

**GREENWICH VILLAGE SOCIETY FOR HISTORIC PRESERVATION
EAST VILLAGE
ORAL HISTORY PROJECT**

Oral History Interview

WOLF KAHN

By Liza Zapol

New York, NY

March 4, 2014

Oral History Interview with Wolf Kahn, March 4, 2014

Narrator	Wolf Kahn
Birthdate	10/4/27
Birthplace	Stuttgart, Germany
Narrator Age	86
Interviewer	Liza Zapol
Place of Interview	Wolf Kahn's Studio on West 21 st St
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Order in Oral Histories	2 (East Village Project)

Background/ Notes:

Wolf Kahn had a cough during the interview. Several phone call interruptions.



Wolf Kahn at his studio, March 4, 2014. Photograph by Liza Zapol.

Quotes from Oral History Interview with Wolf Kahn

“So the [Hans] Hofmann School was located in the Village, near the corner of Sixth Avenue and 8th Street in a place that on the ground floor had a movie house called “Art Movie.” And the Hofmann School itself was on the top floor. It had about thirty students that were enrolled. But most of the time they didn’t all show up because that would have made it very crowded.

And the model was in the middle. Around in a half circle were all the easels with the students drawing from the model. We usually got so involved in drawing from a model it took a whole week to make one drawing. Hofmann would go around once a week and give a critique of these drawings. And we were all very interested in what he had to say because first of all, we understood we were in touch with a great spirit, which Hofmann was. I used to say he was born knowing more than most people die with. He'd just say things off the top of his head that were right to the point. Like one time he said—and he has this horrible accent, which I'll try to employ—he said, ‘I feel sorry for the young artist who knows not how to pound his own drum.’ So I tried to learn how to pound drums.”

(Kahn p.5-6)

“What catches my eye mostly are the changes that are constantly taking place. You know right now they're changing St. Vincent's and making it into condominiums. That seems very strange to have a whole area of a city that has no hospital in it just because there's one hospital that can't make their ends meet. I don't know if I'm really at home in the Village. But then, having been a refugee, you're never at home anywhere when it comes right down to it.

(Kahn p.31)

“Well, my sense of place when it comes to the Village is very limited because I just happened to find myself there. It's not that I had been attracted to the Village or something like that. My most exciting moment in the Village was when I was a blockbuster. That's when I was really involved in the Village.”

(Kahn p.34-35)

“New Yorkers are tough. The spirit of New York interests me because what you have here is a bunch of people who, on the surface, are very severe and tough and strong. But once you get to know them they melt like ice cream on a hot summer day. And they can't help but try to collect friends because everybody basically here is so lonely. Friendship is an important part in New York, more than in other cities, I think.”

(Kahn p. 36)

Summary of Oral History Interview with Wolf Kahn

- Early Years
 - Born October 4, 1927. Stuttgart, Germany
 - German refugee
 - Changes name from Wolfgang to Wolf
 - Enlisted in U.S. Navy age 17
 - Training in radio and radar / flunks out
 - Works in the paint shop, painting portraits
 - Finishes in 1946
- NYC
 - Education
 - The New School- under Stuart Davis
 - Hans Hofmann's studio, 8th St
 - Kahn was his assistant
 - Other artists
 - Relationships
 - Home
 - East 6th St. & Ave. A
 - Old law tenement building
 - Rent \$9.50 / month
 - 2nd. Ave. apartment
 - Work
 - Social worker
 - Personal Life
 - Relationship with an African American woman
 - Mentor - painter Lester Johnson
 - Activism
 - Housing discrimination, "blockbuster": signing lease so African Americans could live in Village apartments
 - Notable Locations
 - Ratner's - Jewish restaurant
- Chicago
 - Education
 - BA at University of Chicago
- Oregon
 - Works for a summer as a logger
- NYC
 - Home
 - Returns to East Village
 - Broadway and 12th St., converts commercial loft
 - Lives with Robert De Niro Sr.
 - Neighborhood
 - Notable locations
 - Cedar Tavern

- Stuyvesant Park
- Notable People
 - Willem de Kooning
- Galleries
 - Hansa Gallery - helps to start
 - Tanager gallery (co-op)
- Work
 - Painter
 - Part-time jobs
 - Career changes and success
- Marriage to Emily Mason
 - Marrying Emily in Italy
 - Raising family in Greenwich Village
 - Moving to Stuyvesant Park
- Anti-semitism
- Politics
 - Dinkins: heroin and drug use in community during this period
- Relationships
 - Friendships with artists, critics in Village
 - 1957 party with David Amram, Frank O'Hara
- Iconic Village art: Edward Hopper
- Current Day
 - 86 years old

General Interview Notes:

This is a transcription of an oral history that was conducted by the Greenwich Village Society for Historic Preservation.

GVSHP began the Greenwich Village Oral History Project in 2013. The GVSHP Greenwich Village Oral History Project includes a collection of interviews with individuals involved in local businesses, culture, and preservation, to gather stories, observations, and insights concerning the changing Village. These interviews elucidate the personal resonances of the neighborhood within the biographies of key individuals, and illustrate the evolving neighborhood.

Oral history is a method of collecting memories and histories through recorded interviews between a narrator with firsthand knowledge of historically significant events and a well-informed interviewer, with the goal of adding to the historical record.

The recording is transcribed, lightly edited for continuity and clarity, and reviewed by the interviewee. Oral history is not intended to present the absolute or complete narrative of events. Oral history is a spoken account by the interviewee in response to questioning. Whenever possible, we encourage readers to listen to the audio recordings to get a greater sense of this meaningful exchange.

The views expressed by the contributor(s) are solely those of the contributor(s) and do not necessarily reflect the opinions or endorsement of our organization.

Oral History Interview Transcript

Zapol: This is the Greenwich Village Society for Historic Preservation's Oral History Project. It's March 4, 2014. This is Liza Zapol. We're doing the East Village Project at the moment. And if I can ask you to introduce yourself, please?

Kahn: Wolf Kahn. What else? Painter. I'm eighty-six years old. I'm a few years past the average age of American males. And I hope to continue to be a few years past that age.

Zapol: Thank you. So when we spoke you said you wanted to begin your story of the East Village when you got out of the service in 1946. Tell me about that—tell me about what was happening.

Kahn: In those days, when you got out of the service, you had the GI Bill. And I was in the service just a short time because I enlisted when I was seventeen. And naturally, as a refugee, I wanted to fight against Hitler. And I actually had some people in the family who were in the Holocaust and didn't survive. And so I felt good reason for going to war. But the only thing they did with me, once I was in the service, is send me to Radio Materiel School and radar school, which were then new involvements of the service because radar had just been invented. And I stayed there until I flunked out. The reason I flunked out was because I had never had physics in high school. I was fresh out of high school. And I was surrounded by MIT [Massachusetts Institute of Technology] graduates and so forth. So even though I worked very hard, I finally didn't make it.

They looked on my record and they saw that I was an art student. Well, actually in the Navy it didn't say “art student,” it says “artist.” So they put me in charge of the paint window, which is where the people who were designing new machinery and new instruments went to get their paint to make everything look gray. Fortunately for my morale and that of the people that came to get paint, there was a huge five-gallon jug of ethyl alcohol in the paint shop because some paint, you have to do that in order to thin it. And very conveniently, next to the window on the outside they had a Coke machine. So I was like the most desirable person on the whole base, because I could give out Cuba Libres at will. Which I did. And in return for which I got all sorts

of things, like I got my belt buckle gilded with real gold and stuff like that.

So anyway, I had a lovely career in the Navy. Actually, they found out I made a portrait of the recreation officer of the base, which actually looked like him, and which he showed to the commander of the base, Captain Eddy [phonetic] [00:04:15]. And he in turn showed it to the admirals in nearby Washington, because this base was in Anacostia, which is right outside Washington. And after that I was home free, because I was passed from one gold braid to another. And in between I had liberty, freedom to go anywhere and leave at any time. So I finally got out I think in April of [19]46. And by that time I had to start thinking about my future.

[00:05:03]

So I wanted to go to Columbia [University]. It was too late to go into Columbia at that late date. So I tried to find another school where I could go. And the only school that still had enrollment was The New School down in the Village. So I enrolled in The New School. And I enrolled in the classes of Stuart Davis and one other well-known painter—I've forgotten now his name. But anyway, these were two of the worst teachers that had ever been foisted upon students. Like Stuart Davis, for example, he had one class a week, which was in the evening between I think seven and ten [o'clock]. And at the end of one class, he said, "All right children, we've conjured up enough art atmosphere for one evening. Let's close the doors." And I didn't like that tone and the general idea that you're conjuring up art atmosphere. I was this idealistic young kid who wanted to become an artist. I mean I was an artist already. So I looked around elsewhere and I heard about the Hans Hofmann School.

And that was a totally different place, I swear. That's where the whole thing was being taken very seriously. And all the people who were my colleagues were either very talented art students or else they were GIs. And made many friends among them. And after a while I became Hofmann's assistant. Because I was able to speak his strange kind of language, which was a mixture of bad English, bad German and bad French. I mean, he said such things to the class as "This picture is too bundt." And people looked at each other and said, "What does he mean by 'too bundt?'" You know, bundt is a German word that doesn't exist in English for disorganized color. So I had to explain to the class what Hofmann meant by 'too bundt.' Things like that.

But Hofmann, and especially his wife Miez Hofman—they took me on as a substitute

son. And I practically lived in their house and ate lunch with them. And I had a wonderful time. Met all kinds of people. I met Jackson Pollock when he was visiting Hofmann, you know. And [Joan] Miró. I didn't even know who these people were. I was a really ignorant young student who didn't know what was going on in the world.

But I stayed with Hofmann and the school. I became a monitor in the school, which meant I had to sweep up after every day. And Hofmann asked me, he said to me, “Always the most interesting work first,” when I was a critic. So I was like the arbiter of taste for the whole school, because I chose which was the most interesting work first. And of course the other people in the class immediately got wind of this, and Mrs. De Pinna [00:09:11] of the famous department store hierarchy immediately tried to get me underwear for nothing and things like that, so that she would become one of the more interesting work first.

But I was very honorable. I had no idea of choosing favorites and so on. And I really looked at whose work was most interesting and showed that first. And Hofmann, and the class at large and the visitors, they could see that, that the good stuff was dealt with first, and then the Mrs. De Pinnas and others like that were left for the end. By that time Hofmann was tired, and he sort of washed his hands of the whole deal.

At that time, I had to find a place to live. And the only place that was really cheap was the East Village. But it was really cheap. I found an apartment on the fifth floor of number, I think, 400-something. East 6th Street, which was right near Tompkins Square. And it was in a building that was the old law tenement, which meant that your bathroom and your kitchen were in the same room. And in order to go to the toilet you had to go out in the hall and share it with three other tenants, you know? Well, the great advantage of that was that my rent—you can't believe this today, but my rent in those days was \$9.50 a month. [00:11:30]

Zapol: No, I can't believe that.

Kahn: Yeah. And I lived right across the hall—maybe I got it through Lester, from my mentor, Lester Johnson, who was a very fine painter in those days, and also later on. And spent a lot of time with him, which I think he resented. He would have rather spent that time with a pretty girl. But still he put up with me, and he taught me a lot. But I was there for a year.

Zapol: What was that space? You described the space a bit, but what was the space like for you?

Kahn: There was a kitchen, which had a bathtub in it with an enamel cover that was also the kitchen table. And if you wanted to take a bath, you had to find hot water somewhere and fill the kitchen table with hot water. We heated with kerosene in those days. I had a kerosene heater. And kerosene at that time cost \$3 a gallon or something like that. It was very reasonable. Everything was cheap in those days. And then there was a small living room, which I used as a studio. And it also had a couch in it, which I used as a bed. And I was living there all by myself, feeling—well, you know, feeling like a poor art student, which I was. Although the GI Bill helped a lot because it paid I think \$65 a month in materials and expenses, which in those days was plenty of money. You could live on \$65 and live rather well. You know, go to have supper. You go down to Horn & Hardart where you put coins in the slot, and the door would open and out would come a dish of macaroni and cheese—very good. First-class macaroni and cheese. And so for 25¢ you could eat a whole meal and feel that you had enough to eat.

In addition to which there was also a place on Second Avenue—that was a little later actually, but still might as well put this in now—where you could go to Ratner's, which is a Jewish restaurant. And at Ratner's, they put on the table a basket filled with onion rolls and other good stuff. Bialy rolls. And you'd eat that and ask for a quarter for a dish of borscht. So you filled yourself up with these rolls and ate a dish of borscht, and you had enough for supper. And you spent twenty-five cents. In those days, everybody was living rather cheaply. I mean they had to. And the building in which we lived on 6th Street, it was a very strange building. I think it had mostly sick people living in it, psychologically sick or actually physically ill. But I mean you had to be very careful with whom you made friends, because you might catch some dread disease.

[00:16:01]

So I made friends—I mean platonic friends—with a young woman who had a monkey. A rhesus monkey. She was on the fourth floor and I was on the fifth floor. The whole fourth floor smelled of that monkey. And then she had to put greater and greater parts of her apartment off for the monkey. And the monkey would live in the living room, and she would put her bed in the kitchen. As soon as somebody came into the apartment, they would be bombarded with monkey shit. You know, which the monkey carefully set apart for such occasions. And that's the kind of

people that lived there. I mean nobody who could afford otherwise would live there.

Zapol: Where were people from? Were they New Yorkers, did it seem, or were they from elsewhere?

Kahn: All over. And quite a few people were artists who lived down there. On my block, there were a few people that got to be quite well-known artists.

Zapol: You talk about your relationship to Hofmann as a German. I wonder if you developed other relationships as an émigré or if, at this point, you're identifying yourself more as an artist?

Kahn: Oh, yeah. And also by that time I was thinking of myself as an American because I had been in the Navy and in the Navy you got automatically made into a citizen after I think a year of service. And I changed my name. My name had been Hans Wolfgang. I changed it to Wolf, because to be called Wolfgang in America is kind of silly. I mean that had already got to be a burden in high school because in those days a wolf was a person who went after women. Was that in your time, already? That's a term that went into disrepute. What did they call guys who were ladies men these days?

Zapol: Oh, I think there are lots of names for those people. [laughs]

Kahn: Well, give me a couple of them.

Zapol: I'll have to tell you later. I'll have to think about it. [laughs]

Kahn: Okay. That's right, I'm not interviewing you.

Zapol: But yeah—so that particular moment, you considered yourself American.

Kahn: Oh yes.

Zapol: And then, tell me more about the culture of the Hofmann School.

Kahn: So the Hofmann School was located in the Village, near the corner of Sixth Avenue and 8th Street in a place that on the ground floor had a movie house called "Art Movie." And the

Hofmann School itself was on the top floor. It had about thirty students that were enrolled. But most of the time they didn't all show up because that would have made it very crowded.

[00:20:00]

And the model was in the middle. Around in a half circle were all the easels with the students drawing from the model. We usually got so involved in drawing from a model it took a whole week to make one drawing. Hofmann would go around once a week and give a critique of these drawings. And we were all very interested in what he had to say because first of all, we understood we were in touch with a great spirit, which Hofmann was. I used to say he was born knowing more than most people die with. He'd just say things off the top of his head that were right to the point. Like one time he said—and he has this horrible accent, which I'll try to employ—he said, “I feel sorry for the young artist who knows not how to pound his own drum.” So I tried to learn how to pound drums. But I wasn't ready. I was only nineteen years old. And I was surrounded by people who were ready.

And also, in high school I'd always been a hotshot. You know, the best drawer in the class and so forth. They made a big fuss over me. Well, at the Hofmann School, I was surrounded with twenty GIs who had gone through the war in Europe and Japan, and who had had experiences such as I couldn't even dream of.

And many of them were more talented, I think, to begin with than I was. And I couldn't stand that. That was very demoralizing because here I had been so—what do you call it when people are lifting you up? I'd been encouraged, let's say, but better than that, in high school.

But I was at the Hofmann School for almost two years. Finally, I started getting more and more confused. Hofmann said to me, “You are suffering from mental indigestion.” And I said, “Do you think I should quit being an artist?” He said, “No, that would be going too far. But go do something else for a while. What else do you know how to do well?” What I always knew how to do well was be a student. I was always a good student. I had the highest academic average in the High School of Music & Art while I was there. So I enlisted in the University of Chicago. And they accepted me. I was there for eight months, which was exactly the amount of time I had left on the GI Bill. And it was also exactly the amount of time that one needed, in those days, to get a degree because there was a special program where you could get a degree at

your own rate of speed, which in my case was rather fast.

So anyway, I came back from Chicago and had a job working in the woods in the northwest. This has nothing to do with the West Village, or the East Village, but it has to do with me. And it's a sort of transition. So I looked up where you could make the most hourly wage as an unskilled laborer—which I was. And I found out that it was doing roadwork in Alaska or working in the woods in Oregon. I didn't want to go to Alaska because I was told that the mosquitoes in Alaska are huge. Have you been there? [00:25:02]

Zapol: Yes.

Kahn: Really? You know all about it.

Zapol: I've seen the big mosquitoes, yes. So you went to Oregon.

Kahn: I went to Oregon and I had a wonderful time there. I really regained all my joie de vivre and my self-confidence. The people I was working with was what they call a gyppo mill, which is like a group of let's say eight guys who travel together. And they have a sawyer and they have an off bear [phonetic] man and they have a pond man and so forth. They have buckers: people who go around in the woods and put cables around the trees that have been felled so that the tractor could come and pull the tree over to an area where they could just be given a shove. And they would roll down the side of the hill into a pond. There's always a pond there. Then, I wanted to be pond man. So they put me on one of those logs. And as soon as I was on the log, the log would go round and round and round. I'd end in the pond.

But I had a terrific time. I really enjoyed it. And I continued drawing while I was there. I don't think I painted, but I made a lot of pen and ink drawings and so on. When I got back to New York, I joined the old group—the Hofmann students and a few other new people who were part of the group, some of whom got to be quite well known painters, like Joan Mitchell. They all accepted me, although I was always the youngest.

Zapol: Now at that point were thinking about doing a PhD and returning to University of Chicago?

Kahn: Oh, yes. I mean while I was at Chicago, I hadn't been to the woods yet and regained my savoir faire. So I thought, what do I do with this foolish degree that I have? The only thing that's useful here is to become an academic. On my own, I wrote an essay about [Paul] Cézanne and gave it to Dr. [Ulrich] Middledorf, who was the head of the art department. And he was very impressed with it. I don't know why because I read it now and think it's terrible. He got it to the point where I applied to the School of Humanities and applied for a scholarship. And on the basis of the recommendation of my advisors and professors, I got a full scholarship, plus a stipend. I was really in grave danger of becoming an academic.

So I got back to New York and fell in with this group. Went back to living on the Lower East Side. Same place. I think I had sublet or something. I can't quite remember what happened. My neighbor by that time was a printmaker named Arnold Singer. Have you heard of him—Arnold Singer? Well, he was living on the Lower East Side then. And he had a girlfriend who was deeply in love with him. To the point of walking around naked all the time. And since I wasn't attracted to her, it made me very nervous. I was still on the Lower East Side. And then I moved. I heard of a place that was available on Broadway and 12th Street. [00:30:16]

So I moved there. And the place was again the top floor. It had a skylight. And the rent was—I mean, it wasn't as cheap as before, but I think I paid \$60 a month or something like that. And at that point, I had a job as a social worker. I was what they called a group worker, which meant that I was given a gang to sort of supervise and help straighten out and get them off drugs and so on. I had all sorts of adventures as a social worker in Harlem. And I had a girlfriend who was Black. I lived with a Black girl. And in the art world in those days, that got me very popular because the artists were always way ahead in social advancement. And the idea that I was living with a Black girl gave me certain advantages and popularity. And because I was working with a bunch of left-wing Black social workers, I became a blockbuster. Have you ever heard of blockbusters?

Zapol: No. What does that mean?

Kahn: Blockbuster is a white guy—or woman, I guess, but mostly guys—who goes and signs a lease for an apartment. Talks to the super, landlords. And then lives there together with a Black

guy. At a certain point, the white guy moves out and the Black guy stays. And I found a place on Bank Street in the West Village. Same block in which they had a famous Black dancer [Pearl Bailey].

So I lived there with Sara [phonetic] [00:33:06], and I stayed there for quite a while. And then I could see that Sara was hot to get married. And then there was me who, as a German refugee who had been afraid to go out on the street because you were in danger of getting beaten up just because you were Jewish—and people could tell what you were, because you didn't wear a Hitler Youth uniform. But when you're out on the street with a Black girl, they're sure as hell can tell that you're a liberal. You become very unpopular with the public at large. I didn't like that. It reminded me too much of my youth.

Zapol: What kind of things would happen?

Kahn: In Germany?

Zapol: Here.

Kahn: Nothing would happen. People would look at you and point at you and look at you as though you're the enemy. No, actually very strange. I took my friend Sara for a hike together with my artist friends in the Catskills. And we were hitchhiking, Sara and I. Nothing bad ever happened to us. And people couldn't believe it. In the Catskills, you'd figure these are old hillbillies that live there. But nothing bad ever happened to us.

Zapol: Did you see housing discrimination?

Kahn: Oh sure. I mean every now and then that strategy didn't work. And if you were living there with a Black person, they'd try to get you out. And if it was too bad, you got out.

Zapol: What happened? How would they try to get you out?

Kahn: By not repairing things and just generally behaving like shitty landlords, which is not hard to do. I mean I'm not saying that I converted the whole Village to being a mixed neighborhood, but I found about three or four places where this all worked. And the strange thing

is, because I had the whole art world on my side. You know, [Willem] de Kooning was a great friend of mine, and he thought Sara was a wonderful person. He liked her. They all liked Sara because she was so happy being in this group since she had artistic tendencies of her own. And she was pretty; had a good figure. And danced like a demon, you know. In those days it was the jitterbugging that was going on. The Lindy. She taught me how to Lindy, which I still know how to do. Do you like to dance? [00:36:35]

Zapol: Yeah, swing dancing, Lindy is fun. It's really fun. And where did Sara come from? Was she living—

Kahn: She had a master's degree in social work from Spellman College, which is a Black school in the South, I think somewhere near Atlanta. And she was a lovely person. I mean, I could have done a lot worse than marry her. But I wasn't about to do so.

Zapol: Right. So you decided not to move out of the Bank Street apartment. Is that what happened?

Kahn: Oh, no. I didn't really live there. I just signed the lease there.

Zapol: I see. You were still living on Broadway.

Kahn: I was still living on Broadway. And that was my studio, too. I had a whole loft. Actually half a loft because one half of the loft I rented out to Robert De Niro, Sr., who is the father of the famous Bob De Niro. I saw him grow up from being a kid to being an adult. His father was a very depressed guy. Do you know anything about him?

Zapol: A little bit, yeah. But what was it like to live with him?

Kahn: Well, it was not good to live with him because he was addicted to the last disk that Billie Holiday made, which is very, very distressing. She was very depressed at that point. She was a drug addict. And he kept them on a moving thing so all night long you had to listen to this record. I'm surprised that I still like Billie Holiday. But I do. You know, great singer.

So anyhow, I was living on Broadway. And this building had some great lacks. For

example, there was no bell. The landlord wouldn't put in a bell. And certainly no buzzer. And all sorts of other things that were missing. There was no bathroom. We had to put all that stuff in ourselves. And furthermore, we weren't supposed to be living there. They had a loft law in those days whereby the landlord had to agree for you to live there. And our landlord on Broadway wasn't having any, no.

Zapol: It was a commercial space?

Kahn: A commercial space, yeah.

Zapol: So how did you put in all the plumbing and how did you make that happen?

Kahn: Well, it was very strange. We all worked together. In fact I had Bill de Kooning help paint the place. Because at that time he was not a famous artist. We all admired his work greatly, but he couldn't make a living at it. So he was painting. And Milton Resnick, another well-known artist, put in the gas line. So we all worked sort of together. **[00:40:15]**

Anyway, Sara badly wanted to get married. I had to skip town because I wasn't having any. So I went to Mexico and lived there for six months. Then, I came back. By that time, Sara had found another guy. And as soon as she left the art world she lost all her looks. It's amazing. She became like a regular Black woman. You know, thick waist. But we still stayed friends. And she told me how living with me in the art world was the best time of her life, which I can believe. It was a good time. A lot of parties.

Zapol: So where were you socializing then? What were the parties like?

Kahn: Well, right across the street from my loft there was the Artists' Club, the abstract expressionist club. You heard about that? It was run by Philip Pavia, who was a sculptor. The artists met there once a week, and they usually tried to organize some kind of a panel or something like that. The thing about that club was hostility hung over everything like a black cloud. There were all these people there together hating each other.

Zapol: What about you? How did you feel about the other people there?

Kahn: I wasn't involved in that degree. Maybe I was too young. I don't know. I don't remember hating anybody at that time, but being every amused by what was going on—how Pavia was so pleased not to let people in who were not members.

Zapol: Would they party at the Club itself?

Kahn: At the Club, and then afterwards we'd go to a bar. It was one block away from the Cedar Street bar [Cedar Street Tavern]. We'd collect there before, after, and during. Actually, the landlord of my place on Broadway was Sam LaLiberte [phonetic] [00:43:14]. He was the landlord of our building and he was a good guy. He liked artists. And he knew what side his bread was buttered on because all the artists would gather around the Cedar Street bar every night. And he was friendly with all of us.

Zapol: Do you have a story about the Cedar Street bar, about the Cedar Tavern?

Kahn: What about it?

Zapol: Do you have a story about that place, a particular night that sticks out?

Kahn: Well, I remember sitting there with de Kooning. And the thing that was so nice, which I really miss and I don't think exists in the art world today, was that there was no hierarchy at all. Some people had made it; other people were just getting started. Art students came and became part of things. And they all sat together and exchanged information and stories and so forth, without any sense that you were particularly favored because you were sitting with Franz Kline or something like that. Although certainly the more famous artists were very popular. But not in any exclusive kind of a way. And certainly not in the way in which it happens today, regrettably, where groups are separated by money. Like rich artists don't associate hardly at all with poor artists, and so on. [00:45:04]

That was a very good time for the art world. There was a certain unanimity about the value of good painting. We all agreed that somebody was a good painter or that also that somebody was a bad painter. For example, Philip Guston—nobody liked him because he was a prizewinner. One year he had won the Carnegie Prize or something. And his painting was sort of

a middle of the road at that point. And that appellation stuck with him, I think, until he died. He never quite became part of the inner circle. But he didn't care, of course. He was way beyond that. But the young artists weren't drawn to him as they were to the older abstract expressionists.

Zapol: Who were you drawn to?

Kahn: Well, of course with my own group, my own age group. I was right in the middle there. Because I had a roommate, a loft mate, named Felix Pasilis. Have you heard of that name at all?

Zapol: Yes.

Kahn: Well, Felix was a very strange guy. He was from Aurora, Illinois. He had been a GI and had gone to Hofmann. He had a natural gift for painting and made really wonderful paintings. We all liked his paintings. But otherwise, he was a hard guy to live with. For instance, he had a dog. Every now and then, you would hear him yowl uncontrollably because Felix had given him a huge kick. Stuff like that. He would take it out on his dog. Then, one summer I rented the loft to De Niro, as I'd told you. Of course, in those days I'd go to Provincetown in the summer. There it was also very reasonable. You could get a place to stay for a couple of hundred dollars for the whole summer. It made life a lot more variable and a lot easier for all of us.

Zapol: To be able to leave?

Kahn: To be able to go and not spend a huge amount of money and still have a good time and be together. Then I had my close friends, like Alan Kaprow. Do you know Alan Kaprow? Well, he was one of my best friends all the way from high school. We had gone through Music & Art together. And he was at Hofmann's with me, although he never really stuck, because he didn't really like painting. Every stroke he made, he said where it came from. "This stroke comes from Kandinsky. This stroke—" That takes the fun out of it. I never worried about stuff like that. I figured if I have something in me, it will come out. I don't have to worry about being influenced by anybody. And it turned out to be quite correct. I still don't worry about being influenced by other people. Every now and then a painting of mine looks just like somebody else's, and I say, "Well, so what?" But I mean, that's the advantage of having made it, you know?

Zapol: That you have the sense of your own vision—that that's also all right that it's influenced by others?

Kahn: You don't even think about whether you have a vision or not. You just do what you have to do. I mean there's a whole set of issues that aren't helpful. The whole idea of trying to find a style, I think that's not a good idea. You just do what you have to do. [00:50:08]

Zapol: At that time there was a lot of discussion about style.

Kahn: It wasn't a discussion about style so much as about subject matter. Which is quite a different thing.

Zapol: Subject or no subject?

Kahn: Well, no. Among the more sophisticated of us it was taken for granted that there's really no difference between representational and abstract painting. That was a previous generation that made those divisions. Mostly through Hofmann, actually. Because Hofmann just thought there was such a thing as good painting and stupid painting. And unfortunately for his enjoyment there was very little good painting and a lot of stupid painting. As there is today.

Zapol: So I'm interested then how this group, this inner circle that you were a part of, how did you then start to form a cooperative? How did that happen?

Kahn: Well, there was another cooperative that I was helping in. There were two cooperatives: the Tanager Gallery and the Hansa [Gallery]. And we both started at more or less the same time; Tanager a little before us. And Pasilis, much more than I, started getting very antsy about starting a career and exhibiting. So he went around and tried to find out who all should be part of this group of cooperatives. And we found some very good people. Alfred Leslie, and gosh, names escape me. Lists. It's bad to try to make lists.

Zapol: It's okay.

Kahn: But anyway, Richard Stankiewicz. And we found this second floor loft on the corner of 12th Street and Fourth Avenue, which I think cost \$100 a month or something like that.

Zapol: I'm just getting the sound of your hand over the microphone. Thank you. So if you can just repeat that again.

Kahn: Yeah. We found a loft that was for rent—a small loft, but nevertheless large enough to make an exhibition space and an office. And that was for rent I think for \$100 a month. So we rented that. I was always the one who was asked to relate to the landlord and negotiate the lease and so forth. Because I think I was the least frightening one of the group. I was young. Nice to look at. Not really well-dressed, but at least decently dressed. Then, we were in business. Of course, every now and then somebody dropped out or else we needed an extra space. There was an empty space and we needed somebody new. To get new members was terribly difficult because we all thought we were so good that nobody was good enough to be a part of this group. And we said to each other, “You know, if Cézanne were to come and wish to become a member of the Hansa Gallery, we'd not let him in.”

Zapol: So what are your memories of the very beginning, maybe the first show? [00:55:00]

Kahn: Well, we moved uptown. I might as well tell you about that show, because it's picturesque. There was a lady named Hady Fuchs [phonetic] [00:55:14], and she was German. Refugee lady. And she was clearly clinically insane. But at the same time she was making these very strange kind of things. You know, she'd start out with a milk carton and that was the center of her sculpture. Then she'd build around it and come up with some horrendous-looking thing that actually was frightening. And we invited her to have the first show because none of us could agree which one of us would get the advantage of the first show. But Hady Fuchs won. She came in and the first thing she did was bring in a tree trunk, a—what do you call it, the bottom of a tree?

Zapol: A trunk, yeah.

Kahn: A trunk, but not the whole trunk.

Zapol: Like a log?

Kahn: Well, where the root and the—

Zapol: Stump.

Kahn: The stump of the tree. And it had all sorts of other mushrooms growing out of it, and she put that in the middle of the show. And there was nobody there who would possibly stop her. We put her in because she was so crazy. Then, she started to put in a camp bed and she lived in the gallery. That was Hady Fuchs. Fortunately, her stay there was over after a while. And then other people got a show. We got some really good attention. Fairfield Porter wrote reviews. Thomas Hess wrote reviews. I mean, the top people in New York at the time. They liked the Hansa Gallery. They liked the Tanager. And of course Tanager had also had some really good people. They had Phillip Pearlstein. And I'm not sure who else, but a whole lot of people that have since made a good career.

And we were very interested in each other's work. That was another nice thing about it. Even though we were competitive and wanted to have the first show, at the same time we admired each other. I remember going to see Stankiewicz's work. He was living at that time with a lady named Jean Follett. And Jean Follett made assemblage. For example, she'd start with a piece of plywood and then start pasting excelsior on it. So it looked like the plywood came out with pubic hair. And then she got invited to be in an assemblage show at the Museum of Modern Art, which was a real success. But she was another crazy lady, too. She wore the brightest possible color lipstick. She didn't just put it on her lips, but out about half an inch outside, all the way around. And she always wore black velvet suits over a white shirt. You know, white shirt buttoned all the way to the top. So she very much had her own style. [1:00:00]

And when she was at the Hofmann School, Hofmann loved her work because it looked like she was making pictures of fish with big fish eyes somewhere in the middle. It was weird, weird stuff. And the weirder it was, the more Hofmann liked it. He could always see the generating impulse in every person's work. And if you didn't have a generating impulse, then Hofmann would just be quiet. He wouldn't say anything. He'd say, "Ah, the blue is a little too dense," or something like that. But he wouldn't deal with the work as a whole.

Zapol: So you were talking about the Tanager and the Hansa. So how did the art world know to come to critique there? Was there already a sense of artists and galleries being in that

neighborhood? Were there already things that people were going to in the—

Kahn: Well, de Kooning had his studio right nearby on 10th Street. And Esteban Vicente had it. And I think Franz was somewhere nearby—Franz Kline. And slowly but surely other galleries got attracted and settled down there. I had my first show there. Meyer Shapiro, who was a famous art professor at Columbia, came. He came and he bought a little picture. Somewhere I have a book that shows where all the people signed. And there were some very good names there. People were in.

[END OF FIRST AUDIO FILE; BEGINNING OF SECOND]

Kahn: They were aware that something was going on down there in the East Village on Third Avenue. Other people were also living there, like Bob Frank [Robert Frank] the photographer. He lived on Third Avenue and 13th Street in a loft. And who else? Well, all kinds of fairly well known people got involved down there. It was a magnet.

Zapol: So there were a lot of artists in the neighborhood? People already had a sense that that was happening in that neighborhood when the Hansa opened?

Kahn: Oh, yeah. I think we were one of the first places that got settled there. But we helped give it the imprimatur of an arty neighborhood.

Zapol: And was there one night when openings were happening?

Kahn: It was very disorganized. Now everybody is around on Thursday evening over on the West Side and you can barely walk on the sidewalk. There was nothing like that then. There were openings and you had these straw-covered bottles of Chianti. Bad wine. God, you could get a headache from that wine.

Zapol: So there were openings, but it wasn't all at the same time?

Kahn: No, there was no central authority so to speak. What you have to keep in mind is that art activity in those days was something very marginal in New York. The artists that people talked about, that the museums featured, were people like Kuniyoshi [Utagawa Kuniyoshi] or

[Abraham] Rattner. Hofmann and de Kooning and people like that, they were relegated to some back room. But the museum people always get there too late anyway. Harold Rosenberg, a famous critic in those days—he's the guy who invented the term “action painters”—described the art world hangers-on, the critics, as the “herd of independent minds.” That's what he called them.

Zapol: What was your relationship to the critics at that time?

Kahn: Well, we knew the ones who were on our side. We knew the critics, the big critics for the newspapers. Katherine Kuh, she was a big critic. I think she's the only one I remember. There was this guy who used to be the food critic for the *New York Times*, but he became the art critic. And he didn't know his ass from a hole in the ground. He was terrible. And yet, we all paid like \$500 for a little insert on the art page. There was a lot of that. Everybody had to be on the art page if they had a show.

Zapol: Of the *Times*?

Kahn: At that time already. There was a famous dentist, Dr. Greenberg [phonetic] [00:04:36]. Do you know about him?

Zapol: Yes, he would exchange service for—

Kahn: He would exchange dental work for paintings. He got himself a wonderful collection.

Zapol: Did you know him? [laughs]

Kahn: No, I was too young to have tooth problems. [00:05:00]

Zapol: Right. Well, that was unlucky for him then, I suppose. You said that you were in charge of dealing with the landlord at the Hansa Gallery. What was their relationship to who owned that building, and what was your relationship to the—

Kahn: One of the people who lived in that building owned the building. I wonder if he owned it when he negotiated first? Anyway, he ended up owning the building. His son was a painter, but he didn't belong to our gallery. It was a mish-mosh. Since the amount of money that was

involved was negligible, anybody could own a building, practically.

Zapol: Right. Was there a particular day or a story you can tell me that would talk about the relationships between 10th Street and your place on 12th Street?

Kahn: Well, we had the Hansa. The problem always was to find somebody to sit in the gallery. Because people had their own fish to fry. But finally we got Anita Manshel. And she was a friend of ours from elsewhere. She'd gone to Sarah Lawrence College and her father owned a big brokerage firm on Wall Street. She ended up being married to another owner of a brokerage firm, Warren Manshel. We got her to come and sit in the gallery and to run it. She had no talent for running any gallery. As soon as anybody came who looked like they might drop some money, she came running over to my studio, which was just across the street. "You better come over, Wolf. We've got a live one." Nobody really made any money.

Except what happened is, while the Hansa was still on, I had a girl in Downtown Community School, which was on 12th Street and Second Avenue, across from the church. And right next to it was a brownstone belonging to Dore Ashton. Do you know Dore? I think one of her children went to the school, too. And once a year we had a thing where works of art were for sale. Of course we all would put in either stuff that we didn't like or else stuff that was too expensive for anybody to buy. Every now and then somebody bought something.

And I remember I was asked to pick up a piece from [Robert] Rauschenberg. His studio was right next to mine, to our loft on Broadway. I picked up this thing that he did on graph paper with a lot of erasures. It was his kind of thing in those days. And he had a \$1,500 price on it. It would be worth a million now. I looked at it and said, "That's really very nice. I wish I could afford it." But nobody had any money. That's the trouble. But I got to be friendly with Rauschenberg because he was so nearby. But I wasn't a homosexual, so my friendship went so far and no further. That's another way that the art world ended up splitting up: into a gay group and straight group.

Zapol: How so? [00:10:00]

Kahn: Well, there was Rauschenberg and Jasper Johns, who were the leaders of the next

generation after us. And they were both gay. They brought with them a whole group of strange people. Like Warhol, for example. He was part of that group. I didn't understand what was going on. Still don't in many cases. I still think Warhol is totally overrated.

Zapol: Did you have a sense of what was happening with The Factory and that group?

Kahn: Not really. I thought it was all an aberration. It was all beside the point. In those days, I was interested in that lady from Cornell. She made horses, pictures. Big horses. She was a famous painter. Wait a minute, I've got her book here.

Zapol: Wait, hang on. Let me unclip—

[interruption]

Zapol: To resume, just talking about how did you make money at that time?

Kahn: Not in this. I only have one thing.

Zapol: That's perfect.

Kahn: Okay. Well, I had a job through my friend Lester. I got a job as a recreation worker for an after-school group on the Lower East Side at Lavenberg Houses, which is like the first co-op.

Zapol: The Garment Workers' Co-op?

Kahn: No, I don't think it had to do with garment workers. But it was down near Knickerbocker Village, in that area. Again, to tell you how different the wage scales were, I had a job—and this was in 1951, I think. When did I come back? Gosh, I should really bring out my—

Zapol: And [19]50 was when you came back from Chicago.

Kahn: From Chicago. Yeah. And I got a job as a recreation worker from three o'clock until ten o'clock, four days a week. And I was making 65¢ an hour working with eighty kids. I worked and I was good at it. I worked my heart out. I went back after the summer and I asked if they wanted to give me my job back. But I said, "I need a raise, just to feel that I've earned

something.” She said, “Well, how much do you want?” And I said, “I think I want a dollar an hour.” And she said, “Well, we can't possibly pay you that.” So I said, “Well, then I'm not going to take the job.” In the meantime, my group of kids, they'd all collected and they were walking past the manager's office, saying, “We want Wolfie! We want Wolfie!” It was fun.

Zapol: Did that convince her?

Kahn: No.

Zapol: So what other jobs did you have?

Kahn: My next job was in Harlem, still as a recreation worker. But I was working with gangs.

[00:15:05]

Zapol: Right, we talked about that.

Kahn: And I did that for about three years, I think. Then, I got a job with the Downtown Community School. I was working right next door to Pete Seeger. He was teaching music. I was teaching art.

Zapol: What are your memories of him?

Kahn: I remember seeing him and how lanky he was; how he was with the guitar and sometimes with a banjo. But I personally didn't have much to do with him.

Zapol: What was your job there?

Kahn: I was the woodwork teacher. I knew just enough woodwork to be ahead of a thirteen year old.

Zapol: Good. And how did you find time to paint?

Kahn: Well, these are all part-time jobs. At Downtown I think I worked two days a week. And by that time I was even making a little money. I could support myself from that salary.

Zapol: And then you said that things started to shift for you in terms of your artwork.

Kahn: When I came back from Mexico, I had a body of work that I thought any gallery should be pleased to show. So I went to the best galleries in town: Kootz Gallery and Martha Jackson. And they all weren't having any. Finally, I went to Grace Borgenicht, and she sent me a telegram because we didn't have a bell then. And telephone? Forget about a telephone. So she sent me this telegram in which she said she wants to take me on, and I should come over and sign a contract. Or we should talk. I don't think we had a contract then. So I went with Borgenicht, and I stayed with her for forty years. That was a mistake because any other gallery would have done much more for my career. The gallery I have now is very good in that regard.

Zapol: So when you went with her, there was just that initial change. Your shift to the gallery uptown—

Kahn: To joining the gallery uptown? No, it was the Hansa Gallery moved uptown.

Zapol: The Hansa Gallery also moved uptown. Where did it move to?

Kahn: 200 Central Park South. Very fancy address.

Zapol: Why did it move?

Kahn: We were feeling ambitious. We thought we'd do well up there. And we could have, maybe. We gave entry-level jobs to two young guys who became famous dealers. What are their names again?

Zapol: It will come to you. But what year around that did you move?

Kahn: I think it was [19]55? Something like that.

Zapol: So pretty soon after. You weren't very long downtown.

Kahn: We were there, I think, for three years.

Zapol: And then the shift uptown to be closer to more established galleries?

Kahn: Yes, to be in an uptown gallery. That was something. And that was before I went to

Mexico.

Zapol: I see. And did you stay involved with Hansa? [00:20:00]

Kahn: No, wait. It's after, I think. No, I didn't stay involved, because in order to be involved there you had to pay \$15 a month to be a member. I figured that since I just spent all my money in Mexico, I couldn't really afford that. These were hard times. But somehow or other we all had a pretty good time drinking cheap wine in spite of it.

Zapol: So now you shifted to uptown. What happened for you, and how did your—

Kahn: I continued on Broadway in my rented loft, and got to be very good friends with Elaine de Kooning. I continued to be good friends with Bill de Kooning. And then my own group was the same bunch of guys who were in their early thirties.

Zapol: And how did you meet your wife?

Kahn: I met her at the Artists' Club, right on Broadway and 12th Street. I wonder if I have a book in which that's all documented. I don't know if I still have that. Anyway, she came. Her mother's a painter: Alice Trumbull Mason. And so her mother brought Emily to the Artists' Club. And she also came with some guy with hair in his eye. And I took one look at her and said, "This is the most beautiful girl I've ever taken up." And I'll show you a photograph of her in those days.

[interruption]

Kahn: She proved to be a very sound and balanced person, and perfectly willing to undergo the difficulties that we had in the early days when we first started having children.

Zapol: She grew up—

Kahn: On the West Side.

Zapol: In the Village?

Kahn: She started out in the Village. She was born on Horatio Street. She's one of the few New

Yorkers who is actually born in New York.

Zapol: So she's a real Villager as well.

Kahn: Yes, she is. And her mother actually belongs to a famous family: the Trumbulls. Jonathan Trumbull was adjutant to George Washington. And he was a painter. He painted the signing of the Declaration of Independence in the Capitol Rotunda in Washington. It's got to be said in her favor that Emily makes nothing of that. But part of her family grew up around where you are, in Duxbury and Boston.

Zapol: Massachusetts. Yeah, it's a familiar name.

Kahn: She has a bunch of aunts, many of whom were anti-Semites. But once I was in the family they just had to get used to the fact. One of her aunts married a guy named Miles Standish IV. He was a banker, but he was very stupid. Uninteresting person. His son grew up without knowing very much of anything, except with a big ego. And he wanted to prove himself. So the way to prove yourself was to buy a share of an oil deal. At that point I had a dealer in Houston. And I told him about that, and he says, "Remember Wolfie, any oil deal worth anything in Texas stays in Texas." [00:25:32]

Zapol: [laughs] Right. Not necessarily the way to go.

Kahn: So anyway, Bill Trumbull [phonetic] [00:25:39], he owned the family Trumbull, which was a portrait of an unimportant guy in the Revolution who ended up running the ferry from Jersey City to Lower Manhattan. His name is Higgins. This picture was supposed to stay in the family and go from the oldest male to the next generation oldest male. And since none of these people had any sense of art at all or interest in it, except the possible financial value, Emily's mother was very upset by that. She thought that was sexism of the worst type and she wanted to be sure that this painting would go to a painter. Bill Trumbull needed money. So I lent him the money with the idea that, as a collateral, I'd get that painting. So now we have the painting because Bill Trumbull never amounted to anything. And the oil stayed in Texas.

Zapol: Well done. So what was Emily like in that moment when you were first courting? Tell

me a story about your courtship.

Kahn: First of all I invited her for a cup of coffee away from the club. She came and she left some guy behind. So I thought, well, you know, she's quite nice. Then, I invited her to come with me to listen to Mahler's Second Symphony in Carnegie Hall because I had free tickets. And she came. In the second movement of Mahler's Second Symphony—a very slow movement—I fell asleep. She took one look at me and says, “Anybody who falls asleep in the second movement of Mahler's Second Symphony can't be all bad.” So two weeks later, she invited me to go to *A Day In The Country* by Chekov. Do you know that play? Well, again in the second act I fell asleep. So that was the beginning of our relationship.

Zapol: And you talk about anti-Semitism within her family. At that time did you feel any anti-Semitism among the general public, like you had when you were dating a Black woman?

Kahn: Well, some. Some. Once you've been a refugee and you think in terms of the world as being divided between Jews and non-Jews, you can't get that out of your head. And also Emily's Aunt Hester [phonetic] [00:29:25] didn't make it easier because she said to Emily's mother, “Get that child out of New York. She's going to marry a Jew boy for sure.” And that got back to me. But Aunt Hester turned out to be a very nice lady once I got to know her.

Zapol: Right. Once you were part of the family. [00:30:04]

Kahn: Yeah. I mean it wasn't anything like in Germany. It was really part of the culture, anti-Semitism. In America, the time that I was here, it already was in abeyance. It just didn't fit with all the immigration and all the success the Jews were having and so forth.

Zapol: And in the art world, did you ever have a sense of anti-Semitism?

Kahn: No, none. No racism. You know, Sara was very, very happily received. I mean she was like the token nigger. She was the only Black person there. It was very different time. I mean, how the times have changed. It's really remarkable in such a short time. The whole idea of how all that technology affects us now. I don't even know how to turn on my computer. But I feel like an ass. I'm very happy in a way that I have my eyes to blame. Because even if I had my eyes, I'd

have a hard time. Because I never learned how to type. I never learned how to do any of these technological things.

Zapol: Right. So rapid social and technological change.

Kahn: In the last fifty years, you know? To see all that happening so fast that you couldn't keep up with it. I mean, people still can't keep up with it.

Zapol: No. As we're talking about change, tell me about some of the changes you saw happening in the neighborhood while you were living on Broadway.

Kahn: Well, from the time when I was there, it was a very sort of dingy, non-descript part of the world. By the time I left which was, gosh, maybe ten years later, it had changed into the antique section of New York that it still is today.

Zapol: It was early Fifties to early Sixties?

Kahn: Probably.

Zapol: Like 1952 or 1951?

Kahn: In [19]51 I came back from Chicago.

Zapol: But you were in that other place in the East Village.

Kahn: Yeah, but I got a job right away at Cooper Union [for the Advancement of Science and Art]. I was teaching at Cooper Union. I no longer had to deal with children, although I dealt with college kids. In those days they were all a bunch of potheads.

Zapol: Around what year?

Kahn: It was around [19]60, I think.

Zapol: So you're saying that the neighborhood became more antique and a little less dingy?

Kahn: Well, our little house where the gallery had been was torn down. It's now a huge

apartment complex, corner of 12th Street and Fourth Avenue.

Zapol: And your life after you met Emily?

[interruption]

Kahn: It was hard. I had two children, not very much income. And I didn't want to spend a lot of time having to be in jobs, because I wanted to get shows together. So I had that job at Cooper Union. By that time I think at Cooper I was making almost \$2 an hour teaching a class.

[00:35:05]

[interruption]

Zapol: You were saying that it was hard to be raising a family and trying to make a living working as an artist.

Kahn: Yeah. My first show that I had down at Hansa was quite successful. It was all paintings of Emily because that was after the first summer I took her to Provincetown. Were we in Italy already? Had we been to Italy? I don't know.

Zapol: You married in Italy? Was that when you went to Italy, in [19]57?

Kahn: We got married in Italy in 1957. [19]58.

Zapol: Right. And you had your second one-man show in [19]55, at the Hansa. So that would have been before.

Kahn: Yeah, that was the uptown one.

Zapol: So when you came back after that, you had another show.

Kahn: After I came back from Italy I had a show. And that wasn't much of a success. Since I was by that time spoiled and used to having gold showered into my lap, that sat badly with me. But on the other hand, you live through that, too. After a while, slowly but surely, I came back to public favor. But it takes a while. And while you're waiting, while you're standing in the wings

watching the rest of the art world going like gangbusters, you start feeling bad. I was quite depressed for a while. Wake up at night in a sweat. And I was living at that time on Broadway and 12th Street still.

Zapol: Where did you go after Broadway and 12th Street?

Kahn: Well, Emily got a loft on 20th Street between Fifth and Sixth [Avenue], where she still is. She actually bought that loft. And it's now worth an amazing amount of money. But in those days, I think it cost us about \$260,000 to get the big loft, as large as this one.

Zapol: And that's where you moved in the late Sixties or so?

Kahn: No. We were still living on Second Avenue and 15th Street. We lived there for forty years.

Zapol: So after living on Broadway, you moved to Second Avenue and 15th Street?

Kahn: Right.

Zapol: I see. And what was that home?

Kahn: That was a third floor walk up in a brownstone. And it had belonged to a painter who had a heart attack. Couldn't make it up the stairs anymore. So he had to move out, and he arranged that I could take it over from him. And from then on in my story becomes less interesting because I started to embrace comfort.

Zapol: What does that mean?

Kahn: It means that my children were getting old enough that I could have them both in private school, and my paintings were generally quite well thought of. And I became sort of famous. Since then, nothing dramatic really has happened in my life, except that I got older and my eyes went bad.

Zapol: What was that shift to more comfort? What happened? And how did that feel to you?

[00:40:00]

Kahn: It felt very good. Because you don't want to live with uncertainty, which is what an artist's life is anyway, because you're at the mercy of taste. But I've been quite lucky in that regard. My paintings continue to appeal to people. And it's because I'm a talented person. I'm aware of that.

Zapol: What signaled to you your shift in public favor?

Kahn: Well, it's very easy: just money, if you sell your work. Like the last show I had here, just now. I have a terrific gallery now. Borgenicht died and for a while I went with a gallery called Beadleston Gallery, which I was terribly pleased to be with because they sold Van Goghs and Cézannes and things like that. They didn't give a damn about me, although they could sell my paintings at these lower prices very easily. People would go in there willing to spend seven figures, and if they only have to spend three they're delighted. Well, actually five. But there's nothing more successful than success. How do they say that? There's a saying.

But anyway, that's more or less what it implies. So now, I go to a party and I'm introduced to some people I've never met before. "Oh, you're Wolf Kahn. I love your work," and et cetera, et cetera. That's all very reassuring. You no longer feel that you're bucking the trend.

Zapol: I'm interested in this show that you had recently about landscape in New York. What are some of your favorite images and sites in New York?

Kahn: Well, look right out my back window. There's the top of the Empire State Building. So I made a few paintings of the Empire State Building. I like to go back and do the Stuyvesant Park, which I took my children to every time they had a birthday party, to play and all. Like sack races and things like that. I always enjoyed having birthday parties in Stuyvesant Park. For a while that got to be too difficult because it became Needle Park.

Zapol: Oh, around when?

Kahn: Around the late Seventies, early Eighties.

Zapol: What would happen in the park?

Kahn: Our house was broken into. In the morning when I'd take my children to school, there was some bum lying in the foyer making it difficult to open the door. There was a lot of crack going on in those days. It was a difficult era to live in that part of the world.

Zapol: Who were your neighbors at that time?

Kahn: Well, the guy upstairs, I think was in the advertising business. He used LSD and he decided to fly out of the window. Fortunately, he ended up on the top of a car. Put a big dent in the top of the car, but he survived. And below us were Peter and Patty Hirsch. And Peter Hirsch [phonetic] [00:45:02] had his own advertising shop. And on the ground floor, there were a lot of people. It changed hands. It was a New York middle class neighborhood by that time. [00:45:20]

Zapol: By the time you moved there in the Seventies?

Kahn: No, no. Well, when we moved there in the late Sixties, it was a decent neighborhood. And then it went downhill under [David] Dinkins. When [Rudolph] Giuliani came in [as mayor], I became an Art Commissioner for the City of New York.

Zapol: Tell me about that.

Kahn: Well, it has nothing to do with the Village.

Zapol: Not in any way? There is no overlap?

Kahn: I don't know, maybe there is. Let's see if I can dig up any. But I had a friend then who was a collector of mine named Arthur Lyman. He was a famous lawyer who was hired by the U.S. Senate to investigate Oliver North and people like that. The Iran-Contra business. And he and I became friends. He was asked for candidates for the Art Commission because that's a political job. It's a volunteer job. You don't get paid. And he got me involved. That was very interesting because you're in charge of passing on everything that happens on New York City sidewalks and parks and everything where the city has a primary influence. And they have an artist, a sculptor, an architect, and I think somebody from the Metropolitan Museum [of Art]. They had four non-professionals who always gave us trouble because they were so ignorant. I

was there for I think a year and a half. I didn't do a very good job because every time you had to go out and do a site visit, I never went.

Zapol: So I'm interested then in images of the Village, images of that particular neighborhood. When you think of the Village, are there particular artists, sculptors, photographers—

Kahn: Who lived there?

Zapol: Or whose work you think of as iconic about the Village? Or whose work you like that has the Village as a subject?

Kahn: Well, of course Martica Sawin, who got me involved with you guys. And Meyer Shapiro. He was on 10th Street. He was a great friend, a wonderful man. He taught at Columbia. Then, I got to be friendly with Barbara Novak. Do you know her? Well, she's an art historian who belonged to Barnard. She wrote an introduction to one of my books.

Zapol: I think you may have misunderstood me, but I was thinking particularly of images, of particular artists' work that you think of.

Kahn: Well, of course there's always the one of [Edward] Hopper, that piece of the Village street with a barbershop in the middle. He really caught the essence of what that part of the world is like, even today.

Zapol: What things catch your eye in the city, in the Village?

Kahn: Now?

Zapol: Yeah. You talked about the Empire State Building. **[00:50:00]**

Kahn: What catches my eye mostly are the changes that are constantly taking place. You know right now they're changing St. Vincent's and making it into condominiums. That seems very strange to have a whole area of a city that has no hospital in it just because there's one hospital that can't make their ends meet. I don't know if I'm really at home in the Village. But then, having been a refugee, you're never at home anywhere when it comes right down to it.

Where else? Well, Canal Street. But that's already south of the Village. But my son-in-law and daughter live down there, much against her will, because she hates the fact that it's so crowded and so noisy down there. Even though there's good shopping for food supplies—good fish, good vegetables.

Zapol: So what about Canal Street lights your imagination?

Kahn: Well, there's a terrific etching, I think, by [Claes] Oldenburg. Do you know that one of Canal Street and Broadway? It's like two blocks of huge blocks on the street rather than cars, and they all face each other.

Zapol: It sounds like a good piece. I must see it.

Kahn: Yeah, it's a good piece.

Zapol: So you say you're not sure you feel home in the Village, and yet you've been around and in the Village for a long time.

Kahn: Yeah. Maybe I'm just not the kind of person who attaches himself to one place. Because I'd be just as happy living anywhere else. I can imagine living on the Upper East Side. The museum is up there. Two of my doctors are up there. A couple of good restaurants where I know the owners. And my friend Kevin Roche, the architect. He has a place up there. I go visit him.

Zapol: So it's not particularly about it being in the Village? It's just that this happened to be the places where you've lived?

Kahn: Yeah, but that's the way I live my life. I sometimes have a feeling that I'm not attached at all. I'm not a family man particularly. I just go along with whatever my wife says. I have no great desires of my own. I like to be in my studio doing my work, and being interviewed by pretty ladies.

Zapol: It sounds like the focus is in doing the work.

Kahn: Yes. I mean, I think for most artists that's the case. It's so hard to be an artist. The chances

of you being able to survive on this narrow ledge are so small. I should just be pleased to be sitting here paying my rent. The rents have gone up so much, good god. Do you know how much rent I pay here? You'll be shocked. Guess.

Zapol: I don't know.

Kahn: \$13,000 a month. [00:55:00]

Zapol: Wow. Compared to your, what was it, \$9?

Kahn: \$9.50, yes. And that's only sixty years ago.

Zapol: Yeah, that's a big shift. It's astounding. That's a big change for this neighborhood. So what's the future for artists in Greenwich Village?

Kahn: Getting more and more difficult. I think you have to really be what they call a 'successful artist' to live in the Village. Unless you have a rent-controlled apartment or something like that. My apartment, incidentally, on 15th Street was rent controlled.

Zapol: And how did you find that place? You said that artist moved out.

Kahn: Yeah, Robin Jackson [phonetic] [00:56:02]. He had a heart attack and moved out. He was a friend. But the thing about New York is it's so vast. There are so many places where the marbles just barely touch each other, you know?

Zapol: That there are many different enclaves or places where people can be and find their way?

Kahn: Right. And sometimes they overlap. But most of the time I think they're really isolated from each other.

Zapol: I'm not sure I get what you're saying.

Kahn: Well, what I'm trying to say is that in New York there are many groups that have nothing to do with each other. You just meet by chance or get to know them by chance. I belong to an organization that's quite wonderful because you meet wonderful people there. It's the Academy

of Arts and Letters. There, you'll meet your generation: the top people in the intellectual world, top architects, top writers. I've made many friends. I even got a very top writer, [John] Updike, to write an introduction to one of my books.

Zapol: So that's a place where the marbles overlap?

Kahn: Where they overlap, yes. We have dinners. We sit at different tables. I got to know a poet from Vermont called Galway Kinnell. And he's very noteworthy because every time he comes he brings another girlfriend for supper. At least he did. Maybe lately he's had to cut some of it out. You can't call that a "community." But you know you sort of belong together, just by dint of fame.

Zapol: We heard about this moment with the 10th Street and 12th Street [Artists' Club]. That was a time when there was a lot of overlap with this group.

Kahn: A lot of overlap in the art world, especially. But there was also in music and in dance. We all went to the concerts of the Composers' Orchestra. And we took an interest—not really a very informed interest—but an interest in each other's work. And the architects, of course. I'm still friends with many architects that I normally wouldn't have met at all.

Zapol: Where did you meet? Was it at the galleries or the Cedar Tavern?

Kahn: What, the American Academy?

Zapol: Oh, I'm sorry. The architects and so on you met through the Academy, I see. So it's a place of overlap there. **[01:00:04]**

Kahn: Yes.

Zapol: I think that we may be in a place where I'm out of questions for you. But I wonder if there is anything else that you wanted to share about the Village that I haven't asked you?

Kahn: Well, my sense of place when it comes to the Village is very limited because I just happened to find myself there. It's not that I had been attracted to the Village or something like

that. My most exciting moment in the Village was when I was a blockbuster. That's when I was really involved in the Village. Pearl Bailey is the person who was on the block. She was a Black lady who was already there. But she was there because she was famous.

Zapol: She was an exception.

Kahn: Yes.

Zapol: It's interesting, you say you didn't explicitly seek out the Village, and yet at the same time you were a part of this larger movement of the Village. You were a part of Hofmann's studio. You were a part of all these artists that were working together to create the gallery scene on 10th Street. So there were just so many different ways in which it sounds like you have been involved, and very much that zeitgeist of that moment.

Kahn: Well, less than a lot of other people, I must say. And I think it has to do with—

[END OF SECOND AUDIO FILE; BEGINNING OF THIRD]

Kahn: —having been a refugee. I'm not quite attached. Having married Emily of course attached me a lot more. She already had, through her mother, many friends who were well-known artists. Like I spent an evening with [Mark] Rothko. He looked at Emily and he said, “You know, I used to have you sitting on my lap.” Because he was at their house, and Emily was just a kid running around. I was also great friends with Milton Avery, who also lived on 10th Street. I'd leave my studio and I'd meet him on Washington Square. He'd sit and sun himself on one of those benches with his little dog. He was a lovely guy.

Zapol: Tell me a story about him.

Kahn: Well, he told me that when he meets a friend or a colleague at an opening and he doesn't like the work, he'll hold out his hand and he says, “You've done it again!”

Zapol: [laughs] That's a good one to remember.

Kahn: “You've done it again.” Milton was a member of my gallery—the Borgenicht Gallery.

And Sally Avery hated Grace Borgenicht. She'd do all kinds of things to make life difficult for her. Like in the middle of a show, she'd change the prices. Grace would be there with somebody who was trying to make up their mind to go buy something. She'd have to go to the person and say, "The price has just gone up 10%." It's not easy to do.

Well, New Yorkers are tough. The spirit of New York interests me because what you have here is a bunch of people who, on the surface, are very severe and tough and strong. But once you get to know them they melt like ice cream on a hot summer day. And they can't help but try to collect friends because everybody basically here is so lonely. Friendship is an important part in New York, more than in other cities, I think.

Zapol: Thank you, Wolf. I wonder if you have anything else you want to share, or if you want to say what your hopes are for the future of the Village?

Kahn: Well, I hope they don't tear all those old houses down. It's a shame that everything new that they build is less beautiful than what's gone down in order to build it. Maybe that's just me being an old man. But that's a shame. That seems a bit wrongheaded to me, that beauty should take so much the second seat to money. And of course New York runs very much on money. The whole status and prestige thing has so much to do with how rich you are. There's a whole magazine that's devoted entirely to the issue: *New York* magazine. I can't stand that magazine. It's really disgraceful.

Zapol: You've talked about the changing influence of money over time and in your life, and in other artists' lives as well, so I think that seems like a good point to end.

Kahn: Okay.

[END OF THIRD AUDIO FILE; BEGINNING OF FOURTH]

Kahn: You know, the German Jews and the Eastern Jews have big contrasts. The German Jews have nothing but contempt for the Eastern Jews because they were poor and German Jews were well off by and large.

Zapol: Did you feel some of those divisions here?

Kahn: No, not here. Once I came here, I became very interested in Eastern Jewish culture. Because when I first saw buildings that had Hebrew painted on them, I felt embarrassed. “How come they have the courage to do that?” Because in Germany, of course, something like that would have been unheard of. And when I was in England, it was so xenophobic. Nobody knew how to spell my name.

Zapol: You went as a part of the Kindertransport? So then coming here was quite different from England?

Kahn: Oh yeah. In England I was living with volunteer families, whereas when I came here I had my own family.

Zapol: And what was your experience of Eastern European Jews? In the Village you must have been around quite a few Ukrainians and other Jews.

Kahn: No, not really. You mean the East Village?

Zapol: Yeah.

Kahn: No. One of my best friends from Music & Art lived on 12th Street and Avenue A, Leonard Slonevsky. And he was anything but Jewish. And there was other people very much of that same type who were living there. And the lady with the monkey, she was not Jewish. Who was living there that was Jewish? I don't think anybody. Tompkins Square I don't think was particularly Jewish.

Zapol: Where did you see buildings with the Hebrew on them?

Kahn: Everywhere down there. On Orchard Street, Suffolk Street.

Zapol: Lower East Side.

Kahn: Yeah, Lower East Side. I thought that was fascinating. And the whole Eastern Jewish culture fascinated me. It still does. For example, I'll tell you a story: I was walking to—what's the church that's on 10th Street and Broadway?

Zapol: St. George's?

Kahn: No, the one that was built by the very young guy, the first Gothic church. Grace Church. And they had a service there for Franz Kline, a memorial service. And I was walking there in the company of Meyer Shapiro and Barney [Barnett] Newman, the painter who does just big stripes. I was walking in between. And we were talking about the difference between 'iches' and 'naches.' Do you know Yiddish at all?

Zapol: I don't know, what is the difference between iches and naches?

Kahn: Naches is good luck that comes to you from outside and iches is the sense of self-confidence that you have. And they were talking about it. And then we got in the church, and there were no seats except way in the back. So Meyer and Barney looked at each other and said, "I guess we don't have any iches. Otherwise they'd have a place for us." [00:05:12]

Zapol: [laughs] Did you speak Yiddish?

Kahn: Never. But I loved the idea. For example, the Jews have a word for the in-laws of one's children. Do you know that word?

Zapol: Mishpochah?

Kahn: No, mishpochah is family. No, this is 'machutten' and 'machuttenister.' A machutten is the father-in-law of your children. See, there's no direct connection except what you invent to make that connection. And there's machutten and machuttenister, which is the female for it. And then machuttenim, which is the plural. So that's one thing I think Yiddish borrowed from German, because German is a language that's extraordinarily precise. They have a word for "step" when you lift up your foot, another word for "step" when you put it down.

Zapol: [laughs] Yes. So we started recording again because you had a story about the party before you went to Italy.

Kahn: Oh, yeah. Well, I thought I should give a farewell party because I didn't know when I'd be back.

Zapol: This was 1956 or so?

Kahn: [19]57.

Zapol: Yeah.

Kahn: It's around there. And so I invited David Amram to come and play for us so we could dance, which he did. I don't think I had to pay him anything. Maybe I did. It was a wonderful party. Franz was there. De Kooning was there. I think even Guston was there. The whole older generation came because I think I was very popular in those days. Nobody had anything bad to say about me. It's because I behaved so well. [laughs] And I had a Black girlfriend. That was all much to my credit. It's not anything that I did in order to gain credit, it just happened.

I believe that it's very important in life to allow things to happen and not to have strategies going all the time. Because when you have strategies, then you have to weigh everything, whereas if you allow things to just take place— I think when you're thinking all the time about what the next step is, it's like making love with *The Joy of Sex* open on the night table beside you. And it's amazing how few people understand that. You've got to allow things to take place under their own impulse, rather than guided by your will. I think the will is a very overrated aspect of human life. Most of the time it's used badly and makes life miserable for somebody.

Zapol: So what happened at this party?

Kahn: Well, David just played and sounded wonderful. And we didn't have any recording apparatus or anything like that. Everything was so modest. The idea of finding Frank O'Hara fast asleep underneath all those overcoats— [00:10:09]

Zapol: So tell that story again because that wasn't on the recording.

Kahn: Well, we had this set of steps going up to the roof. And there was an opening that you could move to get out onto the roof. It was just the right size to put all the coats there, because we had no other place to put the coats. And it was wintertime, so everybody threw their coats underneath those steps. The next morning, I'm trying to find people's coats. I've got people

coming by looking for coats. And so finally we get to the bottom. What was at the bottom but Frank O'Hara, fast asleep. He was sleeping off a drunk.

Another thing that wasn't happening very much then was drugs. Very little drugs. I remember my first summer in Provincetown, I was very good friends with Larry Rivers. And Larry, of course, was in on everything that was slightly corrupt and slightly illicit. So he brought us to this party in Provincetown. It was outdoors. It was at Jane Freilicher's place. Larry and Jane I think were keeping time. And the iconic South American with a paper bag filled with pot showed up. And I had never experienced that. So they fed me pot. And of course I was high, and everybody else was high, too. But that was the first experience of drugs that I'd ever had. And that was all the way back in 1955, something like that.

Zapol: So it hadn't really entered that world yet?

Kahn: No. But Emily was in high school, and her younger brother was a zoot suiter. You know what a zoot suiter is?

Zapol: I know the costume, but I don't know—

Kahn: And everything that goes with it is, you're crazy about Miles Davis. You hang out in jazz clubs. And you use drugs. He was just a fourteen-year-old kid, and he got into that world.

I wish my memory were better. I feel a little bit like, you know, some people are ready to spill the beans.

Zapol: You do have a lot of really great anecdotes. You can remember what people said to you. You actually have a very sharp memory among the people that I've interviewed.

Kahn: You think so? Well, take all the boring things and throw them out. Leave only the good stuff.

Zapol: [laughs] And this last story, as sad as it is, is also interesting in what you're saying that drugs weren't around. It just hadn't totally infiltrated that scene yet.

Kahn: Very little.

Zapol: Okay. Well, I'm aware that you have another date, and that I'm taking your time, too. We will stop now.

[END OF INTERVIEW]