

This is the second interview of Alfred Skondovitch by Sharon Hollensbe. This took place on May 17, 2000 at 202 Slater Street, Fairbanks, AK.

(Sharon asked Alfred what it was like for him, in particular, in New York with those various artists and friends at that time of his life.)

I was attracted to these people and I had a reason, of course, to see Franz Kline. It's amazing how a tragic situation; and it was not wholly a melancholy experience, I assure you, I had a wonderful time. As a matter of fact the peaks of all this, like the accidents that are thrown at you, a bonus of everything else, it was worth remaining in New York.

It wasn't worth being deported for alleged gun smuggling; I resent that picture of smuggling guns and stuff like that, you know...it sounds so vulgar and mercenary which wasn't the case...it was really sort of a religious activity.

This was hanging over me, and going back to Mr. Scottie, young "Scottie" had it wrong when he thought that I was to be arrested for gun smuggling, I mean it turns out I learned some years later that Scottie was very suspicious of people wearing collars and ties, to him they were the "Policia" the Police. But this was really a fellow who was working at the Embassy in New York who I played cricket with. And he was on the county team that we had defeated, you see. (This was a fellow who Scottie had earlier seen at the ship who was looking for me and Scottie thought he wanted to deport me for gun smuggling). This fellow who was looking for me, that Scottie had seen was on the county team that we had defeated in cricket when I was living in Banbury, England, due to being evacuated to Banbury because of the bombings in London due to the war. This fellow simply wanted to talk to me and he was frustrated that I

TAPE 2. Page 2 of 14

wasn't there and all this was misinterpreted by my boxing manager, 16 year old Scottie! Sharon then asked, how long it took Alfred to find out that he was wrong...how long did it take Alfred to learn that Scottie had sent this fellow away. Alfred responds...that he exhibited with Patrick Heron in New York at the Sagittarius (he thinks that was the name of it), it was above the Poindexter Gallery and there were dignitaries there. At that time the British Government had a policy...a cultural policy to emphasize paintings, you see. Patrick Heron was there, Alan Davy who lives in St. Lucia very happily; he was a Scottish painter. I was presenting work, drawings, to an Embassy who was emphasizing British painting. And there at the opening, I thought you are not going to arrest me there 'cause it is foreign territory, you see. Here was this guy, I said, "My God, Michael, Michael Jarvis!" He said "Yes, I heard that you came in on a ship, I went tearing down to the docks and no one could find you....I went back the following day and you had jumped ship or didn't come back!" So, that is how I learned about this, three years later.

When I did this the government was a Laborer or Socialist government and they were hostile to the idea of Israel. They wanted to bring back the mandate, which they had policed for decades. They didn't want a Jewish State; they used gunfire and interdicted people who wanted to go there after the war. But, the Churchillians, of course, Churchill lost the election after the war, were in favor of this.

And my brother became involved and he was a champion boxer and a wrestler.....it's very strange that someone becomes a boxer and then a wrestler, it's like a contradiction in terms. He was very successful at this and he was a promoter and before the war he managed the Blackbirds, a trio of singing girls from Chicago, who preceded the Motown gals who came later.

TAPE 2. Page 3 of 14

Taking advantage of the people that he knew he was not cycling guns but aircraft, fighter aircraft out of Great Britain.

I was involved in one scheme where I went to Genoa and we went to this field where we were to gas up two planes, we go there in private cars and the cars surrounding this field were to provide the lighting. And, the God damned plane crashed and we lost two great fliers. Two famous fliers. My brother had set up a mock movie scene at a British aerodrome, I think it was Watford. There were glamour girls and people were jumping in and out of airplanes and the air ministry was charmed by all of this. And, then, the plane that we had eyes for was a Mosquito, twin engine, 400 mile and hour craft which would have swept the skies over Palestine.

We had a flier for it, a guy named Beurling, nicknamed "Screwball". And "Screwball Beurling" has the largest amount of kills in World War 11 for a flier. He served in the Canadian Air Force, in the Middle East.. He shot down about 37 aircraft. We were not professional people who maintained these aircraft; someone forgot to do an altimeter check, so when they landed, they didn't land, they crashed. I feel terrible about that; these were two great men. The other one was Sargent Cohen who became famous for another incident. He was a non-commissioned officer who was flying an airplane that would really rescue people shot down by "Screwball Beurling" out of Malta. This story is before I came to the United States. I was helping Israel.

When I did get to the US I did think that they were going to try to pick me up and arrest me for gun smuggling but there is no possible way they arrest you, I mean, only an American can arrest you on American soil and a foreign country is not permitted to arrest their nationals on your soil. But, you don't think it through; you look at some panic stricken face and a guy says I'm getting the Hell out of there and you better do the same, like now!

TAPE 2. Page 4 of 14

When the Labor government lost and the new Prime Minister, Harold Macmillan came to power. Then they recognized the State of Israel, you see, so I was off the hook. I have some things that will amuse you; I went to England alone to find out if there was anything, you know, legally awry. I'm traveling now under a British passport, you see. The name on the passport was Skondovitch; all my paintings were always signed Skondovitch. The last guy I saw in England was a guy named Ted Willis who I designed sets for and we were sort of involved in what young people get involved in; in politics, you know. I think we were very left wing and we worked at the left wing theatre. Now he entered the House of Lords as Lord Willis. I went to see him there and I was required to dress in a certain fashion, stay in a certain hotel, I think the rooms are bugged. And the front desk, the people chatter away to the secretarial people who serve the wards. And when we look at that cable, (telegram) we will look at that tomorrow or some other time, he didn't remember the name....but, then he remembered. "Yah, have him come to see me now." And I went to the House of Lords therefore. I was ushered into the gallery; now there's a public gallery, but, there is a small gallery that seats about three people and on it is what they call a wool sack. I was brought to this part of the House by the rod; this fellow looks like knickerbocker, you know, the legendary New Yorker, like Charlie Knickerbocker, with the tri-cornered hat and he has a rod of silver with an eagle on top of it. I followed him and he listened into this little box and he banged his rod; once, twice, thrice in the gallery and during this period every Lord looked at me. And it meant that none had complaint against me, and I looked for my friend. The Lords look at you for three seconds, this is an honor, really. And then I looked and here was this white haired man who I remembered as being blackhaired and someone who I really looked up to when I was sixteen when I was up to no good with him. At first I didn't recognize him with these huge bags under his eyes and then

TAPE 2. Page 5 of 14

the rod came back and he said, "His Lordship will see you now", and we were at the bar and we went down to the bar.

There are other heros that I have, we all admire someone in politics, you know. You admire someone; you idealize his or her life and I always admired Emanuel Shinwell who was a radical laborer, Member of Parliament. I remember his brand of rabble rousing, which I liked very much and there he was, in the bar, under a table shit faced drunk.....under the table, out of the way. The chamber was brand new; actually, here are ancient flags and pennants of the different Lords, all of the Counties and Shires in England. It was all brand-new because two years before it had all been blown up by an Irish terrorist, there was a garage below this building and they have since dispensed with that. So, everything was brand new. Very plastic looking.

That year I came back and we went down to Lake Tahoe and stayed at Harrah's Hotel and as a surprise, Patti said "we are going to have dinner tonight at the House of Lords". You see, I am fresh back from this trip so we sat down at the House of Lords Restaurant in Lake Tahoe, we were in the hotel complex, however. And Patti wanted to know if this was at all like the real House of Lords in England and I have to say that it was more like the House of Lords than the House of Lords! Because they had been established for about five years and they had a patina on these tudor beams but the House of Lords that I had just been in was brand new and everything looked plastic, you see. I'll keep my mouth shut about that and not destroy illusions that people have.

I have always been conscious of my weight 'cause I always had a dream, actually I have these dreams now, that I am a prize fighter, campion del mundo, champion of the world, you see. And in dreams I see myself under the spotlights waving to the crowd, held aloft by brothers who are

TAPE 2. Page 6 of 14

so proud of me. When I arrived in New York, in '47, I had four bouts and I weighed 127 pounds and I was 5' 11" tall, I am 5' 9 and a half inches tall now.

My idol was Panama Brown, a great featherweight who weighed 118 pounds and he was 6 feet tall. He didn't look like a skeleton he looked like some species of snake. I always admired him, I had his photographs, in England I remember Panama Brown. I wound up in New York concerned by Panama Brown. This was an amazing fighter who had the longest string of knockouts in the history of boxing. And he invariably knocked the hell out of people bigger than he was. Now, he was so efficient that fighters refused to fight him. So when this happens to you, in that industry, you need a manager who handles exotics, you see. Like the British had a heavyweight named, Hell I can't think of his name but the man would always wind up flat on his back, he seemed hopeless for a heavyweight. So he needed a manager who handled exotics. Anyway, Panama Brown wound up; and so did this British heavyweight wind up under the control of one of the best managers of exotics. That is if you are too good or too awful; in the case of the Englishman, the manager decided that the women loved him and would go to see him suffer or bring flowers, weep. So he had orchid nights to watch the Englishman hit the deck once again. So this is how this exotic manager; his name was goodtime Charlie Cohen and when he looked at Panama Brown he said, "Well, you're too good, my boy and no one wants to fight you in America, but you are a champion of the world, in Europe they have little people, you know, the kids don't eat their food and stuff like that, so when they grow up they are very small and you are the world champion and they have lots of little people who will fight you. So, he arrived in England and knocked out everybody in sight; he then went to France and his reputation preceded him and so he was the first one ever to go up the Champ's Elysee with a lion in a convertible. (a lion cub), that he would run around Paris with. Then he introduced boxing in

TAPE 2. Page 7 of 14

Marsaille, you know, Marsaille is a cosmopolitan city, you would think they had boxing but, no they had bullfighting. That was the big sport in the '20's, and the municipal people wanted to ban it (the bullfighting) and they needed something exciting to bring in to replace it and they thought of boxing. They had some good fighters: "Kid Marsaille" and "Kid Peretz". Kid Peretz from Marsaille was related to me, he came from this Lithuanian village from which we all came. He defeated Panama Brown and became a world champion, did Kid Peretz. Well, anyway, ah, he went down there and introduced boxing and unfortunately he was so good that the bell clanged and he knocked out Kid Marsaille. It was the fastest knockout in boxing history. This infuriated the crowd. The world champion should humiliate the beast and then, eventually, the animal will expire, but he should show all of his arts. This was totally misunderstood by Goodtime Charlie, his manager, and he said, "Damn it, I think they are dissatisfied". And, for the first time in the history of boxing this world championship fight was cancelled and they began fighting again. And this time he knocked him down in the first half a minute of the fight but I think this time he knocked him out almost instantly. Then they realized that this was a mistake, they were in a different culture, and there were 35 thousand people who watched the debut of boxing and they all wanted to lynch this poor guy. They actually hid under the boxing ring and scurried out between the legs of all these people who were screaming and shouting. They ran into the town of Marsaille which kind of slopes down to the sea and they ran and ran and ran. Meanwhile, these infuriated boxing fans were joined by close to 100 thousand people running through the streets to tear these people apart. They ran to the end of a pier and there was a filthy little coal barge, heading for England and goodtime Charlie said "how much do you want for this", and he bought the boat and they arrived safe and sound in England. They went back to Paris to fight again and he abandoned Panama Brown because he said there is an 8 foot tall

TAPE 2. Page 8 of 14

Chinaman and he would be a sensation and I want to lay my hands on him and he disappeared into China and poor Panama who weighed 118 pounds, ballooned up in weight and became a drunk and people would look at this human wreck and people would look at him and say, "Yes, this was the former champion del mundo, look at him, what a mess." And, believe this or not, Jean Cocteau, poet, writer, filmmaker, "Said who is that wreck?" And they said that was the former Panama Brown. And Cocteau became his manager, amongst all these other things, and retrained him. He said, "If we have to teach you boxing, you will have to study boxing." And, he did. And he took him right back to the world championship. And then the war happened, Panama had to leave and he died in New York, and I was the last one to see him alive. He was in this ward for indigents on Rikers Island. And this fellow who once weighed 118 pounds now weighed about 60 pounds, with this gaze masked over his face because of tuberculoses. Panama was not represented in the United Nations except by the Swiss and we asked them to give him a decent burial. The republic of Panama has instituted a pension plan for their fighters. So, if you ever go through the Panama Canal you will see a statue of Panama Brown

Sharon asked Alfred how he knows all of this, she commented that he tells it almost as though he is observing it. Alfred explained that is all common knowledge amongst boxers. These are things that I knew from childhood and then to my amazement, when I learned that Jean Cocteau was his manager, if I mentioned this to people they would look at me like, "Right, give me a break, you're out of your mind". The reason that I got off on that was to explain the underlying anxiety I felt was that I weighed 127 pounds when I came to this country. I was examined and weighed and boxed at that weight. A year later I would go through plus or minus a pound, I maintained the same weight; I mean a decade has gone by and I am still at 127 pounds. The appearance I had was a scholarly poet or what have you. Then I got my Green Card and within a

TAPE 2. Page 9 of 14

week my weight went up twenty pounds....within one week! This was because for the first time I didn't have antennas out wondering who was a cop or who was from the immigration department. I used to sleep on a couch down in Texas or at Dr. Gray's house, in Claremont, Ca., where I met all these guys who brought me up here. There (at Dr. Gray's house) I would actually sleep on the back porch and if anyone came to the house so if anyone came to the house I would actually come around the house and look who was knocking on the door. I would be there looking at people at 2 or 3 in the morning, you know, guys would come home drunk or what have you. So that is how I lived and then all of a sudden I didn't have to live that way. And all of a sudden my weight my weight went up. When I came up here and met Patti, my weight went to a different plateau, I weighed around 165 pounds. And all the time I am saying, "Well, I can still fight as a middleweight". Or, Hell, I am a welterweight, but all of this is in the past, you see. But, you don't acknowledge this, you still want to go to bed thinking of that, having a wonderful dream. And then we went to Paris, on our honeymoon, and we rented a vehicle from Hertz in Paris. We drove down the route Gastronomique, they call it, because the restaurants are 2, 3 and 5 star restaurants all along the way. The food always amazed me. Whatever we couldn't understand on the menu we would order that and then a steak don que, steak well done. We would always haggle over the unfamiliar thing because it looked beautiful, and it tasted wonderful and you would get stuck with the steak or you would have to share. From Paris, here I am on my honeymoon, and down to the Cote Azure, for the first time in my life, I ballooned to a weight of 235 pounds! And I have had to struggle with that. That brought on high blood pressure and God knows what else. I was quite young at that time; 37 years ago. I have had blood pressure that I have been treated for ever since. And, I will go on diets to bring the weight down; right now, I'm gaining weight, I weigh just over 200 pounds. But, like the

weight was constant at 127 pounds in New York. Sharon interjected that it was as though he stayed on guard or stayed ahead of the law and kept in trim. Alfred: there was an effrontery in California, the boys would have a liquor run and they would go down to Mexico and for about \$150.00 they could buy 400 dollars worth of liquor at fair trade value. Of course, it would be Mexican cognacs and stuff like that and widow's tears that wonderful drink where if you want to keep drinking and you're hungry you just drink that. And so on and so forth and all these drinks and beer which was good. And, we would go down there with a hundred dollars and come back with all of this stuff. There were about twelve guys living in Dr. Gray's house; he was on a sabbatical. And it was plainly my turn to go down there. I said, of course...yah. So I go down to Mexico this means going through the border, we didn't need a passport. And we went into Mexico, no problems, and we got all the liquor. When we would go down there to get liquor we wouldn't come back through California we would come back through Yuma, Arizona. Because the Californian vendors were pissed at the idea of liquor, you see, and the state would impose a tax of about 17% on you. But, if you come through Yuma they wouldn't bother you. But, this is what happened; we were in San Filipe and we ran into a professor who said he was being pursued by the Mexican Police. He had an Inca head or some Goddamned thing. Or some pre-Inca artifact and he wondered if we could take it and he had a Volkswagen bus and this head was the size of this table. And we put it in this Volkswagen, beetle; there was the three of us; Professor Nice, he is a professor now, and...I can't think of their names. A fellow who actually acquired land up here; there was three of us; Nice, myself and this other fellow who married the daughter of the governor of Baja...Oh wait a minute...his name is Cordell Hicks! I didn't tell them that would be a hassle with me at the border and I shouldn't go but everything was routine and my act coming into America was that I am just like a Joe College character, you know, I am

TAPE 2. Page 11 of 14

very young, the crew cut in those days. Now we have a Volkswagen with this huge stone head in there that you couldn't possibly avoid seeing. I don't know how we got out of Mexico; like an idiot, some Mexican guy convinced me to buy a parrot, you know, a poll parrot. And, I said no, no I don't want a parrot it will create disease, silicosis and stuff like that and he is lowering the price and now it was at \$2.00 and I said well at Customs and stuff if it is okay. So, he rolled it up in bamboo and threw it on the ground, not a peep out of him! I said okay throw it in the car, I did and I forgot all about him. So, we go to Yuma and then guy puts his head through the window and I am pretending to be a drunk student, you see. He says, "Are you gentleman American citizens?" And this bird screams out an obscenity like, "Fuck you, Gringo!" and he says okay, out of the car and I thought, "Oh my God, why am I in this situation?" The bird was programmed to respond in this way to the customs people. And, the bird went on a perch, where he was quite comfortable, as though he had been there before. And this guy would get part of the fine to be exacted from us. But, no, this man didn't look in the Volkswagen beetle; where this huge thing, he was all caught up about the parrot. But, not about the silicosis, you see. Ben Nice identified himself as a teacher, Cordell Hicks...the guy was kind of leery about Cordell Hicks; there was something about the name that struck him: he didn't want to mess with Cordell. And, he didn't want to mess with me either. And the thing that was; incredible as it may seem, he gave us a moral lecture. How can you bring a garbage mouthed parrot like this, you know, to screw up the moral, or the right wing parrots that we have in America. Who all they want from life is: "POLLY WANT A CRACKER, POLLY WANT A CRACKER". So, we listened to this lecture from this high school dropout and our heads were on our chests, or certainly mine was. Then we went out to the Volkswagen and we drive back. Yah, we had about 3 or 4 hundred dollars worth of liquor in there. And, we started drinking it, now I certainly wanted something to

drink; a lot to drink. We drove up the coast highway in the wrong lane; this is at dawn and the different police precincts would pursue us, but we didn't know what was going on. We were chug-a-lugging this drink. At this point Sharon asked Alfred to verify that they were driving on the wrong side of the road and didn't they meet any oncoming traffic? And Alfred advised her that if they did he was sure they managed to get out of their way and this was at 4 or 5 in the morning and there wasn't a lot of traffic on the highway. Notwithstanding the pursuits, we got off in this small ocean town and what were they doing? They were calling the Scripps; there is this research institute that is supported by the Scripps people in Claremont and there were girls there, working and we wondered if they would party with us, you see. So, Nice, that was his job in this little phone booth. And, then we became aware of police everywhere. The first time in my life I've seen police with drawn guns. And I sobered up immediately, this is something that I had been self-trained for decades. And I thought I have to save the situation, 'cause Cordell was now foraging through garbage cans. And for some reason we had all exchanged out clothing for Mexican hats and these rubber tired sandals and stuff like this. Cordell looked like Poncho Villa in Mexican peasant pants and I thought, "I, poor son of a bitch have to do something, or we will wind up in jail". The police had surrounded Cordell who was foraging through this garbage in a typical Californian alley way and I approached them confidently and I said, "That fellow is Cordell Hicks". They were asking him for his ID, which he wouldn't give. He was claiming that he was a member of the starving masses and that his day has come and blah, blah, blah and all this tommyrot. I remember; I said, "Just ignore him now". And I flipped his credit cards and threw them at the police; a huge string of cards. And, there was a lieutenant who had joined this thing, the minute he got out of bed, from three towns back and when they heard the name it was obvious that they didn't want to do anything to Cordell. Cordell Hicks is an editor of the Los

TAPE 2. Page 13 of 14

Angeles Times, but that is the name of his mother; her name is Cordella but she uses Cordell in editorials and stuff like that and that month she was alone in the wilderness demanding a pay raise for police officers, you see. So, the lieutenant said, "You'll take care of this, won't you, patrolman?" And he said, "We are sorry and we understand the struggle that has been done on our behalf and we appreciate it and we realize that they have driven him mad but, you know, good night and take care of yourself." I thought, Mother of God. No, the girls did not want part nor participle of us and then we got back. But, I remember being shit faced drunk, I mean, really drunk and I thought, "Well, you better snap out of it, because you are gonna wind up in jail, you'll be....they had this camp for illegal aliens it was situated in North Texas and they would hustle you down there so you wouldn't have your own glib attorney, you see, who knew your case. So, yes that was an anxiety. That would sober me up very quickly. And that kept my weight down. It was terrible and yet it was a great moment of favor. I look at my son and he's nervous, he makes a lot of noise. You go in their house with their children and you see his nervous energy and I think, "Oh, my God, that's what I was like." My son used to live here and now he lives in Anchorage, they have a little girl who needs the hospital facilities down there. She is much better now; pretty little girl. She looks exactly like Patti but, her name is Shelbey, she is two years old going on three. She was prematurely born but she is doing much better; take a look at this photo. I was an illegal alien, this sounds like the title of a movie, you know, but, De Kooning, who had arrived here in the 30's had jumped ship.

He was a totally dysfunctional man, was De Kooning, and I kind of inherited his lawyer, Lawrence Seigel. So I thought, "you don't have to worry about this; the art world is like a family, no one will pick up a phone and inform on you; you're safe with us, you see. And, it's a

TAPE 2. Page 14 of 14

fact that no one ever did this, notwithstanding the jealousies, the sexual divides and competitions: men and men, men and women, no one ever did anything like that. So I felt safe when I was in New York. Not unconditionally safe. I felt pretty good, I thought “I’m where I belong”, you know, and De Kooning was sort of the king of the art world, with a monumental talent and he had jumped ship too.