



Smithsonian
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**Oral history interview with Ben Shahn, 1968
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Transcript

Preface

The following oral history transcript is the result of a tape-recorded interview with Ben Shahn on September 27, 1968. The interview was conducted at Ben Shahn's home in Roosevelt, New Jersey by Forrest Selvig for the Archives of American Art, Smithsonian Institution.

Interview

FORREST SELVIG: This is an interview with Ben Shahn in his house in Roosevelt, New Jersey, and the date is the 27th of September, 1968. The interviewer is Forrest Selvig.

BEN SHAHN: Well, you asked me about this town which must appear strange to you. The architecture is fairly monotonous and the country is flat. And all of my friends who live in Westchester or Connecticut abhor this flatness. And I almost began to apologize for it until the old man John Marin wanted to come out here one day and he asked me exactly where it is that we live, and I told him. And he said, oh I used to go sketching there – which meant seventy years ago when I was a kid, you know. He said that's beautiful country; it's so flat. Now coming from an authority like that I have something to defend here. Anyway, it was built as a subsistence homestead. That meant that a good bit of their food and so on would come from the things they raised. They would have a factory here – a factory of garment workers. And since they had seasonal work – it was the winter when they worked and in the summer they were mostly unemployed in those years. That has changed a great deal. So they actually set up a large farm here, some six hundred acres of farming. And they had a dairy, they had chicken houses. I think the first year they made something like \$17,000 on their tomato crop. But it didn't continue that way. The factory particularly was a disaster. Cooperative meant that everybody had a share in running it and too much time was wasted in those discussions and there were questions of union and so on and so forth. But how it came to start is really a fascinating story. A man who lived in this area, whose name was Benjamin Brown and who had been very successful in organizing cooperatives around the country and was even invited to help Russia in her organization of cooperatives. And he read in a newspaper that they were going to set up these subsistence homesteads. When he was in Russia a young graduate of one of the universities interested in this field came along with him. Brown rushed down to Washington to see what he could do about it. He went to the Department of Agriculture and who should he meet but the young man who was now the Assistant Secretary of Agriculture. And that opened all doors to him. Otherwise it would have been a difficult thing to find your way around in. And it was organized. They advertised in the newspapers and about a hundred people came together over a period of about two years organizing it and planning it according to their lines. And then there were sociologists, economics who planned it according to their lines. It was finally organized. And then there was the problem of building these things. Well, there were hundreds, thousands, of unemployed builders in this very county. And it turned out they employed every single member of the various unions here in the building of this thing. Then the people came out to occupy the houses while working in the factory. And a sociologist made a very fascinating study of them while they were meeting in New York every two weeks or something. And he asked each member of this forthcoming cooperative whom would you like to live next door to. And he made what is called a sociogram. He put down a hundred names and then made lines. You know sixty people wanted to live next door to one of them. But when he made another sociogram here, the one who had sixty turned out to be the kind of a man who wouldn't loan his lawnmower. So the thing changed entirely. That's what happened right down the line. The reality became a different thing,

you see, from the various ideas they had of distributing their product and everything else.

I went to work for Tugwell. Somebody told him he should have me on and he came down and interviewed me and I went to work for them. What I did was after the thing was finished to paint a huge fresco in the school here. It was a good idea because the people who didn't know each other should have some focal point, you know. It worked that way beautifully because when relatives and friends came to visit they would take them over to the school and explain the mural and so on.

And then I finished my job here and went back to New York. New York was difficult. The children were coming along and there were no jobs or anything. And I heard that they were renting the hundred other houses that had stayed empty for two years because the failure of the cooperative in the first year frightened other people away. They wouldn't let anybody except members of the cooperative have a house during the two years. But then they changed their minds and with the qualifications that they set it filled up immediately by people coming in from nearby towns, from Trenton. And I applied for a house here. I said to my wife just for a year because, you know, these towns can eat you up. And that was twenty-nine years ago. I served three years on the Council. My wife served three years on the Board of Education. She comes from Ohio with a very strong political background – her father was a very important man. And she didn't learn enough not to run the second time. I did. And, you know, it's a matter of getting the rascals out.

FORREST SELVIG: But, Mr. Shahn, was this community started with the help of the government? Or was it a private -?

BEN SHAHN: No. Totally government.

FORREST SELVIG: It was totally government?

BEN SHAHN: Totally government, yes. They elected a Town Council, but it was financed by the government. By the federal government, yes. It was called Tugwell Town, you know. The papers were violently against it. The rents were very, very low. So that I could come out here and have to think very little about rent. I was paying \$16 a month for a house then, not with the additions we've put on. I was paying \$100 a month in New York.

FORREST SELVIG: Quite a difference.

BEN SHAHN: Well, it meant I could work all the time, you know. It was totally government. And then after the war around 1946 the government wanted to pull out of the whole situation. There were a hundred such towns around the country, you know.

FORREST SELVIG: I didn't know that.

BEN SHAHN: Oh, yes. And they gave us six months in which to make up our minds whether we wanted to buy the house or get out. They sold the houses very, very inexpensively. It was fantastic. But the government wanted out. You know the whole philosophy of the government sociology or socially had changed, you know, during the war and then they went off in a different direction.

FORREST SELVIG: Fantastically. I grew up during the Depression. I enlisted in the Navy in 1942 when I was 18 but I caught the tail end of those years and some of the thinking and ideas that were going on. But you, of course, were very much a part of that world too as well as this. You've lived through it all.

BEN SHAHN: Yes. Yes. I used to picket Mayor La Guardia to organize some kind of art project. We

had a very strong group demonstrating for some art projects because unemployment was fantastic. It was fantastic. Most of the galleries closed, you know, nobody was buying anything. But I saw it from three sides: first as an outsider returning from Europe in 1930, I think it was, I suddenly came in the middle of it. Then I got involved in the various demonstrations and so on. And then I was hired by the agency to visit many of those places. I spent three months in the South in the coal country and took thousands of photographs for them. But primarily my job was to do pamphlets, posters, and an occasional mural like that.

FORREST SELVIG: Mr. Shahn, I think in everyone's mind, certainly in mine, you're associated with the great pervading liberal movement.

BEN SHAHN: Yes.

FORREST SELVIG: Humanitarianism and certainly the New Deal, everything progressive all the way down the line.

BEN SHAHN: Yes. Yes.

FORREST SELVIG: May I ask you how it happens that you're involved in this?

BEN SHAHN: Well, I tell you, I've written about that in a little book called *The Shape of Content*. When I did those Elliott Thornton lectures at Harvard they wanted a manuscript for a book and I went into that pretty deeply. I think it would be easier to just copy out of there than to recall it.

FORREST SELVIG: Sure.

BEN SHAHN: What started me off. It was a childish thing way back. I seem to have sensed, or had an exaggerated sense of injustice. And that's all it was. And while I was told that art didn't concern itself with things like that I felt – well, if I have this particular inclination I'm going to follow it. And no artist can really be told, at least not in this country that this is the direction of art or that is the direction of art. And the New Deal really happened to be the only patron of the arts during those years. Consequently a great many people concerned themselves because the New Deal itself concerned itself with what we would call injustice, for want of a better term. And then one experience after another: such as I was asked by Rivera – he had seen my work and he asked me to come and work with him when he was doing that Rockefeller Center mural which was stopped. Well, that was kind of a shock, too. It was one thing after another. The Sacco-Vanzetti case disturbed me very much. Curiously enough, I was at school in Wood's Hole. I majored in biology in college and I had a scholarship up there. That case happened nearby in 1920. The papers up there made a good bit. But when I came to New York I heard nothing about it. It was a local case then. It wasn't until agitation went on all over the world. I came to France the first time in 1925 and, my God, they were agitating about that case there then. Then I came back for a while in 1927 and I got involved and so was the whole liberal movement involved in this case.

FORREST SELVIG: But it was in the 20s – in 1927 when you came back that you really became involved in these issues?

BEN SHAHN: Yes. Though it's very odd. I became involved in this thing and went up to Boston where there were demonstrations and so on. Oddly enough, I was driven up by a young man who owned a Rolls Royce. But that's beside the point. I became involved then. And then I went back to Europe again in, I think, February 1928, and I again was not very involved at all. You know when I was a child in Russia I kept hearing about the famous Dreyfus case and I did a series of pictures on

that long before the Sacco-Vanzetti thing. And this particular agency was just the very outlet for me because we had to educate the public through our propaganda frankly. And educate even our Congressmen, you know, for the various projects that were being undertaken. And it went along until the war when it was sort of pushed under the rug.

FORREST SELVIG: Yes. But you were a biologist?

BEN SHAHN: No, I wasn't.

FORREST SELVIG: You were preparing to be a biologist?

BEN SHAHN: No. Worse than that. I was preparing to be a doctor. Not to practice. I wanted to know more about anatomy than any artist ever knew.

FORREST SELVIG: Oh. But, in other words, you were studying this to be an artist?

BEN SHAHN: An artist, yes.

FORREST SELVIG: I see. When you mentioned Wood's Hole I was wondering whether you were working there.

BEN SHAHN: Yes, I was. I put in a summer there. They had students from all over the world practically. And then the most famous biologists were working there too. You were right in their shadow.

FORREST SELVIG: Then, Mr. Shahn, you always wanted to be an artist?

BEN SHAHN: Oh, yes. From the time I was eight years old. Oh, there was no doubt about that. Because I could draw better than the kids around me. Another kid who could run better would decide to be an athlete. One who could fight better was going to be a boxer. Another one who was very interested in money went into business. And so it went. When people ask me about that.... It's as simple as that really. If you feel superior in this kind of thing you just push it, not with any ambition for a career or anything, but every kid looks for that little area where he can be superior.

FORREST SELVIG: Sure. You said you've always had a sense of injustice; or you've been aware of injustices. Would this come from any sort of family background? Was your father very aware of this too?

BEN SHAHN: Yes. Yes.

FORREST SELVIG: He was an idealist.

BEN SHAHN: Yes. My father was very aware.... my father was – this was while we were still in Russia – arrested. My mother claims there was no reason for this; that they planted leaflets on him or something. He was sentenced to Siberia. But he escaped immediately. Graft is so rife there. And he got into Sweden. And we didn't see him for three years. He went to South Africa. Did very well there. It was not too long after the Boer War and it was a booming country. And then he came on here and we joined him.

FORREST SELVIG: So, in other words, when you say they planted the leaflets on him they were apparently claiming he was a revolutionary or something?

BEN SHAHN: Of course. Of course, yes. Now I don't know the truth of it. Because anybody who expressed the slightest word about the government that was critical was being watched. I'll tell you one little anecdote that may be interesting. I studied the Bible, you know; I was in Bible school, as it were, and was rather precocious so we went into Commentary and so on. And in discussing the building of the Temple and the bringing in of the Ark to the Temple, it is detailed in Commentary that it was brought in by two oxen and the Ark would rest on a pole that was sort of laced to both of them. And the Lord warned the attendants that it would teeter – this Ark – but that they weren't to touch it because it was God's Ark and he would take care of it. And one attendant touched it because it was instinctive to touch something that was teetering. And he was struck dead. And I claimed this was an injustice on the part of God. And I refused to go back to school. But a compromise must have been made. I was living in Russia with my grandfather then, my mother and the three children with my grandfather. And the air was filled with this whole revolutionary idea. As a kid if I saw anything in uniform, be it a letter carrier or a policeman, I would run up, you know, and yell, "Down with the Czar!" and then run away. Kids of six were doing this. It was absolutely throughout the whole country.

FORREST SELVIG: Where was this in Russia?

BEN SHAHN: It was Russia then but it was the Lithuanian province. Lithuania became independent after the first World War and was again absorbed by Russia after the second World War. This happened in school. I don't know how it came about. I suppose some people are more or less sensitive to things like that. If a kid was punished unjustly I would raise a fuss over it or something. On the other hand, once the whole class was punished for something, I don't remember what it was, and I just wouldn't go back to school. I walked out. We were kept in after hours and I just walked out. I said, I didn't do it; I'm not going to tell who did it, and that's all; I'm not going to pay for something that I didn't do, or the whole class except one had done.

FORREST SELVIG: Then you were in the Bible school but you also I assume were in a school where you could take art classes, too? Or not?

BEN SHAHN: We left there when I was eight and a half. So, no. But I was drawing then. And since there was very little paper around I used to draw on the fly leaves and on the insides of the covers of the books. But this is very common, you know. Now my father drew very naturally. He had never studied drawing but he could draw anything as naturally as he would describe anything verbally. And one of our kids when he was six and we were living here, was invited to have dinner with a family nearby, the father was a trucker. And Johnny came home very distressed. I said what's the matter. He said Dewey's father can't draw. Because he was so used to asking us – well, draw it, if you didn't quite explain it. My wife is an artist too, you know. So it shocked him that he couldn't draw. And a number of my friends who live here all could draw so it seemed this was absolutely universal to him.

FORREST SELVIG: Also I would suppose that if your father drew he would be delighted to have you....

BEN SHAHN: He was. And so was my grandfather. Really delighted, you know.

FORREST SELVIG: So you grew up in an atmosphere that welcomed and appreciated....

BEN SHAHN: Yes. A good deal of the family on my father's side were in that.... One worked for American Bank Note, he was an engraver. Another one was with the *New York Times*, head of the Gravure Department, a technician. There are several cousins who are architects, and they all drew.

And then one of my cousins – was the fashion editor of the *Times* and she'd get two pages of drawings into the Gravure Section they used to have. And it was just that kind of thing. A lot of people wonder why three of my kids are artists. One is a sculptor, and two are painters. I said the reason is very simple, we didn't make anything holy out of art; it was our jobs, and sometimes when we were doing something and had a deadline they were delighted because we'd go out to a restaurant then to eat, you see. And I never pushed them at all one way or another. If they asked something, yes; but I didn't push them at all.

FORREST SELVIG: Well, then, Mr. Shahn, this interest in and dedication to art has been consistent with you?

BEN SHAHN: Oh, yes. Yes.

FORREST SELVIG: For all this time?

BEN SHAHN: Yes.

FORREST SELVIG: Also the humanitarian interest always existed side by side?

BEN SHAHN: Yes. While I was in art school – I was at the National Academy of Design – I was taught that art doesn't concern itself with anything except the material. And I sort of went along with that. But I began to doubt it. And actually at one time I made a kind of balance sheet comparing myself with Cezanne because he was adulated; I did, too: I adulated him, too. And I said now we aren't the same and I don't see why I should work in his direction. He was brought up surrounded by Roman antiquity. I was surrounded by nothing that was antique because those villages would burn down occasionally, you know. He studied Greek and Latin. I studied only Hebrew. His father was a banker. My father was a woodcarver. So I said we have nothing in common. I don't see why I should look in his direction even. And when I began to sort of summarize my thinking on this I was afraid to show my work to anybody because I was afraid they'd detour me again, you know. And Europe detoured me, too, for a long time. As a matter of fact, the day Hoover was elected I came out of my place and the concierge of the place where I had a studio said with all the anger she could summon, "Are you happy with Monsieur Hoover?" And I hadn't paid attention at all as to who was running. I was much more involved in my work. I guess the Depression helped to sort of clinch more and more of that kind of thinking.

FORREST SELVIG: To bring you back into this.

BEN SHAHN: Yes.

FORREST SELVIG: But in other words, you for a while were trying to follow this concept of art for art's sake.

BEN SHAHN: Oh, yes. Yes, I was much absorbed by this philosophy, as most youngsters are. You have respect for your elders, teachers, and so on. At least I did. I had certain reservations but I kept them pretty much to myself.

FORREST SELVIG: Which of you teachers seemed to you to be the most important?

BEN SHAHN: None. I wasn't lucky enough to find an inspiring teacher. I remember one day a man that was very prominent, quite old, would come once a week to do criticism and I was reading a little book on Cezanne and he tore it out of my hand, threw it across the floor. He said, "What do you want to read this stuff about people who cut their ears off?" He confused him with Van Gogh.

FORREST SELVIG: And this man was an artist?

BEN SHAHN: Not only an artist, his work is in the Metropolitan Museum.

FORREST SELVIG: I wonder who that could be?

BEN SHAHN: I can't remember his name. I don't know whether they still hang his work but – what – 45 or 50 years ago they did certainly.

FORREST SELVIG: Did you find more inspiring associations in Paris? I assume you did.

BEN SHAHN: I did. And particularly when I went to Italy. I found that people did tell stories, you see.

FORREST SELVIG: Sure.

BEN SHAHN: And they told them without impressionistic philosophy. If the robe was blue they painted it blue. It confirmed a lot of my thinking. And I tell you I looked upon my whole art approach as a kid of trade that I was learning and practicing and so on. And my aesthetics just developed as I grew. And what I considered art, say, at one time I wouldn't now. I know one winter I worked with a sign painter who had a lot of contracts for Coney Island. And I painted these 30-foot frankfurters with mustard and picallili. This was very early Pop art, you know.

FORREST SELVIG: Sure.

BEN SHAHN: I remember one elaborate one we did, an enormous thing of a waffle with ice cream running down it. I really wanted to work with somebody who did the freaks at circuses but it was a Cleveland studio that did that. My schoolings stopped at the end of grade school. It was later when I was grown up that I decided to enter college. With this ulterior motive, you know, of learning more about anatomy and so on. But when I was fourteen I went to work as a lithographer. I went through a regular apprenticeship. The glass door leading to where we worked said, "Art Department." I didn't think I could ever make a living from it. But I made up my mind this was the way I was going to live no matter whether I worked for the sign painter or whether I was ever going to paint pictures that would be bought; I didn't know. Anything that I did with my hands, with a brush, or pencil, or pen, and so on, I considered art. And all those distinctions that have later been made between so-called fine and so-called commercial art I didn't have then. I tell you when I entered the National Academy of Design I got those two, you know, but I realized it was a curse to make those distinctions.

FORREST SELVIG: It's a way of thinking that's awfully hard to shake once it's been instilled in you.

BEN SHAHN: Yes. I wanted very much to communicate. This is one of the new words. I wanted to communicate. I could do this better – tell a story better with pictures than I could with words. I would like to have told a story with music. I regret very much that I had no musical education and I insisted that my kids have it, to be able to read music as easily as they read the newspaper. One of them is quite good. He was a classical guitarist, used to concertize. But he's a sculptor now and still plays for himself but his hands are heavy now and he can't do the concertizing.

FORREST SELVIG: He's probably very happy at being a sculptor.

BEN SHAHN: Oh, yes. We were very fortunate that our kids knew what they wanted to do at the very beginning, very early. They've dropped out of some of the nicest colleges. I was invited to speak at the White House Conference on Education three years ago. I was to talk on a panel with

Sister Mary Carite on the Education of the Gifted Child. And I got up and said, "just relax, everybody, nothing I can say will affect your careers or jobs. I'm a dropout. Four of my five kids were dropouts. One is a professor; he's a physicist and teaches at Hunter. And therefore I'm qualified to discuss the education of the gifted child because they're almost invariably dropouts." Well, it's true. *The Washington Post* picked that right up out of one of the first sessions; the first day, this was the one they made a story of, you know.

FORREST SELVIG: Why is that so? Why is it that they are so often dropouts?

BEN SHAHN: Because our colleges by and large began as training schools for the clergy and for law. And to a great degree they still hold on to that thing. And art which to the Puritan and to the philosophy of our country is a sort of thing you play with. I talked at length on that very subject "The Artist and the University" at Harvard where I objected strenuously to giving students courses in art appreciation. I said you don't give them a course in calculus appreciation; you do calculus. And what they do is no more important than the first efforts of a young artist. You teach art history. You give art appreciation courses. But you do not allow them to practice. Oh, Lord, at Harvard they have what they call Career Weed and I was invited to talk. And they had both the Music and the Art Department speaking to the students, a big body of students, urged them to go on beyond their first degree, they should get a master's because if they just go on a bachelor's they will end up teaching in a public school; if they get a master's, they can get in a good top grade prep school; and if they get their doctorate they can come back to Harvard perhaps, which was held out as the Holy Grail. And when I was asked to talk I said, I don't know what I'm doing here. I thought you were going to talk about the career of art and the career of music. You're talking about the career of pedagogy. And I don't know anything about pedagogy. But this much I know: If you ever follow the advice of your good masters here you'd be 28 years old before you'd be allowed to wash a paint brush if you're interested in art; and 28 years old before you'd be allowed to dust the keys of a piano. I said Massaccio was 28 years old when he died, left six children legitimate, and I don't know how many illegitimate children, and died in a barroom brawl. Now eventually I think we'll recognize that it's equally important to teach somebody history or philosophy as it is to teach art, or to let someone practice art, and the other things would be peripheral. Here, let's say, it mathematics which has a use, but art they can't see as a use at all. And the time will come I hope when the head of an art department can say to his students whose work has been falling down, "Have you been fooling around with math recently?" As a math man can say to a student who he knows fools around with art.

FORREST SELVIG: That's great. Do you feel then, Mr. Shahn, that if you put a brush in the hands of one of these students, that through painting they will also be able to appreciate the work of other artists?

BEN SHAHN: Oh, yes. That's been proved consistently. But I cannot see that one must go through a so-called liberal education first, which they always stress. First, I don't agree with the theory that education ends when you're 22 and you get out of college and never crack a book again. Which happens very often. It is just as important that a person be able to play in an orchestra rather than just talk about orchestration. They were building a new house at Harvard. And I've had students complain to me: they said an enormous space was taken over for ping pong rooms. Why don't they give us a photographic developing lab? Why can't we have some studios? And one student I remember, after I made these strong comments, immediately asked, why can't I have a piano in my room? I've been studying piano since I was 8 years old and I've had to stop dead, you know. You see to me the researches of Klee in human terms are as valid as the researches of Einstein; less dangerous even.

FORREST SELVIG: Yes. We've developed so much more in things like the mechanics.

BEN SHAHN: Yes. I've been on the Yale Advisory Committee on the Humanities. There's a group of us and we meet every six months. We quiz the professors and we quiz the students and so on. And hopefully we'll present a program what will be a little more human than even this program that they have there. I remember we were talking with one professor, one of the humanities guys, and he said a group of people organized something about the urban problem in New Haven and they never thought to invite us. So I said, why should they? You should be the first to project such a program and then invite them as a humanist. But their definition of the humanities is so far afield. It's an isolated little group, keeps itself aloof from society.

FORREST SELVIG: How was it possible for someone like Masaccio, for instance, to live a life so full?

BEN SHAHN: Well, they didn't have the nursery extension that we have. You know we don't let a person get out until he's 28 literally in almost any field. Even a schoolteacher can't go very far unless he has a doctorate.

FORREST SELVIG: That's right.

BEN SHAHN: I've gotten a number of these honorary degrees and I always felt guilty about it, you see; I know what it means to get a doctorate, how much research you have to do, and so on. I was reading a little pamphlet on who they were giving doctorates to. And in the AG school they – this is at Rutgers – were giving a man a doctorate who made a survey on the study of the colors of meats. And another one, the Education Department, how to write a supervisor's annual report. Well, I think that's a lot of crap. So I don't feel so guilty now anymore.

FORREST SELVIG: I'm afraid that so often these long, long years of research and of attending seminars and writing papers and so on that graduate students have to go through, I'm afraid that that kills off....

BEN SHAHN: Any creativity.

FORREST SELVIG: Exactly.

BEN SHAHN: It inhibits you when you've written so much about, say, Renoir, for instance. I remember a student was doing – he wouldn't dare try to work anymore himself, you know. As a matter of fact, it's officially discouraged. In the graduate school they say it will result in your losing your objectivity if you fool around with research.

FORREST SELVIG: Meaning, of course, that you were painting in one certain style you'd....

BEN SHAHN: Yes. Lean toward that, you see. And I don't know, I'm pretty fed up with our whole educational approach. And it's showing now with all these rebellions that are going on in schools all over the world actually.

FORREST SELVIG: What do you think would be the right kind of educational system?

BEN SHAHN: Well, in the first place we must say that the work of a poet is as important as the work of a physicist: the work of a.... mentioning all the fields. And that should be allowed to be practiced when you're very young along with your education. You've got to drop the idea that education means having gone through college. That is not education to me. Education is doing the things you want to do when you want to do them. And if that can be arranged then even from the third grade

on after you've learned to read and write and so simple arithmetic, half of your time should be spent – a guidance person would find out what your interest is in that direction at the very beginning, and if you abandon it, fine; find another direction. It may be pole vaulting. Who knows? And the trouble is that we have certified certain things by which you can put out a shingle. You can put out a shingle as a doctor, as a certified public accountant, as an engineer. But you can't put out a shingle saying "poet."

FORREST SELVIG: No. Or earn any money at it.

BEN SHAHN: Or earn any money at it. Though my son-in-law is doing very well. He got about every award that you can get except the Noble Prize. And now he gets \$500 to do a reading.

FORREST SELVIG: Who is your son-in-law?

BEN SHAHN: Allan Dugan. He got the Yale Award of younger poets. And you know he did a very smart thing. He would take any job that would take his mind off his own work after 4:30. So that he paid this bit, he worked as a laborer, he worked in a steel mill, anything. And then from 4:30 on it was his life until one in the morning. That was his life. And he had to pay for that by doing whatever kind of work it was. But it kept his mind clearly on his work.

FORREST SELVIG: It's a very good idea to work that way.

BEN SHAHN: I've talked to many younger artists. My feeling is if you have only two hours a day in which to do your own work, let's say, your mind is on that work during those two hours; but if you have ten hours a day in which to do your work but your mind is on something else – your investments or something – then this is the difference. In general all the creative activities are just about tolerated in our universities. I've talked to probably forty college presidents – I used to barnstorm a bit – and they'd say, well, why don't they go to a professional school? I still hold that the environment would be ideal for a young artist or a young poet or a young composer in the university environment but he be given as much time for that kind of work; not to have to do it in the sparest of spare time they might have.

FORREST SELVIG: Many professional art schools now are –

BEN SHAHN: Tying up with the academic.

FORREST SELVIG: Right.

BEN SHAHN: Yes.

FORREST SELVIG: So that they give an A.B. or a M.A. or something and their students can go out and teach.

BEN SHAHN: Yes. Well, there's another thing. I object strenuously to somebody who wasn't grown up to cast this much of a shadow to become a teacher. And then I wouldn't allow tenure in these creative areas. But bring in new people all the time.

FORREST SELVIG: The artist in residence idea?

BEN SHAHN: Yes. Artist in residence and so on. But to have very little of a fixed faculty. I've seen them become kind of desperate. They feel they're not artists and they resent having to teach.

FORREST SELVIG: Do you think that the situation in the universities today reflects our society?

BEN SHAHN: Well, there's a double struggle there, you see. There are those who feel that we've got to be ahead of the Russians and suddenly everything was emphasized that would help us get up a sputnik faster than the Russians. And the whole emphasis was turned towards science, engineering, and all of that stuff. But there's a good body of our students whose work I think is just as important as those who are working for RCA or something, who should also be allowed to do their kind of work while they're in college. But we've overstressed the whole mechanical approach towards life.

FORREST SELVIG: It would seem to me that the humanities are the elements which can train and direct people as to what they're going to do with these mechanical discoveries. What is science for, for instance? In other words, perhaps we could have more use of these....

BEN SHAHN: I'm sure we can. Probably the best known people in the country today except ballplayers are the astronauts. We know them all by name.

FORREST SELVIG: True.

BEN SHAHN: And this resulted from that first sending up of a sputnik.

FORREST SELVIG: I would suspect, Mr. Shahn, that this country has been mechanically oriented for a long, long, time.

BEN SHAHN: Oh, yes. In general it's "know how." That's one of the great words.

FORREST SELVIG: Yes. Right.

BEN SHAHN: And nobody thinks to know "why" or try to explore "why." You know I did some photography and there was an annual they used to put out, Camera, U.S.A. I think it was called. They reproduced several of my things and they wrote me asking me what the aperture was, what the speed was, and so on. And I put down "impossible conditions" under by picture. And nobody's questioned it. And then I wrote them and said, look, you put these down without questioning them: the picture couldn't have been taken under these conditions, and you only asked me how. Why didn't you ask me why I got up at five in the morning to do that?

FORREST SELVIG: Yes. That's very interesting.

BEN SHAHN: This is very true. The "how" is stressed infinitely more than "why." And it's all part of the interest we have in the mechanics of things.

FORREST SELVIG: Would you say that there was a difference in the climate of this country in regard to these things before the war and now after?

BEN SHAHN: I think there's more of a chance now for the artist or the poet.

FORREST SELVIG: Well, when you say that do you mean there's more of a chance to sell his work? Is that it? Or do you mean something more than that?

BEN SHAHN: To sell his work. To continue his work, you see. Now, for instance, my son-in-law now teaches an afternoon and a morning at Sarah Lawrence College and that keeps him quite well. And that was once unknown. This boy of mine who's the sculptor was invited – he too was a dropout –

they have an Institute for Advanced Studies at the University of Illinois, and he is there only to do his work. He has no teaching, no lecturing or anything at all. And they have good facilities there. He's doing his own bronze casting now, which they have the facilities for and the people to teach it. They asked him to come back for this year. Which astonished me. But they had to give him a title. Now he put in three years at Swarthmore. And just walked out one day. He should have walked out six years before that, you know. Because he was doing his work every moment. And they gave him a title of post-doctoral fellow to explain the reason for having a sculptor. It's idiotic. The man who runs that department came to visit us. And he said he was terribly impressed with Johnny. He said I could put him in the physics department on his own.... You know five years he was in the Boston Museum School after he quit Swarthmore he was allowed to audit at Harvard because I'd been there. Well, he picked his things that he wanted when he wanted it. And to me he's one of the most learned people I know. That was all on his own.

FORREST SELVIG: But you feel that the artist in this postwar world has less difficulty that he did before?

BEN SHAHN: Yes. Well, there are at least 5,000 people who have teaching jobs that didn't exist before the war.

FORREST SELVIG: Yes.

[telephone interruption]

BEN SHAHN: As I said earlier, no artists ever created a term for his direction, you know. I believe that the really creative people in the New Left didn't call themselves New Left. Somebody else called them New Left. And just the same as I find the writing around it now gets to be a little bit boring, it is like that writing around art. There's a man by the name of Leo Steinberg – he writes a great deal and lectures.

FORREST SELVIG: Oh, yes! Sure!

BEN SHAHN: All right. I'll tell you something very amazing. His father was Minister of Justice under the Communists for two years. And then he left the country at the very beginning. And he went to England. Then he was very active in organizing a thing called Free Land. Before Israel looked like a reality he managed successfully to settle Jews in many parts of the world. But now that Israel exists his function has ceased. I met him and it never dawned on me that he was the father of this art historian, critic, and so on. And he mentioned him. And I said, "Oh, my God, he's your son, isn't he?" He said, "Yes, but I don't understand a word he writes." He lived in England for quite a while before he came here. He has a very strong British accent, as you know.

FORREST SELVIG: I've never met him.

BEN SHAHN: Oh. And I said, "Your son is a theologian of a new religion and if you don't have the faith in the religion or the theology it's not going to mean anything to you. No more than the theology of a Catholic would make any sense to a Buddhist. First comes the faith and then comes the theology, you see. If you don't come with the faith then you're not going to understand him. And every movement has its own theologians, as every religion has its theologians. But out tendency above all that disturbs me is the creation of a cult, almost, of one direction, to dismiss everything else. And I've been around long enough to realize that cults are very dangerous. Religious cults are dangerous. Political cults are dangerous, and so on. And I just am very disturbed when I see cults forming. This kid of mine who's a sculptor is very witty with words. He said, "Daddy, I'm going to write

an art book. I've just written the chapter heads. And it's going to be limited to my experience in art school. I'm going to start with the social painters. The social painter is one who comes in in the morning, sets up his easel, then goes around socializing and doesn't let anybody else work. He's the one that coined the "abject depressionists," the "depressionists," and "post-depressionists," and so on. He never intended to do anything but he just wrote a bunch of chapter heads. You know there was a time in Brooklyn College, where they have a big art department, and where all the avant-garde artists taught. One of them who was part of it – he's more an art historian, used to come and tell me that they'd almost start every lecture with, like the Romans, "Carthage must be destroyed," "Shahn must be destroyed." They used to tear me apart, you know. And mostly because I dared in my own writings to question their philosophy.

FORREST SELVIG: But certainly you stand for a concept that art should encourage and continue.

BEN SHAHN: That art is life. I cannot separate the two. When Beckmann died – I had known him – and his wife, who used to go around with him when he did criticism because he couldn't speak any English – asked me if I would take his class. She said he would have been delighted if he knew that I would carry on for him. Well it was for about two months and I'd never taught before. First I announced that I was not going to work with a model. They were an advanced group. So I sat down on the model stand and began to talk. And it was one of those situations, I was nervous and I heard myself talking which is very bad. I finally kept saying to myself I must bring this to a head and finally I was through. I said are there any comments or any impressions? And one young man got up and said, "Look, Mr. Shahn, I came here to study painting, not philosophy." Well, I needed that little shock and I was myself again. I said, well, of 101 directions of painting, which do you want? I developed a new drip technique where you affix your canvas to the ceiling and then the paint hangs down. And I said, if you don't like what I said, go right down and get your money back; and if they don't give it to you immediately come upstairs and I'll give you a check. Because I wasn't doing it for the money and I didn't give a good God damn, you know, and I wasn't doing it for status or for anything at all. I was just doing it to help out there. Well, for about a month he avoided me. When I came near him he'd walk out. And he came over and apologized finally. He said, "Look, I've been going to art schools for about seven years and nobody every talked like that." And I said, "Well, you'll have to forgive me but I cannot separate art from life."

FORREST SELVIG: Or technique from motivation?

BEN SHAHN: Yes. Yes. Yes.

FORREST SELVIG: It's very much like what we were talking about earlier about the problem....

BEN SHAHN: Oh how and why?

FORREST SELVIG: Yes. Right. So here he is learning how but not why.

BEN SHAHN: Yes. And I couldn't care less whether the leg was drawn well or not. That's why I did away with the model. Johnny's favorite teacher was Tovich, the sculptor.

FORREST SELVIG: Yes. Harold Tovich.

BEN SHAHN: Yes. Tovich comes from your part of the world, doesn't he? From Minnesota, I believe it is.

FORREST SELVIG: Sure.

BEN SHAHN: A lovely person. And he had to take over his class. Well, Johnny realized he doesn't like to teach. He isn't interested in what other people do. He's a completely eighteenth-century classicist. There are one or two things around the house of his. He said it was hopeless. Every morning he'd come it, they were working from a model, and he'd hope that one of them would draw six toes, and he'd say, uh, uh, five toes! But he said it never happened. Otherwise he is completely absorbed in his own work.

FORREST SELVIG: I think it's much more interesting to talk about the why obviously.

BEN SHAHN: It is.

FORREST SELVIG: The why, it seems to me, in your work is your commentary on the human situation all the way through.

BEN SHAHN: It is. I mentioned earlier that I promised to talk to the group at Akron why certain ones were chosen and others were not. Well, I told them how I jury: I said, let's imagine that we're in a room that is circular and I'm equidistant from every single picture, and also they're all the same size. So what is the first thing I'm drawn to? It would be the strong patterning. Let's say somebody handed in a picture which was white on one side and black on the other. That would be the strongest design. Now suppose that dividing line were slanted somewhat made a little more dynamic. And if it were yellow and black it would be even more attractive, then it would be drawn a little closer if the pictures all came closer to me, let's say, then I'd be drawn to the color. Then I'd be drawn to the quality of the stroking because some people have a kind of passionate kind of stroking, and some are very dry. And then the last thing I'll notice is what the content, if any, is. I said but I work the other way around.

FORREST SELVIG: That's what I was going to ask you when you started to explain this. Because content is very important to you obviously.

BEN SHAHN: Content, of course, I define it a little bit differently. Content is the total thing. It's drawing, idea, all of equal importance. If one is stressed more than the other it's like a sore thumb. If one painter devotes himself and stresses color more than anything else, if one stresses idea more, if one stressed draftsmanship more, and so on, that transcends the others, then I think it's not a good thing. It's the wonderful distribution of all these things that go into a work of art that is so important to me.

FORREST SELVIG: All along your art has been a means of expression of your philosophy of life and your attitude toward life?

BEN SHAHN: Yes. Yes.

FORREST SELVIG: And it has been consistently humanitarian all the way along.

BEN SHAHN: That's the way I felt. The "condition humaine," you know. I don't know anything that's worthier than that, but I don't say that everybody should work that way. But by the same logic I don't see why the fashion of a time should dictate to artists how to work either.

FORREST SELVIG: Although clearly the fashion of the time may dictate how much appreciated they are by the public

BEN SHAHN: Yes. Then you've got to have a hell of a lot of courage, you know; and you're very much alone when you work in a certain direction at a certain time. Let's say as abstraction was 35

years ago.

FORREST SELVIG: It seems to me you have always been appreciated. You've always had certainly at the high water mark of abstract expressionism your type of painting would not have been the latest thing.

BEN SHAHN: Oh, no! Oh, no.

FORREST SELVIG: But it has always continued to be a highly appreciated and highly respected.

BEN SHAHN: Yes, I guess so. For many years it was just a succes d'estime, you know, I didn't sell very much. And I did all sorts of other things. But that didn't bother me very much. I have a great deal of confidence whether I'm worthy of it or not in what I was doing.

FORREST SELVIG: When you say it was a success d'estime only and you didn't sell much would this have been the period after the war? Or was this long before that?

BEN SHAHN: Long before that. For instance, I used to get long articles about me in learned journals that didn't help me very much financially. But it didn't bother me very much. Often somebody tells me a story of somebody who has an attic full of paintings, you know, and is starving. I say I feel awfully sorry for him if he's starving, I mean something should be done about that. But having an attic full of paintings is like having an attic full of thoughts, a head full of thoughts. There's nothing wrong with having a head full of thoughts. Those are two different things, the economic solution and one's philosophic solution, you see.

FORREST SELVIG: But then sort of taking off on this phrase "philosophical solution" – what you stand for politically and what you express in your work seems to be something that at this time, as we were discussing at lunch, seems not to be the dominating spirit of our society at this time.

BEN SHAHN: No, it isn't. It isn't. And I don't know, somebody asked me about the influence I've had. I've influenced certain artists, yes. But I don't think I've influenced society very much. Look, I made the poster for McCarthy and look where it got him. But I feel that one can be in the minority all his life, if he feels strongly about the position he holds he should not stop, you know. Because numerical analysis and numerical judgments aren't worth anything. There are those who hold that art must have a mass appreciation. I don't believe that makes a good work of art if it has appreciation. Nor do I go with the other direction that says if only one really appreciates it it's a great work of art.

FORREST SELVIG: You say you can conceive of a painting without a political message or without....?

BEN SHAHN: Yes. Indeed. Indeed. I just bought three up in Skowhegan from the students there. I feel very strongly the need for the ability for a person to express whatever beliefs he has, you see. If that comes closest to his philosophy, that's fine. If he does it because it's a fashion or something that I think it's phony.

FORREST SELVIG: But, for instance, in the case of abstract expressionism, would you say that that is an expression of a belief?

BEN SHAHN: Yes. Yes.

FORREST SELVIG: Although a good many of those artists are I'm sure also liberal politically.

BEN SHAHN: They are. They are. But they loan only a part of themselves, their name, you see. But they will not give their total self to a political belief, you see. And that's apparent even now when they sign the petitions or lend their names to one of these big ads that are published in the papers and so on. But I wanted to carry that a bit further and I raised enough money to publish two ads in the Times on the war, you see. But I made a drawing in each case for it.

FORREST SELVIG: I remember those.

BEN SHAHN: Kramer was holding forth on that when he said that a lot of people are willing to give their names but not themselves. But he says he worries about the danger of them using their art for what he calls propaganda. Propaganda is to me a noble word. It means you believe something very strongly and you want other people to believe it; you want to propagate your faith. And it certainly isn't a terrible thing when on the Piazza d'Espagna there's the building that is for the propaganda of the Church. I don't think any Catholic considers that propaganda in the same sense.

FORREST SELVIG: No. Especially as we in America have taken propaganda to be a dirty word.

BEN SHAHN: That's right. Peace is a dirty word, you know. It's less so that it was, say three years ago. But peace was considered a dirty word.

FORREST SELVIG: Oh, yes. I remember it was associated somehow with Picasso and the Doves of Peace and so on. That's true. But the association. But all art – the idea of propaganda in art – art has always been used to propagate ideas and to persuade.

BEN SHAHN: Of course it has. When Giotto did the frescoes in Assisi, you know, that was as propagandistic a work of art as there was. We forget that in discussing art. The art today must be the medium, you see. This is what it's all about. And along comes a fellow like Marshal McLuhan and makes that a kind of religion. *The Medium is the Message*. And I think that's utter nonsense. And I think he's one of the great phonies that have ever been passed off on New York, you know. Utter, utter phony. He will twist any cliché and make it sound very learned and very mysterious. But it is nothing but a cliché. They put out one book on his work called *The Medium is the Message*.

FORREST SELVIG: Yes.

BEN SHAHN: Now that's really brilliant. You know often a period in history is summed up by huge tomes or sometimes by a few words. I heard it somewhere and I don't know who said it first, that in the last 15 years Rothko pulled down the shade, you know, his horizontal compositions.

FORREST SELVIG: Yes.

BEN SHAHN: And Barney Newman had closed the doors with his huge canvases with a slit of light in it. And Ad Reinhardt turned off the lights. It's like that drawing of the guy who draws the cartoons for the *Post*, one of the classic things that summarized the whole political situation, when the cop is breaking into some kind of demonstration and he's beating the guy, and the guy is screaming, "I am an anti-Communist." And the cop says, "I don't care what kind of a Communist you are."

FORREST SELVIG: That's a good one. But the artist being so inextricably a part of all of our society....

BEN SHAHN: He tried to be part of society and he was ignored and finally he found his own little world, you know. And said that hell with society. I remember running into a situation one summer when I taught. There was a very gifted youngster there and I said I'd like to speak to your father

because the boy told me that they wanted him to go from St. Paul's right into Harvard, and he'd like to go to an art school. Well, the father didn't come; but the mother came and said very simply that the father wouldn't understand me. And – well, they won their case. He went through Harvard. And then he put in four years in the Navy. I ran into him in Rome, oh, six years ago or something when he had come into his own money. And there was something mad about him, you know, he felt he'd lost so much time he couldn't stop even to talk for a minute, he was going to see this exhibition, and that exhibition, and so on. The mother told me when they had finally won their argument with him, it was all done very gentlemanly, the mother said, "Had I two sons I would have given one to art." And there's a hierarchy – if he had wanted to become a writer I'm sure the family would have been completely sympathetic. A composer a little less so. But an artist least so.

FORREST SELVIG: Do you suppose this is because of the stereotype they have, they think of an artist as living an immoral and disorderly life?

BEN SHAHN: Yes. Yes. It's all of those things. And it's also part of, oh, the Protestant thinking that wanted to destroy images, you know. It goes way back to that.

FORREST SELVIG: I wonder why that would be Protestant?

BEN SHAHN: Well, it was actually. It began with Protestants.

FORREST SELVIG: The Reformation?

BEN SHAHN: The severity of the Reformation. The severity of the architecture suddenly entered into the churches and so on. I remember I did an imaginary picture of Luther once, and I didn't know what he looked like, it was a picture. And a friend of mine who was an art historian, an old man, was so shocked that I would do that. He said that he was responsible for the destruction of art, the whole iconoclasm that took place at that time. And then the Puritanism too. And then there's the frontier philosophy still with us that that's the last thing; first we're going to do this, we're going to do that, and that; and then we'll probably have art. That's where I think the whole mistake lies with all these communities that are going to bring art to everybody. Art is not necessarily for everybody. Some people don't like it. We admit that a person can be tone deaf, you know, and not interested in music at all. Well, they can be image blind, too, you know.

FORREST SELVIG: Well, is art do you think something that one has to reach a certain level of cultivation to appreciate?

BEN SHAHN: I don't think so at all. I think some people are drawn to it and others are not.

FORREST SELVIG: It's just a natural thing?

BEN SHAHN: It's just a natural thing.

FORREST SELVIG: It has nothing to do with education or cultural background?

BEN SHAHN: No. No. No more that you're attracted to blondes rather than brunettes.

FORREST SELVIG: And yet I would say this, Mr. Shahn, that your art speaks strongly and I would say quite tellingly to a great many different kinds of people.

BEN SHAHN: At different levels, yes. Though when I was in the Graphic Department of the Office of War Information I wrote a memorandum. I said we'll have to use Picasso as well as Norman

Rockwell. If there are six million who understand Norman Rockwell and only sixty understand Picasso's *Guernica*, then we'll have to do something for those sixty as well as for the six million. The approach in that Department was like advertising, that we're going to find the lowest common denominator that will speak to all. There's no lowest common denominator.

FORREST SELVIG: But you would certainly place an appreciation of Picasso on a higher level than an appreciation of Norman Rockwell? Or would you?

BEN SHAHN: I personally would, yes. I'm one of the sixty, let's say, that he spoke to. But Norman Rockwell speaks to me, too. I'm much more catholic in my taste than most people believe.

FORREST SELVIG: I have even some oil paintings of Norman Rockwell that were not bad.

BEN SHAHN: They're very good. He wasn't as good as Vermeer but he went in that direction.

FORREST SELVIG: I don't think that most people are born with an appreciation of Picasso, that even the sixty would be born with this appreciation. I think it would require a certain amount of teaching.

BEN SHAHN: Well, it's impossible to say. It's impossible to say. I don't know. I don't know. Why is a kid drawn to music very early? And to a particular kind of music? This is impossible to explain any more than it's possible to explain whether a collector likes his collection or not, or whether it's the money value that he attaches his greatest interest in. I don't know.

FORREST SELVIG: I would suspect that it's a matter of cultural conditioning over the generations, that something happened 50 years ago and something else has happened since then and you arrive at a time when a style can be appreciated even looking backward.

BEN SHAHN: Well, looking backward, no. I remember a cousin of mine, this one who was a fashion editor, took me to the Metropolitan when I was about twelve. There was a big Sargent show and I didn't like those muddy colors. And we passed a little Taddeo Gaddi and I said this is, you know.... And when we got out she asked me which one I liked best. And I said the little painting by Taddeo Gaddi. I didn't even know who he was then. So apparently I was drawn to that kind of work very early. Perhaps it was the most simplistic kind of appreciation, I don't know. But I was drawn to that.

FORREST SELVIG: Certainly I would say that you could not have this impact without the style that you use, your own style.

BEN SHAHN: I tell you I think I am the most American of all American painters. This is a novel thing to say. It is said with not modesty. Maybe because I came to America and its culture and was sort of swallowing it by the cupful. And it may be one of many other things. Now style comes last. It comes out of certain belief. I have heard students say, well, I'm going to stay in school until I develop a style. I said you have a style right now. And remember this may be the last painting you're doing so let that be the very best you can do and it's got to have everything you feel in it.

FORREST SELVIG: But they perhaps do not have the depth of feeling that you have about this very specific subject, for instance.

BEN SHAHN: It wouldn't even be subject. But people talk about style – "where did you get your style?" you know, that kind of nonsense. It's like why are you the kind of person you are? Where did you get that? Whom did you study? One is like that or one isn't, you see. I used to argue that the painter who paints a bowl of pansies is making a social comment. He doesn't like what society is

doing around him, you see, and maybe the purity of these flowers is more meaningful to him and maybe he wants society to be as calm and as soothing as that is, you see.

FORREST SELVIG: Would you apply that also the abstract expressionist movement in some way?

BEN SHAHN: Yes. There is rebellion always naturally. The painter when he's engaged in a painting is in a hypercondition of self-criticism with every stroke even though they come with great rapidity. It's a critical statement he makes about his own work and about his peers and his time even. If everybody likes the paintings that Cezanne hoped to be like, you know, that would be bad. Now he tried to make his work that way but because his temperament was not like the painter whom he admired so much, I forget his name for the moment, then his style evolved because this was his personality and not the other's personality. When I spoke earlier of sort of weighing myself against Cezanne I had to be honest with myself. You know at that time when I was doing this whole analysis I was told that you don't tell stories with paintings. But I found some damned good art has been told with stories. Giotto certainly told his story with a great deal of human warmth and everything else; and it was a story. And I said to myself, well, suppose you were crippled, as I am a little right now, I have some trouble with a leg, you still walk, wouldn't you? Even if you limped. But you'd want to walk. You wouldn't give up. And I felt the same way of doing the kind of work I was doing. This was my temperament. This is my feeling about the world. This is what I would talk about as I would paint about, as it were.

FORREST SELVIG: It's just the complete expression of the individual right there. Then, in other words, you feel that an artists has got to know himself very thoroughly?

BEN SHAHN: That's the last thing an artist learns. And some artists never learn it. There's a painter, a very gifted young man living here, Prestopino. You may know his work.

FORREST SELVIG: Sure. Gregorio Prestopino.

BEN SHAHN: Yes. Well, Presto in the last ten years has gone through five stylistic changes. I'm very, very fond of him. He's a lovely person. But I think he has the spirit of a peasant. And his background is that. And a peasant thinks in those terms. I'll grow wheat because we may have war, you see.

FORREST SELVIG: So he's changed through all these different styles?

BEN SHAHN: Yes. And he defends each change very ardently. And I remember bringing another painter to look at some of his work and this painter said I don't understand it. He said, "You don't understand it? Then you wouldn't understand a photograph. These are like photographs of nature." Which they were not. Now Presto also is very characteristic of a time, like the Song of the Vicar of Bray, you know. No matter who was the king the Vicar became so. When it was Cromwell he was Cromwellian. When the Cromwellians were thrown out he was with whatever followed.... went right down through our contemporary times. And this is again – it's not venal; it's an eagerness for appreciation. And when, you see, the direction of painting that he'd been doing before began to be ignored, then he went off to another direction, and another direction.

FORREST SELVIG: I recall something that Wright wrote, it was in *The Lonely Crowd*. It said some people are inner-directed and some people are outer-directed, and the outer-directed people were the ones....

BEN SHAHN: Reisman.

FORREST SELVIG: Reisman, that's right. Who were constantly adjusting themselves to....

BEN SHAHN: But I don't believe that because there's no such one person. I remember when I gave those lectures I took a swipe at Reisman. He spoke about the average high school boy. There's no such thing. I've met hundreds of high school boys and they have perhaps more of outer-direction than inner-direction but they have all of those things in them. One or the other becomes the dominant thing in the way they live out their lives, you see. So I took this crack and apparently I really didn't have any influence at Harvard because within two weeks I read that they took him over from the University of Chicago to Harvard. There was a cartoon in The New Yorker a couple of months ago, of an artist looking out of his studio, a skylight studio, and he could see a weathervane and the weathervane said, "Drip, Minimal." And he was looking to see which was it pointed. There is that. There's no doubt about that. Most people sometimes find this particular bandwagon a little too late. If you've just bought ties that are very narrow they're changing now you're caught with a lot of ties that are out of style. But that's all right for ties and things of style, and fashion and so on. But as a human being you cannot shift that way or your work to me loses a great deal of validity.

FORREST SELVIG: I deduce then that you feel that the artist has to find....

BEN SHAHN: Who he is – one; and whom he wants to talk to. If you want to talk to, say, the Guggenheim Museum people, well, you've made up your mind you're going to talk to them. I want to talk to people with whom I can talk in just ordinary conversation. I really am not interested in most of the discussion that goes on about art because all you have to do is look through, say, a catalogue of the Whitney Museum of 20 years ago and it's shocking to see these prominent names. They're out, you know, through; you don't see their names anymore. And when you look at it from a long perspective you realize – if I say the word Renoir you get an image that is pretty consistent. When I say Cezanne, when I say Van Gogh, when I say all of these people – Sissley, and so on, you get a distinct image and with little variations it's been consistent throughout their life. The only exception is Picasso who is a phenomenon of which there has never been anyone like. But when you see something whose image is in constant flux you begin to wonder who is he, whom is he trying to talk to, or what is it? It is not fashion. Art is not fashion. It's inconceivable that a chemist who knew everything that the alchemist knew in the thirteenth century could make any contribution to chemistry today. But art is entirely different. Giacometti can take up where the Etruscans left off and contribute a great deal. In science that is impossible. In art it is happening constantly. But the science or the scientism that has taken over our lives makes us think that if you worked in the thirteenth century or carry on then you're not really a scientist. No chemist could contribute anything that began with the alchemist, you see. Art is an entirely different thing. In the arts in general. It is equally true for music, for literature, poetry, and what have you.

FORREST SELVIG: The people you want to speak to are people with whom you can discuss....

BEN SHAHN: Yes. Yes. Yes. Yes.

FORREST SELVIG: Can you describe that type of person more?

BEN SHAHN: Well, I have been sort of forced to say what do I paint. There are a few subjects – one thing I paint is the indomitable spirit of man to rise from incredibly impossible situation or morass he's in. I did a painting called *The Red Staircase*, I think it's in the St. Louis Museum, where a crippled man is walking up a long flight of stairs and what he's left is ruins, and I and you can that he's going to ruins again. But that doesn't stop him. He doesn't see it. And this is one thing that haunts me, the inability of people to communicate. I can count the times in my life when I've really communicated with someone. Those are moments of epiphany. And then waiting. People are waiting all the time. The girl waits till she's married. Till she has a child. Till the child walks, talks. Till he enters school and everything else. Always waiting, you see. That's the thing that always haunts

me about people.

[End of Tape 1 – Side 1]

FORREST SELVIG: Here we go. There.

BEN SHAHN: Well, I really had never thought of it in those terms no more that I think why I eat or love or what. But when you are forced to say it, you know, you say well, I was hungry and I wanted that and so on. And that's why I sort of forced myself to define these areas in which I work. You know when I came up to Harvard it was hinted very gently that I do a sort of autobiographical lecture. Well, I couldn't do that. Mostly because I can't even prove that I was born. I have no birth certificate. I had trouble recently when I applied for Medicare. They gave me an awful lot of trouble. I couldn't prove my birth. Passports and everything else. They've gotten a lot of directives from the General Accounting Office to watch out for guys who come in and say they're going to be 65 when they are only 60. They have a lot of trouble there. So I couldn't go in with an autobiographical lecture. But feeling the strong pressure of this thing, it was very gentle but strong, I decided to do what I called the biography of a painting; just one lecture. And since in every painting a good deal of the individual enters into I just took one painting and traced it. And it was a dangerous thing to do. I felt all roiled inside me after having done that. I think it's the second lecture in the book, in which I started off with a very glowing criticism that McBride had made of the painting. It had been shown at the Whitney. And then at the very end, through mistaken zeal, he said but as for the subject matter, along with the *Dean of Canterbury* he ought to be deported. This was 1949.

FORREST SELVIG: Would you say that again?

BEN SHAHN: "Along with the *Dean of Canterbury* for his subject matter he ought to be deported." I didn't know him personally. And I never argued with a critic. Once I asked for space in the *Times*. I said I need two columns. And they gave it to me. And I wrote something. But I met this McBride. I didn't know who he was and I asked who is this very tall man, white-haired. And they told me it was McBride. And I went over to him and said, "Sir, if you can possibly arrange deportation I'd love it. I haven't been to Europe for quite a while." And he turned white; he thought, my God, I'm going to stab him right there on Park Avenue. I felt sorry. He could have had a heart attack at that he looked so scared.

FORREST SELVIG: He was talking about the subject matter in one of your paintings was he?

BEN SHAHN: Yes. It was a thing I called *Allegory*. It was shown at the Whitney that particular year. He praised it glowingly for its painting, for its color and this and that. But for the idea he said that I along with the *Dean of Canterbury*, who was in the country then, should be deported.

FORREST SELVIG: The so called *Red Dean of Canterbury*.

BEN SHAHN: Yes. The painting was red; it was a red animal. He was so utterly mistaken because it was something very close to my life. I have been through two terrible fires. Once in Russia when our whole little town burned down. And then I think two years after we were in this country we were living in a tenement and we were burned out. And I along with my brother and sister were thrown out of a window, two stories, and caught, and legs wretched and so on – in snow, in our underwear. Because we didn't even dare change. We had just moved then and we were about a mile away from school. I was very keen about school, being an immigrant. And I thought if I didn't get into night clothes and if I just kept everything on, my underwear and my stockings, it would take me less time to dress. In the February semester, you know, it is pitch dark at seven o'clock. And we were burned

out terribly. And then I recall other things about fire. And it became a symbol, a beast to me, this fire. And he mistook it for something – Communism. I don't know why. Because it was red. It was a very simple kind of mind that could do that. And that turned into a biographic lecture in a sense. Because the biography of a painting to me is the biography of the man that paints it.

FORREST SELVIG: Certainly I would say particularly in your case, Mr. Shahn, it seems to me that it's a complete statement of your philosophy of life, of your attitude toward the world.

BEN SHAHN: It is. It is. And also I lean of words – like in this sketch for a big mosaic that's going to be executed I use the words of Robert Hook that I like, that I thought were appropriate. I would use music, too, if I could. Because I want to communicate with every tool that's available.

FORREST SELVIG: In this period that we seem to be moving into politically which it seems to me is rather opposed to the message you have always been expressing, would it be interesting sometime to listen to this tape maybe 50 or 75 years from now and have somebody saying that...Anyway the period that we seem to be moving into –

BEN SHAHN: Don't you know all these tapes are going to fall apart.

FORREST SELVIG: Sure they will. But there will be transcripts kept in the Archives.

BEN SHAHN: Yes. The papers are going to fall apart, the paper itself, because it has too much sulphite in it.

FORREST SELVIG: Maybe they'll engrave it on something. In any case, how do you feel about the people to whom you want to get your message across? Will there be more in the future? Or will it be less? Or will the message be more urgent?

BEN SHAHN: I haven't the slightest idea. Nobody can say with any authority or meaning that this particular direction or art is going to be with us or not. This whole thing is in a state of flux all the time. You know there was a time when El Greco was just considered of the School of Tintoretto. And suddenly our culture reached the state where we needed that kind of dynamism that he could put forth. And before that we thought the soothing quality of Raphael was the art of our time. And it was. Since we are the product of English culture and the Victorian period was a pretty static one then Raphael, and the others were the symbols of that period. But after the First World War when the British Empire was breaking up El Greco satisfied that period much more. And so it goes. Now we want quiet again and Piero della Francesca is one of the symbols everybody is looking for.

FORREST SELVIG: And Vermeer.

BEN SHAHN: Vermeer, yes.

FORREST SELVIG: Probably also ties in somehow with minimal art. It's just there. It doesn't demand anything.

BEN SHAHN: Possibly, yes. I've been mean about minimal art because minimal art can only satisfy minimal minds. And is often created by minimal minds. You see it's been the role of the critic in the last, oh, 50 years or something to consider the artist a kind of gifted moron. He himself doesn't know what he's doing and I, the critic, will explain to him what he's doing. And I refuse to take that role, you know.

FORREST SELVIG: Of course, your art expresses your philosophical concerns as well.

BEN SHAHN: It does. It should be if I could do it in music I would do it in music. If I could do it in words, I would do it in words.

FORREST SELVIG: Perhaps minimal art would be the triumph of the how over complete annihilation of the why that we were talking about earlier.

BEN SHAHN: Yes. Also minimal art you must remember has a limited audience. We who are involved exaggerate the audience for it. Just the same as I think we exaggerate the audience of the militant blacks. When Carmichael or the other one speaks we think the whole black population is listening to him. I don't think so at all. But in our search for something titillating, startling, and so on, and particularly in the audience of art, they need something, a taste or a flavor of something that they've never had before. Which reminds me of an off-color story. You can pull it out of there when I'm through.

FORREST SELVIG: Oh, sure.

BEN SHAHN: Where a young man came to a house of ill repute and asked the madam what was available. And she told him well, we just brought over an Algerian boy and this and that. And he said, no, no, nothing that she proposed. So she got a little angry, "What are you looking for?" He said, "Do you have any goldfish of exotic coloration?" Well, a great deal of that, you see, in an effete audience like New York, or those that are involved in the art world, I hate that word, the audience of the art world. They have to have something new every time. As this little girl I told you about who was so delighted with this meal of clams, feta cheese, and olives. Because she's been leading a very normal diet, you know. Now she's a youngster fresh out of college working in a publishing house and looking for exciting things. And she found it in that meal. Now that can easily be compared to a work or art with mixed media, you know, that turns on lights, that turns on sound.

FORREST SELVIG: Flashes colors all over, yes.

BEN SHAHN: Yes. Each one is looking for something more exciting, more exotic. Once I was out at Dreiser's home with Rivera. I was his interpreter. And there was a columnist called O. O. McIntyre, a revolting character who was one of the early columnists. He was there, too. And he just sidled up beside Rivera, I was sitting on his right and he was on his left and he was asking questions. Rivera was very offended by his looks even. He didn't understand him very much. We were on a little terrace and Rivera took his bread plate and went out and found a little hill of ants and brought it in and would pick an ant and put it in his mouth. And this man just was so revolted he walked away. It was the only thing he could do, you know, to get rid of him. Now this is a case where you wanted to get rid of an audience.

FORREST SELVIG: Right.

BEN SHAHN: Other people want an audience. They'll do the same thing, you see. I remember two exhibitions right next door to each other. One young man I was very interested in, I don't think you'd know of him, Jeames Kearns his name is, he's a sculptor and one of the great draftsmen. And Brian O'Doherty was critic then on the *Times*. And right next door to it was one of the Op things with colored little sticks, one by twos in full color. And he wrote a violent attack on this boy Kearns and glowingly promoted this other show. Now Brian was trying to become an important enough critic to create a school, as it were. Well, I talked to him about that. I said you'll never create a school. You're a journalist. You're not a critic. Yes, Greenberg could create a school. Rosenberg who writes for the *New Yorker* now can create a school. But you can't do it. You're a journalist. You have to write a piece almost every day, you see. Those guys write a piece once in three months for the *Hudson*

Review or something and have time to think it out. But you were too much in a hurry to do this and you're not going to do it. And an Italian critic arrived here, a friend of mine, I've forgotten his name for the moment. He called me and said he'd like to see the Pop art which was startling. I said, "Oh, you came a week too late. It's all gone." I have other ideas for more Op-sounding things. I want to have an exhibition of whap art. That will be just Italian Renaissance painters. And I want to have one thing called cop art. You know the many robberies that have occurred of collections of paintings?

FORREST SELVIG: Oh, yes, indeed.

BEN SHAHN: Yes, we promised anonymity to the owners, you know, and exhibit all those things. And then we stop art. This would be just the exhibition of canvas. And all the writing about it would be a discussion of the weave and the origin of the linen and so on and so forth, the influence that changed the weaving over the centuries and so on.

FORREST SELVIG: That would be ultra-minimal art then.

BEN SHAHN: Yes. Yes. There was a young man in Skowhegan this summer, a bright boy, and he was doing minimal art. He was very handy at creating these shaped canvases beautifully, and in a half hour he'd have them all painted, you see, and this was his contribution, this flat color. And that was it. But someone told me they were boarding in a house up in Maine, you can imagine an old woman landlady, and this woman who was boarding there felt it was her duty to invite her to the last show that they have there. And she was taken with a painting of stripes down with Scotch tape – thought it was perfection itself. And then two boys came there to the Director – they wanted to do something in sculpture. They wanted to dig a hole five by five by five. And he asked me what to do. I said don't frustrate them, tell them yes. Because they wanted to know more than anything in the world, you know. And they began to dig. Well, it hit granite after six inches. So they changed their minds and they were going to do a long narrow one 20 feet long and only six inches deep, so they wouldn't hit any rock, you know. And five feet wide. And they did and it was taken very seriously and everybody went up and they talked about it and so on. And they asked me what I thought of it. I said, well, the men who dug ditches for me when I was doing the foundation here were much better; much better.

FORREST SELVIG: What justification would these boys have given for that kind of a ditch, that sort of thing? What were they doing?

BEN SHAHN: Well, don't you remember whey they had that big exhibition in New York of.... And what's his name – Oldenburg.

FORREST SELVIG: That's right. He did one behind the Metropolitan.

BEN SHAHN: That's right. And Glueck, the girl who writes a column.

FORREST SELVIG: Grace Glueck, yes.

BEN SHAHN: She pointed out that two kids in Skowhegan had done it before him. Which must have been an awful shock to him because he invents. I don't know what prompts them to do it. The son-in-law I speak of who attends every god damn exhibition but he dresses as a beatnik with long hair and so on. Sometimes he has trouble getting in if it's an evening dress opening, but he gets in somehow. And he loves to meet these painters. He loves the scene, you know, as it is called.

FORREST SELVIG: It's a more – he likes the way of life whatever it's called.

BEN SHAHN: Yes. Well, it's called "the scene" you know. Or concrete literature. Or concrete poetry where you just pick up lines from anywhere and put them all together, you know. You tear them out and paste them up and so on. It becomes the "how" again, you come back to the "how." This is different in the way of a "how" than anything else that has been done before. And this tired palette needs that all the time. I was shocked when I heard – Alfred Barr is an old, old friend of mine from way back – he attended a happening and he took part in it. And there was a black patent leather woman's shoe and he picked up a banana somebody painted red and he walked over and put it in the shoe. This is a very prim man, the some of a minister and so on. Older people who've become involved that way always remind me of gray-haired stage door Jonnies waiting for the chorines to come out so they're sill with youth.

FORREST SELVIG: That's it. Do you suppose it's a fear of being left behind, not being up with it?

BEN SHAHN: Yes. Being considered old. I have a friend who is a brilliant man. He's 88, a philosopher and has written a great deal – Eric Caller. Lives in Princeton. And for a while he was taken in by a lot of this stuff and he began to write on it. But recently he wrote a book *In Defense of Form* or something like that, I forget the title. It's quite a good thing in which he sort of came back to himself after a detour of some eight or ten years.

FORREST SELVIG: I am sure that many artists who are trying these new things are doing it in a very genuine effort to find a new form of expression.

BEN SHAHN: Absolutely, yes.

FORREST SELVIG: But it still seems to me that the old methods – I mean the traditional methods of painting and so on have not been exhausted.

BEN SHAHN: Hell, no. You see there must be a satisfaction. For instance, the whole Stella direction of the stripes – it has a beginning, a middle, and an end but it doesn't require the mind at all. You carefully paste your Scotch tape, you carefully see that it's properly stuck. Then you paint these stripes very carefully. And then you remove your Scotch tape and it's finished. It's very pretty. It's very pretty.

FORREST SELVIG: But is prettiness enough for them even?

BEN SHAHN: If prettiness, or décor is what they're interested in then this is it. But, as I say, there are many more elements in painting than just prettiness. Prettiness is just one tiny part of it.

FORREST SELVIG: It's a curious thing to me that these artists you're mentioning, or this king of artist, would be satisfied with painting paintings like that while at the same time he is involved with the world politically, or he has ideas about the world but he's not expressing it.

BEN SHAHN: Well, a good many aren't involved, you know. The Cedar Bar where they used to hang out, and then the White Horse Tavern where what's his name? – the Welsh poet who died, Dylan Thomas....Well, my daughter was very amusing about it. She said – everybody told her she ought to go down and she said "But when I was three years old my father took me there for lunch every day." I lived right at the corner there. It was an ordinary bar and mostly workmen came in there. But his wife used to make a roast every day, a different one, and she made up small sandwiches that were superb. And she'd bake six pies. And this was the day's fare. And I used to take Judy in there every day for lunch with me because I knew it was first class food – a homemade bowl of soup, and

a sandwich like that, and she really had a good meal. So she really topped them by saying she used to go there when she was three years old.

FORREST SELVIG: I remember the Cedar Bar, too. Is it still going? I suppose it is.

BEN SHAHN: No. No. It's gone.

FORREST SELVIG: And there was The Club over in St. Mark's Place wherever that was.

BEN SHAHN: Yes.

FORREST SELVIG: It was Philip Pavia who ran that I think.

BEN SHAHN: I didn't even know it, no. I've been living out here for a long time. I remember Bill de Kooning whom I've known for many years asked me to come over to the Cedar Bar. They had good evenings there. I might have gone if I had lived in New York. If I had lived in the Village I certainly would have gone over and probably would have argued. But I'd done that period of arguing and I had enough of it. The years I was in Paris we used to have these endless arguments. What they did was either confirm what you really believed through the argument, or if you were ready to be convinced by the other side that's when you argued most violently defending the side before you were giving it up.

FORREST SELVIG: You know I have, for instance, when I was in Minneapolis I had friends there who were artists who felt they could only really perfect their art or develop by moving to New York and associating with other artists.

BEN SHAHN: I believe that.

FORREST SELVIG: You do?

BEN SHAHN: Yes. My own youngest daughter was at Reed College in Oregon, and when we were going off to the Orient we stopped by San Francisco for two weeks, it was Christmas time, and she came down and spent the time with us. And then while we were aboard ship we received a cable saying "Have quit Reed and am now at California School of Fine Arts." It was pointing that way and it didn't bother me. It bothered my wife a little bit because she comes from a very academic family; both her parents taught in the university, and so on. And then when we came back about six months later she was right in the middle of it and she was going to have an exhibition at the City Lights, you know, the poet –

FORREST SELVIG: Sure. The bookstore.

BEN SHAHN: Yes. She did. And she sold out every single thing she did at ten and five dollars. But it was very good. And then she stayed on in San Francisco and from letters and so on I began to...And she came home for a summer and she looked a wreck. She said she was out with two boys and they got into a fight and she had to take one to the hospital so she just had time to make the plane and so on. So I couldn't say "I don't like these intellectual longshoremen that hang around art schools where girls are." And I wanted to get her East. So I said, "If you're going to be an artist, Abby, you'd better come where the competition is absolutely the strongest. In San Francisco third-rate passes for first." I was very overwhelmed by San Francisco as a city but I began to look around at the so-called art activities. But I couldn't say anything about intellectual longshoremen or anything like that and I made one appeal to her. She was very taken with antique shops and Center Street has five blocks of antique shops. I said, "Abby, Third Avenue has 150 blocks of antique

shops.” Then I made out her check for her tuition and plane and her board and everything. I said, “Now you can do whatever you want.” And she stayed East.

FORREST SELVIG: And she’s very happy I’m sure.

BEN SHAHN: Oh, yes. Oh, she has a yen to go out there for a visit again to recall her youth. So I believe in that. I believe that the more artists there are the more good art will come out if it, you see. In a period when hundreds of studios were functioning, say, in Florence a great deal of art rose out of that. Of course, it was mostly art – I have a neighbor who is a carpenter. When he is sent home on a rainy day his wife won’t let him in to the house unless he changes his clothes, his shoes, she’s one of those compulsive housekeepers. So he used to come over here and sit in an old armchair with the wadding coming out of the arms. And he’d build himself a fire. It happened generally in winter, you know, when the weather was bad. And he’d take a look at my table and say, “Is this stock or an order?” There was a time when all art was on order, you know. When the Dutch discovered the East Indies and were pulling fortunes out of there then they had paintings of a man counting his gold practically and so on. His environment, which was glorious. And the meals, incredible still lifes and so on. And when the Church was the patron you had something else. When princes were the patrons you had something else and so on. Whether you like it or not I always have felt, as I’ve said before, that the artist does respond to his patronages. There’s absolutely no doubt of it. Though he may have reservations about it.

FORREST SELVIG: Getting back to you, though, in relation to something like that, you express your opinions in your paintings and the people who buy your paintings I presume are not necessarily in sympathy with the expressions?

BEN SHAHN: I have found only two collectors that made me wonder why they collected my work. I found them completely unsympathetic. And one was a woman who when she was divorced and remarried sold her whole collection to the Modern Museum – about four paintings that she had of mine and everything else she owned. But I was glad of that because I couldn’t see what she saw in my painting. She was a very sort of lacquered piece of humanity. No, I think most of them are – I don’t expect everybody to share my immediate political views. Say, I would support McCarthy but basically I think we share a great many views.

FORREST SELVIG: But what I’m trying to say is you are not working for a patron exactly? You in your case you’re making your statement –

BEN SHAHN: I create my patronage I think. Yes. I’ve done a lot of work like portraits for *Time*. And I think the last one I did was King or – what was the other one? – Sargent Shriver. But the first one they asked me to do to break that pattern of theirs was Malraux. I’ll never forget it. I brought it in. And it was a fairly large canvas that I made. And the editor’s office was surrounded with the originals of all those covers they’ve had, all in the same size. And he gulped when he saw my painting. And I didn’t care. I was going to do what I wanted to do and so on. And then Sunday afternoon he called me and he said, “Have you had your cocktail yet?” And I said, “No, I don’t have cocktails regularly at all.” And I said, what is it? He said, “Oh, it’s passed the editorial board!” And this was a real break for them. And since then a lot of other people have done good things for them. This man David Levine did superb things. A number of others have done very good covers for them. But I broke the pattern of it anyway. But I do those as if I’m doing something myself. My aesthetic arteries have hardened by now. There isn’t any danger that they’re going to be affected one way or another.

FORREST SELVIG: And they would know enough not to try to influence you anyway, I’m sure?

BEN SHAHN: Oh, no. No, they wouldn't. They may not use it but they wouldn't try to influence me.

FORREST SELVIG: Talking about Rivera, and Rivera certainly is an example of someone also who has art as a vehicle.

BEN SHAHN: Well, he did completely. Mine isn't complete at all. I've done things that are....Right behind you is this silly owl that I've drawn there. This is going to be a gift. I'm going to make a set of prints to give it to Channel 13. They'll sell them. They'll raise fifteen or twenty thousand dollars. It'll be a lithograph on very fine paper and so on. Well, this hardly makes any comment.

FORREST SELVIG: That's true.

BEN SHAHN: And I just made a poster for my own show which is being printed. It's a very funny drawing of an acrobat balancing himself very precariously on a tricycle. Which is a rather silly idea.

FORREST SELVIG: I remember the San Francisco Symphony when I lived there had a cover for a program which was music stands done by you.

BEN SHAHN: Yes. Well, I hope they did it with permission because a lot of my work has been lifted. But then I've illustrated books, a number of them. This particular drawing of *The Silent Music* it's called or whatever – it's had different names – a friend of mine, a novelist, a very socially-conscious man, came in and saw that drawing and he looked at me as if I was deserting him. And my wife saved the situation. She said, "Don't you know what that is?" His name is also Ben. "That's Local 802 on strike." Now I've included that is something I've written. He's been furious at me ever since. He denies ever having said it although of course he had said it, you know, or my wife wouldn't have been provoked to say "This is Local 802...." She's a very sharp, witty woman and sometimes you don't know what hit you in something she says. There was a period when the F.B.I. came to see me regularly – that was before the Unamerican Activities Committee. This is the lovely part of living in this country. I was summoned by the Unamerican Activities Committee and that day U.S.I.A. which publishes a magazine for Russia called *Amerika*, you know, all in Russian, had about ten pages of my work in it. They were boasting about it. But the Unamerican Activities Committee was going to do anything they could to me. There was nothing they could do to me. I have never been a Communist. My sin was having signed endless petitions. Well, the F.B.I. used to come pretty regularly to the house here. And one day I kept them here. They didn't dare leave while I was talking, you know, and I began to talk on the most obscure things and they were restless as hell, they wanted to get out. And then out youngest kid, she was still in school here, came in for lunch and I introduced her. I said, these are the real F.B.I. not the television F.B.I. and then I asked them if they'd have a drink and they said, "Oh, no, no," I said, "Won't you sit down with us? We're going to have lunch now." They said no, no. Then my wife whispered to one of them, "Remember nothing I've said to you is to be held in confidence." And he said, "Of course, Mrs. Shahn, of course." And the other guy heard her and he said, "Didn't you hear what she said?" Well, she would do these slight provocations.

FORREST SELVIG: But the Unamerican Activities Committee was interested in you because of your involvement in signing all these petitions?

BEN SHAHN: Yes, involvement in petitions, and caricatures I made of presidents. When Eisenhower was running – and he was in office at the time they called me – I had done a drawing which was used all over. While he was running for office – because I was strongly for Stevenson – I made a drawing of a rearing horse with Eisenhower on top of it and it said beware of the man on the white horse. And then on every part of the horse I put the name of a senator I didn't like. And on the

horse's rear I put McCarthy and so on. Well, I was for Wallace in 1948. And I knew that he'd not get much attention in his first press conference so I made a big painting of Truman at the piano, and Dewey across the piano like Lauren Bacall. There was such a photograph taken of them, you know. Well, they brought all these things out, you know, that I had done. "Did you do these?" Of course I did these. I am rather proud of them. And they were very disappointed. They wanted me to give them names so they could say, "Look we have fifty more names." Then when they asked for the funds, you know... And I just wasn't going to talk. "I'll tell you everything about myself but nothing about anybody else." And the poor Unamerican Activities Committee – this was a hearing – not an open hearing –

FORREST SELVIG: In camera.

BEN SHAHN: In camera. And Walters issued a press release but Eisenhower took it all over because the press showed him – this was when our pictures were being sent to Russia if you remember in 1958 and 1959 –

FORREST SELVIG: Yes, I do.

BEN SHAHN: Yes. And Eisenhower was shown a picture of Jack Levine's *Homecoming of The General* or something. And he said, "Well, this isn't what I think of generals." When my dealer was asked about it she said, "Well, a lot of Americans don't like the way Mr. Eisenhower paints." But they picked that up and they thought they'd call me, you know.

FORREST SELVIG: That was Edith Halpert.

BEN SHAHN: Edith Halpert, yes.

FORREST SELVIG: In fact, weren't there a number of paintings that were withdrawn from that exhibition?

BEN SHAHN: No. You're confusing it with another show. In 1946 there were a lot of requests from various Embassies and Consulates to have paintings there that were contemporary. We used to send them reproductions of portraits of Washington and things like that. I think Marshall was then secretary of state and I forget the guy's name, he was asked to get the collection together. When he came and saw me we gave him a fantastically low price because this was a thing to encourage. And while it was at sea the Hearst papers went after it. See it was shown at the Metropolitan Museum, the whole collection, and it was called to the attention of the press, naturally. And while at sea they recalled it and they sold it then and they got much more money for it than they paid for it.

FORREST SELVIG: It was recalled because the Hearst Papers said there were some Communist artists in the show?

BEN SHAHN: Yes. I remember there was a little painting of mine in it which was a gentle little thing and originally was no bigger than this. And they ran it across the whole page. And then a funny thing happened at the same time. *Town and Country* asked me to make a cover. And I made a very bright cover I think. I just painted the whole thing yellow and then little figures that size on a tennis court in white. You recognized the heat of August, you know, and playing tennis. And when I brought it in the Art Director said, "Oh," – we never discussed price- "we have a very small circulation though it's a high toned magazine. We don't pay more than \$350 for a cover." I said, "Well, that's all right." And I packed it up and started to walk out with it. And when I was in the hall I said, "My God, this is the same publisher who publishes the *Journal American*. And it would please

me to no end to be attacked on the one hand – and I came back very shamefacedly and said, “Oh, well, since I have it here let’s forget the price.” And so on and so forth. I was very embarrassed to bring it back but in the hallway it occurred to me that this is the same publisher. And those little paradoxes just fascinate me. The same as the C.I.A. publishing that big spread on me in their journal that they send to Russia on the same day I’m before the Unamerican Activities Committee.

[Interruption]

BEN SHAHN: [Discussing Rockefeller Center and the Rivera mural] It was the pit of the Depression but traditionally the renting agents rent twenty percent on blue-print, thirty-five percent on the steel, you know, and forty-five percent on the exterior shell, and so on. And they weren’t doing anything like that. They wanted an out. And they went to his father, John Rockefeller, and said we can’t rent it because of the Communist mural. But they thought he would say well, you can’t touch the mural. There was a Medici arrangement there. It was fantastic.

FORREST SELVIG: In other words, Rivera was hired by –

BEN SHAHN: By John Rockefeller, not by the architects.

FORREST SELVIG: And John Rockefeller knew what kind of things Rivera painted.

BEN SHAHN: Of course! Of course! He saw them. And Nelson saw them. And so on. And when these agents wanted an out they thought he would never consent to its removal. And he consented to its removal. Well, they were in a spot. And they went around and raided all the other buildings. The realtors who handled it had many suits on their hands. They would go into the – what’s the building where the first Modern Museum was on 57th Street, just in an office building? – the Beckcher Building – they went in there and they said we have these beautiful new quarters. But I’ve got three more years on my lease. We’ll take care of that. They just emptied office buildings.

FORREST SELVIG: I see, in order to fill this up?

BEN SHAHN: Yes. You know they can be just as brutal as anybody in the world. Business is business.

FORREST SELVIG: It was pretty darn brave I would say of the Rockefellers to commission Rivera to do something like this.

BEN SHAHN: I’ll tell you why they did it. This was the time when Mexico was going to expropriate American oil.

FORREST SELVIG: Aha!

BEN SHAHN: Aha. And Rivera painted a mural in the home of our ambassador who was then the father of Lindbergh’s wife.

FORREST SELVIG: Morrow.

BEN SHAHN: Yes. And one of the things he painted there was Rockefeller with a plate of dimes before him eating them, you know. And you know Mrs. Rockefeller ordered a copy of that for her own collection. They were ass licking. You know the Metropolitan Museum put on the first exhibition of Mexican art in 1931. Rene D’Harnoncourt set that up. Then they had an Orozco, a big panel at the Modern Museum. And this was part of the soft soaping, you know, of the Mexican Government,

that they knew were interested in art and so on really. It didn't help. They did expropriate the oil. But this was one of the tries, you see. And that's why he was asked to do that mural. For no other reason. Because the architects fought it down the line. They didn't want it.

FORREST SELVIG: I see. It's still in the building, but it's covered up isn't it?

BEN SHAHN: No, it's torn down because the last time I had dinner with Nelson I said, "Nelson, you can answer or not as you want. Was the mural covered or was it destroyed?" He said it was destroyed.

FORREST SELVIG: Because I thought I had heard that it was covered up.

BEN SHAHN: No. No. It was destroyed. See this thing was stopped in May. And what happened there – it's too long a story. When Diego told me stories about his own history, you know, I got to the point where I said to myself, oh, crap, you know. And I didn't share his painting ideas or anything else. We used to have long arguments about it. But I wanted to learn the trade of fresco and he was a good craftsman. So what happened was so startling it was unbelievable. Within an hour the building was surrounded by mounted police after we were stopped. We were pulled away. We had fixed scaffolding and they gave us a movable scaffolding. I was on the scaffold with Diego when that happened. They just came and pulled us away. The other guys were out to supper. Anyway on a February day of 1934, which was the coldest day we had, it was fourteen below in New York. And we lived in a whole house but it had no heating system. We had stoves and gas radiators and everything else. And I was called at two in the morning. I remember going to the phone and somebody said do you know that the mural you worked on with Rivera is being knocked off now, you know just chipped off the wall. I said no! Have you any comment? And that's when I opened my mouth first and stuck my foot in and it's been there ever since. I said this is typical Rockefeller vandalism. That was all. I went back to sleep. Oh, well, there are so many God damn stories about that that are fantastic.

FORREST SELVIG: But still it's interesting. You mention the difference between you and Rivera. Yet both you and Rivera –

BEN SHAHN: Are coupled often.

FORREST SELVIG: Yes.

BEN SHAHN: I'm coupled with Chagall. I don't share anything with Chagall.

FORREST SELVIG: I wouldn't see you in company with Chagall.

BEN SHAHN: Oh, endlessly, yes. Particularly in Jewish conscience groups, you know.

FORREST SELVIG: Well, you're both Jewish. I mean –

BEN SHAHN: Yes. Some woman wrote her doctorate on me and Roth, who had written a book *Call It Sleep* which was a failure when she wrote it in 1934 and then it was picked up as a paperback and became a howling success thirty some years later. It was a thick thing she sent to me and she hadn't a work of her own in it. It was all "ibid" a certain author "ibid" she was quoted all the time. She must have used my name 150 times throughout it. And she attached a little note to the ream of paper saying, "Dear Mr. Shawn, (S-H-A-W-N) you might be interested in reading this."

FORREST SELVIG: You were married to Ruth Draper. Dennis Shawn and Ruth Draper. That is

incredible.

BEN SHAHN: I get these requests almost daily, somebody is writing a paper on me and they ask me a few questions which it would take me three months to answer if I answered them conscientiously. Sometimes I write back. Sometimes I don't bother to answer. When I write back I say you'd better write your own paper. You don't want me to write your paper for you.

FORREST SELVIG: There's a great deal of interest growing, renewed interest in – there are more exhibitions coming up, aren't there?

BEN SHAHN: Yes.

FORREST SELVIG: Of your work all the time.

BEN SHAHN: Yes.

FORREST SELVIG: There's a wonderful one in Philadelphia. I thought it was wonderful.

BEN SHAHN: Yes, I thought it was a good show.

FORREST SELVIG: I didn't see it; I saw the catalogue.

BEN SHAHN: It was very well hung. It was refreshingly hung. You know recent exhibitions have been really more like designed things so that you don't have to move your head and there are no reflections. Here there were reflections and you almost had to move your head to see it sometimes.

FORREST SELVIG: But you know, for instance, they illustrated in the catalogue the words – I don't know if it's Sacco or Vanzetti that said them.

BEN SHAHN: Vanzetti, yes.

FORREST SELVIG: Who? Was it Sacco who said that?

BEN SHAHN: Vanzetti.

FORREST SELVIG: And that was so beautiful.

BEN SHAHN: Oh, well, those works are – I call them immortal words.

FORREST SELVIG: They are. They're just beautiful.

BEN SHAHN: They're used in our English books now and so on. Sacco refused to learn English all the years he was in jail, he was seven years in jail. But Vanzetti did. Some people have claimed that it wasn't his – the writing or something. Or his words. But a few years ago something had arisen again on the Sacco-Vanzetti case and a sister in Italy wrote a letter which when translated read just like that, you know. Because there's an expression in Italian that when translated sounds rather pompous almost, you know.

FORREST SELVIG: Yes. And also wasn't there an Italian company that was doing a movie on the Sacco-Vanzetti case within the last five or six years?

BEN SHAHN: Yes. Yes, and I met the director of it on a boat coming to this country. He had written a play which had been circulating in Italy for over a year and a half. And he was going out to

Hollywood to do a movie. I don't know whatever happened to it. But there was a TV show on it, a two-part TV show. I have a death mask of both of them and I gave them to this Italian.

FORREST SELVIG: You gave them to him?

BEN SHAHN: Yes. I can get others.

FORREST SELVIG: You know, Mr. Shahn, it would be impossible for anyone in America to think about Sacco and Vanzetti without seeking in it the terms that you portray.

BEN SHAHN: The images that I...Yes, that's true. I'll tell you one absolutely disconnected story about art historianship. Paul Sachs liked my work very much and he came in to buy something particularly drawings, prints, at the gallery. One day he came in and I had made at the request of *The Nation* magazine a cover for the 25th anniversary of their execution, which was in 1952. And about 1956 I saw it lying around and I had it framed and brought it in. Now Mrs. Halpert used to insist on dates. I never dated my own work. So on the back of the picture they generally marked the date. Well, Paul Sachs came in. He was very excited about this drawing and he wanted to buy it. So John Marin, John Marin's son, worked there. And he asked him when was that done. And John just looked at the back of it and said "1952." Which I had told him when I brought it in. And Paul said, "No, 1925." Well, who's going to argue with Paul Sachs? So he just crossed it out. And then a few years later when I came up to Harvard to do those lectures, and we had to stay there all year, they put on a big show of mine at the Fogg. And they sent the galleys of the catalogue down to me. And I saw it marked 1925. So I corrected it. Had I not caught it, nobody in the world – I couldn't have argued against Paul Sachs, you see.

FORREST SELVIG: Not even you who created it.

BEN SHAHN: No, I couldn't have. Nobody would believe it against the scholarship of Paul Sachs.

FORREST SELVIG: Right.

BEN SHAHN: But I just crossed it out and corrected it.

FORREST SELVIG: That whole series on Sacco and Vanzetti the prints must all be –

BEN SHAHN: There were no prints. There were just the originals. There were just prints I made after I made that cut, you see.

END OF INTERVIEW

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