CANADIAN WAR MUSEUM

ORAL HISTORY PROGRAM

INTERVIEW TRANSCRIPT

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INTERVIEWEE: Bruno Bobak

INTERVIEWER: Hugh Haliday {?}

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Transcription of Interview Number 31D 5 BOBAK, BRUNO
Bruno Bobak
Interviewed September, 1980
By Hugh Halliday [?]

INTERVIEWER: Your army records said that before you became a war artist, you were very proficient in demolition.

BOBAK: Well, I suppose. Like all engineers were. I was in the Engineering Corps. And I think we built bridges, we dug out road.[muffled?] too. I thought I was more in motor mechanics, myself. I suppose demolitions was part of the Engineer's course.

INTERVIEWER: Did you find that an odd thing, going from being an expert in demolitions to being an artist?

BOBAK: No, because I was an artist before I joined the engineers. In fact, one of the things that amused me when I joined the army, the personnel person asked me what sort of things did I do in civilian life. I said I was an artist. I thought for sure they'd send me to some place where I'd be doing truck signs or something like that. But instead, he wrote on the form, No Trade. [both laugh]

INTERVIEWER: As though you'd been riding the rails. Your wife mentioned that you had gotten into this, the matter of being a war artist, through a competition.

BOBAK: Right. I think it was called the First Canadian War Artist -- no, First Canadian -- what'd they call it? Canadian Army Art Competition. And there was an exhibition of pictures organized in Ottawa, I think through the military services. I think I won first prize and Molly won second prize. By the time the announcements were made, I was already in England ready to go over to France on the invasion day. But a couple of weeks before that, I was summoned up to London. And Vincent Massey asked me how I would like to be a war artist. I said, "Sure." Anything but fight. He said, "Well, we'll see if we can release you." And I went back to my unit. My commanding officer said there was no way I could get out of it now. There was just not enough time to replace people. But I guess he put the squeeze on him somehow and got me out. So that's the way I became a war artist.

INTERVIEWER: OK, you became a war artist.

BOBAK: Obviously, the recommendation had been made by the War Artist Advisory Committee in Ottawa.

INTERVIEWER: Now, Mrs. Bobak had done a lot of lobbying to get to be a war artist. You had not done the same?

BOBAK: No.

INTERVIEWER: So, some great mysterious hand reached out of the blue and said, "Bruno, you're going to be a war artist!"?

BOBAK: Exactly. I'm sure that the War Artist Advisory Committee saw the exhibition where I won first prize and said, well this is a guy that should be a war artist. And I think they informed Vincent Massey who was the chairman, I think, of the War Artist Advisory committee. If I remember correctly -- but maybe he wasn't. I think he was also High Commissioner for Canada in London. So he was able to get me out. But I did no applications or lobbying at all.

INTERVIEWER: You just...

BOBAK: I just waited[?].

INTERVIEWER: And you had no previous contact with the Massey family?

BOBAK: No.

INTERVIEWER: Because Tony Law apparently had some connections with the Masseys. In a strange way, he also had been plucked out.

BOBAK: He's a much older man than I am. I was only about 19 at the time, or 20. There was no way I could have any political influence on anybody. I was just a kid.

INTERVIEWER: Had you done any drawing while with the engineers, any artwork other than this item for the competition?

BOBAK: I drew constantly while I was in the engineers. In fact, I used to make pocket money if I did portraits every night of the buddies all around. And sometimes I would do other, considered more serious paintings whenever there was any free time. But, no, I never stopped drawing when I joined the military.

INTERVIEWER: But when you joined, it was for King and country and there was no thought…?

BOBAK: There was no thought of ever being a war artist. Heavens, no.

INTERVIEWER: Do you know what happened to any of these drawings?

BOBAK: I never dreamed that I would be considered.

INTERVIEWER: Did the fact that you were Czech origin have anything to do with enlistment?

BOBAK: I was a Pole.

INTERVIEWER: A Pole.

BRUNO BOBAK: Yeah. Have anything to do with enlistment?

INTERVIEWER: Yes. Was it an added incentive?

BOBAK: No. No. Heavens, I was at the age when I would have been conscripted anyway. So rather than being conscripted, I preferred to join voluntarily.

INTERVIEWER: But you enlisted in '41 or '42? Forty-one, I think.

BOBAK: I don't know. Forty-two, I think.

INTERVIEWER: In which case, you would have been conscripted only for home service.

BOBAK: That's right. But I think they made it rather unpleasant for people that were conscripted for home service. So, I didn't feel like being called a Zombie. And, at that age, one doesn't really know what's going to happen. If I had it all to do over again now, I never would have joined at all.

INTERVIEWER: Why?

BOBAK: Well, because I think, first of all, it's too dangerous. [laughs] And, gee whiz, I was full of adventure as all young people are. I'm sure that's the only way you can build up armies, is to get young people to join.

INTERVIEWER: What about the aspect of, so called chicken shit -- the parades, the drill, the petty regulations? Did this start to turn you off being an engineer?

BOBAK: Well, I thought it was just a lot of boy scouts -- grown up boy scouts. I could never quite understand a lot of their reasoning behind this discipline, I must say. All that nonsense about parade drills and so on. However, I suppose that's all part of it.

INTERVIEWER: And yet, there's a picture of war artists posed at the Gallery, about late '45 or early '46.

BOBAK: Uh huh?

INTERVIEWER: And there's none smarter in his uniform than one Lieutenant Bobak.

BOBAK: Well, that may be. I was considered a dandy, I suppose. Well, I kind of liked the uniform. But, I don't know, so many of the fellows in my unit were killed during the

war that, in retrospect when I think about it, I probably would have been too. Because the odds were certainly against me. Because I think the survival of my unit was something like one quarter after the first two days after the invasion.

INTERVIEWER: Those drawings that you did, the portraits of your friends and so forth that were given away or sold for pocket money, do you ever think of what they're worth today?

BOBAK: Well, they were worth two bucks each then. They were mostly charcoal and pencil drawings.

INTERVIEWER: Did you sign them?

BOBAK: Oh, yeah. I signed all of them. The fellows would send them home to their mothers or their girlfriends. I must have done 10 a night for months and months and months.

INTERVIEWER: So, there might well be a large collection of Bruno Bobak portraits floating around.

BOBAK: Oh yeah. Sure. All in uniforms.

INTERVIEWER: All in uniforms.

BOBAK: Heads and shoulders.

INTERVIEWER: Well, that's something I think we may need to….

BOBAK: The fellows used to line up and wait to be drawn.

INTERVIEWER: At two dollars a head, a shot. That's pretty good money in those days.

BOBAK: Oh, sure.

INTERVIEWER: That one that you did for the [interruption by Bobak] competition, do you remember which one it was? Did it wind up -- I assume it wound up in the National Collection?

BOBAK: No. It wound up in the Hart House collection at the University of Toronto. And it was called 'Cross Country Convoy'.

INTERVIEWER: 'Cross Country Convoy'. We never did [inaudible]

BOBAK: It was bought by the University of Toronto.

INTERVIEWER: Do you know if it's on exhibit?

BOBAK: I don't know if it's on exhibit. It's still in their collection. Yes. It's available, I imagine, to anybody that wants to see it.

INTERVIEWER: You were a pretty prolific artist as an official artist. Let's see, you did well over a hundred works.

BOBAK: Well, a lot of them are watercolours.

INTERVIEWER: A lot were watercolours. A lot were pencils. But there's a fair number of canvases here, as well. When one compares that with other artists -- Miller Brittain doing only nine, I think -- you turned out quite a number, as I said. Do any of these titles -- and the titles run down, of course, two pages -- do any of them strike a note with you as hereby hangs a good story about how I came to paint this?

BOBAK: I don't know. It's hard to remember so far back. After all, we're going back over 30 years. I wouldn't even know where most of these towns are now.

INTERVIEWER: Well, when you were moving around in the units doing this work, what was the attitude of the troops?

BOBAK: Well, they just accepted us as, perhaps being a little more privileged than they were.

INTERVIEWER: Curiosity?

BOBAK: I think, in many cases, a lot of the other officers felt that we were in the way really, interfering in…. They felt that we should be out of the way. But, I don't know, somehow in the mess and with drinks, we seemed to get along fine with them. I do think they felt we were a little privileged.

INTERVIEWER: Did you feel particularly privileged?

BOBAK: Oh, sure.

INTERVIEWER: You were aware of it, then, self-consciously?

BOBAK: Of course. I didn't have to go to parades every morning. I didn't have to go to briefings unless I wanted to find out what was happening, that sort of thing. We were pretty well free agents and that's sort of nice.

INTERVIEWER: Did you…. In your travels, when you were sketching the men and so forth, you would have met other of the war artists?

BOBAK: Oh yeah. Sure.

INTERVIEWER: Any in particular that you worked with, or closely with?

BOBAK: Well, we all met from time to time, in London, where they had our main studios, eh?

INTERVIEWER: Yes.

BOBAK: We'd be in the field for six months and then we'd go back to London for six months to paint. So we generally met everybody, at one time or another, in London. But, while we were in the Continent I would have, you know, come across someone like Alex Colville who was in another Canadian division not that far away. And Orville Fisher. But we never really saw that much of one another while we were in the field. We pretty well had to stick with our own division and not do too much moving around.

INTERVIEWER: Back in London, did you live, physically, close together?

BOBAK: No. We all had our own separate accommodations. I did share a room once, with Campbell Kinney. He's the only one I ever shared a room with. Other than that, we pretty well lived alone in separate parts of London even.

INTERVIEWER: No Canadian art colony, then?

BOBAK: No. Except at the office or studio building, which was Fairfax House, I think.

INTERVIEWER: What about British?

BOBAK: And then, of course, we met in things like pubs after, in the evenings.

INTERVIEWER: Did you meet any British artists who particularly interested you or seemed to be interested in your work?

BOBAK: I met one British artist, a war artist called Art Isony[?] with whom I've become great friends. We still correspond and exchange Christmas cards. He was in Italy but we met in London. I don't know if I remember meeting any other British war artists or not. Maybe John Highburg [?].

INTERVIEWER: Any conscious trading or exchange of ideas or techniques during this period?

BOBAK: I wouldn't say so. No. I think we were -- I think we were pretty well set in our own ideas. There was very little talk about what we were doing, other than we could see one another's work. I remember at one time getting a memo saying that too many burnt out tanks were being painted. That wasn't being directed at me personally, but generally.

INTERVIEWER: Yeah. That's a criticism I'd go with. There's a hell of a lot of burnt out tanks.

BOBAK: I know. But they're gorgeous objects. They look like relics. Like old horses decaying in the field. You know, a good image of the aftermath of war.

INTERVIEWER: Um huh. Something that was so brutish and big and deadly is now so dead and clumsy. Any other directives that you recall?

BOBAK: No. That's the only one I recall. I don't know who the directive came from. It may have come from Colonel Stanley or Stacey maybe.

INTERVIEWER: What sort of terms of reference would you be given before you were assigned to a division? Surely it was more than just saying: "Here, lieutenant, go and paint."

BOBAK: I don't think there was much in the way of directives given, other than one had to represent one's own division that one was attached to. But other than that, there was no -- you know, nobody actually said what had to be painted or what should not be painted.

INTERVIEWER: Did anybody actually say, "Look, this is the age of photography but we're still going to have war artists and here's why"? Did anybody ever justify the trade?

BOBAK: Well, I think it was justified. I think somebody tried to justify it at that time, by saying, you know, that we weren't really people who were documenting anything because that was being done by the historians and the Signal Corps, who were great photographers. I think it was a question of traditions that, you know, that artists should be able to interpret the war in their own way. And this becomes yet another kind of document, other than photography or literature. And I think that's the only reason they had war artists. I don't think we were meant to make any sort of documentation as such, except, I think, some people in the early stages were forced to do portraits of generals and things like that.

INTERVIEWER: That then implies that somewhere in this vast bureaucracy that runs the war, there was someone who was saying, not for the sake of the services but for the sake of the art community, for the tradition of art, we must have war artists.

BOBAK: Well, I think ….

INTERVIEWER: A rather enlightened view, I would think. I mean, one that one would not expect to find in that big, bloody bureaucracy.

BOBAK: Well, let's see. People like A.Y. Jackson were war artists during the First World War. And I think they, he and probably some other colleagues, put quite a bit of pressure on the Canadian Government to see that that same kind of tradition was carried

on during the Second World War. And he was on the War Artist Advisory Committee. I'm sure, obviously the art community was lobbying for some kind of, you know, art representation of the war.

INTERVIEWER: What tends to stand out in your mind then, other than these burnt out tanks? You were at Belsen, were you not?

BOBAK: No.

INTERVIEWER: Not at Belsen?

BOBAK: No. I think Abby Byefsky went to Belsen.

INTERVIEWER: Yes.

BOBAK: I don't think I did. No. I never saw anything like the concentration camps. I think the thing that struck me was how smart some of the girls looked in these ruined villages. You know, literally flattened to the ground and out of the basements would come these well-groomed girls. It surprised me how people can, you know, not give up. That was the thing that surprised me. You know, how life can just carry on in this sort of fantastic devastation from day-to-day.

INTERVIEWER: Did you try to bring that out in your work?

BOBAK: I don't think so. I don't think I was aware of it at the time.

INTERVIEWER: The one thing that is sort of striking me as we talk is that here's a lieutenant -- a young lieutenant, 22 years old now so well recognized in the art community that he is appointed as a war artist, one of only about 40. Who's sufficiently self-confident that he borrows not at all from other people's inspirations or ideas or techniques. That you must have had a fantastically resilient character.

BOBAK: I was brought up in a tough neighborhood, and a tough background. We were very, very poor. As for myself, I was very, very ambitious and probably one of the reasons for so many works. And I was determined to get ahead and work like hell. It's as simple as that, I think. Because I just didn't want to go back to the kind of poverty I was brought up in. So I had that kind of confidence that I must succeed. In a way, being a war artist was my first opportunity to prove myself.

INTERVIEWER: Sounds like it was the toughness of the alley fighter then.

BOBAK: Yeah.

INTERVIEWER: And where were those alleys?

BOBAK: Toronto.

INTERVIEWER: In Toronto.

BOBAK: In the slums of Toronto.

INTERVIEWER: OK. How does a slum kid get to be an artist? To be inspired towards an artist? What keeps his mind from blocking?

BOBAK: That's a long story that I don't like really telling. That is that I was a rather difficult student when I was in grade school. In fact, so difficult that they considered me mentally retarded or suggested that I was mentally retarded. So they took me out of the grade school and put me into something called a school for slow learners. Which meant that as a student in the school for slow learners, they gave me virtually all the freedom I wanted to do, whatever I wanted and express myself, rather than be forced to take specific classes. And I took what was considered the easiest thing and that was paint and draw. So I spent four years out of my school system drawing and painting instead of learning arithmetic and spelling and mathematics. So that gave me my start in art. Once I got that far, then I was determined I would go to art school, which I did. I went to Central Tech and took art for four years. Before I could take art, they made me pass the academic entrance examinations, which I boned up in about two weeks and got through all right. So, the three or four years that I spent in the school where I learned nothing, was all made up in a couple of weeks.

INTERVIEWER: Your anecdote reminds me of the one about Winston Churchill who was also considered a slow learner and was forced to take all his courses in English literature and English writing while his comrades were having to take Greek and Latin. When they were all finished, he found he had a head start on everybody because he could write a decent sentence in English and they couldn't.

BOBAK: Right. So that's how I got into art. So I had a good head start in art, you know, that other kids didn't have in art school. And it was free. I don't know what I would have done if I had gone through school, normal school, and come out the other end. Probably would have gone to trade school or something and learned how to be a mechanic or bricklayer or something.

INTERVIEWER: OK. So going back to an earlier question, I think we -- I was probably responsible at the beginning for getting sidetracked. You remember the images of the tanks.

BOBAK: Uh huh.

INTERVIEWER: The tanks stand out. You certainly remember the memo about too many burned out tanks.

BOBAK: Yes. It's away in the background.

INTERVIEWER: Is there anything else that stands out as something you wanted to paint?

BOBAK: Oh, I did once remember seeing a rather wonderful image in a painting. The thing that made me want to paint it, it was a sort of a burned out gas station. And seems to me that the gas station was selling Shell gasoline. And the thing that struck me as being odd was that the 'S' had been completely blown off the top of the sign, so all one had left was HELL. And that struck me as being an interesting image. And I think I painted that in one of the pictures.

INTERVIEWER: That was in Britain or in Europe?

BOBAK: That was in Holland, I think.

INTERVIEWER: In Holland.

BOBAK: It must be one of these paintings. I really don't know which one.

INTERVIEWER: Yes. Unfortunately I wasn't able to bring photographs of all of these.

BOBAK: It might have been something like this. Could have been. I think it was only titled as a town.

INTERVIEWER: Were you ever actually under fire while you were…?

BOBAK: Uh huh. I was under fire once when I was drawing, actually, which was sort of silly of me to be there. But as the shells started falling close to me, I had to go into a slit trench that somebody had built. Unfortunately, there was a dead German in the bottom of it and I had to lie on top of him for a couple of hours before I dared get out.

INTERVIEWER: Oh, boy.

BOBAK: And the image of that was pretty frightening. There were flies crawling in and out of his eyes. It looked pretty awful.

INTERVIEWER: Do you remember when that was?

BOBAK: That must have been when they were, I think, ready to cross the river somewhere.

INTERVIEWER: The Rhine?

BOBAK: No. It wasn't the Rhine. It was in Holland. The Nijmegan River, could it be?

INTERVIEWER: It would be the fall of '44 then.

BOBAK: Yeah. I don't, you know, I don't have much of a chronology of what took place.

INTERVIEWER: The dead German didn't come up as a painting later, did he?

BOBAK: Not in the slit trench. No. I did paint, I think, some dead Germans, in dark gray uniforms. I don't know. Death looked pretty awful. I do remember once, my driver and I going out in the jeep. And as you probably know, during the Second World War, there was not always a clearly defined line between where they were and where we were. But, you know, one sort of took a cross roads five miles away and one sort of controlled that territory because one controlled the crossroad. But I do remember once going out in the jeep with my driver. And we were driving to where we thought were Canadian Forces. Suddenly we turned around. We realized that there were German people, German soldiers walking on the road. We thought, oh, they must be prisoners of war. So we kept on going. We got to the point where there were so many Germans that we realized that we weren't on our side anymore. I think we quickly turned the jeep around and roared back as fast as we could. By this time the Germans had realized that we were also in the wrong place. They were shooting at us on the way back. [laughter]. So that was just about as close as I came to being captured.

INTERVIEWER: Again, do you remember where or when that was?

BOBAK: That was in Germany. That was very close to the end of the war when things were moving pretty fast. Probably somewhere around the Black Forest.

INTERVIEWER: That didn't come up in any sort of painting?

BOBAK: No.

INTERVIEWER: OK.

BOBAK: It was not a paintable thing, you know?

INTERVIEWER: Except, perhaps, the image of that two guys high-tailing it across country. You work in a great deal of our hardware here, the Staghound, the Ram, the tanks, the self-propelled guns.

BOBAK: I think that's, you know, obvious, because I was with an armoured division. I mean I wasn't with the infantry so, I mean, it was obvious that I was, you know, expected to represent the things like self-propelled guns.

INTERVIEWER: Those two incidents, though, the shell fire and the incident on the road, were they the only incidences of being under fire, close to being a combat soldier again?

BOBAK: Well, I was in bombs, you know, falling anywhere but these were two that were specifically directed at me.

END OF SIDE ONE

INTERVIEWER: You met Mr. Bobak overseas?

M.L. BOBAK: Um huh.

INTERVIEWER: Now, you never really mentioned how. How did two great Canadian artists come to meet?

M.L. BOBAK: Well, we weren't great at the time. But because of that contest, because he came first and I came second, we both got to be war artists. I figure, that was it.

INTERVIEWER: Yes.

M.L. BOBAK: And so he came back from Holland, I suppose it was. Hey, Bruno? You were at Fairfax House when I arrived overseas.

BOBAK: Yeah, right.

M.L. BOBAK: I came up from Aldershot. And I knew Jack Shadbolt, who was the admin officer. He was my teacher. He took me around. I remember, I remember clearly, meeting Bruno. He was standing against a door. I'd met some of them before. I'd met Comfort before. And the rest I just met over there. But that's how we met. Then we all used to go out together, you know, Alex Colville, Bruno, me, Campbell, Tinning. And I'd hear them talking on the radio, you know. Have you heard those programs?

INTERVIEWER: I've been missing them, unfortunately.

M.L. BOBAK: It just boring. There's not a thing in them that Campbell should talk about his…. You can't, I guess. We had a fine time. I've heard Lawren Harris and Campbell, Tinning and Mo Ryan. I didn't even know he was a war artist. He was with the Air Force.

BOBAK: Mo? Yeah.

M.L. BOBAK: I never met him. I met him but I met him before that. But we used to have great times in London, just for a little while there, didn't we? Just before we all went home.

INTERVIEWER: I remember reading in Miller Brittain's correspondence actually. He made a reference to a letter, or to a meeting. The war artists having met with Vincent

Massey on a question. This was just shortly after VE Day. The question was, "OK, what are we going to do with you now?" And the general consensus of the meeting being, please send us home. We can work much better in our own studios, in our hometowns, than here in London. Do you recall that meeting?

M.L. BOBAK: No. It was before my time.

BOBAK: I don't recall.

M.L. BOBAK: Besides, I wouldn't have said that.

BOBAK: I don't recall any such meeting.

M.L. BOBAK: It might have been before, when you were over in Europe or something.

BOBAK: Well, I may have been on the Continent.

M.L. BOBAK: But I heard that Lawren Harris [inaudible].

BOBAK: As this implies, they didn't know what to do with us so why would I have been on the Continent?

M.L. BOBAK: After VE Day? Did you come back?

BOBAK: Oh, after VE Day. Yes. Oh. Yeah. I think that was probably true. I think they decided to set up studios for us for about six months in Ottawa, where we could paint there instead of in Europe.

M.L. BOBAK: And that's what happened.

BOBAK: And we took all our sketches and our unfinished paintings and completed the work in Ottawa.

INTERVIEWER: But the artists, themselves, seemed to have wanted this, this move.

M.L. BOBAK: Well, I think everyone wanted to go home.

BOBAK: Oh, I think everybody wanted to go home.

M.L. BOBAK: Besides, it is easier to paint at home.

BOBAK: I don't think, I don't actually recall a meeting with Vincent Massey about it.

M.L. BOBAK: I never met him in Europe, ever.

BOBAK: Because you were there at that time.

M.L. BOBAK: No. I didn't get away until just after VE Day.

BOBAK: After VE Day? Well, that's when it happened.

INTERVIEWER: Well, it was June, I think, from the correspondence.

M.L. BOBAK: Oh, I was over in Europe in June.

INTERVIEWER: Did you feel that, because you wanted to get home, from an artistic point of view?

BOBAK: I think we wanted to get home because we were homesick.

M.L. BOBAK: Get home, period. Yeah, I think everyone did. The war was over and….

BOBAK: After three or four years, two or three years, I think everybody was.

M.L. BOBAK: And we all wanted to get back to civilian life.

BOBAK: In fact, there was a lot of resentment because all the available transportation was being used to send Americans home first. The Canadians had to wait until all the Americans got home before they could get any available transportation.

M.L. BOBAK: They had riots, didn't they?

BOBAK: They had riots about it. Yeah.

M.L. BOBAK: And over in Holland….

BOBAK: In fact, I think they almost burnt Aldershot Camp down, didn't they?

M.L. BOBAK: Well, they made an awful lot of mess, I can tell you. And I was there at the time and they were absolutely angry. They were real troops and some of them had been over five years or whatever the war lasted. And they were -- they had heard, whether it's true or not, that Canadians sort of had to wait. Over in Holland, you know, when I was there after the war, the Dutch people, who had considered them, [indistinct] you know, that the Canadians were their saviors kept bumping them off every night in the canal. They really were. Because the Canadians had nothing to do and they were being naughty and behaving badly. And the Dutch were tired and had no food and every night they would hear of a murder. It's true. And it was very difficult for the Dutch to pretend they liked the Canadians any more, at that point. That's, you know -- I don't know if that ever gets in to the history but, my gosh, a lot of rotten things happened. It was because the war was over. I mean, rotten things happen during war but when the war was over and people were bored and nasty. They got bad tempered, you know. There was a lot of really bad things going on. All kinds. I don't care if the tape's on because it's really true.

The UNRWA people -- I remember the young kids. I met a couple of UNRWA guys. A woman and I went out to dinner with them. And they treated us to champagne. And we were all sort of kings and queens. The Dutch -- and this is in Belgium, as a matter of fact. And they hadn't suffered quite as much. But, after dinner, these guys took us out to the parking lot and they had three huge trucks full of tires that they were black marketing, UNRWA.

INTERVIEWER: Yes.

M.L. BOBAK: And I'm sure everyone knows that happened. It doesn't shock me. I just think the world is full of that all the time. And we're all now getting very moral after Watergate. But it was really, really disgusting, what was going on. And it was inevitable. And I think that was partly because of, not the UNRWA thing, but the Canadian soldiers were really tired and they wanted to get home. And stop all the nonsense, you know. So, I had great sympathy for them.

I know a lot of the women didn't want to go home because they were officers. At the end of the war, that's who I knew, officers, you know. And I lived in a mess with them. And a lot of them, they never had it so good and had so much fun. And they were going back to Eatons and school teaching and stuff like that.

INTERVIEWER: Yes.

M.L. BOBAK: And they really regretted the end. But -- this is nothing, but I must tell you a beautiful thing that happened. I was out at Banff teaching this year. We had a top CWAC -- a top woman CWAC was called Colonel Dover. And she was very slim and terribly full of personality and a really remarkable woman. And she was -- I think she was half Indian or something. She came from Alberta. She was black haired. And she was really a remarkable person. When I was out at Banff, I met a teacher out there. And he said, "Look, I just met this terrific old lady. She lives on a ranch down in Calgary. And we were talking about the war. And she said, 'Do ever remember Molly Lamb?'" And I just died, because I never knew she would remember me. I met her once in the Army Show. And that really pleased me. And now she must be, you know, oh, well up into her seventies. That's terrific. I think she was just…. She had an absolute ball in the army. And she worked hard, too.

INTERVIEWER: Well, so did you, by your account.

M.L. BOBAK: Well, I had a lot. I did work hard. Yes, I did. But there were lots of times when I just, before I got to be a war artist, where I would have nothing to do. They didn't know what to do with me. I was running little canteens and drinking chocolate milk, just like I am here and getting fat. [laughter] Really bored. But most of it wasn't boring.

INTERVIEWER: Did you get to meet any German war artists, after the war?

M.L. BOBAK: No.

INTERVIEWER: No.

M.L. BOBAK: I didn't even know they had any. They did, eh?

INTERVIEWER: Yes. They did. Charles Comfort tells a story of painting one side of a mountain in Italy. And after the war, meeting a German artist, who was painting the other side of the same mountain, at the same time.

M.L. BOBAK: Oh. In Italy?

INTERVIEWER: In Italy, yes.

M.L. BOBAK: Isn't that interesting. That's quite nice. I met some Germans, though. They were pretty shocked and shy or resentful when I went to Germany. Some of them weren't but some. In Wilhemshaven, nobody would speak to you at all. They were just so. That was sort of like the last place that would give up because the navy wouldn't believe it. You had to not go out at night in Wilhemshaven. There wasn't much place to go out anyway. It was bombed to bits. But they would never let -- they told you to always walk in twos and to be very careful. That was about in June '45. But, no, I never did meet any war artists.

INTERVIEWER: Comparing some of your post-war works, most notably the ones that are in the Beaverbrook Gallery today, and your style has changed a lot.

M.L. BOBAK: Who's? Bruno's or mine? I don't think mine has.

BOBAK: Oh, I think it has to.

M.L. BOBAK: I don't think yours has either.

BOBAK: That's natural enough after thirty-five years, I guess. I was only out of art school when I was a war artist. I hadn't really developed my true style. And even since then, remaining, you know, painting in one style forever is pretty unusual because one's always finding out new ways of doing the same thing, new ways of discovering other things. There was a long phase when I was interested in plants. And then there was a long phase when I was interested only in people. So, obviously, the character of the painting changes as well as the subject.

INTERVIEWER: Well, you said those years at the high school, for example, four years taking art had helped you by making you a very competent technician, I guess.

BOBAK: Yes.

INTERVIEWER: Artistic technician.

BOBAK: Yes. I was pretty competent technically. I think I still am. In fact, that's one of the few things that I think is pretty consistent with all my work right through from the beginning. I suppose one of them is, first of all, I think I'm a good draftsman. Secondly, I think I have a great sense of tone that permeates through all my work. So in that respect, I think my work is pretty consistent all along, other than techniques may change and styles may change and subject matters may change and mediums may change. But I think that anybody that's a scholar of my work will recognize any one of them as being mine.

INTERVIEWER: Is there anything, though, from your experience as a war artist, that you think affected you either in terms of materials, subject matter, medium, technique?

BOBAK: Sure. I was forced to do oil paintings when I was a war artist, which I had never done before in my life.

INTERVIEWER: Forced?

BOBAK: Yeah.

INTERVIEWER: This was one of the few restrictions laid down upon you, that you had to do some oil?

BOBAK: Yes, because at that time they considered oil paintings were major works and watercolours and drawings and graphics were not considered major works. So there was, you know, a clear indication that one had to do oil paintings. I don't know who suggested it. Probably Colonel Stacey. So I was happy about that because it forced me to take up oil painting.

INTERVIEWER: Which you might otherwise not have done?

BOBAK: Which I might otherwise not have done. Why, I might have many years later but not then.

[interruption of conversations in background]

INTERVIEWER: Any other factor that the war art experience helped you subsequently or, at least, affected you?

BOBAK: Well, oh yeah, the fact of being in Europe and seeing old masters and paintings in museums certainly had a tremendous influence on me. It was like a scholarship today, to go abroad. See what the rest of the world was like. So that must have had some affect on my development. After all, people today at that age get a Canada Council grant to do the same thing.

INTERVIEWER: It's funny to think of the Canada Council grant as a substitute for military experience or for going to war.

BOBAK: Well, it doesn't matter what the format is as long as they're exposed to this stuff. You could be on a Boy Scout jamboree in London and it might have exactly the same effect as a Canada Council grant to get to the same place.

INTERVIEWER: And that was virtually an education in art then?

BOBAK: Sure.

INTERVIEWER: To the post-war period?

BOBAK: I saw Dutch painting, you know, for the first time. You know, other than reproductions. I saw lots of art treasures in London, England. And I also saw what contemporary artists were doing in England. So all of that certainly must have had some effect on the development of my own work, maybe, perhaps not consciously but certainly unconsciously.

INTERVIEWER: Could it perhaps -- I'm just going to suggest this and you can say, yes, that's true or no, that's a lot of bullshit -- but I'm so impressed by this, struck by this factor, kid from the slums working his way up.

BOBAK: Uh huh.

INTERVIEWER: Were you consciously, then, using the wartime experience and the post-war experience? Were you looking at old masters just for the enjoyment of it or was there, in fact, the ambitious boy saying, I can use this? Or looking for something to use.

BOBAK: To be perfectly frank, I never thought of painting as art at that time. I thought of painting as being a way of improving myself socially and financially. I had a selective eye. That's true. I had a good technique. That's true. I probably had all the makings of an artist but I wasn't consciously thinking of expressing myself, you know, from the heart or the soul. I looked upon it as a profession. I never thought for one minute that I was creating artwork. If somebody else decides to, you know, find art in it, I'm happy about that but, for me, it was a profession that I got into and I wanted to do it very well. And that's exactly what my approach was. It was only many years later that I actually started thinking in terms of, you know, art as being a vehicle for emotional expression and all the stuff that one attributes to art.

INTERVIEWER: You say that almost apologetically.

BOBAK: [laughter] I don't know what art is, frankly. Art is what people think is art. It's as simple as that. For me, painting is painting. If it's art, that's good. If it's not art, it's still a good painting. It's art historians that make art, not painters.

INTERVIEWER: Yes. Like people doing more for Francis Bacon by writing about him than he ever did for himself.

BOBAK: That's true.

INTERVIEWER: You touched on a lot of -- Oh, here's one. 'Dead German Soldier'. Now, I'm going to look that one up when I get back. I'm just wondering if that's the guy in the trench. 'Dead Goats'. 'Dead Goats in the Streets'. 'Dead Horse with Nuns'. 'Dental Treatment', this is the one I was after. As I recall, this is an odd one of you, of a dentist with the old foot operated drill.

BOBAK: I don't know if that's what it was. You may be confusing that with somebody else's work. I think the one I did was of something that looked like a van.

INTERVIEWER: Yes.

BOBAK: And people were lined up, waiting to get their teeth fixed outside of it.

INTERVIEWER: Ah.

BOBAK: 'Dental Parade' was it called or something?

INTERVIEWER: There are two, 'Dental Treatment' and 'Dental Treatment 2'

BOBAK: Oh maybe…. One I don't remember. It may be. Yes. I'd have to see them before I could. Goodness, you're looking at Molly's work, aren't you?

INTERVIEWER: No. I believe I'm looking at yours. [conflicting talk over]

BOBAK: You're right. What's this about the Chelsea garage?

INTERVIEWER: Ah, that I can't recall.

BOBAK: I never heard tell of anything like that. I don't remember half of these things.

INTERVIEWER: You know what you're going to have to do at some time if you're ever in the Ottawa area, is come over to our museum and we'll give you the grand tour of what you were doing 30 years ago.

BOBAK: I'd be interested in that.

INTERVIEWER: Well, I've got a, there's myself and an assistant, Fred Assare [?] that would be more than happy to give you and Mrs. Bobak the great fifty cent tour, as we call it.

BOBAK: That'd be great. That would be fun. Next time we're in Ottawa, we'll call on you.

INTERVIEWER: Do you come up often?

BOBAK: Not recently. I used to come up quite often because I was on the Canada Council Advisory Board, but that was only a three-year term.

INTERVIEWER: Well. Let's see. There's something else I wanted to cover. So you came back to Canada about – [indistinct] I'm going to go back here. I got you down as '42-'43, mainly '42, employed as a commercial artist, Lithoprint, Toronto. Do you recall what that was? What you were doing there?

BOBAK: I think I worked for a while with something called the Canadian Banknote Company. And I worked with some artists who had a commercial studio called [indistinct] Bush and Winter[?]. That was Jack Bush and William Winter. And then I did a lot of freelance work. Those are the only two I can recall actually working at on a salary.

INTERVIEWER: So you're back in Canada in November of '45. You're married in December of '45. And you've got a studio in Ottawa.

BOBAK: Yeah. On Nebeen Street, was it?

INTERVIEWER: Nepean?

BOBAK: Nepean Street, that sounds right.

INTERVIEWER: Very close to National Defense Headquarters?

BOBAK: Uh huh.

INTERVIEWER: And you didn't share that studio with anyone except Mrs. Lamb, or Mrs. Bobak rather?

BOBAK: I don't remember. We shared a studio in London, in England. I'm not so sure that we shared a studio in Ottawa. We may have had separate studios.

INTERVIEWER: And who was, sort of, looking over your shoulder, supervising the work? There was some degree of supervision these last six months.

BOBAK: In Ottawa?

INTERVIEWER: Yes.

BOBAK: I don't know. I suppose Will Ogilvie and Charles Comfort were the senior officers but I don't know that they imposed much direction for us. There was somebody called Jack Shadbolt who was the war artist administrative officer. He's the one that probably, you know, laid down the rules.

INTERVIEWER: Such as they were.

BOBAK: Such as they were.

INTERVIEWER: Was there any passage of people through your studio looking on?

BOBAK: No. I don't think so. I don't remember any.

INTERVIEWER: Really, was anybody paying much notice to you in these last six months?

BOBAK: I don't think so. [laughter] I don't think so other than a major exhibition that was organized by the National Gallery about that time. And I think they had people like Governor-General Alexander, I think, at that time, come to the opening of it. And they did things like assemble all the war artists when we were in Ottawa and took, sort of, official photographs of us all standing around for the records. That sort of attention was being paid.

INTERVIEWER: What seems to have happened here? Maybe I'm reading more into this than I should but all that war art, six thousand examples of it anyway, are shipped over to the National Gallery about 1946-47. Sporadically exhibited around the country and in the gallery and then becomes a very largely forgotten collection. Now, it's not forgotten now. We're getting increasing demands upon it. But for 20 odd years, it has been very largely forgotten. I'm wondering if this process of forgetting about it had begun rather early?

BOBAK: I think it did. I think they were very -- I think they were pretty slap happy with the collection too. They'd lend them out to anything, you know, like to an officers' mess in Halifax or Camp Gagetown. They sort of became almost like permanent fixtures there like the piano, you know, in the lounge. I don't know whether they're being recalled or much more carefully administered now. But it seems to me I've met soldiers who say: oh, I saw one of your paintings from the war in the officers' mess the other day.

INTERVIEWER: Well, we do still lend them out to military messes. And [tape garbled and skips]

BOBAK: So, they're now becoming increasingly interesting because it's like nostalgia. You're putting out something that has suddenly become of historical importance.

INTERVIEWER: I wonder if it's more than nostalgia, though? Again, you can say, yes, that's so or no, it's a bunch of crap.

BOBAK: Well, it's not being pulled out because it's artwork.

INTERVIEWER: Isn't it?

BOBAK: Well, some of it is artwork. Sure. But not everything is art.

INTERVIEWER: OK. Granted. Eight thousand pieces of work and half of it, let's say, is art and the other half is propaganda or whatever. It's [indistinct] just defined art. I haven't [indistinct] definition either.

BOBAK: Yeah.

INTERVIEWER: But.

M.L. BOBAK: I was just going to say, all art is like that. You take art nouveau or say that pre-Rafael. And for a whole time, nobody wanted to look at it. They thought it was the worst junk in the world. And then now they're really big. It is partly nostalgia. You get far enough away from it and you can see it for a very interesting time in history. But I don't think one has to be esthetic about it because I still don't like the art nouveau. But, in fact, it's interesting because you suddenly see why. It all comes together when you're far enough away. And I think that's what Bruno means, don't you, Dear?

BOBAK: Yeah. Well, what I meant was like, you know, twenty years ago, nobody was interested in the paintings of the thirties. Suddenly the National Gallery launches a big exhibition called 'Painting in the Thirties'.

M.L. BOBAK: And it's wonderful.

BOBAK: And it's interesting to see. It has a style now because we can recognize the style of it. But 25 years ago, you didn't recognize any style in the work. So it is a bit of nostalgia, I think.

[tape interrupted]

M.L. BOBAK: Whatever that means. Sometimes, it wears well, you know. And you suddenly say, gosh, that wasn't bad. But I don't know.

INTERVIEWER: There's also this looking at -- well, looking at things in the perspective of time. To look at an Alex Colville or to look at a Bruno Bobak and say, well, here's what he's doing now. Ten years ago, he painted thusly. Thirty years ago, he painted thusly. Now, Mrs. Bobak has taken, correct me if I'm wrong, your techniques of thirty years ago, and refined them and improved them.

M.L. BOBAK: Well, I hope I have. But Bruno was saying earlier that he's very skillful and very good with his hands. I'm not knocking myself but I've always had a very

difficult time doing anything technically or skillfully and that goes for cooking and everything else, you know. So that I've never really been involved in learning a technique. I've only been involved in wanting to say something something very simply. And I think that , sure you learn and other people teach you things. You don't really know… I've never been a follower [?] so anything I pick up is sort of… I pick it up all right but I'm not constantly doing it. I get it from somebody else sometimes. Somebody says Why don't you stick with what you're doing, watercolour? Great, so I take their idea, you know. I don't know [indistinct] That's true, isn't Bruno? I have great trouble with my technique.

INTERVIEWER: Alex Colville, his World War Two paintings are not that different from what he did in the subsequent thirty years.

M.L. BOBAK: That's right. I think so. They keep a direction all that clean, precise, -- you know, yeah.

INTERVIEWER: As we mentioned at St. Andrew's, Miller Brittain jumped all over the place.

M.L. BOBAK: Except [indistinct] Miller. Yeah. I think it's right in the personality. I really do. Whether it's like Bruno said, you can jump but it's really the same man jumping. It isn't….

BOBAK: It's just that some people have many facets to their personality and some people don't.

M.L. BOBAK: I was going to show you my diary. It's too much to show you but if you're interested…. There's a lot of junk in it but you can take it back to Ottawa if you want to.

INTERVIEWER: I should like that very much.

M.L. BOBAK: Would you? I'll get it for you before you go.

INTERVIEWER: We're probably at the end of that tape.

BOBAK: I think you have enough material now.

INTERVIEWER: Quite possibly. Quite possibly.

TRANSCRIPT ENDS