

Interview with Alfred Skondovitch on 5/31/00, Tape #6.

Interviewed by Sharon Hollensbe in Alfred's kitchen in Fairbanks AK

There were a number of things I did that I have no explanation for, except that I think when you live through a war and the violence done to you over a period of years, you just live on adrenaline, particularly if you're young. You fear you are going to die, but then these scary things happen. Being in a home that was bombed, and knocking down a brick wall and going into the next house and living there.

I remember I had a dream of peace in which I would join the British Army—this was during the war—and I went to my medical to be examined for the army and they wouldn't accept me. They placed me in category 3; this is like 4-F in America. I remember trying to remonstrate with the doctors, saying, "You've made a mistake, I'm a very strong person, I'm a boxer for God's sakes, I come from a family of fighters." They said, no, no, Alfred—they sort of looked at the map where I lived, and it was entirely devastated and they'd had bad luck with people who came from that area, in the Army. Rejected from the British Army ppl from bombed area were bad luck

I'm trying to find an explanation for what happened in Provincetown. I think the architect, Bob Teager—this fellow in the picture is Arthur Teager—his brother Bob is an architect and he reminds me that there was a big stir at the Hofmann School. We had visited Bob's home, and he had aligned the beam of his house with the monument to the Pilgrims celebrating their first landing in America. I said, "My God, that's magnificent."

We're in Provincetown on our visit, and he says, "Remember when you tried to blow it up and you collected all that dynamite? And Hofmann said we've got to get him. We don't

TAPE 6. Page 2 of 13

want the police to get him, destroy my school.” Bobby knew my whereabouts and the student the body had come to town for me and they sort of caught me and disarmed me. I had no explanation for it. This is like the truck.

I want to say about the truck, where I seem to have offended the owners of one gallery in New York and the owner of another gallery in New York, and 40 or 50 artists. If only it were that simple; the problem there was that the show was curated and put together by Meyer Shapiro. And this was to be the first boost the second generation artists would get under the shadow of the massive publicity and money thrown at Pollock. And this was to go, not to a private gallery in Houston, but to the newly opened Museum of Modern Art in Houston. The new director of this new facility was a student of Meyer Shapiro, and he had recommended me and my paintings, the paintings that would come.

So this is what happened there: it had greater ramifications. Number one, Shapiro was to be my sponsor, and I needed a sponsor very desperately for the immigration people. And that was out of the question now. Of course, Jerry McAhee was outraged by all of this. And when I got shot down in Houston in a situation peripheral to all of this, I was banned from going anywhere near the Museum.

The only friend I had down there, other than the two fellows, David Percy Bell and J. R. Cooley—the latter took me there—was George de Menil. George found all of this amusing and wonderful. He was an oil man and a geophysicist who was president of Schlumberger. He presented machinery to the industry that could search for inclines and synclines below the ground and see if you had a chance for oil. And of course he was a great collector. We visited his home and it was just a marvelous place. When you approached the home of George de Menil, incidentally, you are confronted by a brick wall of mature brick that had been brought to

TAPE 6. Page 3 of 13

the site. And the driveway to the house was what you get in an urban surround. A huge driveway through impressive gates. The site of this brick was that was 80 or 100 feet long was somewhat disconcerting—what lay behind this wall and one door? There were two coach lamps indicating some gentrification. Anyway we knocked on the door and we were ushered in to the foyer of the de Menil home, and you saw neither stone nor wood. Everything was glass, right out to the garden. There were partitions, I don't know of what, and it was truly magical. Outside there was sculpture, inside paintings by Braque and Picasso. It was really breathtaking, the home of this man. Also his boon companion was a lady from Martinique in the West Indies. She had a delightful headgear where a knot would indicated she was married, I forget what. This charming lady was the cook and bottlewasher and everything else. I met the only painter who was really working there who made any sense. There were people doing Texas cowboys and stuff like that, as people do the bears up here. And that was Forrest Bess. He would invariably paint little dead bodies, really, or things that looked like an incubus. I'd seen Forrest Bess's work, he showed in New York, and there were some paintings of his. But the vision of this guy was apparent. What we were looking at were the stuff that would form the basic collection of the Museum of the Modern Art in town. I opined to de Menil that I thought that George Poindexter was a madman and I wished that I could buy him out.

He said, "Alfred, you idiot. You can't buy out old money. No way. However, you might go to Alaska and get an oil lease. And his wife runs the gallery now and you could buy the gallery. He'll go for that, but the idea of buying him out is ridiculous. He's *rich*."

I always remembered that. I came up here somewhat involuntarily. But when I met Patti, we got married and the business of oil leases came up. I acquired two oil leases in a place called Prudhoe Bay. And I remember de Menil saying "All you need is one. All you need is

one.” And I had two. It was all taken over by the State, and we lost this acreage. What we had acquired is what is called under Federal Law a priority leasehold. This is how all leases all over America made oil leases available to the people. Oil companies would come in and you’d receive a royalty on this. So our development vis-a-vis the oil companies is different in all the other states. There individuals have become very wealthy. Well, we don’t have people who have become wealthy; what we do have is a yearly check. The magnitude of it would be that if there is \$20 billion or more in the permanent fund, this is really money that should have gone into the ranks of the people, and you don’t see that here. I don’t want to characterize it as sort of a socialistic thing, and then I’m prejudiced. I remember I once went to a lecture by some oil man and he was pointing to this area as though we were unfamiliar with Prudhoe Bay, and his stick passed over what once belonged to me.

Anyway, I always remembered that advice from de Menil, saying there’s a place called Alaska where you can get land and there is oil up there, my boy. You have as good a chance as anyone else. The State took all this and under their entitlement with respect to the Federal Government, they had a right to 10 million acres. Normally a State will choose acreage with infrastructure, highways and townships or what have you. No, they grabbed this area, all of our leases. And they made them available to seven oil companies, sold it to them. So you have money in the ranks of politicians which is a helluva problem. So anyway that was one sub-dream I had coming up here. You can imagine how enthusiastic I was, thinking, “Oh my God, I’m going to go back to New York and buy the Gallery.”

Back to Provincetown: The attempt to dynamite the Pilgrims’ Monument—I remember it as something one would have to do. Then we’d have dignitaries that visited the school and there was one lady that was an enthusiastic buyer of paintings of Hofmann. She wondered if there was

TAPE 6. Page 5 of 13

anyone who could sail her rented boat, and I immediately volunteered to sail her boat and crashed into the Provincetown Ferry which was tying up. Terrifying to her, and Hofmann was furious over that. After the fiasco with the truck in the transfer of paintings—well, he said it exactly right, that this is what happens to people who go through a war.

I really had a massive resentment, guilt about surviving things and then you come to this country and everything seems so happy. Why not? I read that the pursuit of happiness is in our constitution. There's no other country on Earth that has a clause like that, no other nation. I think it's wonderful except when I went to California and met Californians and these people without gray hair and faces without crinkles or seams or character, and all of them have something they're going to do that day that involves golf or yachting, or this or that. I looked at them at first with great resentment wondering what mischief I could do. And then I thought, you know there's an occupational hazard about being happy all the time, and I thought about the constitution. I think that registered with me, but it took almost a decade for that to sink in with me, that happiness is great, and possible.

In the East when I was there, I just had great resentment of freedom. Imagine. I jump ship. I find a job in the middle of the morning. Then I get out, and walk across town. I mentioned what tailors look like. I forgot one other characteristic. There's always invariably a tailor wearing shades, dark glasses on the street. Because the Duke of Windsor made houndstooth checks popular, and the tailors who worked on them *hated* them, would go blind. The blindness would be what up here we call snow-blindness. And they had to quit work until they regained their eyesight. They just hated houndstooth checks.

It's difficult to explain. Either you feel guilty, and I overcame that, at survival. And then this is what happens to you. **You want to smash things that are precious to people because you**

resent their happiness, you resent their tranquility that they've enjoyed, and which you haven't.

And this would be a recurrent thing when I would be with art and in places like Provincetown, and sometimes in New York. Except that in New York—I meant to say that jumping ship, finding a job that morning, getting out of that job, and then finding another job in the afternoon, and on the evening of the same day shaking hands with the *President* of the United States. And I felt nervous about that and then I thought, he's going to look at me and he's going to say, "This son-of-a-bitch jumped ship here," said Harry Truman, "and get him out of here. How can you pull something like this!" But that didn't happen.

But it's a kind of a miracle that these things happen; these things don't happen in England. You don't find a job like that in England. In England wherever you go you have insurance cards that are given to you by the government under a social contract. And that identifies you.

I remember saying to Scottie, "I don't have cards, I can't get a job."

He said, "You don't need cards. All you need is a Social Security card and I'll get you that. It'll take a few minutes."

Unbelievable. In England you had to have a National Identity card, to identify yourself. Here you don't have this. Obviously people state who they are. In these amorphous cities and places where a cop doesn't walk the beat, but is on a motorcycle. He accepts information from you and writes out a ticket, but you've not really identified yourself. Always unbelievable to me.

So this is freedom, and I couldn't believe it. It's in the Constitution to be happy. I don't what the British have. They don't have it in the Constitution. I don't think they have a Constitution in England, for that matter. The Brits do have cricket, the morality of cricket, and as a democratic leveler amongst people. The British were kicked out of Pakistan. For a century

did they fight along the Khyber Pass that bisects that country. You'd think that great enmity would have arisen, but no. Last year Pakistanis arrived in London to play cricket, and won the world title. Their batsman was a handsome looking and was at the level of a rock star in America. Women were just swooning at the sight of this fellow.

Who was Sir Leary Constantine? Sir Leary came from one of the West Indies Islands, and was a marvelous batsman, cricketer. He was knighted by the Queen. Football, or soccer, is not one of these benighted games, and its greatest player, Stanley Matthews, was at long last the first soccer player to be knighted by the Crown. So cricket, like "is it fair?", is a British attitude that permeates law or the spirit of law, even though we don't have a Constitution. Yet we enjoy things that are part of our inheritance: the jury system and things like this.

I remember there were a bunch of British mountain climbers were in the hospital here, and they called me and said, "Who's gonna pay the bill on these guys?"

I said, "I don't know. Why the hell are you calling me? I'm not even a consul. How much is it, by the way?"

They said it's about eight thousand dollars, which seemed very reasonable to me. And she said, "They don't want to pay it."

I said, "They don't want to pay it because in England, where they are from, the rights of the foreigner were spelled out in the Magna Carta. And it says thou shalt not torture the alien amongst you, and you must cosset and care for him, and pay for his medical treatment."

(Why did they call you?)

This was about five years ago. I was familiar to them because I had served as chaplain and I'd been in and out of that hospital, and they thought this guy's from England, maybe he can solve this puzzle. I said they come from a country where they don't do this to a foreigner, where

TAPE 6. Page 8 of 13

they charge him, they don't and that's all there is to it. And maybe you should talk to the British consul in Seattle or San Francisco and they might send you some money. Why this country doesn't have the Magna Carta beats the hell out of *me*, with respect to the medical expense of the alien in our midst.

So we do have compensatory things that have evolved. How does a fellow like Ted Willis get into the House of Lords? This friend of mine, running around wild, both of us at the end of the war. He explained to me that if you are a troublemaker then you wind up in the House of Lord. That's how you are neutralized. And that's true. We really don't neutralize people that way in this country, not in politics. Once there was a strike that was different from all the other strikes. It was really a revolutionary thing where the entire economy of a nation was brought to a standstill by unions that united, and they formed a general strike. This is in the early 30s that the general strike occurred in England. The leader of the strike was a Scottish gentlemen, a union leader named Ramsey MacDonald. He led a march of 150,000 people to London and when they do that they even march on Buckingham Palace and raise all sorts of hell. In the old days they would come to town and kill all the lawyers which is what one bunch did, and demanded to see the king. The king was young King Richard, who met them at Mile End Gate and he was 12 years of age. And the young kind decided that these seemed like reasonable men, that upon my word your demands will be satisfied by the Crown. Watt Tyler, who was the leader of this medieval revolutionary group, approached the king and touched him. And a knight ran him through with a spear. You cannot touch the king.

At that time Watt Tyler arrived with fifty or sixty thousand peasant types. The second in command was a guy named Jack Straw who was from the north. The government in England, I believe their home secretary is a fellow named Jack Straw, so things evolved in this way. You

TAPE 6. Page 9 of 13

have people who talk in England about “this king is a ridiculous business” but then if you learn they’re from the north they want their own, they want the Stuarts to sit on the throne. It’s as though if you just scratch them, they want a Stuart, or what about Queen Mary, Queen of Scots.

I think I love England but I really believe in the United States. I feel like I’m an American. I believe in transparency and a democratic way of doing things, and this is what I’m learning really and it always astonishes me. I never had a voice except in art when I came here, except responsibilities and it’s just a miracle. I write to other Englishmen who are relatively mute and don’t understand this system. I like America.

(Do you ever feel that you are still affected by the war, or is that in the past?)

It’s pretty much in the past, but I compulsively watch war movies, uttering “kill ‘em all” if the Germans are getting bombs dropped on them. You don’t ever forget what your own personal situation was, and it really profoundly affects your self esteem to be targeted for mass murder by the enemy.

The silver lining were Americans who came to England. I just remember those handsome beautiful people, wonderful, marvelous people. I thought, my God, I have relatives who live in America and they are Americans, and I thought I’m going to see them one day. We had one fellow I learned who came from Brooklyn. His parents owned a liquor store, and he was their only son and he died on his last mission. He was a captain in the Air Force. Americans looked different—sort of freer in their limbs.

In this country I think I aspired towards things that are ridiculous. I did want to see the West and places where cowboys lived. On one trip to Los Angeles there was another Englishman on the Greyhound bus, and there was a degree of difficulty in talking to another Englishman because of class divisions. They never shake hands unless they’ve been to the same

TAPE 6. Page 10 of 13

school. This is a free-and-easy gesture among Americans, the simple act of shaking hands. You really have to find out about the other fellow. Of course you might say that to shake hands with somebody means that you are under a serious obligation.

I remember there's a wonderful cartoon I used to enjoy when I was a kid which describes this. There was this heroic figure and his crew of honorable sailors who were captured by a bunch of rascally pirates, and they beat them up, and they had them down in these foul quarters in the ship. Once again they arrived in some port in the Spanish Main, and the pirates were all going ashore once again to get drunk. The captain who had a pegleg and an eyepatch, of course, goes down below to talk to talk to the prisoners. Our hero is a fellow like Dudley Doright, and he approaches Dudley Doright and he says, "I say there Dudley. You won't be trying to escape will you?" And his friends are all listening for his answer. He said no I won't, seeking to get this guy off his back and off the ship. And the pirate said, "Well, then let's shake hands upon it." And to everyone's horror, Dudley shook hands with the pirate, and the pirate knew that he had the fellow.

And his companions are trying to say, "Well, we *don't* have to—I mean the man's a bloody pirate."

And Dudley is saying, "Oh, God, we can't escape now. I shook his *hand!* You saw me shake his hand." It's a nightmare, you see, involved with shaking hands. Although I don't see that obligation as much, but do see people very inhibited about things. Of course, Americans are not like that, thank God.

(Did you lose anyone close to you in the war?)

A third of my schoolmates were killed in bombings. Of course they weren't exactly cowering in shelters. They served as messengers, as I did, and a lot of them were killed that

TAPE 6. Page 11 of 13

way. One of them won a George Medal which is a high decoration for civilians. He was all of about 16, got cut in half. Germans had pilots who would do really hideous goddam things. One was dropping toys on schools. The first time I ever saw anodized metal. You used to see it in modern furnishings of the 30s. You had these bright golden and sky-blue hues. It's a technique of dipping metal in cyanide, and it's very unreal and pretty. Anyway, those bastards made these butterfly bombs, brightly colored this way just to attract children. So I lost a second cousin through that, a six-year-old.

But there were jolly things, too, I remember about the war. Like people discussing a bombing attack as though it's like the weather. People could anticipate the bombs raining down the way you look at the sky and say it'll rain. But I don't whether you'd ever get used to it. And then when you come to a country where this is a boring matter to bring up, it really pisses you off.

There were parts of the district where I lived that were so devastated that they would put tape around them, and this was off limits. There was a reason for that. There are no people living there and it isn't a good idea to go into this area, because there would be no rescue effort made in this area that has been roped off. But these were ideal areas for exercising and jogging. You'd run on roads that had been cleared up. I'd jump over the tape. I don't think I'd ever bothered to look at these houses. Then I heard a plane, and it was a buzz bomb.

When I came to the United States, you'd have these motorcycles, and the roar of a motorcycle would evoke the flying bomb. If I was asleep I'd wake up; it would be a nightmare. Or my instinct if I heard a motorbike would be to look for a table to jump under. And I had these experiences here when they had these European bikes, these Czech Skoda vehicles. They had that full-throated roar. But I don't have that anymore. I don't even have dreams about that.

TAPE 6. Page 12 of 13

So I was in this area and the buzz bombs, which were the first of the so-called secret weapons, the victory weapons, that the Germans had, were actually more terrifying. They were supposed to be a gradation in terror, but that wasn't true. The rockets, which were V-2, were a weapon which people were very fatalistic about. They didn't care. You couldn't hear them coming, and they did little damage. They'd just smash a hole in the ground, maybe destroy one house. But the V-1 was horrible. It wouldn't crash into the ground, it would land on rooftops and blast blocks of houses. The thing about it was you could hear it coming. You couldn't hear a rocket coming.

Anyway, here I am in this roped off area and I dove into a collapsed doorway, down what was left of the staircase and found a table. It just amazes me how you find these things. And then "Crash". What remained of the roof came crashing down and I found I couldn't get out of what I had gotten into. And then I realized that there'd be no rescue team because it was a devastated area. I was there for the rest of the day, all night, and got out miraculously the following day at noon. I was under a table, the legs had been smashed, and a roof had collapsed on it. A dog was released that sniffs for corpses or people in ruins. They would release them in these areas to defecate and the little bastard found me. They called him back, saying there's nobody here and the dog insisted that there was somebody and wouldn't go back, and they yanked me out. Just routine.

Sometimes I used to think about how fast I could go down a staircase. I was in this rotunda-like building, an old brick building, and it went down like the Guggenheim Museum. And a bomb hit the main building in which there was this circular staircase. I remember getting down to the bottom and out of the building and then the whole thing collapsed.

TAPE 6. Page 13 of 13

It's an adrenaline rush. You had to do something and you would do it, and there wouldn't be any fear. But then after you would go into a shock. After you'd be kind of susceptible to things.