

ORAL HISTORY INTERVIEW  
LOUIS SIROTKIN  
OF THE  
JOHN REED CLUB

INTERVIEWED BY  
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SPORN: Places that we could start, usefully, is a discussion, of some conversation about what you recall about cultural activities, at that time. Because, obviously, that's what you seem to have been interested in, and also, actively, doing something about. As we said in the car coming over here culture always seems to be something that people think is a very significant factor in the life of society. And, that's been true of politically oriented people also, perhaps, more so of politically oriented people than anyone else. So, at that time, what was the purpose of organizing these meetings?

SIROTKIN: Well, from what I can recall, it seems that it was to provide those individuals, who were either writing, or interested in literature, or readers of literature, or who were aware of, or beginning to be concerned about, the social and political situation during the depression years, possibly, were looking for answers, of some kind, that . . . as I said, searching for some way of explaining, or helping them in their search for some solutions.

SPORN: To the social and political problems?

SIROTKIN: Political problems, economic problems. The meetings would generally revolve around discussions pertaining to the impact of the Depression, of the economic situation.

SPORN: The impact on just anyone, or . . .

SIROTKIN: In general, yes. One the social effect. There was, of course, a considerable interest in the Marxist approach to literature, and to writing. Also, considerable interest in working class problems, and how those could be identified.

SPORN: But, this was done within the context of this cultural manifestation, and it's literary manifestation?

SIROTKIN: Yes.

SPORN: Or written and thinking form. You say, these were discussions? What was the format of it? Did someone come in to speak? Like a writer, who might've been invited from the outside to come to speak, and then, after making an address to the group, were there . . .

SIROTKIN: It would be open . . .

SPORN: Open discussion periods?

SIROTKIN: . . . discussion, questions, and discussion groups. I can't, at this time, recall who some of these writers were.

SPORN: Well, do you recall, even vaguely, what some of the discussions were about? Would you say that there were parts of the audience that were in serious disagreement, with what a speaker might've said?

SIROTKIN: I think so. I think there were times there, if the speaker had a strong view, as far as a Marxist approach to literature; that there were probably certain members of the audience who would question this and had strong . . .

SPORN: Can you remember any specific incidents, or any specific questioning, or disagreement?

SIROTKIN: I doubt I can.

SPORN: Do you remember any interesting, amusing, or dramatically problematical ways of organizing these meetings that stick in your mind about those years?

SIROTKIN: I'm afraid not. Sorry I can't be of . . .

SPORN: That's alright. Sometimes . . .

SIROTKIN: . . . help to you in that area.

SPORN: Now, what time span are we speaking of?

SIROTKIN: Well, this would be a period from about 1932 completely through the thirties.

SPORN: The entire period?

SIROTKIN: Yes, from the thirties. Yes. The entire period, yes.

SPORN: And, the audience that you reached would . . . How would you describe it?

SIROTKIN: Well, they would consist of persons who were just interested in literature, or interested in writing, who may not have published any work. Some of them may have still been students at Wayne University. Some were . . . Some people would occasionally introduce some individuals from the Wayne University English Department. Some of their students would attend. And, I think, I mentioned to you the names of John Malcolm Brinnin and Kimon Friar. There was another . . .

SPORN: How do you spell that Friar? F-r . . .

SIROTKIN: F-r-i-a-r.

SPORN: Is that one of his books?

SIROTKIN: This is one of his books.

SPORN: Kimon Friar, right?

SIROTKIN: Yeah. In fact, I think he also may have translated some of Euripides

SIROTKIN: poetry.

SPORN: Oh, yeah?

SIROTKIN: He may have. His speciality has been the Greek, and his speciality Greek writers.

SPORN: Kimon Friar is Greek?

SIROTKIN: Kimon Friar is Greek, yes. Another name that I recall, is a person by the name of Jack Thompson. Now, whether he did any writing, I don't know.

SPORN: He came from the English department?

SIROTKIN: No, no. No, but, I understand he's teaching somewhere. Throughout some university in the east now. But, he was in this . . . Not in the group that I was involved in, but knew some of these other writers.

SPORN: Like, J. Malcolm Brinnin?

SIROTKIN: Yes, right.

SPORN: I see.

SIROTKIN: Now, there are some other people that may know some other information. And, if you're interested in their names, I'll be glad to mention them.

SPORN: Sure, of course. You mentioned a name during lunch.

SIROTKIN: The poetress. Anne Marie Persov.

SPORN: Okay. Persov. P-e-r . . .

SIROTKIN: S-o-v. Or s-o-f-f-. I'm not certain, but it may've been s-o-v.

SPORN: And, you're not sure where she is?

SIROTKIN: Whether she's still alive, I don't know. But, she was writing poetry, and I think, and published some poems at the time.

SPORN: And, you suspect that she may have been connected to the Federal Artists Project?

SIROTKIN: She may have.

SPORN: But, you're not sure?

SIROTKIN: No. I'm not sure of that.

SPORN: And, there's this Adrian McGill.

SIROTKIN: Adrian McGill, right. Now, there's some other individuals who may have information about other writers that would often attend some of these lectures and meetings. There was a woman by the name of Mendleson. Her married name now is Tate.

SPORN: Duva Tate?

SIROTKIN: Duva Tate. Yeah, she's living in this area now. I don't think she did any writing. But, she may have certain . . .

SPORN: She was interested in writing?

SIROTKIN: Another person is John Gilbrath. Now, John did not do any writing that I know of, but he knew some of these people, too. He was also living in this area.

SPORN: Now, in coming to organize these meetings, you say, that these meetings were around throughout the thirties? That would be a stretch of ten years, you're speaking of?

SIROTKIN: Yes. Well, I . . .

SPORN: So, this was a very serious endeavor?

SIROTKIN: Well, I don't think that these lectures, meetings, were going on for that long of time. I would think that, possibly, four or five years, perhaps.

SPORN: Would you think more of, let's say, the first half of the thirties, second half of the thirties, or the middle stretch of the thirties?

SIROTKIN: I think it would probably be the middle stretch, probably, from 1932 to 1936. I think that it might be the period, that I was involved.

SPORN: In those days, at least, certainly, around 1936, there were many people concerned with the rise of fascism.

SIROTKIN: Yes.

SPORN: And, I know that in New York City, and elsewhere, many cultural meetings were organized, open to the general public, on the relationship between fascism, and writing and fascism, and art and fascism, and this and fascism.

SIROTKIN: Yes.

SPORN: Whatever aspect of cultural output one could think about. But, many such meetings held . . . Do you recall if any of the themes of your meetings had to do with the questions of war and fascism and their relationship to art?

SIROTKIN: There may have, but I just can't remember any specifics. It was most likely true, but . . .

SPORN; Were there . . . Did you organize things all by yourself, or were there other people that you worked with?

SIROTKIN: No, no. Not . . . I worked separately.

SPORN: You mentioned Saul Sniderman. He's one person who helped you to organize these meetings? Or . . .

SIROTKIN: He may have. I'm really not sure. But, this would be the same groups that were involved, more or less, in the John Reed Club.

SPORN: I see.

SIROTKIN: In other words, the Contemporary Theatre, all the cultural . . . All left wing cultural groups were centered. In fact, I think, there was one in New York City at the time, in the thirties.

SPORN: John Reed Club?

SIROTKIN: John Reed Club.

SPORN: Oh, yeah, there was.

SIROTKIN: Yes.

SPORN: There was a John Reed Club.

SIROTKIN: Yes, right.

SPORN: New York was the one, and Chicago, and . . .

SIROTKIN: So, this was this focus, or the central point. Artist group, dance group, theatre group, writer's group.

SPORN: As I recall, the John Reed Clubs were phased out when the question of fascism became the most central political question. And, when that happened, at least on the left, at least on the part of the Communist Party, the stress became united front, rather than . . .

SIROTKIN: Yes.

SPORN: . . . what was felt to be a fairly narrow approach with say, John Reed. The John Reed Clubs. And so on. I think, if I'm not mistaken, '35 was sort of . . .

SIROTKIN: Well. That may be. I wasn't sure of the dates.

SPORN: It may be earlier than '36.

SIROTKIN: That might be.

SPORN: And finally, the John Reed Clubs were phased out. Incidentally, much to the unhappiness to a number of people. Richard Wright writes about that. He belonged to the Writers' Project.

SIROTKIN: Oh, yes. In Chicago, yes, I remember.

SPORN: And, he was one of those who felt puzzled . . .

SIROTKIN: Sure.

SPORN: . . . why phase out something that they felt very strongly about?

SIROTKIN: Sure, yes.

SPORN: And, were very fond of. So, you would say that . . . Was it the John Reed Club that was, basically, behind . . .

SIROTKIN: Yes.

SPORN: . . . these kinds of meetings, and so on, and so forth? So, then, by '35, '36, they were over?

SIROTKIN: Well, if you have those dates, I would think that's probably true.

SPORN: Well, that strikes me as those are the . . .

SIROTKIN: Yes.

SPORN: . . . those are the dates.

SIROTKIN: Yes.

SPORN: Now. In the John Reed Club, as I understand it, at first, there were writers, dance groups. I think we mentioned that.

SIROTKIN: Yeah.

SPORN: Theatre group . . .

SIROTKIN: And artists.

SPORN: And artists.

SIROTKIN: Right.

SPORN: But then, the Contemporary Theatre people told me that they separated from them. Not because of any particular disagreements, but simple because it was too unwieldy organizationally to keep all these people doing . . .

SIROTKIN: Sure.

SPORN: . . . what they had to do. At one point, I believe over 28 East Warren, or West Warren, whatever Warren, the Contemporary Theatre had a studio, where they did their rehearsals, and I was told, by Minnie Gossman in fact, that she would run off to the Contemporary Theatre studio, and her husband, her husband at that time . . .

SIROTKIN: Her first husband was an artist. Maurice . . .

SPORN: Maurice Merlin.

SIROTKIN: Merlin.

SPORN: Would dash up in to the art studio, and in fact, I think it was Leo Mogill who told me, that if you weren't careful, as you were on your way up to the Contemporary Theatre, you might be caught by one of these art people, and would have to serve as a model for them while they were drawing or painting.

SIROTKIN: Yes.

SPORN: Do you remember any of that? Was that anything you were involved in?

SIROTKIN: No. I don't recall. But, I mean, I was aware of the activities, of these various groups, but the relationships, I don't : . . .

SPORN: I see. It sounded like it was very exciting to me.

SIROTKIN: Yes, it was.

SPORN: They had a dance studio up there, and . . .

SIROTKIN: Yes. In a sense, there was times when some of the dancers . . . There were some New York dancers that lived in Detroit, were with the Detroit group for a while.

SPORN: Some . . . Who?

SIROTKIN: In fact, one was Edith Segal, who's done some work on children's books, I understand.

SPORN: She was a choreographer, for a period of time, for the Contemporary Theatre, and I'm going to see her in New York. I've spoken to her. I've written to her, and I've spoken over the phone.

SIROTKIN: I see.

SPORN: And, I have an appointment to see her on Septmeber 11.

SIROTKIN: Have you talked to anyone else who was in the dance group?

SPORN: No-one else . . .

SIROTKIN: Blanche Shafarman was very active in it. She might give you . . .

SPORN: Blanche Shafarman?

SIROTKIN: Shafarman, right.

SPORN: Is she here in Detroit?

SIROTKIN: Yes. Her husband is a doctor. Eugene Shafarman.

SPORN: Oh. And, you know she's definately here and still alive?

SIROTKIN: Yeah. Right, right.

SPORN: I hate to ask these questions, but . . .

SIROTKIN: No, no. I know. I . . .

SPORN: One of the things I suggested in my proposal, is that we'd better carry this out soon, otherwise . . .

SIROTKIN : Right. No, she was very active in the dance group. You might call her up.

SPORN: Oh, well, I'll try to get in touch with her.

SIROTKIN: There was another dancer from New York who was . . .



SPORN: Who lived here for a while?

SIROTKIN: Yes. And another . . . The composer Alex North was in Detroit, doing some work down there, it seems to me. That name familiar to you?

SPORN: Not Alex North, but when you say composer, I did come across a . . . Someone who, I was told, was a young composer here, who did some of the scores for, perhaps, The Cradle Will Rock when it was put on here. Let me see if I can locate that information quickly, you know.

SIROTKIN: It was either Alex North, or the brother. The name's familiar.

SPORN: I got some of this material from somebody in the Contemporary Theatre. Let me see. Here's a program. It's for presentations by the Contemporary down in Toledo. Here's The Cradle Will Rock. Musical Direction, Carl Miller. So, that's not the same person. "Piano accompaniment, by Carl Miller, and Norma Kroll." who, I'm sure, must be of the Kroll family.

SIROTKIN: Norma Kroll, that name is . . . Now, there's a Ben Kroll in town, who's an artist.

SPORN: I spoke to him yesterday.

SIROTKIN: Yeah?

SPORN: Yes.

SIROTKIN: He was in the artist group.

SPORN: Yeah. He was never in the Federal Arts Project.

SIROTKIN: Oh, he wasn't?

SPORN: No.

SIROTKIN: I'm sorry.

SPORN: Because, he told me that, when he graduated from Wayne, he got a teaching job with some art department in a high school.

SIROTKIN: Oh.

SPORN: So, he didn't qualify. In order to get on to the Federal Writers' Project, one also had to be on the relief roles.

SIROTKIN: Yes.

SPORN: On the relief roles.

SIROTKIN: There was another person in the Contemporary Theatre, a Shepard, James Shepard. And he's living in New York, I think.

SPORN: Yeah.

SIROTKIN: Well, Minna Gossman would know some of the names, which I . . .

SPORN: Well, she gave me some.

SIROTKIN: There's a Rose Nidhmin. She's living in Cleveland.

SPORN: Cleveland. That I pretty well have, because, of course, I spoke to Charlotte Shapiro.

SIROTKIN: Oh, yeah. Well, that's right. Charlotte would have that.

SPORN: And, I spoke to a number of the other people.

SIROTKIN: Yes.

SPORN: In fact, in California, I also spoke to a person . . . Faygabeth Henry Wolfson. I don't know if you ever heard of her. She was in the Contemporary Theatre for about a year.

SIROTKIN: Faygabeth? Yeah, I know. Well, of course, Maurice Sugar was very active in the labor movement.

SPORN: Yes.

SIROTKIN: His name's probably familiar to you.

SPORN: Yeah.

SIROTKIN: And, he wrote some adaptations for some of these labor songs.

SPORN: Right. And, a number of those . . .

SIROTKIN: And "Soup Song" is a misnomer.

SPORN: Yeah. And, a number of those things are in the Reuther Archives, by the way. And, but, I do want to go through his material a little more carefully, and I can't remember what it is, but somebody thought that a good source of information on him would be Ernie Goodman.

SIROTKIN: Yes.

SPORN: Some of the names that I've been able to pull out of the archives, Mary Barrett, I told you about. Some of these are administrators. But, let me run through them. Maybe you know about them. Dr. Eghbert Isbell? He was state director for about a year, then Mrs. Cecil R. Chittenden, whom I spoke to you about earlier.

SIROTKIN: Yes.

SPORN: Estelle Wolfe?

SIROTKIN: Estelle Wolfe?

SPORN: Yeah. She was a photographer. Ralph Goll? G-o-l-l. He was a reporter. William F. Young, I mentioned to you. Arthur Clifford, Woody Jarvis, and John D. Newson was state director for a while. Ralph R. Wayne? Rebecca Rathmer? R-a-t-h-m-e-r-. Arthur D. Graeff.

SPORN: Lucy Williamson? Rudolf Jacob? A lot of people in . . .

SIROTKIN: I know.

SPORN: James Strasburg? Leon Cousens?

SIROTKIN: Leon Cousens, that name . . .

SPORN: C-o-u-s-e-n-s?

SIROTKIN: Yes. Leon Cousens. Was he in the Writers' Project?

SPORN: Yes, he was the . . .

SIROTKIN: Oh, is that right? Yes.

SPORN: He was the ethnology editor. At least, in March 31, 1936.

SIROTKIN: I don't think Leon is living. I don't believe so. His wife is though. And, whether or not she's remarried, I don't know. Yes, right. I remember.

SPORN: Is he a writer?

SIROTKIN: I can't . . .

SPORN: But, he was on the . . . Apparently he was a writer, because . . .

SIROTKIN: Apparently he was, and I didn't remember. But, I remember . . .

SPORN: . . . His name came up in some of this correspondence in some of these archive records. He was the ethnology editor.

SIROTKIN: Yes.

SPORN: J.E. Wells? T.H. Hewlett? J. Marshall? Donald Houghton? E.H. Latham? Maxine Finsterwald?

SIROTKIN: Yes, I remember Maxine Finsterwald, yes. Yes.

SPORN: Do you know if she's still around?

SIROTKIN: I don't know if she was a member of that . . . It was a well known family in the city.

SPORN: Finsterwald?

SIROTKIN: Finsterwald family. And, she was part of that family. They were in the Griswold furniture business.

SPORN: Oh.

SIROTKIN: But, whether she's still around, I don't know.

SPORN: Someone, I don't know his first name, but, his last name is Briley. Briley? Ruth Crawford?

SIROTKIN: That name is familiar, but I can't . . . I'm not sure.

SPORN: Ralph Montgomery? Well, I'll have to check those people out, and I'll just look them up in the phone book, and see if I can't find them. One of the first ways to go back is . . .

SIROTKIN: There was a chap in the group who was doing some writing. I never saw any of his work. His name was James Lindahl. But, whether or not that was a pseudonym, I'm not sure.

SPORN: He used that name at that time?

SIROTKIN: He used that name, but whether he was writing under that name, I don't know.

SPORN: James . . .

SIROTKIN: Lindahl. L-i-n--d-a-h-l. He said he was writing, and whether he did, I don't know.

SPORN: Well, it doesn't sound like a name one adopts for a pseudonym.

SIROTKIN: Well . . .

SPORN: But, you can never tell. Yeah. Well . . .

SIROTKIN: Well, at times, some people in the John Reed Club did take . . .

SPORN: Pseudonyms?

SIROTKIN: . . . pseudonyms. Particularly if they were employed somewhere. Didn't want to be identified with these . . .

SPORN: Are you suggesting that James Lindahl was part of the John Reed Club at one point?

SIROTKIN: Yes.

SPORN: And, was he also in the Writers' Project, then later?

SIROTKIN: I don't know.

SPORN: You don't know. But, you think he was a writer?

SIROTKIN: I think he was.

SPORN: Who functioned at that time?

SIROTKIN: Yes. I just mentioned that in passing.

SPORN: The . . . We were talking earlier about, or I mentioned to you that one of the things that I'm interested in is the problem, or problems caused by the Federal support of the arts in terms of bureaucratic functioning, in terms of political content, and so on. In the Federal Writers' Project, there were instances . . . One of the ideas behind this, let's say this, guide series that I mentioned to you before, was to write a guide, that was not just a tourist kind of thing, or a Badecker kind of thing. It wasn't meant to commercially promote tourism, although there was an attempt to, in fact, stimulate touring, touring in the United States. But, what these were meant to do was to present in as historically accurate way as

SPORN: possible, a picture of each state that would give full credit to all the various groups in existence. It wouldn't be one sided.

SIROTKIN: Yes.

SPORN: Give the sympathetic people, the working class, for example, ethnic groups within the state, and would also, not simply be a balanced view of the various peoples living in the state, but if there were things to be critical of, would be critical of. Certain things that had happened in various states. It was the 1930's, and so, there is a great deal of sympathy toward oppressed and submerged groups. An attempt to portray them in a more positive manner than had before. Along with that, of course, obviously, it went into the fact that some of the other groups would be portrayed less favorably.

SIROTKIN: Yes.

SPORN: Especially if there was, say, some contact between industry and labor, if they had just grievances, that's a sympathetic statement toward labor, but it's also an unsympathetic statement toward the honors of industries. Well, the principals of writing this guide series, was that that kind of thing should be done. But, then, problems immediately arose for the administrators because in some instances the administrators felt that too negative a picture was being given of the honors of industry, or certain politicians, and so on. So, they had to curve some of the things. And, had a lot of conflicts. Okay? That's the kind of thing that happened. One can understand. On the other side, there would be problems for artists in being artists, and at the same time presenting political points of view. From the political angle, it's always desirable, I suppose, to be as straight forward, and as clear, and direct as one can possibly be. But, sometimes, art doesn't function that way, or at least artists don't think it functions that way. Sometimes this material just had to be, or gets presented in a more indirect, more elusive way. So, that creates a conflict. Because . . . And, I, myself, have been involved in such debates. Why not say this, or say that, or the other thing? In fact, I believe it was Albert Maltz. I was interviewing him in California, who mentioned the story to me. He had written a play about a pacifist involved in an anti-war movement

SPORN: in the latter half of the 1930's. In the play, he had the pacifist say that he is opposed to all wars.

SIROTKIN: Yes.

SPORN: Well, listen, there was this tremendous critical debate around that one line in the play. And, all sorts of people criticized this might inadvertently give people the impression that no wars are any good. And, that would be politically wrong from that . . .

SIROTKIN: Sure.

SPORN: . . . point of view. From a Marxist point of view it's a politically wrong concept. So, there was a big debate about this. Now, he says he agrees that there are some just wars. Albert Maltz said so. But, what the people criticized and didn't understand was that he wasn't saying that, the pacifist, as a character in a play, and that's what a pacifist would say.

SIROTKIN: Yes. Sure.

SPORN: But, the more political people, the ones who, you know, were concerned, 'Well, that may be true, but still, the audience might walk out of here, somehow or other, identifying with that idea.' So, there was a conflict, you see, between presenting political material, and the artist who felt that he had to be true to the character he was presenting. The pacifist who would say that. Now, in your work with the '30's, or your own views about these matters, let's talk about that. You were interested in the arts, and said you yourself were not a writer, but, you enjoy what writers do, and take advantage of that. Obviously, you must have had some views, or at least some notion, about these problems that result from government sponsorship of art. Incidentally, the left fought for it.

SIROTKIN: Yes.

SPORN: But, of course, it's a government sponsorship by administrators, who basically are representatives of a specific kind of system.

SIROTKIN: Sure.

SPORN: No matter how liberal minded they may be. There's a point beyond which they really can not go and remain representatives of that government. So, on one hand, there's a problem and on the other there's the problem that I just mentioned. So . . .

SIROTKIN: Well, I was aware of this conflict, as you might call it, or dif-

SIROTKIN: ferences, but I just can't recall of any specific events or situations that involved these differences. I was aware of them, heard of them, some of them that would usually arise in cases like art work with certain pictorial, and you had this . . . visual image, whether it was a mural or painting done that was considered too radical or was surrounded by some sort of controversy. For instance, the Rivera murals, as you know.

SPORN: Yes.

SIROTKIN: There was considerable furor over political and other symbols that were used in there. Although, this was not a federally funded project, yet it was some other community or cultural act. Incidentally, there was a Canadian writer living in Detroit at the time, but was not involved in the Federal Works Project, named Leo Kennedy, who was a Canadian writer and poet. But, I don't know if he would know any of that. He's not living in this area any longer.

SPORN: Did he continue to write after he left here, or do you . . .

SIROTKIN: He was mainly involved in advertising. So, whether he did any writing at all, that . . . But, most of his creative writing was done when he was living in Canada as a poet.

SPORN: Did you, in that period, attend any of the Contemporary Theatre performances?

SIROTKIN: Yes.

SPORN: How would you characterize the audience? At the Detroit Institute of Art?

SIROTKIN: Well, they were held in various places. I can't remember just where.

SPORN: Well, for a period of time, they were held at the Detroit Institute of Art. I forget how many they put on a year, but they put on quite a few.

SIROTKIN: Yes.

SPORN: In fact, they considered it as seasons.

SIROTKIN: Yes.

SPORN: Leo told me a very interesting thing that after a point, the Contemporary Theatre decided to rent it's own auditorium, and put on performances there, rather than the Detroit Institute of Art. Thinking that in that way, they would open the door more to a working class audience. They said, in fact, that sort of closed the door.

SPORN: because very few people, working class people, came to this other place.

SIROTKIN: Yes, yes.

SPORN: Not that he thought very many came to the Detroit Institute of Art. But, in certain senses, a little more convenient, easier to get to than the other places less well known, and so on.

SIROTKIN: Yes.

SPORN: But, the . . . Would you want to venture a characterization of the audience at the Detroit Institute of Art? Or, don't you even recall?

SIROTKIN: I can't, I can't recall.

SPORN: Did you attend any of the Federal Theatre Project performances?

SIROTKIN: I don't recall any in Detroit. I remember some in New York that I attended. I didn't know that, remember that, they ran any Theatre Projects presented in Detroit.

SPORN: Yeah. I know for a fact they put on Living Newspaper.

SIROTKIN: Yeah, but, I thought it was a New York company.

SPORN: That came through?

SIROTKIN: Yeah. That was my impression. But, I don't know.

SPORN: Well, maybe so. But, I do know that they did have a Federal Theatre Project here.

SIROTKIN: Oh, they did?

SPORN: Oh, yes.

SIROTKIN: I see.

SPORN: Because I've met at least one person in the Federal Theatre Project.

SIROTKIN: Oh, I see.

SPORN: And who spoke to me. Gave me some information.

SIROTKIN: Oh,

SPORN: The plays they put on tended to be plays that were written by people in New York.

SIROTKIN: Yes.

SPORN: And which, frequently were first put on by the New York company.

SIROTKIN: Yeah. Oh, I see.

SPORN: And, then, rehearsed and put on by a local company.

SIROTKIN: Well, that's possible.

SPORN: So, I just wondered. So, I remember, when I was a very young boy



SPORN: going to a Federal Theatre Project performance in Cortona Park in the Bronx, when I lived in New York City. This performance was put on outside in the park. A truck or van would come into the park, and drop down one side of the van, and that would be the stage. And, they put on different kinds of performances. And, I remember seeing that. You don't remember?

SIROTKIN: No, no.

SPORN: Anything of that sort?

SIROTKIN: One of the writers that may have come to Detroit to talk before, may have been Alfred Hayes. I'm not certain, but it's a possibility.

SPORN: That's sort of a name that . . .

SIROTKIN: Yes. And, you're familiar with Alfred Hayes?

SPORN: Yes, sure, sure.

SIROTKIN: I think it's possible that he may have come here.

SPORN: Poetry, or a novel?

SIROTKIN: Right, right.

SPORN: He use to write for the "New Masses"?

SIROTKIN: Yes, yes.

SPORN: But, now, you spoke about you were aware that the government found some art works embarrassing to it, and tried to do something about it. You mentioned the Rivera murals, or something that caused a fuss here in town.

SIROTKIN: Yes.

SPORN: What about the other question? The problem between trying to produce art that is well crafted and, at the same time, clear in it's presentation as political issues.

SIROTKIN: Well, what seemed to me that that was one of the most serious problems for that period there. Any serious writers and artists were attempting to include some political working class, social content, That is, in the writing or the painting, became so self-conscious about it, that it seemed to be a strained effort rather than a free flowing creative work, which interfered with the quality of the work.

SPORN: Do you have any specific works in mind that struck you as being that way?

SIROTKIN: I wouldn't remember. Just it seems that this was a subject that

SIROTKIN: would often be discussed, and the subject of criticism,

SPORN: Oh, yes. It was frequently criticized.

SIROTKIN: Yes. But, I can't recall any specifics.

SPORN: One of the things that were very often discussed was this, what came to be known in the literature as the 'conversion' scene.

SIROTKIN: Oh?

SPORN: George Sklar, the playwright and novelist, described the formula for writing a play or a novel, let's say, of that period. And, that would be the presentation of some social problem -- the problem of working conditions, and so on -- during which, the characters would be introduced. Then the conflict over that particular issue. Then a sort of stand-off, and finally a resolution of either victory or defeat, as the case might be. If a victory, then not too much else would have to be presented, because, that would be sort of a political lesson. If a defeat, it had to be done in such a way that somehow or other, there was a feeling that the next time we would have learned from this, and the next time it was going to be better. So, there was always the next time, in a sense that every piece of writing had to have that kind of formula, which ended on a note of optimism. And that was one kind of formula. The other formula was that, as a consequence of the other ending formula, the consequence of the conflict, somebody, the hero, and somebody close to the hero went through a conversion from his or her right wing politics to left wing politics. And that became known as the 'conversion' scene. And, a lot of people, critics, both on the left and on the right, were unhappy with it, because it was felt that nothing before that scene really led to that conversion. It just happened, period. So, those are the kinds of criticisms that would come up.

SIROTKIN: Yes.

SPORN: And, well, it's kind of formulistic working. It goes by 'I've got to have this thing in there'. I take that these, that as far as you can recall, these questions weren't that openly debated, at least not here in Detroit?

SIROTKIN: Well, I can't recall. It may have been. But, I can't recall. Another name that can help us, Manny Bilsky. Has that name come up at all?

SPORN: No.

SIROTKIN: He lived in Detroit in that time. He's teaching out at Eastern Michigan, I believe.

SPORN: Yes, who gave me that name? I have it somewhere here. Here it is. Manny Bilsky, Art Dealer. He's also dealing in art now.

SIROTKIN: Yes, well, he does that to sort of . . .

SPORN: He's a philosophy professor at Eastern Michigan?

SIROTKIN: Yes.

SPORN: He's an artist, you say?

SIROTKIN: No, he's not an artist.

SPORN: Oh. He's a writer?

SIROTKIN: I don't know whether he's done any writing, but he's been teaching at Eastern Michigan for a number of years. And, he has taught philosophies. Just basically been philosophy classes.

SPORN: Yeah.

SIROTKIN: But, I just mentioned, since you have the name that possibly he might be a source of some information.

SPORN: About this period?

SIROTKIN: About this period.

SPORN: Yeah. The reason that I have that name is that my wife and I are just beginning to collect art. That is mostly the seriously done.

SIROTKIN: Sure.

SPORN: We bought a piece here and there occasionally. But, we'd like to have a little more. Extensively so. It came up in a casual conversation with Minnie Gossman. She said "Hey, you want to look up Manny Bilsky, since he's an art dealer."

SIROTKIN: Oh, I see. He does that on the side.

SPORN: Yeah, right. She mentioned that. Well . . .

SIROTKIN: There's another artist who lived in Detroit at the time. I don't know whether he was in the Federal Art Project. That was Milton Kemnitz. He lives in Ann Arbor.

SPORN: Yeah.

SIROTKIN: And, his wife was in the dance group, I believe.

SPORN: Yeah. That name I got from Sophie Fordon.

SIROTKIN: Oh, yes.

SPORN: Last night. Her . . . She came up to Kemnitz. She might be a good

SPORN: source.

(END OF TAPE, SIDE A. END OF INTERVIEW).