight like hell to get it back. By the time I got it back, it was wrecked, ruined, scratched, stained, because nobody took care of it. And so I took a big hit.

MIJA REIDEL: Yes.

VLADIMIR KAGAN: At the same time, as the saying goes, "When the shit hits the fan"—pardon me—everything goes wrong. I was being, unbeknownst to myself, I was being embezzled by my bookkeeper and secretary. They did a very clever scam of double billing. It got exposed because a third partner in this deal was the trucking company that did the deliveries. And [laughs] what they would do is they would bill the trucking shipment to the client. But they also billed me for the shipping. And so I had to theoretically pay the trucking company, which went into a—when you have a name like Fernandez, everybody's called Fernandez. They opened a separate bank account under Fernandez and embezzled me for thousands of dollars. And it only came to light because the trucker didn't get his share. And so he was pissed. And so when we went into that and we found how much we had lost, it was really devastating.

MIJA REIDEL: There have been really—While we were talking about it, there have been such cycles.

VLADIMIR KAGAN: Cycles.

MIJA REIDEL: Yes. Such cycles of such difficulty.

VLADIMIR KAGAN: You know. And so that as I was saying, you know, when we were driving up, it moves sideways, you know. You think you're climbing up the ladder and you're having an element of success. Bingo! You tumble down again. It deflates you. You come back to reality.

And this was an ongoing thing. So by the late eighties or mid-eighties, '85, '86, I got really very fed up with it. But everybody was going bankrupt. I wasn't ever going to do that. I hated the thought of sticking anybody with debt. And so I prepared myself. I first of all sold the inventory in the factory, the raw materials, to a colleague's shop. Then I sold the machinery that somebody in the building took over the facility of the factory. So I crept out of that one. As far as the showroom was concerned, I first of all had private sales. Then I had public sales. I asked my landlady, I said, "Joanne, I don't need 10,000 square foot anymore." I was willing to carry on without a factory and do subcontracting. And she said, "No, Vladimir, I only want to rent a whole floor through." I said, "I need only half the floor. Rent the other half, and I'll stay in business." No way. She was totally intransient. So I said, "Okay, I'll go out." And we started to sell everything off. When we were moving furniture out of the building, she came to me and said, "Vladimir, if you want to keep some space, I'll let you have it." By that time I was so psychologically set up to bail out, that I bailed out. And I closed the factory, closed the showroom. Took my secretary—I got a new secretary, not the one that embezzled me—and I worked out of my apartment. And we took a small warehouse space, 3,000 feet or 5,000 [feet]—no, 3,000 feet—across the street from the old factory. And we—

MIJA REIDEL: This is the mid-eighties, just so we're oriented.

VLADIMIR KAGAN: Mid-eighties, yes.

MIJA REIDEL: 'Eighty-seven?

VLADIMIR KAGAN: 'Eighty-seven or so. We moved everything in there. It became a huge clutter of oddball things: the fabrics that we didn't sell, the furniture from the showroom that we didn't sell, an accumulation that took up a whole warehouse. And also Erica at that time was still manufacturing needlework. So we actually gave—part of that space became her factory for her needlework.

MIJA REIDEL: Ah!

VLADIMIR KAGAN: And we had three nice, faithful employees who worked there unsupervised. And whenever they ran out of work, they started to build more inventory. With the upshot, of course, that Erica Wilson's factory became a noose around our neck, because we were not doing it correctly. And we developed a huge inventory of product that wasn't needed.

MIJA REIDEL: Ah.

VLADIMIR KAGAN: And sold. So that became another aspect. We finally gave up manufacturing needlework.

MIJA REIDEL: Hmm.

VLADIMIR KAGAN: In the meantime, I was working out of my apartment. My kids had grown up and moved out. So we took two of the bedrooms and made one office for Erica and one office for me. And I worked out of the apartment.

MIJA REIDEL: This is the New York apartment.

VLADIMIR KAGAN: On Park Avenue. And then people would call. There was a lot of service work, re-upholstery. Well, I took that on. And then there were people that would call up say, "I love that sofa [inaudible] that you made back in the fifties. Can you do it?" And I'd say, "Yes, we'll do it." Because what happened was, when we closed the factory, I supported all of my workers by helping them set up shops.

MIJA REIDEL: Ah!

VLADIMIR KAGAN: And I gave them my work. I used them as subcontractors. So in a way I could keep them going. And they knew how to make my furniture.

MIJA REIDEL: Right.

VLADIMIR KAGAN: And my upholstery shop was way out someplace upstate New York. And one of the cabinetmakers moved to Brooklyn. So I had a good ongoing resource for production. So as the inquiries came in, we produced them. And about in the, I guess 1990, the American Society of Interior Designers, and I was a member of that organization, came to me and said, "Mr. Kagan, we'd love you to run for president of the local chapter." But by that time I had nothing significant to do. I said, "Why not?" It's flattering. They come to me. And I was easily flattered. [They laugh.] I ran for president and got elected. And then all the shit hit the fan again [laughs], because they were going bankrupt. They didn't know what the hell to do. And they were paying the president $10,000 a year as a stipend. So the first thing I did was eliminate the president's fee. [They laugh.] So I ran the operation through my office with my secretary. And helped them really avoid bankruptcy.

And the New York chapter was not liked by the national chapter. The New York chapter was snooty. It was elitist. And it was run by that time by a lot of old fogeys, has-beens, who considered this to be their private club. And I kind of spun them into shape, because I brought a lot of business acumen and, you know, no baggage to the office. And they asked me to run for a second year, which I did. And it was fun. I went to national conferences and had a lot of fun doing that. But in the same time period, I decided, you know, "I'm not doing any furniture now. Why don't I look to see what can be"—High Point was always a nemesis to me. They would come in secretly to my showroom and knock me off. Sketch the designs. And then next year you'd find them down in High Point by the manufacturers. It was a terrible thing.

MIJA REIDEL: Yes.

VLADIMIR KAGAN: So I said, "Rather than fight them, join them."

MIJA REIDEL: Mm-hmm! [Affirmative.]

VLADIMIR KAGAN: So I looked to see who was the most well-reputed manufacturer. I asked my friends in the magazine business. And they pointed me in the direction of a company called Directional Furniture. In those days it was run by the Mesberg family. George Mesberg was a maven of salesmanship.

MIJA REIDEL: Okay.

VLADIMIR KAGAN: Maybe George was the father. No. I'm looking—The father was the great maven. The son was a guy my age, perhaps a little younger, who ran it out of his showroom in New York at 200 Lexington. And they had a nice factory down in High Point. And we made an agreement which was a simple two-page or three-page agreement that has come back to bite me until this day.

MIJA REIDEL: Oh, dear.

VLADIMIR KAGAN: Because you don't make simple agreements, and I didn't like lawyers and the gibberish and the boilerplate that goes with legal agreements. So we signed a stupid document that had no time limit. Nor did it have a limit on the designs. So if they made three or four pieces a month or a year, that license continued. And that gave me a lot of grief. It came back to bite me a lot. So nowadays I write 20-page license agreements that have a little bit more bite in them. But working with Directional, they were lovely people. They were trustworthy, very nice people. Their son lived in Chapel Hill, North Carolina, and ran the factory. And I came up. It became a very creative period for me. It was fun, because I never worked in production.

MIJA REIDEL: Right.

VLADIMIR KAGAN: I never worked with high-tech—or higher-tech—technology. I was able all of a sudden to design products that I didn't dare to do for the Kagan custom shops. It was too crowded, too labor-intensive, too much development time. I just never saw it as a cost-effective approach. But High Point all of a sudden opened your eyes. "We can do anything, you know. We'll find a way of doing it."

MIJA REIDEL: Because you're doing it in much larger quantities.

VLADIMIR KAGAN: There was a larger quantity. And there was a can-do atmosphere. There was also the fashion aspect of it. We had—every six months there's a show. And that show you had to come up with new products. Every manufacturer had to have new products because the press would come down a week in advance and say, "Hey, Mr. Mesberg, what's new?" So you'd have to show them all the new things. So you were forced into a creative mode like a fashion designer coming up with lines. Except fashion design is lucrative but furniture design is not.

MIJA REIDEL: Yes.

VLADIMIR KAGAN: And I had this great illusion. [They laugh.] When I went down to High Point, I was making 5 percent royalty, which is better than a lot of manufacturing give—they usually give 3 percent. So I had what appeared to be a decent contract. And I said, "Well, I figure this is a $20 million factory. And if I do 10 percent new products for them, 10 percent of 20 million is how much? 200,000. Nice sales. And next year I'll design some new stuff. I'll get 25 percent of the market. Eventually I'll have a decent share of that $20 million business." What you didn't take into accounting at that time was obsolescence. Every time the factory or the company had to come up with a new design, they would have to drop something at the other end.

MIJA REIDEL: Ah!

VLADIMIR KAGAN: Didn't keep it in production. Why? Because stores would allot you 2,000 feet of space, 3,000 feet of space. That was Directional. And you had to fill that up with new, saleable products. So the older products would drift away. Also the computer started to tell the story. They knew which was selling and what wasn't selling. So instead of climbing up the ladder with more pieces of the pie, you never get a bigger piece of the pie.

MIJA REIDEL: Right.

VLADIMIR KAGAN: And then, while I was selling sofas maybe for six, seven thousand dollars at that time—I don't know; I don't remember exactly my price range—they would sell sofas for $900, because that was the price range for a sofa to wholesale. A chair, I think, was maximum $600, maybe 599. There were price points. And these are all things you learn. And if you didn't stay within that range, you didn't make the sale. And so 5 percent of a $600 chair—how much is that? $30?

MIJA REIDEL: Sounds about right, yes.

VLADIMIR KAGAN: So you never made a lot of money. Though the illusion was, "Geez, it's going to be very profitable."

MIJA REIDEL: Right.

VLADIMIR KAGAN: And you devoted a lot of time to developing those products, had to go to the factory—which I enjoyed. I liked that being back in the factory, learning about new technologies, new springing, foam rubber.

They knew how to cut corners. That entire industry is built on cutting corners, because they are locked into a price. So to be creative—to be creative—you had to be creative in how to make a design look great and not cost a lot of money. And that was an interesting challenge. And I enjoyed doing that.

And then Directional, which was an upholstery collection, expanded into case goods. Case goods is a trade word for cabinet furniture, tables, and so on. Well, tables had an even bigger restriction on it as far as price. A coffee table could not cost more than $600. End tables were almost undesirable because there was not enough money in them. And they were the same amount of work as a coffee table. So you make coffee tables.

MIJA REIDEL: Right.

VLADIMIR KAGAN: Some end tables. And this company was out in Ohio called Artistic Furniture. And they had great capability of doing lacquers but no woodwork. But it was a period of time when faux finishes were big. And so I did a lot of interesting faux finishes. It was a fun period. I look back at those designs; they're beautiful. But they quickly went out of business with that. And I did some wrought-iron furniture in Mexico that was very exciting.

MIJA REIDEL: Really?

VLADIMIR KAGAN: But the Mexican production was so unreliable.

MIJA REIDEL: Where in Mexico?

VLADIMIR KAGAN: Oh, God knows. Someplace. Border towns, who knows?

MIJA REIDEL: Okay.

VLADIMIR KAGAN: But when one shipment of the tables, say, were 17 inches, another time they ended up being 14 inches or 20 inches. You know. They lacked supervision. And Mexico—But creative, wonderful.

MIJA REIDEL: Beautiful metalwork.

VLADIMIR KAGAN: But Mexico as a resource, you had to be down there.

MIJA REIDEL: Yes.

VLADIMIR KAGAN: So that line did not survive. So it was again this moving sideways, you know. Interesting opportunities, great press. But the companies wouldn't support with advertising.

MIJA REIDEL: Aha.

VLADIMIR KAGAN: They expected my name to bring the PR, which it did. But it didn't do any huge volume. Then Directional decided to give up their New York showroom. Of course George Mesberg really preferred to play golf than run his business. And he retired into a nice golf community and played golf. His son was a reluctant factory guy. He was really interested in computers and in electronics and got bored running the factory and wanted to go into the electronics business. So he sold. The company was sold, and with it my contract.

MIJA REIDEL: Wow.

VLADIMIR KAGAN: And then it went from pillar to post.

MIJA REIDEL: That's a problem. So once it was sold, it was completely [inaudible].

VLADIMIR KAGAN: Then you were dealing with people, unreliable people. And they ended up in the end—I'm a very bad businessman from the point of view of watching pennies. And they owed me $70,000 in back royalties. Well, maybe it was only 30,000. I don't remember. But I think it was more like 70,000. And when they wanted to sell the company to a conglomerate, I was in England at the time. They called me up and said, "Well, if you don't agree to take 10 cents on the dollar, the company's going to go broke." So I crawled out with a little bit of profit and moved on to the next company. And then we went—you know, you ricochet in that industry. And I think at this moment we'll take a little break.

MIJA REIDEL: Sure.

[END DISC 4.]

MIJA REIDEL: This is Mija Riedel with Vladimir Kagan again at the artist's home and studio in Nantucket, Massachusetts, on June eleventh, 2010, for the Smithsonian Archives of American Art, disc number [five]. Good

morning.

VLADIMIR KAGAN: Good morning.

MIJA REIDEL: A little sun today.

VLADIMIR KAGAN: Oh, what a beautiful day. Sunshine, a breeze, and dry.

MIJA REIDEL: Mm-hmm. Mm-hmm. [Affirmative.] Especially welcome after all the gray, yes.

VLADIMIR KAGAN: You betcha.

MIJA REIDEL: When we stopped yesterday, we were talking of the nineties. I'd like to start this morning back in the nineties and consider, if you would, or if you would relate the story, of the reintroduction of some of your classic and earliest designs that happened in the nineties; how that came about.

VLADIMIR KAGAN: Well, let me tell you. The nineties to me—it was very exciting. It was an awakening. After I had gone into a slumber in the late eighties of disappointments and discouragements and a kind of a finale and quitting, the nineties all of a sudden were a rebirth.

MIJA REIDEL: Yes.

VLADIMIR KAGAN: They really actually started with my going into the commercial furniture field down in High Point, where I all of a sudden came up with a whole lot of new, innovative designs totally different from what I had been doing in the eighties, largely concentrating on upholstery. But subsequently also adding something just in case goods and cabinets. They always call them case goods; it's a horrible trade name. Cabinets and tables and things like that. And it was a stimulus. It was fantastic for me. And because we were dealing with a fashion industry, as I mentioned yesterday, you had to come up with new designs all the time.

MIJA REIDEL: Yes.

VLADIMIR KAGAN: So that was terrific. Simultaneous to that, my little private business, which was at that time mostly servicing clients, older clients, not necessarily new clients, who needed re-upholstery or wanted something new done for them, which we did through my old network of cabinetmakers. But then ICFF started in the mid-nineties, I believe. ICFF is the International Contemporary Furniture Fair.

MIJA REIDEL: Right. At the Armory, yes?

VLADIMIR KAGAN: No, it's not at the Armory. It's at the Coliseum.

MIJA REIDEL: Oh, okay.

VLADIMIR KAGAN: It's not even at the Coliseum. It's at this Jacob Javits [Convention Center].

MIJA REIDEL: Oh, okay.

VLADIMIR KAGAN: And it started off as a wonderful showcase for young designers. You'd take a 5-by-10 or 10-by-10 space. And they showed a lot of things. And it became a very bright, exciting show for Modernists, for craftsmen. And like everything else that starts and that has a continuity eventually becomes institutionalized. And the ICFF show going fast-forward into 2010 is dominated by a lot of industrial manufacturers who are not the core and not the purpose of that show. But they're awfully good for selling real estate. So there were so much bed and bath stuff, it could have been a bed and bath show. But back in the nineties, the early nineties, mid-nineties, it was an exciting show to walk through, seeing new ideas and young people with creativity.

And I guess after the first show, I said, "Well, next year I ought to take a small space and give it a shot," because people were always asking about my designs. There was a lot of interest in it. I think I took about a 5 foot-by-10 foot booth. Didn't decorate it very much. And stuck, I think, first one of my Serpentine sofas and maybe a barrel chair, something like that. Some of the very early Kagan. Revisiting the early Kagan pieces that I had not ever shown in my showroom in the seventies.

MIJA REIDEL: And what made you decide to show such early work?

VLADIMIR KAGAN: I thought it was time.

MIJA REIDEL: Aha!

VLADIMIR KAGAN: I thought there was a mood and an interest in that spirit. And this gut feeling, I think it was—

And also because I liked those pieces, and they hadn't had a chance to breathe.

MIJA REIDEL: Right.

VLADIMIR KAGAN: And that started, you know, a huge kind of rebirth. And I don't know whether it was as a result of that first show. But I certainly made a major commitment in the second show, and I built a beautiful booth. And I never do things in haphazard half-measures. I built a fantastic booth with lighting, with beamed ceilings, with multi-level floors. And I put the Omnibus collection into that. And so I actually went from revival of visiting the fifties, I went and visited the sixties and seventies in the next show. But something in between the first and second show, I could almost measure the—the one thing, that bolt of lightning that never happened, happened then.

MIJA REIDEL: Ah!

VLADIMIR KAGAN: And I got an article in *House & Garden* magazine. It was commissioned by the editors of *House & Garden*. And a wonderful writer, whom I actually had never—hadn't met personally—and I can't remember his name now, which is really shocking because he's a friend, good friend. And he happened to be Tom Forward's [Ford? ph] partner, living in Paris. And he wrote a wonderful article, very sensitive because we did an interview kind of thing the way we're talking now. He got to know me well. And I think the headline of it was: "Vladimir Kagan Has Been Rediscovered. In Fact He Never Went Away."

And that was kind of the stimulus. And the press listens to the press, you know. So one thing begat another, and I got a lot of press: *New York Times*, all kinds of shelter magazines. I had been living, by that time, I had been living in my apartment for 30 years. Nobody ever bothered to look at it as a photographic possibility. From there on in, it has been photographed for books, magazines. And I didn't think that you could take the same project and photograph it and show it in a magazine more than once. But in actual fact every photographer had his own take on it. And it's been kind of fascinating. But this was all part of that new vibration for, "Hey, Vladimir Kagan is cool."

At the same time, I had this exhibit. The Italians had also a show at ICFF. And one of the Italian manufacturers, a jolly little man called Alberto Vignatelli, came to me and said, "I have a furniture factory in Italy. And I would love to license your designs." Well, this was a wonderful opportunity because for years I had been going to the Cologne fair and to the Milan fair and tried to make contact with manufacturers and never could make a hit. And I was knocked off over there. Walked through the shows, and they had some of the pieces that I had done for the American manufacturers ended up being copied there. But Alberto said, "I want to do a Kagan collection. And for the next show in Cologne, I want to reproduce exactly your exhibit." And that became—that was in 2000—and that's become a wonderful working relationship. I licensed him to manufacture my furniture and sell it throughout the world with the exception of America. I kept the rights for America, Canada, Mexico. That remained our territory. And that made me very—brought my name and my designs to international recognition. Lots of magazine articles, press articles. And we needed a name for the collection, and it was called the Kagan New York Collection.

MIJA REIDEL: I see.

VLADIMIR KAGAN: Very confusing. [Laughs.] Kagan New York Collection manufactured in Italy.

MIJA REIDEL: Yes.

VLADIMIR KAGAN: So the nineties was really the start of a new ten-year period in my life. And it would go—I kept working also with my licensees in America, adding to the Italian collection. The Italian collection was basically—was based on the things that I had been doing fifties, sixties, seventies. And adding that into it. And in the latter years actually saying we needed more updated things. So I then added new designs. So it gave me—

MIJA REIDEL: What in particular? Do you remember anything that stands out in your mind as [inaudible]?

VLADIMIR KAGAN: Well, you know, it was always upholstery. These are upholstery manufacturers. And to try to teach upholstery manufacturers to make cabinets is very tricky. You know, they have to outsource it. They don't like to do that. So the emphasis was very largely on upholstery.

MIJA REIDEL: Okay.

VLADIMIR KAGAN: But through that connection, I also then the Italians' factory, which was called Clubhouse Italia, and it is based in Forli, F-O-R-L-I, Italy. And Forli is a very industrial city near the Adriatic coast in the middle of Italy. Nobody's ever heard of it. And when we took a train from Bologna—or from Milan—to go to Forli, we were sitting in the cabin, and we were getting up to leave, and the other passengers said, "No, no, no! This is Forli. You want to go to Rimini, don't you?" I said, "No, no. We want to go to Forli." The train went to Rimini.

MIJA REIDEL: Aha

VLADIMIR KAGAN: But Forli was famous for the fact it was where Mussolini was born. There are no statues to Mussolini there, though. But also it is in Umbria, in the mountains. The best food in all of Italy.

MIJA REIDEL: Really!

VLADIMIR KAGAN: And the best truffles. And when we would go to the factory to develop new products in October, all we did was eat truffles in the mountains. It was really quite a treat.

MIJA REIDEL: [Laughs] That sounds lovely.

VLADIMIR KAGAN: And I still look forward to have to go again this year to develop new products because it's been a little bit dormant. Because my manufacturer was also a licensee for Fendi, and the Fendi Collection took off very strongly for them. And Fendi put a lot of pressure on their producing enough products in order to retain the license.

MIJA REIDEL: Right.

VLADIMIR KAGAN: But now last year they did a licensing agreement with Kenzo. You know Kenzo the fashion designer?

MIJA REIDEL: Sure.

VLADIMIR KAGAN: And so then we did a conjoint effort and said: "Kenzo Meets Vladimir Kagan."

MIJA REIDEL: Oh!

VLADIMIR KAGAN: And so they—And what we did was take Kenzo fabrics and put them on Kagan furniture.

MIJA REIDEL: Ah!

VLADIMIR KAGAN: Which was a very nice breakthrough.

MIJA REIDEL: Yes.

VLADIMIR KAGAN: And so I had a whole showroom on Via Manzoni with all of my furniture. There was again a lot of very interesting—interest and rebirth of these—again on the fifties pieces.

MIJA REIDEL: And it's interesting because it comes back to, too, what we've talked about—we've touched on multiple times over the past couple of days—which is this sense of almost collaboration and how that really always brings something new to your work.

VLADIMIR KAGAN: Yes.

MIJA REIDEL: And in this case with Kenzo.

VLADIMIR KAGAN: It's a nice opportunity. And then one of Alberto's clients that he did—what is the proper term for it?—where you make, "private labeling" is the word I'm looking at. He did furniture for a wonderful company called Roche Bobois. Roche Bobois is a French-based company in Paris, and they have about 70 showrooms around the world. They have in New York, Boston, Los Angeles. I don't know what other cities in the States, but a huge coverage in Europe. And they asked me to design some furniture for them. And of course, as I mentioned yesterday, everybody wants the Serpentine concept.

MIJA REIDEL: Right.

VLADIMIR KAGAN: And the Serpentine was also marketed under the name Free Form, meaning all kinds of different names to describe more or less a feature like an arm, the size, or something like that. Because we no longer numbered them. You remember, in the fifties I numbered them.

MIJA REIDEL: Right.

VLADIMIR KAGAN: There was a hundred series. That hundred series covered many designs. Now we had to come up with names. But they wanted a Serpentine. And of course I can't give you that; it's already licensed to Clubhouse Italia. It is our mainstay product in America. I can't give you that. But I'll come up with some designs for you. And I started doodling. And understanding how the commercial furniture market works, you can't have too many what's called in the trade skews, stock-keeping units. And stock-keeping units means you have to keep raw material and products on the shelf in order to make delivery. That's a nuisance, both to a manufacturer and

to a dealer that has a warehouse. So there's a clever collection that consists of three pieces of furniture that can be modularly united in different ways. And by having the backs separate from the seats, we were able to change color. And it became a very exciting new version, a nineties version, of Omnibus, it was a 2000, 21st-century, version of Omnibus. It was very popular and largely advertised. And I still—

MIJA REIDEL: What was this one called?

VLADIMIR KAGAN: It was called Comet. Because it behaved like a comet, you know. It had a trail to it. [Laughs.]

MIJA REIDEL: Ah, yes.

VLADIMIR KAGAN: So that was just one phase of developing new products.

MIJA REIDEL: And going again even more largely in the international direction.

VLADIMIR KAGAN: Yes.

MIJA REIDEL: Yes.

VLADIMIR KAGAN: And, well, my reputation, the rebirth of Kagan, came along with the craze for revival of the fifties.

MIJA REIDEL: When [inaudible] interest in Modernism.

VLADIMIR KAGAN: I really wanted to keep moving forward.

MIJA REIDEL: Right.

VLADIMIR KAGAN: So it was a question of nurturing that which has made my work iconic, and the opportunity to develop new designs. Alongside—as a byproduct again of the ICFF show in 1999, I met Ralph Pucci. Ralph Pucci has the most wonderful showroom in New York City, on West 18th Street. And it's a gallery. Ralph is a lovely man. The family and he—his father started it—made mannequins. And out of that mannequin business grew a rather large industry. But Ralph liked furniture. So he used part of the factory space, converted it into showrooms, and made it into an art gallery. And so while the core business and the core money-producer is and was mannequins for Saks Fifth Avenue, for Neiman Marcus, major companies, Ralph loved furniture, and he gave me my first show. And that became very successful. And Ralph and I have been working together now for ten years.

MIJA REIDEL: So that was about 2000?

VLADIMIR KAGAN: Yes. And he represents my classic furniture. We actually had to sort of subdivide and reinvent ourselves to fit into market niches without encroaching on the other products. It was very difficult.

MIJA REIDEL: Yes.

VLADIMIR KAGAN: We already had a showroom in New York with Dennis Miller. And Dennis represented the Italian collection, the Kagan New York Collection. So then I had to sort of create a divide between what is the New York Collection, which came out of the fifties, and whatever I do for Ralph Pucci that also was a revival of fifties.

MIJA REIDEL: Right.

VLADIMIR KAGAN: But I have a large inventory of designs, both in prototypes and in photographs and in models. And we managed to create a visual separation between the two collections. And our relationship with Ralph has grown exponentially. We have a showroom in Los Angeles. We have a showroom in Dania [Beach], Florida, with a company called J Bachelor. But we are in there with the Pucci Collection. And so that has been moving along very nicely. A few years ago—

MIJA REIDEL: One quick question: It sounds then that the emphasis has really shifted now from an earlier emphasis on limited production with individual studios or cabinetmaking shops, things that you would market out to other people to do; now it's really much more of designing and allowing—it's much more a commercial furniture business, yes?

VLADIMIR KAGAN: Not really. No.

MIJA REIDEL: No. Okay.

VLADIMIR KAGAN: Actually it's not. We have solidified our production capability. We are still working outsourced.

MIJA REIDEL: Okay.

VLADIMIR KAGAN: I do not own any factories. Thankfully.

MIJA REIDEL: Yes. Sounds like it.

VLADIMIR KAGAN: But what we have are three or four shops that work exclusively for us. And not only that, I've been able to reintroduce my sculptured wooden furniture from the fifties that we haven't manufactured for 50 years. And we found through my old connections a cabinet shop in Pennsylvania with the kind of machinery, equipment, and capability to build my wooden frames. And so all of a sudden I was able to reintroduce those 175 series, A, B, C, D, and so on. And they are fantastic sellers now. They're expensive. But the market has now—where I couldn't attain the price 20 years ago or 30 years ago for that expensive furniture—today the market is there for it. And it is expensive because it's handmade.

MIJA REIDEL: Right.

VLADIMIR KAGAN: Because it's very labor-intensive. And we make it in exactly the same way as I made them 60 years earlier. So when they buy one of these pieces, it's beautifully manufactured to the original standards. We looked at some photographs yesterday to show how the springs, [inaudible] springs, hardwood frames, horsehair stuffing, and things like that. We maintained that. And I insist that the custom collection, the Original Classic Collection it's called, replicates what I did 50 years ago. And that is its selling point. Because we also make the little Serpentine sofas. I think—what was it called? I have it.

MIJA REIDEL: The Mini?

VLADIMIR KAGAN: Zoe.

MIJA REIDEL: Oh, the Zoe, yes.

VLADIMIR KAGAN: The Mini, the Zoe, and so on. Little six-foot versions of that big ten-foot, 20-foot sofa. And that sells for about $1,700 covered in an ultra-suede fabric. So it's a different product, a different market. And people said, "Well, you can't do that really. How can you do—sell your expensive furniture and that." But I look at the fashion industry and look at Ralph Lauren and Yves St. Laurent, and they have a couture collection and they have their mass market collection. And they work. And when the Pucci salespeople said, "Oh, my God, Vladimir, how are we going to sell a $20,000 sofa when these guys sell one for under $2,000?" I said, "That will help you sell the expensive furniture." It's not made the same way. It's made with plywood frames and foam rubber and no springs. And there's a huge difference.

MIJA REIDEL: Yes.

VLADIMIR KAGAN: And so it has never really interfered with our business.

MIJA REIDEL: Interesting. Do you still continue to do—well, we talked briefly last night—you do still continue to do also individual interiors.

VLADIMIR KAGAN: Oh, yes. And we'll go into that momentarily. I want to sort of go a little sequentially.

MIJA REIDEL: Sure.

VLADIMIR KAGAN: A few years ago, I think maybe four years ago, one of my clients or a manufacturer came to me and said, "Look, we'd like to—we want to open a showroom with your furniture in it." And I said, "But I have difficulty with that. We already have the Pucci, and we can't really—how are we going to separate?" But then because of my licensing agreement with the Italians that I could retain the right to do the collection in America, I used the Italian collection as a separate product. And we called it Vladimir Kagan Couture.

MIJA REIDEL: Mm-hmm! [Affirmative.]

VLADIMIR KAGAN: And now we have a showroom at 200 Lexington Avenue with that. Doubled the size this year. And there we are selling the same products that the Italians are selling in Italy, Europe, England, France, the Middle East, and so on. And oddly enough, just parenthetically speaking, one of my major clients is in China. We have showrooms in Shanghai. But I also have a big client in Taiwan.

MIJA REIDEL: Hmm!

VLADIMIR KAGAN: And we've been twice to Taiwan to promote and market the products there.

MIJA REIDEL: Interesting.

VLADIMIR KAGAN: And it's very interesting that even in China, the wealthy people don't want to buy the Chinese reproductions of anything. They want the original. And the couture showrooms, the fashion people are selling like mad in that market. And so is the high-quality furniture.

MIJA REIDEL: Interesting. That must be fascinating to see the work in that context.

VLADIMIR KAGAN: Yes. I haven't been to China in years, and I'm dying to go there. Shanghai is spectacular.

MIJA REIDEL: I'm sure.

VLADIMIR KAGAN: And I don't know what's coming up in the future. I never know beyond the tip of my nose what I'm doing. [They laugh.] And I react to whatever comes up. I do. I'll have to go to Paris in September for the Maison & Objet show, because we want to show my wrought-iron collection, the Capricorn collection, we'll talk about that in a minute. And also my Italians want to do a bigger commitment to the Kagan-Kenzo relationship. And so we'll have a show in September when we go to Paris.

MIJA REIDEL: How fantastically exciting. It's seems that business is absolutely booming on an international scale.

VLADIMIR KAGAN: Well, booming it's not. We're in a recessionary period.

MIJA REIDEL: Yes.

VLADIMIR KAGAN: And sales are considerably off, but they're not dead.

MIJA REIDEL: Right.

VLADIMIR KAGAN: And you have to manipulate. You have to navigate in tough waters. And the furniture industry is at the bottom end of the feeding trough until the building industry and the real estate business picks up, and of course the bankers are making money again and getting their bonuses—these are our clients—then we'll start selling more furniture.

MIJA REIDEL: Right.

VLADIMIR KAGAN: But anybody that can see the future realizes we don't stay dormant, and you've got to be proactive, not reactive in that kind of thing.

MIJA REIDEL: But the showrooms aren't closing down. Production isn't closing down; it's slowing down.

VLADIMIR KAGAN: No. It's shrinking.

MIJA REIDEL: Yes.

VLADIMIR KAGAN: Everybody shrinks.

MIJA REIDEL: Yes.

VLADIMIR KAGAN: I haven't really done anything new for High Point in two years. But one of my manufacturers now, Weiman/Preview, I've got to do something like six or ten new pieces for them for the October market.

MIJA REIDEL: This October?

VLADIMIR KAGAN: Yes. So I've been working on that. Before I came up here, we were working on that collection. And when Will, my assistant, comes up here, we'll continue to program that. So there are vibes of rebirth and of energy. And I must say this recession which we're talking about in the current terms, but when you start listening to these records five years from now, it's a thing of the past.

MIJA REIDEL: Right.

VLADIMIR KAGAN: We feel there is a light at the end of the tunnel, of this downturn period, which is the worst recession we've had since the thirties.

MIJA REIDEL: Yes.

VLADIMIR KAGAN: Much worse than anything I've gone through. But it also [laughs] reflects that ten-year cycle of my life, that something always hits the fan. And when you think everything is going to be wonderful, reality strikes you in the back, and you're got to come to grips with it.

And I have now five employees that work for me in my present facility, meaning administrative, sales, and so on. But we had to cut that back. I went on four-day work weeks in order to conserve and keep the thing going. Because everybody is a cog in the wheel, and you couldn't—(a) I don't like to let people go, and secondly, each one had a significant role to play, but we just couldn't keep them fulfilled. But this will change.

MIJA REIDEL: This seems an appropriate time to ask, at this point in your career, what do you see as the similarities and differences between your early work and your current work? Or do you not see much difference at all?

VLADIMIR KAGAN: Oh, there are huge nuances of difference.

MIJA REIDEL: Mm-hmm. [Affirmative.] For example?

VLADIMIR KAGAN: To my clientele, to the buying clients, they're buying my designs because they are reminiscent of everything I've done. You can understand and see a Kagan when you see it.

MIJA REIDEL: Yes.

VLADIMIR KAGAN: And so that handwriting has sustained itself through all of my work. And my work of 2010 and 2009 is radically different than what I did in 1947, but they're still the same antecedents are there. We looked at my fiberglass chairs yesterday.

MIJA REIDEL: Yes.

VLADIMIR KAGAN: I think my fiberglass chairs are the most exciting furniture that's I've done in years. I'm very, very excited and thrilled about it. It gave me a chance to do real sculpture. And out of the fiberglass chairs came a commission for four pieces of very wonderful pieces of pure sculpture, which we also do in fiberglass now.

MIJA REIDEL: And where did those go, to private commissions?

VLADIMIR KAGAN: Well, this is the relationship with Ralph Pucci.

MIJA REIDEL: Yes.

VLADIMIR KAGAN: And it's always interesting. You know things, how they evolve. They metamorphize into something else. Ralph has the mannequin business. And he has decent capacity for manufacturing them. I suppose with the downturn in the industry of everything, there was room in the mannequin manufacturing to add some product line to it. And a year ago Ralph and I were in California, in Los Angeles, and we went to see the new Philippe Starck hotel out there. I forget what it was called. And it's full of Starck's fiberglass furniture on the deck. And Starck, you know, is very entertaining designer.

MIJA REIDEL: Is this the Standard Hotel?

VLADIMIR KAGAN: Now the Standard I did. I did the Standard Hotel. But this a Starck hotel. I don't know who the owners of it are. Morgan or—inconsequential. Anyhow, in going through the hotel and enjoying [laughs] what we saw there, I said, "Ralph, you know, I would love to do some fiberglass furniture, because I think my designs are so fluid and sculptural. It would be cool to do some fiberglass." He said, "Well, I can do it. My mannequins are fiberglass. We've run through our production needs for the year for our major clients. We'll do something for the fall." That was wonderful, and it came about purely from a conversational relationship into a new product development.

MIJA REIDEL: Yes.

VLADIMIR KAGAN: And working in fiberglass, we built these complete models in clay.

MIJA REIDEL: Mm-hmm! [Affirmative.] Right. We were looking at those.

VLADIMIR KAGAN: They're very sleek, finished products. Very tactile and with lots of curvatures to them, but with an edgy curvature that is strictly 21st century, as opposed to the curvatures of my designs from the fifties. But they are the grandchildren of the old designs. [They laugh.]

MIJA REIDEL: Okay.

VLADIMIR KAGAN: So this was—The sculpture, after we did the chairs and ottoman, Ralph said, "Well, you know, I do a yearly fashion show for my new mannequins. And why don't you do me four pieces of sculpture that we'll exhibit with the mannequins?" And this December—yes, I think it was December second, no, December tenth—he had the fashion show, and we introduced the sculpture, which was very well received. And they're cast either

in a granite black finish or in a white finish. And so that is just one phase of responding with new product because somebody needed them.

MIJA REIDEL: Right.

VLADIMIR KAGAN: As we talked about earlier, I'm very in that way reactive to clients' needs. I would never have thought of doing a piece of sculpture. My dad did sculpture. When he retired at age 80, he became a sculptor. And he did what he always had wanted to do all his life: become a—to do art. And he had a lovely fulfilled ten years of life from 80 to 90 doing amazing sculpture.

MIJA REIDEL: Does that appeal to you?

VLADIMIR KAGAN: No. You know, I didn't have that dream because I was still actively working. And now I'm 82, going on 83 in another month or so. But when Ralph said, "I want some sculpture," I turned to sculpture. And now of course I'm radicalized by that thought, and I'd love to do more.

But I need a clientele—I need (a) a manufacturing capability to make them. And Ralph is the natural gallery to display them. So it'll happen. But then also we were talking about doing commissions and doing residential jobs. And I've always believed that there's a purpose for everything in life, and nothing is ever wasted. And even an adverse experience, obviously as you've seen in my life, has become—I can turn into a positive. We were here in Nantucket, I guess it was two, three years ago, sitting in front of Erica's shop. And this very attractive blue-eyed guy came up to me and said, "Vladimir, you don't know who I am. I know who you are. And I just came from your son's studio, and we just bought some paintings." And it turned out this is an amazing guy by the name of Bob Eccles who had a house here in Nantucket. Loved Ilya's work. And had a very small, little—You know, Nantucket has had a hierarchy: There were the sailors who were the poor people, and they lived at the far end of town. And then there were the sea captains, and then there were ultimately the owners. And things separated themselves. As you went up the hill, the classier people, the more expensive homes were built. And as you saw yesterday, we have some exquisite classic houses that were built by the ship owners in the 1800s.

MIJA REIDEL: Mm-hmm. [Affirmative.]

VLADIMIR KAGAN: But anyhow, they had one of the sailor's houses, a little, totally restored, sweet, small little dinky thing. Small rooms, fireplaces everywhere. And this Bob liked to work at home. He really was from Ohio. He had a big real estate development company out there with his partner. It's called Polaris, in what is it? Columbus, Ohio. And he wanted to have an office, but in that little sailor's house the only place he could put an office was in the basement. The ceiling was only six-foot high there. So we had to dig out. I went to see him. You know, we became friends from that street encounter.

MIJA REIDEL: Right.

VLADIMIR KAGAN: Went to see his house. We had drinks there, good martinis. And he showed me the space, and he showed me what he thought he wanted to do. I said, "Oh, God, Bob. I can do a lot better for you than that." So I designed him that basement space. It was strictly a pro bono thing. I made no money on it. Had no interest in making money on it. But I turned it into a delicious little cubbyhole for his work. He also sat in the same rocking chair that I'm sitting at here up in my studio. He said, "I've got to have one of those." So he did buy a piece of furniture. But a year later he and his partner bought a little pied-à-terre in New York. In one of the very iconic Art Deco buildings on Seventh Avenue and 58th Street. It has a name. I forget the name. But it is an exquisite building. And one of the features of the building is that the living room was completely oval.

MIJA REIDEL: Ah, right.

VLADIMIR KAGAN: So actually it's [inaudible]. Really a fabulous place. He said, "Vladi, I want you to design some stuff for me." Well, Bob loved Modern, but his partner, Bob Geas [ph], liked traditional. [Laughs] So I had to kind of bridge between one taste and the other taste to come up with something that they could both love. In the course of conversation, we decided that he really loved the Chrysler Building. And I love the Chrysler Building; I think it's one of those great iconic New York landmarks. Great Art Deco design. And he said, "Well, what can you do—I like those gargoyles." [They laugh.] Well, it turned that about 20 years earlier one of my clients owned that top floor on the 63rd or 64th floor of the Chrysler Building. And I did all the offices for them.

MIJA REIDEL: Really!

VLADIMIR KAGAN: And in each floor corner office you were looking at these gargoyles. So I was very familiar with them. Loved them dearly. And I said, "Hey, that's a hell of a challenge." And then I started to doodle. And out of that flew some designs that, when you looked at them yesterday, you couldn't believe they were Kagan designs.

MIJA REIDEL: Right. Very Deco.

VLADIMIR KAGAN: Totally different, totally Deco. But I used the marquetry of the elevator doors as the marquetry on the furniture. I created—reproduced—the eagles and cast them in acrylic. And then sandblasted them so they looked like Lalique and were illuminated from the inside. And it became a wonderful piece of furniture. I also designed a dining table—well, they didn't have any room for a dining room. So I made a curved sofa into the bay and a dining table that was a coffee table, that lifted up electronically and then added leaves, and you could seat ten people in that very teeny space. And the bar cabinet, what looked like doors really were chairs. And those became the chairs that went around the dining table.

MIJA REIDEL: That's right.

VLADIMIR KAGAN: So it was a really beautiful, wonderful apartment. And very sadly, Bob Eccles developed a brain tumor out of the blue. He was an athletic guy. He was up here. He was doing, what do they call it? circuit training or something, working on a bicycle, whatever they do. And he fell off a bike. Went up to Mass. General and had this irreparable tumor. Within nine months or a year afterwards, he died. It was terribly sad.

MIJA REIDEL: How awful, yes.

VLADIMIR KAGAN: It was so sad. And we became such dear friends it was really, really wonderful. And there was this gorgeous apartment. Bob Geas couldn't stand living in it anymore. He was so heartbroken. He dumped it.

MIJA REIDEL: Yes.

VLADIMIR KAGAN: And he sold the apartment. The furniture went to auction. The cabinet—Oh, another feature that I did in there in that oval room for Bob, a workstation. He needed—he wanted—to work at home. And I built him a home office into a very magnificent, eight- or nine-foot-tall cabinet that had a cathedral quality to it.

MIJA REIDEL: Yes.

VLADIMIR KAGAN: With remote lighting. And you opened it up, and it became a real workstation. Wonderful space. When we put that into auction, nobody could buy it. Nobody knew how to use it. Where would you put a nine-foot-tall or eight-foot-tall oval cabinet?

MIJA REIDEL: Right.

VLADIMIR KAGAN: And again, there's a German word called *Schicksal*. It's a beautiful word. And *Schicksal* means "fate." And just as a little aside [laughs], my great motto in my life is: "No amount of careful planning can replace the element of good luck." And my life has always been an element of good luck without careful planning. I'm a reactive guy. I shoot from the hip. [Laughs.] But there we had this cabinet. Offered it twice at auction and couldn't sell it. But both Bobs had a dear friend in St. Louis, Missouri, by the name of Saller [ph], the Sallers. And he was a builder. And the Sallers happened to be my clients as well, quite independently, because they bought an apartment in New York City down at the Brevord [ph] on Fifth Avenue that I designed in 1951 or '52.

MIJA REIDEL: Oh, my goodness!

VLADIMIR KAGAN: And it was a time warp.

MIJA REIDEL: Yes.

VLADIMIR KAGAN: It was left intact when my client died. It was David Green. He was a financial guy; it was his New York pied-à-terre. His daughter took it over and lived there for a number of years. Unfortunately they had a decorator, and decorators have an urge to change.

MIJA REIDEL: Yes.

VLADIMIR KAGAN: And part of that apartment had exquisite glass mosaic tables and consoles, where the decorator changed the whole image and pasted black Carrara glass on top of my mosaic tables. Well, when the Sallers bought that apartment from David's daughter, they invited me to come up and see it, to see what I could do, what I could add, make changes. I said, "Do you realize that under these black glass tables are mosaic tops?" And they couldn't believe it. And I said, "You have to carefully, carefully remove the glass." And they did, and we restored them right back to the original mosaic. So it's really quite wonderful.

MIJA REIDEL: That is extraordinary good luck.

VLADIMIR KAGAN: Isn't that amazing? All fate and luck.

MIJA REIDEL: Yes.

VLADIMIR KAGAN: They got the furniture inside because they were big pieces of sofas that we actually constructed on location. And when the daughter moved out, she said, "Well, you keep it. I can't move it." And so it stayed in the apartment. But anyhow, Giselle/Liesl? [ph] and Stephen Saller, they were developers in St. Louis. And they wanted to build the tallest building in St. Louis. And as a byproduct of that tall building, they would have the penthouse on the top floor. And that was a conversation ten years ago or something like that. And they said, "Vladi, when we do that building, you're going to decorate it." Well, you know, it was one of those things that drifted on, and I never really thought it would happen. But darn it, that building was built. And they did take the penthouse. And I did some spectacular designs for it. You saw the photographs. It's too bad my audience can't see the photographs.

MIJA REIDEL: But maybe we can get some images [inaudible], yes.

VLADIMIR KAGAN: They were really—it was a wonderful building. And so Bob Eccles and Bob Geas were good friends of theirs. And so Geas decided—and I have to step backwards a little bit. Two of those rooms were oval rooms. The dining room was an oval room. And above the dining room on the second floor was the library, which was an oval room.

MIJA REIDEL: Interesting.

VLADIMIR KAGAN: And by God, that cabinet fit in like a glove on the hand.

MIJA REIDEL: Amazing.

VLADIMIR KAGAN: And he gave it to him as a present. So all of a sudden this cabinet that was a drug on the market, that cost 40, 50 thousand bucks to build also has a new home, and it's exquisite. And we saw the pictures of that. But what goes around comes around. Steve needed—they needed an oval dining table for the dining room. And I designed all kinds of interesting new products; it would be exciting to do it. But in the meantime at Sotheby's there was an auction of a client's house that again I did in 1951, '52. And I built a huge, eight-foot oval dining table, and that came up for sale in the auction. And I said, "Steve, you guys have got to buy this. You'll never have another opportunity." And they bought that table. It was rather expensive, about 30, 40,000 thousand dollars. And again, it's exquisite in that room. And then we did some cycle chairs that are from the sixties. And so they've become great fans of my work. And earlier we discussed the fact that my life and my work is like an installation art. Did I mention it in the conversation?

MIJA REIDEL: I can't remember [inaudible].

VLADIMIR KAGAN: Maybe not. But this is my life.

MIJA REIDEL: Yes.

VLADIMIR KAGAN: Everything I do. An architect, no matter how bad the building is, becomes a monument. And we were driving through New York two days ago, and we were looking at these ghastly tenement—not what do they call them? Project buildings. Ghastly, hideous things that clutter New York City with ugliness. But they're there. And an architect's work becomes a monument to the architect. A designer, a furniture designer like I, my stuff is here today and gone tomorrow. And almost every interesting project I've had to do as a designer has somehow been demolished, destroyed, and lost. And unfortunately not documented, except perhaps with snapshots.

MIJA REIDEL: When you think back on those that have disappeared or just in general, which do you think of as the most significant commissions?

VLADIMIR KAGAN: Well, I'll tell you, there's no most significant.

MIJA REIDEL: Okay.

VLADIMIR KAGAN: But there are significant landmarks. And back in the eighties—it might have been, no it was early eighties, because I think these people came to my showroom on 59th Street—this guy was a young man, I guess in his thirties, who'd made millions of dollars in one of the high-tech firms of Boston, you know. While we think in terms of high-tech being a West Coast item, the Boston area was a seed ground for all of that stuff. And that company went public, and he walked away with millions. He wanted to have a media room. And so I designed a most fascinating—you know, just discussing their needs. They wanted to use—SONY had a projection gun. In those days we were still using small tubes, a 24-inch tube. But SONY came up with a projection gun that could shoot on an eight-foot screen. But it had its limitations, that the screen had to be curved, concave in all directions. And if you were looking at it from anyplace but from the middle, it became very distorted. So I had a technical problem to create a viewing facility for many people to look at that rather confined screen. So I said, "Well, the best thing to do is to build an amphitheater." Let me go right back to Woodstock, sitting on the

boulders in the swimming holes. I built a three-level sofa arrangement. So everybody could pile up on that and watch the television.

MIJA REIDEL: Is this the dot.com sofa? Was that subsequent to that?

VLADIMIR KAGAN: Well, the dot.com was a subsequent commercial version of this. This was 30 years ago.

MIJA REIDEL: Before.

VLADIMIR KAGAN: Very interesting. All the—I decided to do the entire room in upholstery, tables and everything were done in ultra-suede. It had just come out. And it was *the* hot material. And we did it in multi colors. And we did back-to-front seating because there's also a fireplace in this room. So one part was focused on the projection screen; the other part focused on the fireplace. And the third portion focused on the swimming pool. And it was a wonderful job. And I didn't have the money to send good photographers up. The records of it are pathetic. But it does appear in my book.

MIJA REIDEL: Which home is this?

VLADIMIR KAGAN: In Newton—near Boston.

MIJA REIDEL: Okay.

VLADIMIR KAGAN: Outside of Boston.

MIJA REIDEL: Is this the Gropius home?

VLADIMIR KAGAN: No, no. This is an eighties, a real eighties project.

MIJA REIDEL: Okay.

VLADIMIR KAGAN: And it was a nondescript modern house. But I had this crack at doing this one room, which was just fantastic.

MIJA REIDEL: Yes.

VLADIMIR KAGAN: Well, you think it would last forever. But, you know, as the young man developed older and had lots of dough, he decided he'd build a house out by the water, up in Marblehead [MA] or something like that. And my room, that room, disappeared. I've no idea where it is, what it is. And one more iconic image that I was very, very proud of disappeared. Yes, one major thing with that Gropius house, this I think was another landmark from my design point of view because it stimulated new products. And out of that eventually came dot.com.

MIJA REIDEL: Aha! Right.

VLADIMIR KAGAN: Because I wanted to make a commercially available, multi-level sofa. And the little dot.com sofa had to be small enough to go into an apartment. So I had to build it sectionally, but I built it sectionally going upwards. And you stacked it together like a wedding cake.

MIJA REIDEL: Right.

VLADIMIR KAGAN: And the original prototype for that is now in Kino's [Kino/Kimo Bailey, ph] house in San Francisco.

MIJA REIDEL: Ah, San Francisco.

VLADIMIR KAGAN: So you'll get a chance to see it. Call up Kino [Kimo? ph]; you'll see it. [Laughs.]

MIJA REIDEL: That's great.

VLADIMIR KAGAN: And so other jobs, certainly the Sallers' house in St. Louis is an important landmark. The Geas—Bob Eccles and Bob Geas's apartment in New York. Gone! And now my clients, the Sallers, are thinking of selling their big penthouse. They have a beautiful farm home on the Mississippi River, and they really like that. And they feel they don't need this big space. And their kids are not interested in it. They have different tastes. And so here will be another landmark Kagan that eventually will evaporate. I think it's unfortunate.

MIJA REIDEL: Yes.

VLADIMIR KAGAN: But it is no different than—who's the guy who draped cities [inaudible]?

MIJA REIDEL: Oh, Christo.

VLADIMIR KAGAN: Christo. You know, he does these massive installations.

MIJA REIDEL: Right.

VLADIMIR KAGAN: Except Christo was very clever. He financed them by selling artwork along with it.

MIJA REIDEL: And they're very well documented.

VLADIMIR KAGAN: Yes.

MIJA REIDEL: Yes.

VLADIMIR KAGAN: So there's a history of them. Is he a multi-millionaire? No. He lost his wife recently, and they were lovely people. I met them. And they're really nice. They're artists. So I sort of compare myself not to Christo but, yes, it's here today and gone tomorrow.

MIJA REIDEL: Will you have an opportunity perhaps to document that Saller house before it's gone, do you think?

VLADIMIR KAGAN: Oh, yes. There are some very good photographs. I have another interesting project like that. I have a client of mine in Boca Raton. And she has always loved my furniture over the years. She's been a friend many, many years. And, you know, all of my clients are my friends. And she bought this wonderful house on the Intercoastal. It was furnished with rather traditional, overstuffed furniture and just not— Erica! Please don't. Please don't!

[END DISC 5.]

MIJA REIDEL: Okay. You were just about to talk about Boca Raton before we paused. Please.

VLADIMIR KAGAN: My good friend Susan Klein lives in Boca Raton, but I met her years and years ago in Houston, Texas. She is a typical product of Texas. Multi-million heiress in the oil business, in real estate, self-made, and shed her husband years ago and is quite a very elegant, independent gal. She has this beautiful house on the Intercoastal in Boca Raton. Furnished rather drably. She said, "Vladi, you've got to redo this place for me. I can't stand it any longer." And I did. I made her drawings of a very wonderful Omnibus sofa grouping. Got rid of all the overstuffed furniture. The one thing I retained was her dining table, which she made out of an antique piano and put a huge glass top on it. You could seat 12 to 14 people. Quite interesting. The difficulty was, that that made the table like 31 or 32 inches tall. And a regular chair, you were sitting like a baby in a high chair with the table coming up to your chest.

MIJA REIDEL: Right.

VLADIMIR KAGAN: So in the process of doing this, I made especially high chairs. What we didn't take into account—and this is so typical; when you do one-off, it's the second time around you make the mistake that you realize there was a problem. And [laughs] these chairs, by their design, had rounded fronts to it. And when you are sitting up at that height and you lean forward, they became tippy.

MIJA REIDEL: Oh, dear.

VLADIMIR KAGAN: [Inaudible] She had a stuffy old Englishman as a visitor, and he tumbled off the thing. And I had to take all the chairs back and remake them.

MIJA REIDEL: Oh, dear.

VLADIMIR KAGAN: And there went the profit on the chairs [laughs].

MIJA REIDEL: Right.

VLADIMIR KAGAN: I did a wonderful rug for her because I had been designing rugs. One of my commissions, one of my extended commissions, was to do a rug collection for a Thai manufacturer. Talk about it in a minute, we won't forget about that. But I designed a wonderful rug to go with these Omnibus sofas. And it was conceived, shipped to my warehouse in Paterson, New Jersey, and her house wasn't ready to receive the furniture. And so it stayed in the warehouse for six months. When we got it down to Boca and it was finally opened up, it had mildewed. And we never opened it up in the warehouse. Nobody inspected. But to open up a rug that is like, Jesus! 16-foot-by-16-foot, no space available. And in retrospect what we presume happened was, when it was packed in Thailand, it was moist. And then packed in wax type of paper to keep it watertight, it retained that moisture. And in the warehouse it bred the mildew. It was only a small corner, but I said, "Susan, it's really not

that bad." Blah blah blah. "Let's see if we can't restore it. Have it cleaned. God knows what." "You know, Vladi, I paid a lot of money for this thing. I want it new." So we had to eat the rug and make a new rug. And this is the kind of second-day problems you have when you do these very special custom things.

MIJA REIDEL: Right.

VLADIMIR KAGAN: But the customer's always right. And we ate our lumps. We took the lumps, and we made it right. And it's exquisite. The apartment is a showcase. She does a lot of entertaining, a lot of charity work. But life has changed for her. Her daughter moved to Santa Monica, one of those cool places in Southern California. And she decided she wanted to be near her daughter. And she got an apartment and moved out there. All of a sudden the Boca house became a little surplus. And while she was there, the couple that she had hired would embezzle her. And, you know, horrible things happened. So she's dying to get rid of it and sell it. She thought she had it sold a month ago. And she said, "Vladi, great news. I'm keeping all the furniture, and we'll get a condo this time, and we'll redo it." But of course for me it would have been much nicer had she sold the apartment with her furniture.

MIJA REIDEL: Of course.

VLADIMIR KAGAN: Because I would have made new furniture. Now I have to help her decorate on a pro bono basis, and use the furniture we had. But the sale fell through. The guy was a four-flusher and didn't have the money. [Laughs.] And so she still owns the apartment—the house. But down the pike it's going to sell. It is being offered at such a ridiculously low price, that I would love to buy it myself. I don't have the money, and don't have the need to have the burden of a house.

MIJA REIDEL: Right.

VLADIMIR KAGAN: But it's exquisite. Out-indoor-outdoor and so on. So that's another one of those installation arts that is here today and gone tomorrow.

MIJA REIDEL: Right.

VLADIMIR KAGAN: But stepping a little bit backward now, back in the early 2000s or to mid-2000s, a Thai manufacturer of rugs came to me and said, "Would you like to design a collection of rugs?" So I came up with the idea that a rug should be the jewelry of a room.

MIJA REIDEL: Interesting.

VLADIMIR KAGAN: Because chances are you will not cover the furniture in wild colors. I mean, you can, and some do. But by and large you have sedate colors on the upholstery. You can let the floor become the color thing. And the rug became the painting on the floor.

MIJA REIDEL: Hmm. Mm-hmm. [Affirmative.]

VLADIMIR KAGAN: So that was one feature. The other feature I did was I coordinated these rugs to go with my furniture so they became free-form rugs. And they would wrap around the furniture.

MIJA REIDEL: How interesting.

VLADIMIR KAGAN: And the hidden advantage of that was, instead of wasting ten or 20 square feet of rug underneath a sofa, for which you had to pay, I just made the rug go in front of the sofa and delineate in front of the rug where the furniture would sit on the sub-floor, marble, whatever it is, wooden floor. So they were very nice. And as part of this thing, part of this project, I had sent email—by that time we were heavily into electronic communications.

MIJA REIDEL: So this was in the nineties, these rugs?

VLADIMIR KAGAN: No, we're now in the 2000s. In 2004 or something like that. We did the designs, we did the colors. They sent me hundreds of color swatches, and we did it all in electronics. This is, of course, the advantage of the electronic communication is that you can work with clients thousands of miles away. And I would send a drawing there in the afternoon. And in the next morning—because they have a different time, a 12-hour lack, a different time—they'd send me back corrected proofs and so on. It was wonderful communication. And as part of the deal was that I would go out to the factory, Erica and I, and there we did in the middle of Thailand. And on this huge gymnasium-type floor, were all my rugs. It was quite a wonderful experience to see.

MIJA REIDEL: Is this in Bangkok or Tilmura [ph]?

VLADIMIR KAGAN: Outside of Bangkok. Well, Bangkok is where they have their headquarters.

MIJA REIDEL: Okay.

VLADIMIR KAGAN: But their factory wasn't as far as Chimlai [Chiang Mai? ph], but it was someplace in the midlands there. Three-hour trip out of Bangkok. And there I could tweak and do whatever needed to be done. And it was just a great experience.

MIJA REIDEL: What was the name of the company, do you remember?

VLADIMIR KAGAN: Goodness. It's in my computer. Carpet Creations, I think. That was their American name.

MIJA REIDEL: Sure.

VLADIMIR KAGAN: They have another name for the international thing. Well, it turned out to be a compound of acres and acres and acres of land, exquisitely landscaped, with a real Thai house on the end of the property where one of the family members lived that was in charge of production. Factory was huge. They do their own dyeing of all the wools. They get all their wools from New Zealand. The weaving of these rugs is not a traditional weaving technique, but they're tufted. So they have tufted—it is done vertically. And so they had acres of these stretched canvases with the cartoons drawn on the surface. And these little Thai ladies with these tufting guns were sitting on planks—it was rather modern and medieval in a sense—tufting away on these rugs. And it turned out this company makes huge installations for hotel lobbies and public spaces and so on. And they were lovely, lovely people. [Inaudible] every time we did go to Thailand, we'd go back and visit.

MIJA REIDEL: Yes.

VLADIMIR KAGAN: So that was my first Thai experience. The second Thai experience is again a replay. You remember we talked about Capricorn?

MIJA REIDEL: Yes.

VLADIMIR KAGAN: The wrought-iron collection? Where I threw away at least two dumpsters full of my original tools for making Capricorn. I found a manufacturer—or the manufacturer found me—in Thailand that was willing to try to reproduce the furniture. And I fortunately had prototypes of all the pieces. I saved them. I bought them back at auctions. I think we mentioned that earlier. So I had a little mini-collection of that group. Never thought I would have ever had a chance to remake it. It was more an archival collection for some future museum, as opposed to a rebirth. But here was this opportunity to make this furniture. And I sent the prototypes there, and six months later they said, "You've got to come over and see what it looks like." Well, we went again to Bangkok. And then we went down south this time, about an hour south in a very industrial part. You know, you drive for miles and miles through marshlands, where they grow shrimp. It's very interesting. Very interesting landscape. And I always loved—I give myself to wherever I am. As I mentioned to you, I haven't been to a place I didn't want to live. I was quite happy; I could live in Thailand with those charming people.

But we drove through this vast industrial compound of factories. Then we arrived all of a sudden at a paradise, all walled in. And you come in the inside, the first you get is a private golf course, because the owner of the factory liked to play golf in the morning before he went to work. So he built something like a three- or four-hole golf course for himself. And then these wonderful, large buildings where the furniture was made. And the Thai are beautiful craftsmen. And they did it all by hand; what we did with jigs, they worked from my prototypes. Of course, with that were a lot of problems of continuity, of perfection of lines. I had to do a lot of tweaking. But a year later this became a collection which we introduced just now in May at ICFF. And it's a company in America called Oasiq, O-A-S-I-Q. Wonderful people to work with. And they really devoted themselves to making this—making it right. And hopefully it will have a new rebirth. It certainly was beautifully interpreted.

MIJA REIDEL: Yes.

VLADIMIR KAGAN: And another phase of my fifties life reinvented and rejuvenated.

MIJA REIDEL: And again intended to be both indoor and outdoor?

VLADIMIR KAGAN: Yes. It's an indoor-outdoor collection. I even have here in Nantucket some of the original upholstery components, because, oddly enough, 50 years ago one of our friends bought the original Capricorn for her garden a few blocks away from us here. Still there today. And so I was able to borrow her upholstery to duplicate it, make the cushions.

MIJA REIDEL: So is this a reinterpretation of the original? Is it an addition?

VLADIMIR KAGAN: No, it's a real reproduction of the original. The only thing I really changed—

MIJA REIDEL: The same materials?

VLADIMIR KAGAN: It's wrought-iron and steel. The difference being in those days our finishes were not that great. We had to go through a process called bonderizing, which kind of coated it to make it rustproof. And I must say that process held up well enough that 50 years later some of these pieces that show up in antique shops and auctions are still in damned good condition—not rusted out.

MIJA REIDEL: That's extraordinary for 50 years, yes.

VLADIMIR KAGAN: So that was good. But now what we have, now we do powder coating, and the finish is exquisite on it. It's much more tactile to the touch. And it's an automotive finish they put on it. They guarantee it for five years. I suppose if you nick it, you can damage it. So the end product was beautifully manufactured. I changed the cushioning for a little easier on and off, because I found using snaps—in those days we used snaps; well, they rusted out.

MIJA REIDEL: Right.

VLADIMIR KAGAN: Now we can use Velcro. And so I re-engineered the cushioning. But other than that, it's very original.

MIJA REIDEL: And it's just being now introduced?

VLADIMIR KAGAN: It's now been introduced, yes. It's been kind of fun. Was it an easy road? No. Because nothing is—it's always two steps forward, one step back. The first client for this collection was a man by the name of Joe Del Grecco [ph]. Lovely man, I've known him for years. Always wanted to manufacture my furniture. And he is the guy who came up with the Thai connection. Joe had a lovely showroom on 59th Street, oddly enough in the same building where I had my showrooms 30 years earlier. And a very enthusiastic fellow. But he tripped all over himself. He didn't know how to run a business. And he had money loaned to them by the Chinese people from Thailand. Somehow blew the deal, and the whole thing got stuck in limbo. Thousands of dollars' worth of orders were not delivered. The Chinese—or the Chinese who worked out of Thailand—refused to deliver, because they weren't being paid. And everything—it was horrendous. And we stuck with Joe because we felt we owed him a loyalty. But he went slowly, slowly down the tubes, where finally he couldn't maintain. I said, "Joe, I love you dearly. But, you know, this contract is now finished. I've got to go work with the Thai people." So it's through the Thai people now that we have Chinese, that we have this new product collection.

MIJA REIDEL: Mm-hmm. Mm-hmm. [Affirmative.]

VLADIMIR KAGAN: But so it shows you, while to the outside public there's a new beautiful collection here, it is, the growing pains were growing pains.

MIJA REIDEL: Yes, yes.

VLADIMIR KAGAN: Childbirth labor.

MIJA REIDEL: Absolutely. Absolutely.

VLADIMIR KAGAN: So everything that you do has that element. And as a painter, as an artist, a lot of the people that you interview don't have these obstacles.

MIJA REIDEL: Right, right. Absolutely not.

VLADIMIR KAGAN: They may need to make a living, and their life may not be as glamorous as mine. But you pay a heavy price for that glamour.

MIJA REIDEL: Yes, the manufacturing.

VLADIMIR KAGAN: My life has grown beautifully. We have comfort. As you know, we live in a paradise up here in Nantucket. Our home in Palm Beach is—again, just luck; the Palm Beach apartment was given to me by my sister, who lives in Switzerland and no longer used it. So we lucked into that space. But with it came a $70,000 obligation of maintenance, taxes, and insurance. So you kind of have to struggle along. And because of all these fun toys that I have, I've got to keep working. Well, my envy of an artist is he can work in his studio, be creative, and doesn't have to face these total reality issues that I have. Yes, he has to worry about galleries. And by the way Oshi [OSHA? ph]. And marketing and selling; you make your livelihood from that. And not everybody can be an Andy Warhol or the wonderful lady who just died just now—the French woman.

MIJA REIDEL: Nicholson? No.

VLADIMIR KAGAN: The woman. She did the big spider. Her children were clients of mine. I'm so sorry, I forget the name. [Louise Bourgeois.] It's not totally important in our conversation. But some artists float to the top and have amazing success. And some artists get to the top because they are amazingly good businessmen.

And know how to market. But I think most artists go through their life doing what they love to do. But not necessarily becoming wealthy as a result of it. In my work, which I consider to be artistic—and you asked me to fill out how would you describe me. I think I'm a designer, but I'm also a sculptor. And all of my designs really were motivated and founded on sculpture. And I've in a way come now with my fiberglass opportunity, have come back to the roots as a sculptor, with a great chance for new creativity. And again a new rebirth for the enthusiasm I have for my work. And that kind of takes you to the current—I'm trying to think if there are any other unique design projects. But the examples I gave you are very typical—

MIJA REIDEL: Right.

VLADIMIR KAGAN: —of how I evolve these things, how I respond to the client's needs, how my designs change in such a way that they are not necessarily recognizable as Kagan. I mean, there's a lot of furniture out there that you know is Kagan. And there is furniture out there that you'd never know is Kagan.

MIJA REIDEL: That's true. That's true.

VLADIMIR KAGAN: And there are a colossal amount of fakes. Just this morning before we got going on our interview and I snuck up here to do my email, one of the auction houses sent me a chair. Said, "It looks like one of yours, but we're not sure." Of course it was a knockoff, and I have it in the computer; I'll show it to you. And I saw that knockoff about five, six years ago, when I was in Brazil in São Paulo doing a lecture. And the architect with great pride showed me through the house that he had designed with the knockoffs of my chair. And those are the ones that were offered to the auction house. I don't know who makes them. And this is another very nasty issue.

MIJA REIDEL: Yes.

VLADIMIR KAGAN: In our industry, the patent laws are much more in favor of the guy who copies than the guy who invented it. It was done so to encourage disbursement of ideas more available to the masses. Of course when you're in the pharmaceutical business, you sit on those rights. But we in the furniture business, they can knock you off. And the deal is this: If they make three small changes, they can get away with it. And while at one point I tried to do patenting and copyrighting. Lugubrious prospects, very costly in the process. And the whole thing in the end is as good as the amount of money you're willing to throw at fighting it. And by example, just going back into the nineties, I had designed a number of pieces, primarily it was called the Corkscrew chair. And very successful introduction. It then was knocked off by a company called Bassett. Another company called Lazar Furniture and a dozen of other people. And you know you're successful if they knock you off.

MIJA REIDEL: Right.

VLADIMIR KAGAN: But my manufacturer at that time, different owner than the Mesbergs, was feisty—"Let's fight these bastards." So he made a big mistake and went after the big guys. And I would have gone after the little guys because we could have won those. But the big guys mounted a defense, and they said, "We're going to spend millions defending this; you haven't got a chance." And so we finally had to come up with a settlement that satisfied nothing. I got one dollar for allowing them the rights to produce something. They in turn agreed to discontinue some of the other items. And that was all that came out of this year-long lawsuit, where I had to give, I think, a week of depositions where I went through an inquisition.

MIJA REIDEL: Yes.

VLADIMIR KAGAN: It's brutal. And you have to answer every question you can, plead any kind of innocence. And it was a horrible experience. So I've never wanted to sue. And the only way you do is you go forward and come up with the next idea.

MIJA REIDEL: Right.

VLADIMIR KAGAN: Until they knock that off. So that was another lesson learned.

MIJA REIDEL: I want to go back to something you said right before we want into this topic, which was talking about the new work in sculpture. Most of your work has had so much to do with function. What was it like after all these years of working very much with a function orientation in the work to be freed of that and make pure sculpture?

VLADIMIR KAGAN: That was rather difficult.

MIJA REIDEL: I would think.

VLADIMIR KAGAN: But once I got cooking, it started to flow like a waterfall. And what I did really was do a lot of drawings. And my ability—I had a sketchbook of designs. I started to look at things. I thought, "Maybe I'll take some of my furniture and distort it on the computer." So I really worked a bit with the computers to see if some of the shapes I had in my furniture could become shapes for my sculpture. One of them did, and that was in a way the most difficult. The difficult interpretation was to move it away enough from furniture to let it read as a piece of sculpture. But when I started to doodle sculpture, it became a flow.

MIJA REIDEL: Mm-hmm. [Affirmative.] Did it in turn affect later furniture?

VLADIMIR KAGAN: No. I mean, well, it's too recent. I mean, that was something I just did this year.

MIJA REIDEL: Okay.

VLADIMIR KAGAN: And so really I haven't had a chance to—I don't think I want to apply that to furniture. But I do want to—In a way I have applied it to furniture, because the new fiberglass furniture is sculpture. And as we looked at this yesterday in this little prototype. Somebody, a client of mine, bought some of my sculpture, my fiberglass chairs, and wanted to have a fiberglass table. Well, the process of developing that table is a piece of sculpture.

MIJA REIDEL: Right.

VLADIMIR KAGAN: It just happens to be a utilitarian piece of sculpture. But the motifs and the elements that make up that table are much more related to my sculpture than they are related to the furniture of the past. So it will have an influence, depending on who the client is, meaning whether it's a manufacturer, a private residence, or whatever. And what the capability of the factory is.

MIJA REIDEL: Right.

VLADIMIR KAGAN: I have learned that you must always work as a designer within the capability of your client's ability to produce. And you have to rationalize, "Is it cost-effective to get this little tweak and turn. Or is the public not willing to pay that extra premium?" So you start to think rather commercially, which again relates back to discipline. I have a colleague whom I love dearly, Wendell Castle, who's a pure sculptor. And he makes exquisite furniture, total disregard for practicality of manufacturing, because number one, his clients pay hundreds of thousands of dollars for one item. And he can let his imagination run free.

MIJA REIDEL: Right.

VLADIMIR KAGAN: Now that I'm doing my sculptural things, I'm totally envious of what he's done all of his life, because I've come into that phase of my life where I can do this, providing I have clients who want to have that sculpture. So that's a new challenge for the coming years: developing a clientele where I can play around in the products that I'd like to do. Because in a way, to reinvent the fifties, is very boring. I mean, it's commercially feasible, but aesthetically not totally satisfactory.

MIJA REIDEL: Mm-hmm. [Affirmative.] Of course.

VLADIMIR KAGAN: I kind of covered you until you come up with some more questions. I've given you kind of a range of where—what the hell I'm all about and where I think I'm going. I have no intention of stopping. This summer I hope to pour myself into my sailboat, which may be very difficult because, you know, I hobble about on two sticks. But I will try to pour myself into the boat and go racing with my son. If I can brag a little bit, my son is a painter on the island, who has established a lovely reputation. He's a hell of a guy. And he and I sail together. That's the way we've bonded our lives because otherwise he goes his direction and I go mine.

MIJA REIDEL: Right.

VLADIMIR KAGAN: And we're very lucky if he shows up for dinner once or twice in the summertime. [Laughs.]

MIJA REIDEL: I have a couple more questions.

VLADIMIR KAGAN: Oh, I'm with you.

MIJA REIDEL: Okay. How have your sources of inspiration changed over time?

VLADIMIR KAGAN: Sources of inspiration?

MIJA REIDEL: Yes. Or have they?

VLADIMIR KAGAN: Well, I think very little of it comes from a source of inspiration. Well, no, let me be a little bit more—When I travel, and I traveled a lot, and when I'm in Thailand or in Switzerland or in China, it opens up the mind. And, yes, the inspiration is very remote. I don't look at something and say "I'm going to do this. I'll follow this." But I love Chinese furniture. There's an aesthetic to it. And years later when I designed my Fettuccini chair for the Italians—

MIJA REIDEL: Right.

VLADIMIR KAGAN: —it was really based on a Chinese chair.

MIJA REIDEL: Interesting.

VLADIMIR KAGAN: Can you see the antecedents? No way. But I can trace it on paper how I first started to draw the Chinese chair, and then eased up and loosened up and then came up with my own design version. And the Fettuccini chair's an interesting thing because that's another little phase of my life. Originally I designed it in 1985 as a contest from Udine in Italy. It's where the big Italian chair manufacturing are. They have a national association. And in order to market and promote, they invited designers from around the world to come up with a chair. And for me the challenges were [inaudible]: high production capability; let's do something very exciting. And I designed a bentwood plywood chair. And visionary idea was that this plywood chair could be shipped in parts and then assembled; it would be an inexpensive way of doing it. Also interchangeable parts would allow me to change colors. And so it could become either monochromatic or colorful. It had a lot of intellectual rationale. Did it excite the Italians to do? No. Much, much too complicated. You know, they wanted a chair. A chair's a chair.

MIJA REIDEL: Right.

VLADIMIR KAGAN: But it got huge attention. They made prototypes. I went to Italy, drank a lot of good wine, ate excellent food, had a lovely time. But once they did the prototype, they tried to license it to a manufacturer. They finally found a guy who was a crook—not too hard to find a crook in Italy. [Riedel laughs.] And he absconded with the model and went out of business. We don't know what happened to the original model. Thankfully I have photographs of it. And Erica always said—I named it the Fettuccini chair because it was for Italy.

MIJA REIDEL: Yes.

VLADIMIR KAGAN: And it was kind of bent spaghetti.

MIJA REIDEL: Right. Yes.

VLADIMIR KAGAN: And so [laughs] Erica kept saying, "Darling, you'll have to do something with that Fettuccini chair of yours." I said, "I don't have a client, you know. You can tell me I should do it, but I can't do it." Well, some years later when I started to show my furniture in Italy, I ran into this company called Fasam [ph]. And they are up near Florence. Beautiful, wonderful, bucolic countryside, right in Tuscany. Just wonderful. Nice, lovely people. And they said, "We'll make it, we'll make it in steel and cover it in leather." And the Italians do this exquisite work with saddle leather. So all of a sudden that chair had a new birth. And it was a good five, six years ago, and it's still is a very iconic piece. Perhaps one of its limitations was it was heavy, because it was made in steel and the leather. You don't move it easily. And we made it in colored leathers. And we made a simpler version of it. I wanted to expand it into barstools, tables, and everything. But they did the one product of it. So we moved onward. But the Fettuccini had a second life. And that's kind of fun.

MIJA REIDEL: Yes. And talking about—yes.

VLADIMIR KAGAN: So getting back to inspiration, this was based on Chinese, and it became Italian [laughs].

MIJA REIDEL: Yes.

VLADIMIR KAGAN: Sometimes—interestingly enough, I work very well in a kind of a vacuum environment, which can be up here in my studio looking at my trees without. But it's got to be pretty. I have to have everything just so before I can sit down and draw. But one of the places I have done a lot of drawing is on airplanes, when airplanes were more comfortable and seating was a little bit more luxurious [laughs]. And nowadays when you travel business, you have that; it's fine. And I can sit down and take out a roll of paper and start to draw at random. But seldom, really, do I do that. And mostly I—I'm not so much looking for inspiration than looking for verbal inspiration.

MIJA REIDEL: Verbal inspiration?

VLADIMIR KAGAN: Verbal inspiration. "I need this. I need a media room. I need something for this penthouse,"

you know. And that's when I come up with a design. That, hell, this is a wonderful opportunity to do something extraordinary. Does it get built? Seldom.

You know, so I have portfolio after portfolio of design ideas that I fostered. Interestingly enough, I was with Erica. We were in France and in Paris at 9/11. And we were about to get on the airplane in Paris. I had just finished a week-long seminar for the Vitra [Design] Museum. They have a summer school, summer program. I'd done it the year before as well. And did some very fun projects I'll talk about in a minute.

MIJA REIDEL: Yes.

VLADIMIR KAGAN: But we were at the airport, and people were gathered around the television set. And somebody said, "There's a plane that just crashed into the World Trade Center." Well, *tant pis,* it's a horrible idea. But it can happen, you know. So a little private plane. Didn't pay much attention. We got on line to board our flight. We were sitting in the airport bus that was taking us to the plane. And in the meantime I receive a telephone call from America that said, "Don't you even think about coming back. This is a disaster." And of course ultimately they took us off the bus, and we saw it on television. Couldn't believe what we saw. We had given up our hotel room. There were no more hotel rooms available.

MIJA REIDEL: Right. Of course.

VLADIMIR KAGAN: So I did the one thing—When I need solace and I want to have quietude, I love Switzerland. I adore the mountains of the Swiss Alps. And I said, "Erica, we're just going to drive to Switzerland." We've been there. My parents lived in Switzerland; my sister still lives there. So it's kind of a second home. And if I had a choice—we love Nantucket, we love the water, we love our house—but Switzerland offers another face of living that's really, really wonderful.

MIJA REIDEL: What in particular?

VLADIMIR KAGAN: The smell of cows. [Riedel laughs.] The cheeses.

MIJA REIDEL: Okay.

VLADIMIR KAGAN: You know, honestly.

MIJA REIDEL: Yes, yes.

VLADIMIR KAGAN: And my niece has a chalet there that we stay at. It's for our use. And the cows come right up to the front door. And the local farmers raise the cows organically and milk them and make cheese. And there's an earthy quality to that part of life. I'm not talking about city life in Geneva.

MIJA REIDEL: Right.

VLADIMIR KAGAN: I'm talking about that very bucolic country life, old chalets that are 400 years old and still in use by the family. Glorious. So we went there, to the mountains. And then I said I've got to—What would I—Then I started to design things. And what did I design? I had gone the week before to the, in Paris—what is the name of the museum? The Pompidou Museum. And there was a show—I forget the name of the artist now—very abstract Modern artist. But based on that Modern philosophy, I started to think of what would I do as a design? And those were designs that still today have not been made, that would be terribly exciting to produce. I also designed a lot more furniture for the fiberglass concept that have never been made. Only a chair and ottoman was produced. But I started to rethink how we live. And since I have difficulty walking and so on, I designed a chair that is a totally upright chair that you can lean into and have a work table in front of it; [inaudible] in fiberglass. Purely a pure piece of sculpture that would have rational function. So there are a lot of ideas germinating in my head that need to find fruition. But primarily to find that fruition I need the client, the customer, the fabricator that are willing to take a chance on it.

MIJA REIDEL: Mm-hmm. [Affirmative.] So it comes back to the idea that the commissions really have been very good catalysts for you.

VLADIMIR KAGAN: That's right.

MIJA REIDEL: Yes.

VLADIMIR KAGAN: That's how new products were developed.

MIJA REIDEL: We've mentioned Switzerland, we've mentioned Thailand, we've mentioned Italy. Are there any other travels that have been—we mentioned China.

VLADIMIR KAGAN: India.

MIJA REIDEL: Oh, India.

VLADIMIR KAGAN: India. Amazing, India. Did I come back with any design ideas out of India? No. But my mind is refreshed. You know what happens? You have a flow of creative ideas. And then nothing. And sometimes you just immerse yourself into something else; it opens the mind up.

MIJA REIDEL: Absolutely.

VLADIMIR KAGAN: That trip through India was amazing. I didn't come back with a sketchbook. I came back with 3,000 photographs, but not 3,000 creative ideas based on what I saw in India. But I could come back, yes. Color. There are subtle influences. And you come back with a clear head. And you can design. So the travel does clear the head.

MIJA REIDEL: Anyplace else in particular that comes to mind?

VLADIMIR KAGAN: We had a couple of trips in China, which was interesting. Mostly done for Erica's needlework. But we ended up in the Forbidden City. Amazing. The Wall, the Chinese Wall. But I find these trips mostly for the rejuvenation of the mind, and not necessarily as breeding grounds for new ideas.

MIJA REIDEL: That's interesting.

VLADIMIR KAGAN: Yes.

MIJA REIDEL: It's just to clear your mind.

VLADIMIR KAGAN: Yes, yes.

MIJA REIDEL: Fill it with something completely—

VLADIMIR KAGAN: And then another thing I've always said: You've seen my creative side, and I've shown you pictures of what I've done, do creatively. The realism is I spend 10 percent of my life being creative and 90 percent putting out brush fires.

MIJA REIDEL: [Laughs] Yes.

VLADIMIR KAGAN: And that's really what happens in the real world. You have these joyful peaks of creativity.

MIJA REIDEL: Right.

VLADIMIR KAGAN: And the rest of it is dealing with mundane—from mundane to horror. And it keeps you rooted and keeps your feet on the ground. Your head may be floating around in the sky, but you've got to keep your wings cemented to shoes.

MIJA REIDEL: Yes.

VLADIMIR KAGAN: And that's part of my life. And when I've had young interns, and I've had a wonderful collection of interns, I always hired one intern to work with me, bring him up to Nantucket, take him down to Florida. And it's a great experience for them, and it's nice for me. But I always admonish them. I say, "You know, it's not all fun. And you're going to learn that it's not what you did in school where you spent a 100 percent of your time being creative. You're going to have a lot of stuff hit the fan every day."

So that's the reality. And then we talked about, at one point, I don't think I've emphasized it. But for me—and I suppose for most people—life is not going up one steep hill to a pinnacle, which then is a hard time to come off the pinnacle. Life goes horizontal. And you climb hills, and you come down the hill. And you have peaks that are pleasant. And then you have troughs that are horrible. But everything kind of levels itself out.

MIJA REIDEL: Yes.

VLADIMIR KAGAN: And the bottom line, after 80-odd years, it's better than it started out. [Reidel laughs.] From a little kid from Nazi Germany to a comfortable life with three great children, creative children. My daughter does jewelry. Might as well give her a plug: Jessica Kagan Cushman. She lobbed in the name Kagan because she figured by that time it would help her sales, and it did. And that's one—By the way, I'm designing jewelry for her now.

MIJA REIDEL: Really!

VLADIMIR KAGAN: Yes.

MIJA REIDEL: Oh, we haven't talked about that.

VLADIMIR KAGAN: Which is kind of a combination of my sculpture. And she said, "Dad, you've got to do some jewelry." So we're working toward that.

MIJA REIDEL: Very interesting. Oh, I'd love to see [inaudible].

VLADIMIR KAGAN: So there will be a collection of jewelry coming out of that which will either be cast in—probably cast in acrylics and done in color or done in ivory colors or so on. But so that's a fun little challenge.

MIJA REIDEL: Absolutely. Absolutely.

VLADIMIR KAGAN: Which will be a pure extension of my sculpture.

MIJA REIDEL: Sure. And very site-specific again.

VLADIMIR KAGAN: Yes, yes, yes.

MIJA REIDEL: Yes, only with the site on the body. Interesting.

VLADIMIR KAGAN: Interesting.

MIJA REIDEL: I'd like to talk a little bit about teaching because we haven't addressed that at all. I mean, you haven't been in a university setting at all, but you said you—

VLADIMIR KAGAN: Let me tell you, I taught for about ten years. I taught at Parsons School [New York, NY].

MIJA REIDEL: Ah! Were you a professor there or a guest lecturer?

VLADIMIR KAGAN: Not a tenured professor. I don't know how it would be qualified. I taught classes. And I taught a class in furniture design. I taught classes in interior decorating.

MIJA REIDEL: Okay.

VLADIMIR KAGAN: The timeframe for that was about nineties, I would say.

MIJA REIDEL: In the nineties.

VLADIMIR KAGAN: In the nineties.

MIJA REIDEL: For about ten years at Parsons.

VLADIMIR KAGAN: Yes, when I closed my factory and my operation down, and I had the time available, it was a time to try to impart some of what I had to people interested. It was wonderful because I was working with highly overqualified people. It was not a student course; it was an adult education course. And a lot of the people came out of careers with PhD's and bored in what they're doing. And so they were challenging to me. They were intelligent to work with. But I tell you, the commitment to have to be there three days out of the week every day for so long, it became much more of a burden than it became an asset. And today, while I could do it again, I really prefer my freedom of not having a commitment, and when I can spend my time up here in Nantucket. I will do lectures. I do lecturing. And I'm invited and I've gotten, I've been, you know, graduation speaker at various schools. I have two honorary PhD's.

MIJA REIDEL: Where are they from?

VLADIMIR KAGAN: One is from the Kendall School of Design in Michigan. The other one is from the New York School of Interior Design. I'm a fellow of the American Society of Interior Designers.

MIJA REIDEL: Right.

VLADIMIR KAGAN: I'm a member of the American Society of Furniture Designers, which is basically a Southern-based High Point operation. I'm a good joiner but not a very active member. I pick up awards nowadays pretty regularly. I mean, that's a very nice thing. I just recently, this past December, was elected to the Designer Hall of Fame, which by the way is the only hall of fame that's a virtual hall of fame instead of a real one. Because if you're a baseball player, you get a photograph and a statue of yourself in a brick-and mortar hall of fame. And while this one is just an evening at the Waldorf Astoria with 2,000 people in attendance and a lot of hoopla. But my statue is not hanging anywhere. But I have a shelf full of glass awards.

MIJA REIDEL: When you were teaching, did you develop any sort of teaching philosophy? Were there specific skills or ideas that you felt were important to impart?

VLADIMIR KAGAN: Well, I tried to. You know, I tried to impart what I learned in high school.

MIJA REIDEL: Okay.

VLADIMIR KAGAN: I tried to make them understand that discipline is the most important thing. And the ability to draw is the greatest gift. So if you can apply those two elements and then you start getting technical—and technical, well, trying to teach people how to do—To be a furniture designer, you have to understand construction. And a lot of people who want to be furniture designers and will become furniture designers don't know how to make it.

MIJA REIDEL: Right.

VLADIMIR KAGAN: And so the ability to know how to make it is a great asset. And I try to impart that to them. And I don't remember—when we did interior design, it was kind of, again, a need-driven program—I don't remember how I developed the curriculum. But it was nice. It was well accepted. I got good reviews for what I did. And just last year I was down for an award in Boone, North Carolina, the University of North Carolina [Appalachian State University], which has one of the really fine furniture-making schools. Good people working there. Professors and nice people. Exquisitely equipped workshops. And by God, I was really tempted. [Laughs.] I said to Erica, "I could be down here for a semester, teach furniture-making."

MIJA REIDEL: Yes.

VLADIMIR KAGAN: It's lovely. So, yes, there's always that urge that I could do it and maybe I will. If the right offer comes along and the environment is nice, I think it would be nice because at this stage I'm free enough to be mobile. And working with young people is very nice, and to guide them into reality. They had an exhibit there of, everybody had a chair to make. And they went from interesting to great to mediocre and ghastly. But it was fun to see the variety. And what's fun is the enthusiasm of the students.

MIJA REIDEL: Right, right.

VLADIMIR KAGAN: And I kind of miss that. That interaction with people because I'm good with people.

MIJA REIDEL: Yes.

VLADIMIR KAGAN: Oh, an interesting project. Back in the seventies, I think it was seventies, Erica was invited—Erica is major needlework, as you know.

MIJA REIDEL: Yes.

VLADIMIR KAGAN: And she's the queen of needlework. She was invited by the State Department to go down to Jamaica for U.S. AID's program to teach Jamaican women how to do needlework as a home craft so they would be a source of income. Along with that, they came along and said, "By the way, we're looking for a furniture designer to work with the furniture industry in Jamaica." Well, at that time we were naïve enough to think that that really was a wonderful coincidence. In retrospect, I think they looked at Erica's curriculum; and they realized if they're going to get her to go down there for two months or three months, they'd better take the husband along. So we took Jessica out of school. And "Yes," I said, "I will do that. Lovely idea." Took Jessica out of school, And we moved to Jamaica, to Kingston. And I had a ball working with them down there. Working with them. They have a lot of cabinet shops that were competing with each other. They were doing things badly. And I went into the local schools in a place called Spanish Town, which is— Running out of juice?

MIJA REIDEL: Yes. Just hold that thought. Well, you can probably finish this story about Jamaica, and then we'll change the disc.

VLADIMIR KAGAN: Okay. Spanish Town was such a slum area that even the upper-class Jamaicans, or the wealthy Jamaicans, would not dare to go there. And I worked with the minister of industry—a fellow by the name of Bob Lightbourne. And I went into that school, and there the guys with big, long Afros and going barefoot in the workshop. And I said, "You guys shouldn't—" I made them clean up. First thing I made them move all the spider webs, made them clean up the shop. And these boys ate out of my hand. Nobody had ever talked to them like that. You know, they were all scared of them. And I made that school into a much more viable place. I also discovered while there the poverty was horrendous. The living conditions were terrible. They would have five kids sleeping in one bed. And one kid had scurvy, and they would pass it on to the next one and diarrhea. And they used—instead of sleeping in the bed the standard way, they slept across in the bed diagonally, you know, in the other way of the bed.

So I started to design housing projects for them, where they could have—I said, "You know, somebody when they have five in one bed, if we change the standard of beds—instead of being 36 inches we made it 24 inches wide, that would be a hell of a nice bed for each kid." And I designed the thing where they could drop them down out of the wall, and you'd have five bunks going up this way rather than five people sleeping alongside each other.

MIJA REIDEL: This is perfect because you'd been designing multi-use spaces for quite some time.

VLADIMIR KAGAN: So it was a really great project. And they loved it, and everybody latched onto it. But when we went back to America, it's like grass growing. If you kept it cut, it was fine. The moment you let it grow, the jungle takes over again. And that's what happened. Nobody was there—

MIJA REIDEL: Was there funding? Maybe there was no infrastructure?

VLADIMIR KAGAN: No one was there to follow through on it.

MIJA REIDEL: It didn't have much chance.

VLADIMIR KAGAN: And my tenure was over. And that was it. But it was again an enlightened project. I guess I have some of the drawings in my book. I did talk about it in my book.

MIJA REIDEL: Mm-hmm. [Affirmative.] Right.

VLADIMIR KAGAN: So that was a fun project.

MIJA REIDEL: Absolutely.

[END DISC 6.]

MIJA REIDEL: This is Mija Riedel with Vladimir Kagan on June eleventh, 2010, at his home in Nantucket, Massachusetts, for the Smithsonian Archives of American Art. This is disc number [seven]. We were talking about your teaching at Parsons before the last disc ended. And you, I think, were in an interesting position to consider the differences you might have seen between designers in furniture—artists—who have been trained at universities, and ones who have learned their trade or design outside of universities. Do you see any sort of vast differences or notable differences?

VLADIMIR KAGAN: Well, actually there are two phases of that. Kids who go to school to study furniture design: Each school has its own complexion. And I know that from the interns I've hired over the years. Kendall College of Design in Michigan is perhaps the best furniture design school in America.

MIJA REIDEL: Really!

VLADIMIR KAGAN: Amazing.

MIJA REIDEL: What makes you say so?

VLADIMIR KAGAN: Because it was designed and created by a furniture designer by the name of Kendall [David Wolcott Kendall] in the twenties or thirties or something like that. And they were taught the needs of manufacturers. And those students would move automatically into jobs down in High Point, North Carolina, in Michigan, which was at that time the furniture capital of America. Herman Miller, Steelcase are still there. And Baker Furniture. All the major quality, high-quality furniture manufacturers were there until they moved south because of the labor costs. So these students were taught furniture detailing, and they were taught traditional furniture. Very classic stuff. They could make perfect Chippendale pieces of furniture. They were lousy at doing a modern piece.

MIJA REIDEL: So was it in many ways like a guild's training [inaudible]?

VLADIMIR KAGAN: They were like a guild training, I think. And I went to the school. Ultimately they gave me a doctorate from there, which was very flattering and nice. And I said, "Guys, this is the only way to get a doctorate. You guys have to work eight years to get it. I got it in an hour's time." Very cool. So that school had exquisite capabilities.

MIJA REIDEL: Rough hands-on and practical.

VLADIMIR KAGAN: And those people were very hirable because they knew how to make joinery. They knew how to work with the machines. But they had no computer skills. And I said to the head of the school, or the head of the furniture design department, "You've got to get these kids going on computers. This is the way." And so I

really helped to impact that further development. And now the pupils that come out of there understand doing computer work. In the old days, I mean, what they were doing there was real drafting board stuff like I have here in my studio. Now they can design on computers as well.

You go to RISD, Rhode Island School of Design, and there they are taught to be very imaginative. And every kid comes out of there thinking they have developed the masterpiece. Strongly under the influence of their teachers, who—I see a lot of bentwood furniture, bent plywood furniture, because obviously that's what the teacher particularly likes and moves them in that direction. When they come out of that school, they're not very employable. They don't have the deep-rooted skills. They have been taught to use their imagination. And so you have to then take that skill.

My next intern's going to be from RISD. My last intern, Will Smith, was an architect out of Clemson University in South Carolina. Will brought a lot of architectural skills, little furniture knowledge at all, but with a willingness to learn. My new intern is going to be full of creative ideas, which I have to harness and bring down to reality of what can be manufactured. And I know that's how these RISD kids are. They also have been taught computer. So I think they will bring the skills that I need. Pasadena School of Design [Art Center College of Design] is a very good school; I never had an intern from there. But each school has its complexion.

Interior design has come a long way from when it was an artsy-fartsy profession, either of the housewife—in the trade we call them the ten-percenters—the housewife who had nothing to do, who did her home and her girlfriend comes in: "Amy, I think you did a wonderful job. Can you help me with my apartment?" And they became interior decorators. Then there was the other face of the interior decorators where you have very artsy, creative people who—brilliant: Elsie de Wolfe and so on. Who were not trained but had amazing taste. And the industry has changed vastly. It has become very much more focused on the contract side, on the commercial hotel/ hospitality side. And there were tremendous inroads being made into the interior design field by architects. They became a threat to the interior designer. Because architects have control of the job, and they wanted to do the interiors, oftentimes without understanding an interior. And today even, when I do something—you saw my house—I build and conceive from the inside out. Architects build a shell and then try to fit things into it. And so there's a big difference.

But the interior design industry, which was organized under the American Society of Interior Designers, and I was president of the New York chapter in the nineties. We felt the threat of the architects wanting to encroach on the interior design field. And using a lot of clout, because they had the AIA [American Institute of Architects], and the architects have to pass exams. You have to pass boards to be an architect. And they said, "Hey, you decorators can't come work in these commercial buildings. You don't understand plumbing, you don't understand safety laws and all of that; we do. And we are the right people to do the job." So interior design started to become disciplined. And these schools started to concentrate. And there was an NCIVQ test. I don't know what the hell it stands for. [National Council for Interior Design Qualification.] But it was tough, a tough test. And the idea was to teach disciplined skills to the interior designers so they could work *with* architects and be of service to the architect. I was afraid that approach would take away the creativity of a lot of these decorators who do not draw a straight line but have exquisite taste. So today's decorator has the skill *and* the taste, which is terrific. Because I mean it draws—the people it attracts now are willing to learn and come out with amazing skill. Could I pass that test? No. So they come out much more professional. Can I hire them for my work? No.

MIJA REIDEL: No.

VLADIMIR KAGAN: They don't bring what I need. You know, it's different. And I don't even like furniture designing students. I prefer somebody who comes out of industrial design.

MIJA REIDEL: Interesting.

VLADIMIR KAGAN: Because that gave them a much broader range of exposure. When you deal with furniture design, you're dealing with the teacher's favorite project which may be bent plywood or whatever else they get inspired by. But in industrial design they have to design a camera at one time, and then something—some other gadget—another time. Much broader exposure to the use of materials and so on. So I prefer industrial designers to furniture designers, as students.

That doesn't mean—That doesn't answer the real question: What do the furniture designers bring? How does that differ from the other category? What is studied in the four-year course in college? The other one is the craftsman who likes to make furniture. Who's inspired. That's much more of an artist than artisan. And who has worked in his own little backyard, maybe in the garage, and makes furniture. Some with exquisite taste, some without taste. And those guys also want to become more popular in the furniture field. That's where they go to ICFF and start to show their work. And some of it is incredibly creative. I like those people out of that background because they spend years making furniture. And now they're trying to apply it to a broader market. As opposed to the ones who went to school and never had a hands-on experience and handled a piece of machinery.

MIJA REIDEL: Right. And it seems like the hands-on has been extremely significant for your career.

VLADIMIR KAGAN: Yes, which I like.

MIJA REIDEL: And it's something that you really valued, yes. It gives a sense of limitation. And with that comes discipline, which is a word you've used a lot.

VLADIMIR KAGAN: My word.

MIJA REIDEL: How has furniture changed in your lifetime? Design. How has that sense changed?

VLADIMIR KAGAN: Well, furniture in many ways hasn't changed, and in many ways it's changed dramatically. And in some ways we're stuck in the 18th century as far as furniture is concerned, which is okay. The real fact is, that I don't know whether the statistics are still right, but I think they really haven't changed dramatically. Only 10 to 15 percent of America is Modern. Everything else is traditional.

MIJA REIDEL: That sounds right.

VLADIMIR KAGAN: And so when you're looking at tradition, you're not doing anything innovative. You may innovate in the way it's produced, because you can't make it the old-fashioned way, and machinery has changed how to do it. And when people ask me what is the single most unique thing that's happened in the furniture industry, can you guess what it is?

MIJA REIDEL: Nothing comes immediately to mind.

VLADIMIR KAGAN: The stapler.

MIJA REIDEL: [Laughs] Really?

VLADIMIR KAGAN: The machine stapler. The air gun stapler.

MIJA REIDEL: Oh, okay.

VLADIMIR KAGAN: Because in the old days an upholsterer would take a mouth full of nails in his mouth. Then had a magnetic hammer and picked them out one by one out of his mouth and hammered them in. And then the stapler came along, and he didn't have that mouthful of nails, and goes bang, bang, bang, bang, bang. It speeded up production. Yes, then there came CNC [computer numerical control] machines and all the good things that make production easier. But the stapler was a really major breakthrough. [Laughs.]

MIJA REIDEL: Interesting.

VLADIMIR KAGAN: So that's now furniture has changed. But because of the traditional values, it hasn't changed. But then, when you're thinking modern, then you're thinking of lifestyle. And for me it has changed dramatically over 50 years, you know. I created the change. I envisioned the lifestyle changes. People don't wear hoop skirts. So therefore the bergere, that lovely chair with the cutback arms, which was intended for the hoop skirts, is no longer the criterion. In actual fact, that 18th-century furniture was extremely functional. Today it's traditional, and we like it for its antiquity. But the inception of it was function. And so function has changed furniture. And technology has changed furniture dramatically. But in the end, a dining chair is still 17 to 18 inches tall. Or maybe 19 inches. The seat depth has had to change because people are six inches taller than they were when I grew up. They're all taller than me. One of the biggest impediments in my life is that I'm short. [Riedel laughs.] I find that such a horrible thing.

MIJA REIDEL: Really?

VLADIMIR KAGAN: I am stymied by it. I mean, I'm a little Caesar, and I overcome my shortness. But I was at a party the other day at the Four Seasons in honor of the Mies van der Rohe glass house and the Philip Johnson glass house.

MIJA REIDEL: Philip Johnson, right.

VLADIMIR KAGAN: And I am a contributor. There is a program. They've invited a hundred designers around the world, artists and designers, to contribute artwork towards this project of the fundraiser. And I was very honored to be one of the hundred people to offer a design. So I was invited to this very elegant party. And the sponsor of the party is the director of contemporary art at the Sotheby's auction. And he wrote me an email: "Vladi, I didn't see you." I said, "That's because I'm short, and everybody towered over me." [They laugh.] So, yes, shortness is a real handicap.

MIJA REIDEL: It doesn't seem to have slowed you down [inaudible].

VLADIMIR KAGAN: And if your head can stick above the crowd, you're ahead of the game. [They laugh.] And my interns are all six-foot-plus tall.

MIJA REIDEL: There you go. [Inaudible.] way around it

VLADIMIR KAGAN: So they stick their heads over for me. They're my eyes above the crowd.

MIJA REIDEL: There you go. Do you think of your work and yourself as part of an international tradition? Or do you think of yourself as somehow particularly American?

VLADIMIR KAGAN: I did all my work in America. I like to think of myself as contributing to the American vocabulary. And, but ultimately we've become international inadvertently. The computer and the Internet has crossed all borders. There's no longer any restriction. And I rather hate the Internet. I'm addicted to it and hate it.

MIJA REIDEL: You write a blog.

VLADIMIR KAGAN: I write a blog. But the more I'm involved with the electronics, the less I like it, the more I realize I don't like it, never did. I don't like Internet selling. I find that's a horrible thing. They've put people with bricks and mortar out of business. It's a new way of doing business. But I like the people who invested in bricks and mortar. And I mentioned this earlier: I have—and I don't like Amazon as a book source. And I'm so nasty about it when people buy my book on Amazon, I won't autograph it.

MIJA REIDEL: How can you tell where they bought it?

VLADIMIR KAGAN: I can't. But I can talk about it. If you bought yours on Amazon, I won't sign it.

MIJA REIDEL: I say, all right. Well, I certainly wouldn't tell you if I did. [They laugh.]

VLADIMIR KAGAN: Because I like the bookstore. And I like the furniture store that makes an investment in furniture and makes a commitment. The people with Internet selling make no commitment. They don't buy a damned thing. They take an order and pass it on to the manufacturer. And it's become a new way of life. But it's not [inaudible].

MIJA REIDEL: It's also made it easier for people who don't have access to a bookstore where they might find your book or certain other things.

VLADIMIR KAGAN: Well, that's the excuses. It's true.

MIJA REIDEL: Yes. I mean, that's a wonderful thing.

VLADIMIR KAGAN: There's no such thing as all bad and all good. And I'm aware of that. So I do a blog. My son will never read my blogs because he's old-fashioned. He says, "I hate blogs." He says— "Ilya, they're not blogs. They're essays."

MIJA REIDEL: There you go.

VLADIMIR KAGAN: But he won't look. He won't look them up. So my kids don't read my words. But I'm glad you do.

MIJA REIDEL: [Laughs] How has the market changed for American furniture and design over your career?

VLADIMIR KAGAN: Well, it's always so much price-driven. It's regrettably so price-driven that the furniture industry has escaped from America to China. And we are amazing victims of the outsourcing. And it happened over the last ten years. And it has crushed manufacturing, and whole cities and states have been wiped out economically because there's no longer a textile industry is abandoned America. The furniture industry has largely kept going from the north south, south, south until it went all the way south to the South China Sea. So there are empty factories. So that's very discouraging. But the public benefits from it. The public demanded it. The very people that are out of jobs were the people that were looking for cheap blue jeans. And so there's the plus side in that things have become less expensive, reasonably good quality and even good quality. But it has hurt the American industry. And part of our recessionary problems today are based on that: loss of jobs. And until jobs are recreated, and I can't see how that can happen, we're going to be in some aspect of a recession.

MIJA REIDEL: Has it changed the way you operate?

VLADIMIR KAGAN: No.

MIJA REIDEL: Okay.

VLADIMIR KAGAN: In a sense, yes. In a sense I'm part of the—I really am not an outsource manufacturer.

MIJA REIDEL: Right.

VLADIMIR KAGAN: But I found manufacturers outside of the country that could do things more efficiently than we're doing here. So, yes, I'm part of the problem. I make my furniture in Italy.

MIJA REIDEL: Thailand.

VLADIMIR KAGAN: And I'm making my furniture in Thailand. And my wicker furniture's made in China. Yes, I'm part of the problem.

MIJA REIDEL: But at the same time you couldn't find a shop in the States [inaudible].

VLADIMIR KAGAN: Well, I'll tell you something. I would not have been able to make my wicker furniture in America. Much too labor-intensive. Wicker was always made in Indonesia, in that part of the world. So it's not that I've created an outside sourcing. It's that it has given *me* an opportunity to do more design work. So it ain't all bad—

MIJA REIDEL: Right.

VLADIMIR KAGAN: —from the designer point of view. And like I said, there's no positive good and bad. There are always the tradeoffs.

MIJA REIDEL: I think of the—When we were talking yesterday about the furniture that you wanted to design and you ended up going to the fire escape company.

VLADIMIR KAGAN: Yes.

MIJA REIDEL: But there was practically nobody could do what you were looking to do.

VLADIMIR KAGAN: That's right. So you keep looking, and you try to invent new resourcing. And the people who are making my Capricorn Collection, my wrought-iron collection, they are really in the—of all things—in the saddle-making business. Their big thing—they're probably the world's largest manufacturer of horse trimmings and horse elements in the world. And their quality is as good as an Hermès saddle. Really exquisite. And that's made in Vietnam.

MIJA REIDEL: Interesting.

VLADIMIR KAGAN: There is, because—I think the future is China. Because they have the economic means to do it, and they are a fraction of our costs. And cost is what drives the engine. So much it's unbelievable what comes out of China. It used to be just little cheap five-and-ten toys. But today it's the most high-tech things. I can't envision how the world will adjust, but I know it will. At least I hope it will for my kids' sake.

MIJA REIDEL: All right, well, we've done a very good job of addressing the bulk of this list of questions. Just a few final ones in summary. Would you discuss your thoughts on the importance of furniture as a means of expression or as an art form? And what in particular about it is significant to you? What does it bring to the world that nothing else does? What are its limitations?

VLADIMIR KAGAN: Well, furniture—

MIJA REIDEL: And design.

VLADIMIR KAGAN: Furniture essentially fulfills a human need. That's kind of a fun thing to do. That you're a part of a cycle. It's like the food chain. This is the cultural, environmental need of mankind. We don't live in caves any longer. We live in homes. And "the home is my castle" has become much more a reality than it used to be. People didn't care about their home. They traveled, and the world was safe and free. The world is unsafe. And so the home as a castle is much more of a significant element. And within that home you try to create comfort, innovation, excitement. You create a shelter. You create a shell for functionality. Computers weren't with us as a significant factor until a few years ago. Now you have to design furniture that can accommodate the computer. Television has moved from the little tube to five-foot-long flat screens that are a new challenge for incorporating.

The nature of the home is walls are shrinking. You have a lot of fenestration. We like light. We don't want little

holes in the wall for a window. We want picture windows. So you have fewer walls both for your art and for furniture. The shrinking of the function of the home—and I mentioned that earlier in my work in the sixties, where I predicted this was a path which I think is happening, that you don't have a dining room. We have a dining room here because we live in an old house, old-fashioned house. We live in a prewar apartment in New York. While in Palm Beach we live in a modern house where the dining room is the living room. So furnishings have to be conceived in that context. That's a challenge and an opportunity. And what is wonderful to see—that's where the fun part of working with young students is—within that discipline, creativity has to come out to make your piece of furniture a better mousetrap to sell. So you've got to have taste, innovation, color, price, God knows what, to make it cool. The word *cool* is a word that I've learned from the kids, and it's part of my vocabulary.

MIJA REIDEL: Yes.

VLADIMIR KAGAN: Much better than *fuck.*

MIJA REIDEL: [Laughs] Which also gets ample use. How has your work been received over time? We've certainly touched on it. But it seems that there have been, as you said, peaks and valleys. But it does seem to have really come to a new peak at this point. Is that your feeling of it as well?

VLADIMIR KAGAN: Yes. I think over the years, as I've mentioned, it's like one step forward, two steps back, two steps forward, one step back. Yes, I've progressed. And certainly my designs are much more exciting today, I think, than they were. They're intellectually much more conceptual and reactive. Because when I first designed furniture, I designed it like an artist. I made a chair. Didn't care how much it cost. I mean, it also didn't sell. And that chair that didn't sell is selling today.

MIJA REIDEL: Yes.

VLADIMIR KAGAN: But today I'm wiser. And wiser makes you more conscious of what you're doing, and it may also be a restriction. There's another thing that we really haven't touched on, that I've talked about in part of my blogs even, is: is it design or is it art? And furniture, more than anything else, can transgress from function to art. I think I design furniture. But a lot of people think they're going to make innovation by having their furniture be art. And you get furniture, guys like Marc Newson, whose furniture is unsittable in many ways, selling for millions of dollars at auction because of its rarity. The guy was an aviation, an aeronautical designer, and has created furniture based on aviation stuff. Very talented, and some of his stuff is exquisite. But so much of furniture design today is done for shock effect and for the artsy-craftsy approach—not crafty, but art. And so the art and design, the overlap is both interesting and damning. And by example Zaha Hadid, who's a great architect, good friend of mine, she always says, "Vladimir, you've inspired all of my furniture ideas."

MIJA REIDEL: Really!

VLADIMIR KAGAN: She did. And she's taken my ideas to wild extremities. And she designs furniture that isn't furniture. It sells for hundreds of thousands of dollars. She doesn't care; it's not her main source of income. If I had to design furniture that cost hundreds of thousands, I wouldn't sell it. So I've got to stay practical and more rooted in the earth. I will take it to the edge. But that edge also has to be functional and practical and saleable. While an artist like Zaha can do an outrageous table, and there will be three made in her lifetime of that table, and it's amazing. It's exquisite.

MIJA REIDEL: When you said that you made a chair that didn't used to sell and now it does, why do you think that is?

VLADIMIR KAGAN: Because there's a better acceptance for it. It was very much ahead of its time.

MIJA REIDEL: Right.

VLADIMIR KAGAN: I think my furniture always has been, like, 20 years ahead of its time—inadvertently. I mean, that's not what I was looking at, but that's what it was. And so what wasn't looked at in the fifties and sixties and seventies is now looked at with different eyes and therefore has acceptance. Plus I think my reputation has now made the value of the furniture justifiable.

MIJA REIDEL: We've talked about your career in terms of episodes, sort of ten-year periods. What about it in particular is significant to you? What about it is important to you?

VLADIMIR KAGAN: The willingness or the ability—not so much the willingness—to recover from adversity. And when all things looked like hell, when the factory burned down, when I was being embezzled, and all these downturns in my life, the joy of recovery. And I think largely that is also because my life was not a thousand percent involved just in my work. And I have a lot of exterior elements that gave me enough happiness and joy

to carry on. I think that's a factor.

MIJA REIDEL: Where do you see yourself and your work fitting into contemporary art and design?

VLADIMIR KAGAN: I wanted to be—it ain't cutting edge anymore. I always sort of wrote in my press kits "cutting-edge Modern." I'm not cutting-edge Modern. Some parts of it is. But it is practical Modern. It's functional. And that's why I think it has longevity, because the furniture as art is here today and gone tomorrow. And my underlying motivation to do things that are practical I think also creates longevity. And I think that's where I've been, and that's where I keep going.

MIJA REIDEL: Mm-hmm. Mm-hmm. [Affirmative.] It seems to straddle that balance you were talking about: innovation and function.

VLADIMIR KAGAN: Yes.

MIJA REIDEL: Yes.

VLADIMIR KAGAN: Yes, yes.

MIJA REIDEL: Well, that's all I have. Any final thoughts?

VLADIMIR KAGAN: Shucks! Well, I love you all. I hope everybody listens to my conversation [laughs]. I'm amazed there's even any interest in it. But I've enjoyed doing this.

MIJA REIDEL: Oh, good.

VLADIMIR KAGAN: And I've burbled a lot more than I ever thought I would.

MIJA REIDEL: No, I think it was very insightful.

VLADIMIR KAGAN: And you've done a great job of drawing it out of me.

MIJA REIDEL: Thank you very much.

VLADIMIR KAGAN: The fact that you're pretty to look at wasn't harmful either.

MIJA REIDEL: [Laughs.]

VLADIMIR KAGAN: Unfortunately the audience can't see you, but I can.

MIJA REIDEL: Thank you very much.

[END DISC 7.]

[END OF INTERVIEW.]