

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

Oral History Interview

PETER RUTA

By Liza Zapol

New York, NY

March 24, 2016 & May 9, 2016

Oral History Interview with Peter Ruta, March 24, 2016 & May 9, 2016

Narrator(s)	Peter Ruta, Suzanne Ruta
Address	Westbeth, 55 Bethune St, New York, NY
Birthdate	2/7/1918
Birthplace	Germany
Narrator Age	98
Interviewer	Liza Zapol
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Order in Oral Histories	22 [#1 2016]

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Peter Ruta at his home at 55 Bethune Street, on March 24, 2016. Photograph by Liza Zapol.

Quotes from Oral History Interview with Peter Ruta

“Anyway, there was a night attack by the Japanese on our camp, and we were in straight trenches. Throwing hand grenades at them and them at us, and shooting. My gun was empty, my magazine was dirty, so I asked my neighbor, “I’m coming over to get some ammunition.” I went out, and in front of me was a Japanese. He talked to me, and he said, in Japanese, said *banzai*. I tried to hit him with a bayonet, but he shot me four times. And I lay the whole night there. Nobody could move, of course. Somebody pushed me in a trench, in a hole. And I say, “If I could only live twenty more years, I’ll be happy.” And then I was saying, “What am I doing here? I was born in Leipzig. What am I doing here?!” Anyway, it was up ahead at [WORD UNCLEAR—00:48:45], and there I was in a coma, and put in a tent to die by myself. But I didn’t die.

... Nero, when he died—Nero thought he was an artist. He said, “What a great artist is dying in me!” [laughs]

No, when I was lying there dying, I said, “Here’s a painter dying in the Philippines. If he could have five years more or ten, I’d be happy, or twenty.” But I felt, dying, I was an artist dying there.”

(Ruta pp. 16, 20)

“Well, the [19]50s I was mostly in Venice and Positano. In Positano because it was easy. We rented a house for, what, 200 dollars a year. Now it’s a Best Western hotel, costs more a night. [laughter] And bringing up a child, when there was a charming local woman who would take care of her. It was an interesting public, changing international public of painters, coming. I spent winters in Positano and summers in Venice with Peggy Guggenheim and her circle. I met basically every painter of the [19]50s and [19]60s.”

(Ruta pp. 40-41)

“Eventually I was in New York, yes, also looking for work. Maybe next year, with some drawings, I went to Radio City to show my drawings to, the *Ladies Home Journal*. Waiting there, at Radio City, a woman came and said, ‘What are you doing here?’ I said, ‘I wanted to show you these drawings, maybe you can do something here.’ And she said, ‘Do you want to work for me?’ I said, ‘I don’t know anything about magazine publishing.’ She said, ‘I’ll teach you.’

She was a fashion editor of *Ladies Home Journal* for thirty years, a woman in her late fifties, I suppose, and she was fighting the owners of Curtis’ because the year before McCall’s had become very contemporary in the design. *Ladies Journal* was very stuffy, had a circulation of six million or so. The budget for that department was 7,000,000; that was quite a lot. Anyway, she wanted to show the owners how it could be different. More contemporary. She put me to work, and I worked once thirty-six hours at a time. It was interesting work, very interesting, but, a completely different world, certainly. And that’s how I got involved in publishing generally.”

(Ruta p. 47)

“If I could just say something more about Joan McClure. Her roots in the Village going way, way back, like the [19]50s. She remembered the sailors sleeping in the lobby, outside the doors of her building, they would leave her flowers. Anyway. She had come into money by marrying this guy who had that townhouse on the other side of the street. She’d always been

poor. And she wanted to do things for people, so she asked one of the women in Westbeth, whom she knew, “Which painters should I patronize?” She wanted to buy paintings by people — it was this kind of solidarity that was old Village, I think, no? Maybe? I don’t know.

Anyway, the friend introduced her to Peter, and she began buying paintings of Peter’s. Not for very much money, but still. And she had this garden with the tulips, and every year around Mother’s Day, the tulips were out, she gave a party and she invited a whole bunch of people from Westbeth, along with other friends. And Amy Clampitt, the poet, do you know? Well, she’s gone now, but she was a real Village poet. And she wrote a poem about the locust [catalpa] tree that hung over Joan’s garden. There was such a fusion of things, you know. Peter painted the yard, Amy wrote about the poem. It was very beautiful. And she introduced me to my first literary agent, also. She was just always wanting to do things for people [...]

[...] Joan was so positive. Her response to a mugging was a campaign. She started selling very strong whistles, and everybody was to wear a whistle, and if ever you felt in danger you were to blow your whistle, and then everybody else blew their whistles, and it scared people away. She was always looking for community nonviolent responses to the fear of crime. Because there was a time. Somebody was mugged in the elevator, and they tried to set them on fire. Do you remember? I don’t know.”

(Suzanne Ruta pp. 68-69, 86)

“There’s a certain kind of attachment to older European painting. And possibly a more literary sensibility than pictorial, necessarily. Certainly not plastic painting, like most other painting. I’m really completely opposed to plastic art, contemporary. But I was not opposed to Pop art, for instance. Certainly, simple objects that I was painting in Italy, for instance, became simple objects in New York, seen from an American point of view, which I found very interesting. And the whole end of abstract expressionism was due in great part, was sensibility of Pop art.

What’s being done right now in painting I find horrible. Either insincere, or retrograde or commercial.”

(Ruta p. 71)

“No, I paint what they call *alla prima*. No, I start with a line, I don’t know. It just develops by itself, I don’t think about it. And change, and—I mean, you start with a landscape, it interests you in color, naturally. Like yesterday I went out, I saw fantastic lights, glitter of the sun, and on the railing, on the street, and so on. It’s enough to want to paint it. I mean, you see something you want to paint!

I mean, if you’re a trained painter, you just do it, you don’t think about it. You don’t plan it. You start with the line, and if you don’t like it, you can cancel it, after all.”

(Ruta p. 70)

Zapol: And what is the light, what’s the quality of the light here in New York?

PRuta: Well normally it’s a very golden quality. Yesterday exceptionally, it was very silvery. But the house was still very light. Paris is very silvery, but a soft silver. When you used to go by boat, just two days before you arrived in America, suddenly the light changed in the sky. It becomes this American orange light. On the plane you don’t notice anything. [laughter] Except the people going to the bathroom [who look out the window].

Zapol: What pigment or what paint do you use for that gold? Is there one? Or are there some?

PRuta: Ochres. Maybe cadmium, but not really. Light cadmium, I don't know.

(Ruta p. 88)

Summary of Oral History Interview with Peter Ruta

Peter Ruta was born in Dresden, Germany at the tail end of World War I. His family fled to Italy during Hitler's rise to power, settling in the small town of Ruta, which Peter's father then adopted as the family name. Peter's father was a writer, and Peter recalls his childhood home as "an intellectual house with many visitors ... Of course, we used to go to Rome, to Florence, eventually Venice, too. Lived for a long time in Milan, at that time a rather stuffy bourgeois town."

Peter's grandfather managed a successful international business selling furs, and Peter first came to America under the sponsorship of his uncle, who worked for the business. Peter's first residence in New York City was the International House at Columbia University, where he was befriended a number of fellow German students. It was in New York that Peter began to develop his artistic sensibility, going to galleries and getting involved with the Art Students League. He also began to paint regularly.

During the Great Depression, Peter grew "fed up" with New York, and left for Mexico. "I wanted to paint," he recalls. "I wanted to be in a more Mediterranean atmosphere." Once more Peter found himself drawn into a cosmopolitan milieu of artists: "I got a great deal of feeling what an intellectual, artistic capital like Paris can be, and what it offered, and what really art life is. Much more than New York, where everybody was all scattered in groups and there was no unity of painters."

During World War II, Peter was drafted into the US Army. He was initially assigned the responsibilities of "division artist," but he asked his commanding officer for the opportunity to fight. Peter was then sent into combat in the Pacific Theatre. He almost died in the Philippines, and was brought back to San Francisco, where he learned how to walk again. After V-E Day, Peter was given convalescent leave. He returned to New York in July 1945, quickly plugging himself back into the city's art world. He moved into an apartment at 53rd Street and 3rd Avenue, near the Art Students League building, and began studying graphics.

Peter returned to Italy in 1947, living and painting in several different locations. He became a close friend of Leo Stein (Gertrude's brother) and worked among a circle of "anti-modern" painters that focused mainly on painting local landscapes. His first child was born in December 1948, while he and his first wife were living in Venice (she left him and the baby shortly afterwards). In 1949, Peter met Stella Adler, who became a great influence and introduced him to a circle of Jewish intellectuals in New York. Soon afterwards, Peter began working at *Arts* magazine, where he remained for six years before leaving once again for Mexico.

Peter's wife Suzanne is present throughout both sessions of the present oral history interview, showing many of his paintings to the interviewer and supplementing Peter's accounts of his family and personal history. Much of the second session is devoted to Suzanne's memories of living in the Village; specifically in the Westbeth, where she and Peter have resided since January 1970 (several months before the birth of their son). The second session also deals significantly with Peter's approach to painting every day, wherein he tries to faithfully reproduce

the material realities that he observes around him. “I suppose it’s my character to work,” he tells the interviewer. “I suppose my feeling of the reason of my existence is to work. I mean, not to work, to produce. My father was a writer, he worked every day at it too. You’re involved in something and it’s part of your life, you do it.”

General Interview Notes:

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

GVSHP began a new Oral History Project in 2013. The GVSHP 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 Greenwich 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.

Oral History Interview Transcript

Session 1

PRuta: —that building, another – I was living in Positano in the early ‘50s, I was on the beach. And suddenly, a cry—“Help! Help!”—in Spanish, and there was a young woman hanging from a house whose balcony had crashed down into a canyon. She was American. I vaguely knew her. She was hit by blocks of masonry. I took her in. I took her in because I was sorry for her, and eventually, through her mother, who was a volunteer at NYU, my friend Paul Resika got that apartment on Washington Square, which was, at that time, a studio building. What’s his name, American painter --

Zapol: Edward Hopper.

SRuta: Hopper! Hopper lived downstairs, and other people. He had gone away one summer, and I took over that place for a month or so, that’s where Suzanne met me.

Zapol: Were you a student at the time?

SRuta: Oh, that’s another long story. I had an aunt who was in the models’ union at the Art Students League in 1940, and Peter knew her from there. And she was back in New York in 1966, and everybody had thrown her out. Peter took her in, and I had just come back from Europe, and she called me and said, “Come out to dinner with my friend Peter Ruta.” And it was Peter and about six women, and he came in from work and had to go shopping and buy the food and make dinner. [laughter]

Zapol: So that was at Washington Square, at that time.

SRuta: Yes, let’s just say that was also part of his New York life.

Zapol: Ok.

Well, I want to get to this story, but I want to be able to start from the beginning. So I’m just gonna restart.

[END OF FIRST AUDIO FILE ‘Ruta_PeterGVSHPOralHistory1.mp3’; BEGINNING OF SECOND AUDIO FILE Ruta_PeterGVSHPOralHistory2.mp3’]

Zapol: So this is the Greenwich Village Society for Historic Preservation Oral History Project. It is March 24, 2016. This is Liza Zapol and I'm here at the Westbeth. If I can ask you both to introduce yourselves, please.

PRuta: I'm Peter—I call myself Peter Ruta now, my legal name is Peter Franke-Ruta. My father's name was Franke. It's a long story. Should I tell you? [laughs]

Zapol: Uh-huh!

PRuta: My father was—well, beginning with last century, two centuries ago [laughter] my father was born in Leipzig, in Germany. My grandmother was rather musical. My great-grandfather was a member of a symphony orchestra, in the 1840s, 1850s. He started Romance languages at university, and had gone to Provence in 1930, and met with great Provençale poet—

SRuta: [Frédéric] Mistral.

PRuta: Mistral. And then came back to the States and was drafted. And in 1914, sent to war on the first day of the invasion of Belgium. And he was wounded after 100 days and sent back. Eventually he became a Secret Service agent in Denmark, and then a schoolteacher in French in Dresden, where I was born.

And since I was born in Dresden, there was a woman who specializes in the lives of émigrés, people from Dresden. I left when I was six months old, but she publicized my work in Italy, in Germany. She became a great friend.

Anyway, he lived in a very avant-garde world, if you're an artist, and was connected with the Dada cadre, and finally he had to go to Italy, because my grandfather had a small fur business. When Hitler made the revolution in [19]23, he called the whole family over to Italy. Essentially we didn't go back to Germany. He became a writer, in Ruta, a small village above Portofino in Italy. And added that name to his name, Franke, which is a very common name, Franke-Ruta, as a writer. Eventually I took that name, his name, when I was naturalized.

Zapol: Why did he take Ruta?

PRuta: Because he lived in Ruta, and Ruta was a small village overlooking the Riviera. Nietzsche had lived there, and Byron had been there, extremely beautiful. Rather isolated at that

time; now it isn't, of course. It was the fashion of the 1920s to add something to the common name, at least in Germany.

Zapol: So—

PRuta: He published six novels. Later, he couldn't publish anymore in Germany, after the war, but particularly he specialized in radio plays. He wrote about 150 radio plays in German for Switzerland.

Zapol: In Switzerland, uh huh.

PRuta: I mean, they were—it's a long story, my parents—[laughter]

Zapol: Well, I just want to make sure—cause this was by way of introducing you. [To Suzanne] Then I want to make sure that I have your name, as well, so I'm going to give you my mic, and—

SRuta: Oh, ok.

Zapol: —and if you can, just—

SRuta: You want me to clip it on something? [00:05:05]

Zapol: You know, if you can say your name in there, and I'll stop this for a second, yup.

SRuta: Oh, ok, hi. Suzanne Ruta. I was born in the Bronx.

Zapol: Thank you.

Ok. So you were about to explain, I think, your parents' trajectory, but—

PRuta: Yes, by that time I was five. I went, and my father lived in Milan the first few years, taking care of the business of my grandfather. And then [19]29 he quit, at the beginning of the Depression. And devoted himself to writing. We had no money. We lived very simply in this village in Ruta. We took in paying guests, too. I went to a local school. A place called Camogli that was training ships' captains. Eventually we moved to a more fashionable place, Santa Margarita, in north Italy. Do you know Italy at all?

Zapol: Not that well. A little, but not that well.

PRuta: Apollo Santa Margarita?

Zapol: Uh huh. But you ended up there—

PRuta: Portofino.

Zapol: Yes.

PRuta: You know Portofino?

Zapol: Yes.

PRuta: Ruta's just above Portofino, that's where.

We lived there, and then we moved to other towns, because of our schooling. Up to the age of 18.

Zapol: Tell me a little bit about your mother. Did she have an artistic background as well? She was an intellectual?

PRuta: Well she was at the university studying philosophy, but she never got her thesis. Partly because her sister married this art publisher. Her sister was ten years older, anyway. And of course she was involved, not in the art world, certainly literature, but not art. But she was not a creative person. She was really a companion to my father, who would talk to her for hours every afternoon after writing.

Zapol: What would they talk about?

PRuta: I wasn't with them [Zapol laughs], after all. No, I suppose literature. I mean, my father knew many well known German writers at that period, and was most in touch with German intellectual life. But of course because of Hitler, and Nazism, they became more and more difficult to communicate.

Eventually he lost his citizenship, because the consulate asked him to divorce his wife, because she was Jewish. He isn't of any nationality. But that was after I had left Italy already.

Zapol: In terms of your upbringing, were you encouraged as an artist when you were moving in these various places? Was that something that was encouraged? As a writer, or, in terms of your own creativity, where do you think you saw that beginning?

PRuta: I mean, it was an intellectual house with many visitors, naturally, and connections: Italians, Germans, were sent to France on exchange program. Of course, we used to go to Rome, to Florence, eventually Venice, too. Lived for a long time in Milan, at that time a rather stuffy bourgeois town. [00:10:05]

Zapol: Sorry, I didn't—

PRuta: A Rather stuff—

Zapol: Ah.

PRuta: —bourgeois town. I was enriched by the atmosphere. My first interests were really literary, not painting. Moving to the States, I lost any native language. I started to go into art school because I was working for an art publisher, after all.

Zapol: Can you explain again how you moved to the United States, maybe even your first memories of arriving in the US?

PRuta: Well, I saw the Statue of Liberty.

No! I saw it because at that time ships couldn't land at night. We had to wait until morning, and we were anchored in front of the statue. [laughs] Well, it looked busy, and [coughs] I stayed in the room with my uncle, in a hotel for three days. And [I'd been at] the international house in Italy, I met some German students who had been studying in America. So I went there, and they took me in as a German student.

Zapol: That's the International House at Columbia.

PRuta: At Columbia, yes.

Zapol: Who sponsored your visa? Was it your—

PRuta: Oh! A half-brother of my mother, about ten years younger than she, went into a family business. Leipzig used to be the fur capital of Europe for many centuries, because it was close to Russia. Between Canada and Russia, had some big company. They had a fur business, and I came on the ship with him, but he had left me on my own, essentially. He wasn't married yet, and he was turning around. My first impressions really were of Madison Square [laughs], where the office was, of his company. Later on I was an art director of an art magazine, and then eventually had an office in the same square. [laughs] And my son has an office, up to now, very close to it. [laughs]

Zapol: That's a nice journey. [laughs]

So, I don't think you said on the record, but—your relationship to the arts, the reproduction company. Can you tell me that story again, how you ended up working for the reproduction company here?

PRuta: My aunt had arranged for me to meet the director of this company in Milan. I went to Milan to see him, and he said, "Yes, come over, I'm going to give you a job." I came over, and I started working, after a second or third day. Actually, in the stock department, where they had all the paintings and photographs. Mostly European paintings were in American publishers.

Zapol: What paintings do you remember seeing?

PRuta: Well, I saw all of them. And then, because of that, I started to go into galleries. And museums, naturally. Through friends I also got involved with the Art Students League and started taking courses, but at that time I was still ambivalent about being a painter. I developed slowly, three or four years before the war, but I painted, and then really became involved in painting. I met, for instance, Suzanne's aunt. We met a few months later in Venice again. In London, and— [00:15:53]

Zapol: She was an artist's model, right?

SRuta: Yes, she was a model. She was just part of the whole scene there, but you could tell about Charlot.

PRuta: Well, that was later, yes.

SRuta: Well, 1940.

PRuta: Of course, I hated that life a certain way, having to work forty-eight hours in the office and then fifteen hours at the Art Students League, made it a long week.

Zapol: Where were you living at that time? At International House?

PRuta: My brother came too, a year later, stayed at International House. I got him set up in the Village, too, later on.

Zapol: Where was the apartment in the Village? And when did you move there?

PRuta: It was Waverly Place, corner of Sheridan Square. I mean, ten yards—

SRuta: Stonewall?

PRuta: Stonewall place. [laughs]

SRuta: What was the rent?

PRuta: Couldn't be more active!

Zapol: What was the rent, and how did you find that place?

PRuta: I think maybe newspapers, I don't know. The person that lived there was a painter, too. Stella. Joseph Stella, not the older Stella.

Zapol: And he was also in the same building? Or you had rented his place?

PRuta: He was in the top building, also, a skylight actually. It was perfect for painting, and anything that went with painting. [laughs]

No, I mean, what happened when I went back to Italy, in 1978, for two months, to visit my parents, the last time I saw them until 8 years later, and [19]39 I guess I was fed up with New York, I decided to go to Mexico. At the League there was a Mexican painter—no, Charlot was French! A French painter that lived in Mexico. You know about Mexican art?

Zapol: A little. The fresco, and, yeah, that particular moment.

PRuta: *Escanselos?* Well, it was a period of *escanselos*. Charlot was working with them. He made discoveries in Chichen Itza, and so on. She introduced Italian fresco painting to Mexico. After that it came to New York, and she was teaching fresco painting in New York.

Later on I became his monitor at Art Students League in fresco. No, but at that time he just introduced me to a Mexican painter called Pablo O'Higgins. I didn't have much money. I had about 100 dollars. At the time it was a lot, of course, and I hitchhiked to a boat, or took a bus from a boat to Mexico City. And Pablo O'Higgins told me to go to the Pacific Crest Hotel, close to a Reforma. Do you know Mexico? [00:20:07]

Zapol: No.

PRuta: Oh. This hotel was full of American émigrés and intellectuals. It was very interesting. He introduced me to Mexican painters. It was run by a young woman who was a bride, later wife, of Ciceros. Her two brothers were painters, too. They were stone Stalinists. Rivera at the time—Trotsky was staying with Rivera. Eventually they tried to kill Trotsky, the brothers, with a machine gun attack, and had to flee. It was before Trotsky was killed. Anyway, it was obviously, for a young man, very exciting period to be in the middle of that. [laughs]

And then I hitchhiked to the West Coast from Mexico. To the Rocky Mountain National Park, where a cousin of mine, who was a great mathematician at the University of Illinois, at the summer house. We stayed there, and then hitchhiked back to New York.

Zapol: So what had inspired your travels away? When you say you were fed up with New York, do you remember what that was?

PRuta: No, I wanted to paint. I wanted to be in a more Mediterranean atmosphere. New York, now, it's gay. At that time it was sad in a certain way. Of course, the middle of a depression, it was a certain grayness. And now New York's alive.

When I came back, I met, through a friend of mine, some of the refugees from Paris, [19]39, and I met a whole group of interesting French, Italian refugees who'd left Paris before the occupation. Since they spoke Italian and French, and German, and Spanish too. I mean, I was a young man, obviously, twenty-one, twenty-two, and they really loved me, and I got a great deal of feeling what an intellectual, artistic capital like Paris can be, and what it offered, and what

really art life is. Much more than New York, where everybody was all scattered in groups and there was no unity of painters.

Zapol: What do you mean by that?

PRuta: It was a strong Leftist group involving fresco painting, and that's why I got involved in fresco painting, before I went to Mexico, partly, too, naturally. When I came back I became monitor of a fresco class at the Art Students League. Charlot was my teacher there.

My other slow development from being involved with reproductions into the gallery world, into the real art world, even now, I mean, it's going on, it's evolving into—nothing intellectual, I'm involved in seeing and developing—

Zapol: Your work.

PRuta: My work, or my vision, I'd say. My feelings, sensibilities.

Zapol: So it sounds like you were interested in fresco because it was, a Leftist group. Was your work at that time political? I know you created a fresco at the Art Students League.

PRuta: Yes. Well, it wasn't really political. Fresco painting was a part of a WPA [Works Progress Administration] program, after all. It was in great part a declaration of my interest in fresco painting. My first show in New York was in 1940, with the Valentine Gallery. Was with people involved, mostly 1930s painters. But someone like [Willem] de Kooning, at that time, was also a 1930s painter. Not abstract yet. [00:25:55]

I mean, I evolved more and more into the art world. As a painter, as a student, and so on, and suddenly you can call yourself an artist. For a long time, it sounds presumptuous, naturally.

Zapol: When did you start calling yourself an artist?

SRuta: Young Peter.

Zapol: Yeah, I'm seeing an image of young Peter. Is that in Italy, or?

SRuta: That is actually shortly after the war. He had all his hair. [laughs] Anyway. And this is right before he left Italy, looks much more—

Zapol: Uh huh, uh huh!

SRuta: He's wearing Gustav's suit.

Zapol: I like that suit, right.

SRuta: His uncle, who died. His mother cut down the clothing for him.

Zapol: So when did you—are you thinking about that? When did you start calling yourself an artist?

PRuta: Well, certainly by the time I was drafted, yes. During basic training, for instance, on weekends I used to go in the woods, in South Carolina, and paint. And one painting was even shown at the National Gallery in Washington, under “soldier art.” I was given a week or two weeks, a holiday, to go to the opening. However, I went to New York to see my girlfriend instead. [laughs] I never saw the show.

SRuta: But this is with division artists, no?

PRuta: Yes. And then I was assigned to a National Guard division, the Indiana National Guard. And they wanted me to be the artist of a division to make portraits for the Armory in Evansville, Indiana, the headquarters of the Indiana National Guard. They sent me to New York to buy material and I started sketching, and I found it ridiculous. I was a strong supporter of the war, and this group of farm boys didn't know anything about war. So eventually, to our division's battalion commander, I said, “I want to fight. I don't want to be an artist.”

Zapol: Because you believed in the war. You wanted to fight more than to create art?

PRuta: Well, I felt I had to, yes. Of course.

Zapol: I think there was a story, you said, about being drafted. How were you drafted? How were you called up? Did you enlist, or were you drafted?

PRuta: I was drafted.

Zapol: And how were you drafted?

PRuta: Well, I was told eight weeks before, that I had to show up.

Zapol: And you were living at the Northern Dispensary at the time? Was it the Village?

PRuta: No, at that time I'd moved out, and I was living at 63rd Street in a small room closer to the League.

Zapol: Huh. But you said you were called up by the Village Draft Board?

PRuta: Yes, I was registered, because I'd lived there. Well you go to a station, Pennsylvania Station, meet with people. They all looked terribly shabby and poorly dressed. And sent for the physical [evaluation] and got uniforms. So then every shabby dresser looked well dressed! Don't realize the difference of clean clothes. [00:30:35]

SRuta: But also, in terms of the food.

PRuta: Food, yes. I was a 120 pounds when I was drafted. After a month I was 160. [laughs]

Zapol: You were being given three square meals a day? [laughs]

PRuta: Well I had very little money. I lived on five dollars a day, more or less.

Zapol: So that was before you were drafted. What were your days like? When you lived on five dollars a day, what was your day like? What time would you go to work, can you tell me about a typical day?

PRuta: Well, I mean, when I was working I was paid, so, I mean, normal pay. When it was in the Village, most of the time, I had off-jobs. I was trying to get fashion jobs, fashion illustration, that type of thing, like a young artist, you know. Going to school—but even going to school, I mean, sometimes I have a need to pay for a school, after all.

Zapol: And when you were painting, you were painting in your apartment there.

PRuta: Yes.

Zapol: And what was your work like at that time?

PRuta: Very influenced by the neo-Romantics. Later on, I became friends with many of them. I don't know if you know about the neo-Romantics?

Zapol: Can you describe your work though?

PRuta: Yes. Usually historical things like Judith with Holofernes or young—my show in 1940, that was about stage designs, and there were stage designs based on Piranesi, for an opera at the Metropolitan.

Zapol: Uh-huh. So you were explaining how you then were drafted. You chose to fight, and—

PRuta: Before, I also worked for a while in New Haven. I worked in mosaics, because, the wife of a gay dealer, a German dealer was a mosaic artist, and her sister owned a church at Yale University.

SRuta: The Thomas Moore Chapel. It's still there.

PRuta: Yes. And I had a girlfriend in New York, a Colombian girl who lived on Fifth Avenue, two floors on Fifth Avenue. I hitchhiked every day, every night back to New York. And every morning, I would go back to New Haven. [laughs]

Anyway, it was interesting, and later on I studied in Venice with a mosaic master, Gregorini, who was involved in repairs in Turkey at Hagia Sophia, and realized, they are just cultured craftsman. I mean, not artists, really craftsmen who knew their taste. They were not artists. [00:35:16]

Zapol: So that made you choose not to do mosaic, after that?

PRuta: No, after the war I had the GI Bill, of course, and the GI Bill was similar to vocational rehabilitation, which was better than GI Bill. I had the Fulbright, too, of course.

Zapol: You had the Fulbright, yeah.

SRuta: Well, that was a long time later. But the reason he got vocational rehabilitation is because he had been so badly wounded in the war, that it was as if he had to—

Zapol: We've jumped a little bit in time. So, you chose to fight. You were in Indiana at the time, is that right?

PRuta: No, in Spartanburg, South Carolina.

Zapol: Then you went to South Carolina, yeah.

PRuta: The division was in the South.

Zapol: Southern, yes.

PRuta: I mean, most National Guard divisions were trained in the South. National, federalized, were sent to the South for training. Because of the weather. Especially in [19]42. In [19]43 there were great war games in Texas, and Indiana, of many divisions. And—

Zapol: It sounds like you thought you were going to be sent to Europe because of your language ability.

PRuta: Yes. Anyway, the colonel made me his assistant. A very nice man. They were all very nice, actually. So I wasn't a commander, but I was a top enlisted man. When it wasn't a commander job, I was an assistant. It was assistant to a battalion commander, essentially. Which most of the time meant sitting in an orderly room, eating, waiting, reading the journal, and answering the telephone. [laughs]

Zapol: Was that your idea of serving? Was that what you wanted to do?

PRuta: Yes. No, because I'd volunteered before. I'd tried to join the Spanish-American Lincoln Brigade; they wouldn't take me with a German passport.

Zapol: As an anti-Fascist.

PRuta: At that time, the RAF [Royal Air Force], they wouldn't take me either, with a German passport. All afraid of Nazi infiltration, actually.

Zapol: Uh-huh. How did that make you feel, that you weren't able to enlist at those times?

PRuta: Relieved, naturally. [laughter] I wanted to, but of course it's a fearful decision.

Zapol: Yeah. So, what was your, what was the road to Bataan? How did you get to the Philippines?

PRuta: Well, first we went to Hawaii on beach defense. Which was wonderful. We changed beaches every month or two, and had to make a machine gun positions and fires. I mean,

practically every beach in Oahu. We went to other islands, too, on holidays. Then we went into New Guinea. A place called Eroro Bay, close to—I don't know if you know New Guinea. What it looks like?

Zapol: I know a little bit about it, yes. And— [00:40:00]

PRuta: No, this was in Papua, at the end of the Kokoda Trail. The Japanese had been defeated already, we were in reserve. I went once on the Kokoda Trail with a group of people, which was a great experience. The trail is a hilly trail with rope bridges over gorges, and we had to deal with natives to get to food.

Zapol: How did you deal with natives to get your food?

PRuta: They all wanted razor blades. They had no knives, no weapons.

Zapol: So you would trade razor blades, and what would you get in exchange?

PRuta: Carrots, potatoes, something like that. You can mix with a can of --

Zapol: Beans.

PRuta: —beans, [laughter] and cook. [laughs]

Zapol: Wow. How long were you on that—

PRuta: Trail?

Zapol: —journey?

PRuta: Oh, about a month. Then we went to Kokoda. Kokoda's the farthest the Japanese got to Australia. And Kokoda Trail is like Vermont for Australians.

Zapol: It's sorry, a what for Australians?

PRuta: What? It's like Vermont.

Zapol: Vermont! [laughs] Yeah.

PRuta: No, nothing much happened, really, we waited and waited. When the reserve, with the tropical vegetation, it was really like Rousseau come to life. We went swimming on some beaches, too, on the sunken hull of ships, ships with small fish, and cowrie shells.

Zapol: Cowrie shells, yeah.

PRuta: Of course, it was a segregated army. The only blacks there were people loading and unloading, more or less.

Zapol: Why did you, why did that idea come to mind, the segregation of the army?

PRuta: Why?

Zapol: Yeah.

PRuta: Obviously, I mean, it seems strange, living in the South particularly, with segregation. Naturally.

Zapol: It sounds like that place left a big mark on your imagination. Do you feel like it has effected or imprinted your imagination or creativity in some way?

PRuta: No, I was making some drawings. Then the ship—then we went to another place, in a convoy to the Philippines. We were attacked by kamikazes. The ship next to us was hit. It was very strange. It was a regular ship, just soldiers, a passenger ship. They were shooting at the kamikaze coming to us. And suddenly there were about fifty, 100 yards before hitting us, it exploded, and all we saw is dust falling down. Completely, the plane disappeared into dust. But it hit the ship next to us, and killed sixty people.

We landed in the Philippines and the first night, actually, there was a Japanese attack on an airport. Part of another battalion had to go and fight right away. Then we were sent to a small town, Samar, which was just like Mexico. With a few, like doctor, or poor American, anti-American [UNCLEAR]. That was very interesting to have lived in. We had made some palm huts, asked natives to build them for us. They were trying to build an airport in the place.
[00:45:55]

Zapol: What island were you on in this time?

PRuta: It was Samar. Samar. Which is across from Leyte. Then from there we made a landing at the neck of Bataan, where it turns to the mainland. The landing was on the post, and we were more or less the first troops in Subic, which became a big American base.

Zapol: Subic base, yeah.

PRuta: Subic Bay. Two days later, I was in front of an American army, so strange, we're leading the sixth army. The sixth army had been found, an American army, to volunteer it, behind the tank and two other people, an artillery observer.

Anyway, there was a night attack by the Japanese on our camp, and we were in straight trenches. Throwing hand grenades at them and them at us, and shooting. My gun was empty, my magazine was dirty, so I asked my neighbor, "I'm coming over to get some ammunition." I went out, and in front of me was a Japanese. He talked to me, and he said, in Japanese, said *banzai*. I tried to hit him with a bayonet, but he shot me four times. And I lay the whole night there. Nobody could move, of course. Somebody pushed me in a trench, in a hole. And I say, "If I could only live twenty more years, I'll be happy." And then I was saying, "What am I doing here? I was born in Leipzig. A mistake! What am I doing here?!" Anyway, it was up ahead at New Guinea¹, and there I was in a coma, and put in a tent to die by myself. But I didn't die.

Zapol: Why?

PRuta: I had pneumonia, I had an infection, both, my stomach blew up. I was infectious, stinking.

SRuta: Can't hear you, sweetie.

PRuta: Stinking!

SRuta: [laughing] Ok.

PRuta: Foul! Anyway. I recovered.

Zapol: How did you recover?

PRuta: How?

¹ P. Ruta noted in October 2016 that he was relocated to a British Outfit in New Guinea.

SRuta: Penicillin had just been invented.

PRuta: Oh, penicillin helped. Yes.

SRuta: They just poured it into his wounds.

PRuta: They poured it, as a liquid, with a small garden—

SRuta: I'm sorry, what?

PRuta: A flower—

SRuta: Oh, like a little flowerpot, with a watering can, they just sprinkled it all over him.

PRuta: A baby flowerpot. [laughs] Over your wounds.

SRuta: But he was on intravenous, I mean, he couldn't eat, or digest, or anything, so he wound up weighing ninety pounds by the time he was—then he went back up again. [00:50:08]

Zapol: Where were you in the hospital?

PRuta: What?

Zapol: Where was this?

PRuta: It was not too far from Subic, or Olongapo, which I went to visit, twenty years later, just all houses—

SRuta: Can't hear you, sweetie.

PRuta: All houses! [laughter] And night clubs for soldiers, for army men.

SRuta: That was later on.

Zapol: You went back in the [19]60s.

PRuta: Yes. I happened to be in Tokyo, on the way back.

Zapol: So you recovered. How long were you there? And then where did you go after that?

PRuta: Well then, eventually, on a hospital ship, I went back to the States. In San Francisco I could walk again. Then a hospital train took us to Pennsylvania. I spent the Fourth of July in the hospital, getting to see the country that way.

Zapol: What's that?

PRuta: It's wonderful to be lying in a hospital bed on the train and see the country that way.

Zapol: Really?

PRuta: Great comfort.

Zapol: It must have been a relief to be back. What was your feeling about returning after that experience?

PRuta: When the ship arrived in San Francisco, there was a band in the Bay playing "California Here We Come." Was it?

SRuta: [singing] California, here I come! [laughs] Very nice.

PRuta: That sounded nice. I could walk by that time. I went to the museum, the Young museum, I guess?

Zapol: To which museum? The de Young?

PRuta: De Young, yes.

Zapol: So, was there a moment when you thought you wouldn't make it back?

PRuta: Yes, and then in Pennsylvania, I was in the hospital, they realized I still had a bullet in me. It came out, hit my spine, but obviously got involved in the flesh.

SRuta: It was altogether miraculous. And one bullet went through the hole in the pelvis. I mean, it could have shattered it, but he was just crazily lucky.

Zapol: Wow. Very lucky.

PRuta: Lucky.

Zapol: Yeah.

SRuta: And look at him now. [laughs]

PRuta: Now, I'm ninety-eight.

Zapol: You made it! [laughs]

So Pennsylvania, you continued in the hospital. And then, how did you decide where to go from there? What was that journey?

PRuta: Well, I was given convalescent leave, then the war was over. V-E Day was in May. I tried to go to Pittsburgh, but the uniforms were stowed away. There were only pajamas, I couldn't get into—[laughs]

Zapol: Were you drawing or painting at all in recovery?

PRuta: What?

Zapol: Were you drawing or painting at all in that time when you were in recovery?

PRuta: No, I don't think so. But they gave me convalescent leave in July. I went to New York and I met some friends, and through them I met my first wife. Then I was in New York, and Montauk, Somehow, through friends, it turned into the art world. I mean, I registered again at the League, too, I think. [00:55:04]

Zapol: Sorry?

PRuta: I registered again at the League, too.

Zapol: Ah.

PRuta: After that leave, I was discharged, more or less. And on V-J Day—

Zapol: After V-J Day you were discharged from the hospital?

PRuta: Yes.

SRuta: From the army, no?

PRuta: From the army.

Zapol: From the army, I see. Sid your relationship to art or art-making change?

PRuta: To?

Zapol: Did your relationship to art, to art-making—

PRuta: Yes.

Zapol: —change based on your experience?

PRuta: No. No, in the army I felt I was a painter, definitely. Before, too. Like Nero was saying, “What a great artist is dying in me.”

Zapol: Sorry?

PRuta: Nero, when he died—Nero thought he was an artist. He said, “What a great artist is dying in me!” [laughs]

No, when I was lying there dying, I said, “Here’s a painter dying in the Philippines. If he could have five years more or ten, I’d be happy, or twenty.” But I felt, dying, I was an artist dying there.

Zapol: So what was your first—

PRuta: Although to use the word “artist” is so pretentious in a certain way, but—

Zapol: What do you use?

PRuta: What?

Zapol: What word do you use?

PRuta: “Painter,” which is more professional, less demanding, let’s say.

Zapol: So what were your—

PRuta: I went to—saw, yesterday, was it?

SRuta: To Chelsea.

PRuta: To Chelsea. Lots of painting, but no art.

Zapol: So what was your return to painting? You said you went back to the League.

PRuta: Yes, and, well, that time, of course, I had money, too, cause, other money. I didn't get paid in the army, first of all, and discharged, and I was worried about my parents. Who had escaped from prison, and lived in Switzerland.

Zapol: Where were you living in New York at the time you were with your first wife?

SRuta: Well they only married much later in Italy.

Zapol: I see.

SRuta: But where were you living when you came out of the army?

PRuta: I'm trying to think.

SRuta: I can't say. [laughs] I wasn't there.

PRuta: Oh! I already said I couldn't find an apartment. I found an apartment right away. On Third Avenue and 53rd, which now is extremely elegant. At that time it wasn't. Third Avenue had the elevator—

SRuta: El train.

PRuta: A simple place for sixteen dollars a month. And a toilet between two floors. But it was cheap and had light, and close to 53rd Street and the League.

Zapol: Uh-huh. And then, as I asked before, what was your work like at that time? Before the war you were creating neo-Romantic work. What started to happen then? [01:00:02]

SRuta: We have some work of the [19]40s that I could show, but it's from when you were in Italy already, no?

PRuta: Oh, actually my wife, a young woman, was an extremely talented painter, much better, more talented, capable than I was. No, I was making a big painting of a woman with a mandolin, for instance.

SRuta: Oh, yeah, I can show you, hang on.

Was that before you left for Europe? I didn't know.

PRuta: Yes.

Zapol: Mm.

SRuta: We're making a digital archive, so some of these recent [19]40's have just come up—

PRuta: [PHRASE UNCLEAR—01:01:04]

SRuta: Oh really? I've never seen those.

PRuta: No, because it was painted over.

SRuta: What? Oh I see. By whom?

PRuta: By me, because I needed a canvas.

SRuta: Oh, I see.

PRuta: No, it was—I found old canvases of [Edward] Melcarth and painted over it, and then Mougouch, the wife of [Arshile] Gorky, but she was my girlfriend before that.

SRuta: For a few months, before she met Gorky.

Zapol: Hm!

SRuta: That's another story.

PRuta: I mean many—these connections of art worlds, before and afterwards. At that time you don't take them seriously, the connections. Then only realize, everything is connected!

SRuta: Ad Reinhardt made a huge family tree once, I bet in the 1950s, of all the artists and girlfriends and women painters. It was hilarious.

Zapol: Small world!

[END OF SECOND AUDIO FILE 'Ruta_PeterGVSHPOralHistory2.mp3'; BEGINNING OF THIRD AUDIO FILE 'Ruta_PeterGVSHPOralHistory3.mp3']

SRuta: Let me see if I can find it. It was a very big family tree. [laughter] Let me see if I can find some of this.

No, Erica was a fantastic painter. It's too bad she—it was very difficult for women at that time. And she has—I don't know, here, let me just see here.

PRuta: And I was studying at the League, I was actually studying graphics, not painting.

Zapol: Why?

PRuta: Because I wanted to paint in my own style, but the painters are very academic at the League.

SRuta: Here, this is from late 1945, so it was still rather Romantic. Was that Erica, in that painting?

PRuta: No.

SRuta: Whoever that is, anyway, with the instruments, let me see, what else is there? Those others are from Italy. Here, this looks like you and Erica. But in New York, no?

PRuta: Yes, wait, first year after the war.

SRuta: And the others are all in Italy. But it's funny that someone who had this very dramatic war, and then someone like [Robert] Motherwell, who wasn't drafted, so he stayed in New York and did this elegy for the Spanish Republic. Meanwhile Peter is taking it in the belly and winds up painting these Romantic paintings afterwards.

Where are these—oh, this is by Erica, these are hers. This is very good. Yeah, anyway.

PRuta: There was another painter—

SRuta: Who?

PRuta: —in the company.

SRuta: Oh really?

PRuta: Chaplain's assistant, who was involved with liturgical art. In New Guinea, he built a chapel and decorated it, painted it, so beautifully. That was much more than church decorations.

SRuta: Oh really? What happened to him?

PRuta: Oh, no.

SRuta: Did he survive the war?

PRuta: He survived the war, he was a chaplain's assistant.

SRuta: Ah. So they didn't send him into combat?

PRuta: I was a chaplain's assistant. No, when he joined the division, there was no place for division artists in the table of organization, so they made me chaplain's assistant. I'm not particularly religious. They never asked me about my religion. And I found it was ridiculous, to be chaplain's assistant and to have the chaplain—well, that chaplain is also more a social worker in the army, but still.

Zapol: You thought it was ridiculous to be that—what religion did you identify with?

PRuta: At that time, none particularly.

SRuta: But your father had you baptized Protestant, no, just to save the trouble, cause he—

PRuta: My father wasn't religious at all, but when I was born he had to baptize me Protestant to avoid any problems. When I get into the army, they ask you what you are, you say "Protestant," and that's the end of that. If you say "Jewish," [laughing] you have difficulties, like my mother, who is Jewish.

SRuta: This is nice. Is that a self-portrait? 1952. It must have been. Where is that, in Positano already?

PRuta: Capri.

SRuta: Capri. That's funny, that's cute.

Zapol: So were you living in Midtown East: 53rd Street and Third Avenue. And studying graphics.

PRuta: Yes, with what's his name—

SRuta: Cantor?

PRuta: No

SRuta: Barnet. Will Barnet, who just died recently. He was like 103 or something.

Zapol: Yes, yeah. Then what happened? What were you doing at that time to make a living? Or were you living off of the pay from the army, or from disability?

PRuta: Yes, and I got a disability rating of seventy percent. The American Disabled Veterans' lawyer said, "I tried for 100 percent," because actually I was. He lost, but later on in Santa Fe, somebody told me to try for 100 percent, because I had 100 percent. And they gave me 100 percent disability pay. Which is enough to live well in Mexico, for instance. [00:05:23]

Zapol: What was the circle within the art world at that time? Who were your friends? Who did you consider people you were learning from as an artist, but also socializing with?

PRuta: Well, many Romantics, mostly. [Eugene] Berman.

SRuta: After the war too? And what about [Roberto] Matta? Matta was a very good friend. He was a Surrealist, and very influential on a lot of people.

PRuta: Yes, but I met Matta later in Italy.

SRuta: I see. I thought you had known him in New York, too.

Zapol: So then what happened? What do you think was the next shift in your art career?

PRuta: As soon as I was able to go to Europe, it was the spring of [19]46. I took a ship that was carrying troops back to the States, but was empty, going to Paris. And met my parents, who lived

at that time in a small room in Basel, in Switzerland. No, my father lost his citizenship and then was sent by the police to look in Tuscany.

SRuta: Oh here we go, 1947.

PRuta: And when Mussolini was captured, when Italy switched over, and the Germans took over northern Italy, fled nearby, by Bagni di Lucca, which was a resort, well known in the 1830s for German writers, Romantics.

Zapol: He was with your mother at this time?

PRuta: Yes, yeah. [coughs]

Zapol: And then how did he get from there to Switzerland?

SRuta: Well he wrote a whole memoir, which I could send you, which is actually very charming.

Zapol: A long journey.

SRuta: What happened was the Germans came in and they started rounding up the Jews very furiously, because Mussolini had dragged his legs all those years, and they sent their best and most experienced predators from eastern Europe to clean out Italy.

Peter's parents were living in Bagni di Lucca, but then one day in December of 1943 there was a big round-up of the Jews. Because they were all on a list. They were refugees, like, from Croatia, or Yugoslavia, or rather, or from Vienna, wherever, and they had been friends of theirs, because they were all living in the same hotel, in Bagni di Lucca, but they all got rounded up that one day, but your father wasn't on those lists because he'd been in Italy for twenty years. He wasn't a refugee. But he realized that they had better go into hiding, and he had been given the name of a Catholic lawyer in Luca—there was a Catholic and a Communist underground, they were working together—and he went to see the guy, and the guy said, "Well, come back at night, and I'll take you into hiding."

So they hung out in Lucca for the day and while they were in Lucca, they were picked up by a woman who recognized them from a village where they had been, and said, "That man is a

German.” And then Peter’s father, so the Italian militia was on him, and then he said, “I’m a German, you can’t do anything to me.” So they said, “Well, we’ll take you to the Germans.” So then for the first time they were confronted with the German military police, and there was a swastika, and they said to them, “Don’t come shuffling in here as though it was a synagogue.” You know, it was the first real blast of—and then, I don’t know, whatever. [00:10:24]

PRuta: My grandmother was—

SRuta: Yeah, that’s the other thing, is they could have really tried to escape south, north, many different ways, but Peter’s grandmother was in a hospital basement in Barga, which is a nearby town, dying, and they didn’t want to abandon her. So they were tied to the spot in a certain way.

But at that point, they would have been sent to jail, to deportation, and then to Auschwitz, but the jail was full because there was so much going on there, so they sent them to the barracks of the *carabinieri*, which are the national police, which are loyal to the king and didn’t like the Germans very much anyway. And the *carabinieri*, the maresciallo, he was called, sees this little German couple coming in. He’s like, “What are you doing here?” And Peter’s father explained the whole thing, about how he had been told to divorce his wife, and he refused. And from then on they were pillar to post, so he said, “Well, all this has nothing to do with me, I don’t take orders from the Germans,” and he left them alone. And Peter’s father, at one point, said to his mother, “Come on, we’re just going to walk out of here.” And they did! And because he’d been living in Italy for twenty years, and because he spoke Italian, and knew his way around, and he knew that people didn’t interfere with you at certain points, they just walked out in the evening. The guys were all eating their dinners in metal trays, and he said, “*Buon appetito*,” and they said, “Would you like a bite?,” which is the polite thing to say, and they said, “No thank you, but what a beautiful evening,” and they walked out, and they managed to get back to that lawyer, who was just closing his office, and he said, “Where were you?” And then they explained. He said, “Well stay here, or stay on this other street here, and I’ll send somebody for you.”

So some man came with a bicycle, and sent them to a house of some simple woman, who would take the risk to hide this couple that was being sought by the Germans. So they were hidden in one place and another, and then finally they decided, because he had escaped from the

barracks, they figured he was some big [laughs] partisan leader or something, and there was like a price on his head --

PRuta: 100,000 lire.

SRuta: What?

PRuta: 100,000 lire.

SRuta: More money than he had ever seen in his life. So they decided they'd better get him out of town. So they sent this little Communist kid to be their escort, to take them to the border, where they would find a priest, who was going to help smuggle them into Switzerland. And they did that.

It took several days, and they had to hang around, and the train stations were locked up until the trains came. It was always this worry about, "somebody's going to stop you," and this little Communist kid kept disappearing, and finally they got to Como, and this priest had just been arrested the day before, so they had to find another priest. It was a lot of adventure, but they finally got over the border into Switzerland. And actually, even the Swiss were throwing people back into Germany, and I think Peter's mother threatened to commit suicide on the spot if they didn't take her. Because here she was with this German, you know, he could have been anything. But they took them, and then they were safe, as of the end of December, 1943. But it was really a miracle. And the man who made the miracle was that *carabinieri* captain Paglucci, who just left them, unguarded.

And after the war Peter's father got in touch with him, and tried to do things for him, tried to find a job for his daughter in Switzerland, sent him packages, but it was just—anyway, a strange, strange story.

Peter with his four bullets—it was incredible.

PRuta: My grandmother.

SRuta: Meanwhile, the grandmother, they abandoned her. And Peter's mother's said, "Oh, but we left her." He said, "Oh, but she's so old, *die Uralte*, the ancient one."

And then afterwards, many years later, Peter's mother said, "Now I'm older than she was when we abandoned her." [laughs] That kind of thing. So she died in February. They left in December, and she died in February. She was sort of in a fog. But the last time they went to see her, they had been in hiding, more or less. They walked in, and she said, "Oh! I thought they'd shot you." And where did she get that idea from? She didn't know what was going on outside, but that was her word to them. It's very strange. And then she told them about a wonderful meal she'd had in a restaurant in Leipzig, a restaurant we went to, many many years later. It was right next to the Thomas Church, where Bach led the choir, and where Peter's father had sung in the chorus as a boy. So, that's what she was dreaming of when she died.

Oy yoy yoy! Anyway, so that's the story, of them. [00:14:58]

And then he was in Basel, and he wrote for the radio there, and he did *Gone With the Wind* in ten episodes, and things like that. He was like a John Mortimer kind, you know, anything you gave him he could turn into—and he did the *American Tragedy*, by Dreiser, you know, and he got into trouble because of that because Dreiser was very critical during the Depression of the the way America was run. Some crazy Swiss attacked Peter's father as though he was a Communist, you know, and corrupting Swiss youth with this drivel, which was just all in the book, and that gave him more troubles, again. But that was later on, in 1949. That was his Cold War catastrophe. [laughs] Anyway.

Zapol: Thank you. How did you keep in touch with your family? How did you find them? How did you know where to go when you returned to Europe?

PRuta: Well, I had an uncle here—

SRuta: Ernst, yeah, he was living in Great Neck.

PRuta: A half-brother by my—

Zapol: Your sponsor.

PRuta: —my mother.

SRuta: And he kept track. After the war, Peter's mother scolded him. She said, "Every Italo-American wrote back to his family during the war, and you never wrote to us!" And he said, "I

was afraid to get you into trouble.” Cause once he was in the American army, and they were under suspicion in Italy, as foreigners. He was afraid, you know. So Ernst was the go-between.

Zapol: Mm.

SRuta: But she was angry with you about that. [laughs] Oh, these little things!

Zapol: So they had remained in touch. Or they had found a way to remain in touch.

SRuta: Yeah, well they could.

Zapol: And so you knew where to go, you went back on that ship.

PRuta: Yes, and I lived in a small room. They had just found a two-room apartment when I came. In Switzerland.

No, my father couldn't write since the [19]30s. He started I think publishing in Austria, and in Switzerland, and knew a head editor of a newspaper in Basel, so they had connections to Switzerland when they got there, and were able to get permits to stay. And to work, I mean, for my father. Because he started writing mainly radio plays, before we even had a radio. And one of his first radio plays, he wrote in 1920s. He wrote it when we were living in Ruta. We had never had a radio, and we went to some neighbor who had something, it was stone and wire to make a connection [laughs].

SRuta: No, but you were asking, “What did his mother talk about with him?” Every afternoon, he wrote in the morning, and then in the afternoon they went for a walk, and he told her about what he had written in the morning, and they discussed it and she gave him her ideas. If there was some feminist critic now who had access to those conversations, she would probably say that she was the, you know—but it's not quite true, but she certainly was a big help.

Zapol: So, you returned. This is in 1940—

PRuta: —Six.

Zapol: —Six, yeah. And how long were you in Europe? When did you come back?

SRuta: This is Tuscany, 1947. [laughs]

PRuta: When?

SRuta: When were you in Settignano? In [19]47, right?

PRuta: Yes. I stayed only in Europe. Once I got to Switzerland I realized I could make easily money by not doing anything. [laughter] As a foreigner I was allowed to import 5,000 francs. The currency restrictions were [WORD UNCLEAR—00:19:48] The American soldiers, for instance, didn't have money. They were paid in scrip or in money orders. And they went to Switzerland to buy watches, and paid with these money orders, and they were valued about forty percent. So I used to go to stores and buy these money orders, send them to New York every month, and my uncle would send me 5,000 dollars every month, legally. [00:20:37]

SRuta: In other words you played the black market. [laughs]

PRuta: It's not the black market. I was equalizing [laughs] for capital reasons.

SRuta: This is very nice. This is Settignano, 1947.

Zapol: So—

PRuta: And we had a need of money, and Europe was ridiculous. Inexpensive. I used to go to Italy and I used to go in Venice. The best hotels were a dollar a day.

SRuta: Here is Venice, 1947, for you.

Zapol: Mm.

SRuta: So you just painted the view. [laughs]

Zapol: Where were you? It looks like you went to Italy after Switzerland.

PRuta: Well, because of this money situation too. Because my girlfriend I had met in New York. I got her over, we lived together, in Venice and Florence, Settignano, and then she had a child, and her mother came, too. We lived in Capri. We lived very well. I paid her debt in Capri. I was a guest of Peggy Guggenheim. Because Peggy, I met in Venice, and she was looking for a palace, and I tried to help her with finding a palace. And became great friends. And met Stella Adler. A whole American world went to Rome in the [19]50s.

Zapol: Right. So then, it sounds like the artists who were around you may have changed. How would you describe your circle of friends at that time?

PRuta: My friends?

Zapol: Yeah.

PRuta: Well, in Venice particularly, the friends I had were Americans who were very, let's say, not conservative, but believing in—let's say anti-modern, believing more in Romantic or traditional painting, particularly Venetian painting.

A friend I knew from before, Edward Melcarth, do you know him?

Zapol: Melcarth, yeah.

PRuta: How come you know him?

Zapol: I know a little just from American painting history, but also from the article in the tablet that was just written about you.

SRuta: Here's Melcarth, photographed by Karl Bissinger.

PRuta: Anyway, the people—

SRuta: You know someone who knew Melcarth as a teacher published that a few years ago.

PRuta: —Stalinist, which was—

Zapol: A stalinist?

PRuta: Well, they were against contemporary art. Like Melcarth painted—

SRuta: Oh here, here's the picture. [00:24:57]

PRuta: —a huge painting— [00:25:00]

SRuta: Here, this is Peter's first wedding. [laughs]

PRuta: —of a steel strike, a Ford strike, but like a Renaissance painting. Painted like a Renaissance painting.

Zapol: Renaissance. Yeah. Right.

SRuta: And here's Peggy wearing the glasses that Melcarth designed for her. They sell those glasses in plastic now at the museum in Venice, can you believe that? Like something you'd wear at the masque.

PRuta: I must meet that man.

SRuta: Who was that man, that tubby man? You can see he's making money on the black market! [laughs]

PRuta: Sounds interesting.

SRuta: And there's Buffy Johnson. Did you ever hear of Buffy Johnson?

Zapol: No.

SRuta: She's a painter, a woman painter. She was quite good. She died a few years ago. And there's Peggy. And Erica, poor Erica. Well, poor Erica. There she is with the pigeons. Anyway.

Zapol: It looks like you were making landscapes at that time.

PRuta: Yes, in Tuscany – well, I went to Tuscany from Switzerland. I couldn't go to Italy, anyway. The first winter we spent in Ascona, or near Ascona, at the northern tip of Lago Maggiore. [PHRASE UNCLEAR—00:26:40]. We went there, my ex-wife, and rented a house nearby, close to the Italian border. I couldn't go to Italy, after all. I spent a winter painting on Lago Maggiore, mostly landscapes.

Zapol: Is that when you started painting landscapes? Or you had been doing that before?

PRuta: I guess so, yes.

Zapol: Why do you think you started?

PRuta: Well, it was the beauty of the lake and I wanted—the life there was very pleasant, and the house belonged to a Jewish couple. The man was a music director of Ascona Music Festival, so hundreds of interesting composers and singers were coming all the time, and he was playing too. He was very musical.

SRuta: Oh, yeah, this is also Settignano. Oh, but the window, I never saw that one.

PRuta: Lago Maggiore also had some paintings.

SRuta: What?

PRuta: From Lago Maggiore.

SRuta: No, but this is Settignano, this is—

PRuta: Even my self-portrait.

SRuta: The self-portrait? Yeah, which one? From then? Is there one from there? I found one from 1952, but not that early.

PRuta: Yeah, where I'm holding the—

SRuta: Erica?

PRuta: —easel.

SRuta: Easel? Oh that one, we have a photograph, but I'm not sure where it is.

PRuta: Not easel, palette.

SRuta: The palette, I know. He made a self-portrait. It may just be in here, let me see. This is at Leipzig, for his ninetieth birthday, they gave him a charming show. Hold on, is that one there? No. Anyway. *Je ne sais pas*.

Zapol: So it sounds like that space on the lake was also infused with a lot of beauty. Physical and sound and—

PRuta: Yes. And of course, all my life I loved women. So, [laughs] and they loved me, so it became part of life, too, but not in painting. [00:30:11]

SRuta: Until the [19]60s. [laughs]

PRuta: What?

SRuta: Until the [19]60s, with those pop nudes, but that was a whole other thing. Anyway.

PRuta: That was a pop period.

SRuta: No, I know. I'm looking for that picture of you, with the palette. I can't find it right now. Anyway.

But in Settignano, Peter knew Leo Stein, who was the brother of Gertrude. In his last months, actually, they became quite close.

PRuta: Yeah, he was telling me—

SRuta: What did you talk about with Leo Stein?

PRuta: Well, he was telling me that [Pablo] Picasso was a big phony. [laughs]

Zapol: Why? What did he say?

PRuta: He's the first one who found Picasso. We bought him for five and ten dollars, and he was present when the *Mademoiselles d'Avignon* was painted. He came in the next day, and there was those changes, and he said, "Oh, he wasn't serious about it. It was more or less a joke." And [Giorgio] di Chirico thought that, too --

SRuta: What?

PRuta: Di Chirico told me, too, that Picasso was a phony.

Zapol: Di Chirico said that? When, where did you speak to him about that?

PRuta: Well, I met him off and on. Once I had dinner with him. I wasn't particularly close, no. He published a book about painting, about materials.

Zapol: So you said that your circle was anti-modern. And how did you feel?

PRuta: Well, when I was young, at the League, before the war, I loved Picasso's blue period. But abstract painters never really touched me. I knew de Kooning before he was abstract. Usually I always know, a wife, a sister, or ex-boyfriend or somebody instead of a person. [laughs]

SRuta: I don't know if you want to hear this, but my aunt, who introduced me to Peter, had known de Kooning and his whole circle before the war. Then she went off to England in 1943, and then she came back around 1949. They were all on the verge of rich and famous already, and she insisted that they all said, "It's all phony, it's all something that we're pulling over on the public." Which may or may not have been true, but that's how she felt, I guess, cause she had known them in a different context, and it was very hard to believe that there was that much money chasing these same artists.

Zapol: So the sense is that this movement wasn't really born as a movement. It was born as a joke, or as a—

PRuta: Which movement?

Zapol: Well, you were talking about Picasso, you were talking about—

PRuta: Well, it's not a movement, I mean, there are many people in 1910 were changing.

Zapol: But also, you said that abstraction didn't touch you. You didn't necessarily feel something from it. [00:35:02]

PRuta: Yes.

Zapol: So what ideas were you exploring? What was compelling you? Let's say at this moment when you're beginning landscape.

PRuta: Well, the visual world, which means landscapes—the only movement I felt attracted to, or understood was the Pop movement.

SRuta: The which?

PRuta: The Pop movement.

SRuta: That was in the [19]60s, that was later though.

PRuta: Cause many things we were doing at that time were amplified by the Pop movement. Many of the early paintings in Positano, simple objects and so on, were part of what they were doing, too.

Zapol: So before then you didn't necessarily feel like you were part of a larger movement? It was exploring, or—we'll come back to that.

I'm interested in getting from the beginning of your landscape work to the Pop art movement—so you continued in Europe and you made it to Italy.

PRuta: Yes, well, then, my wife left me. We got married, we had a child, we lived in Capri, lived in Rome, lived in Venice. There was this house —do you know Venice?

Zapol: A little, yeah.

PRuta: Well, where we lived, because the owner, a fairly—the woman and her husband was a painter who died, and she rented this place with huge rooms. And that's where Paul Resika was my neighbor, and what's his name, that other German painter.

Zapol: Matta, who you were talking about before?

PRuta: No.

SRuta: No, Wolf Kahn—

PRuta: Wolf Kahn.

SRuta: —was there. Yeah, a bunch of Americans who were there, and Melcarth was there.

PRuta: Hundertwasser [Friedensreich], I mean, people were my neighbors. First I had the whole place to myself, but eventually we lived, first in Tuscany, and Settignano, and then a friend from New York came. I'm searching for names.

SRuta: Who?

PRuta: Dutch American painter. Paul—

SRuta: Pearlstein? No.

PRuta: No. He lived in Paris afterward.

SRuta: I'm sure I don't know who you mean. Who came to where? Came to Positano?

PRuta: No, to Settignano.

SRuta: Oh, Settignano. That I don't know. No, I just know that Leo Stein was there, but who else came?

PRuta: A friend of Charles—

SRuta: Charles Owens? Bissinger? No.

Did you know Karl Bissinger? He was a wonderful photographer. He did a book that was just published a couple years ago. He photographed in New York in the [19]40s and [19]50s and many places. I'm sorry, yeah? [00:40:17]

PRuta: Anyway, he came, a friend of Edward. He said they were going to Venice, to meet Edward, and we went to Venice, too, and stayed in Venice, found a place in Venice.

SRuta: I know who you mean.

Zapol: We can fill that in.

SRuta: That doesn't matter --

Zapol: It's ok.

SRuta: A guy who he hasn't seen for many, many years. Anyway.

Zapol: How did you find your way back to America? It sounds like this was a very rich time in Europe. What brought you back to America? Why did you come back to America?

PRuta: Well, my early paintings in Italy actually, were in Venice. They were very Romantic: lying woman, woman on terrace, and so on. And Iolas. Do you know Iolas?

Zapol: No.

PRuta: Iolas was a dancer with American Ballet Theatre, I suppose. I knew him before the war. He was an art lover hanging out with a Parisian girl. He became an art dealer, and had a gallery, the first gallery in New York. Then he became a dealer in New York, and then Paris, and he showed my first show, was it in [19]49?

SRuta: At which?

PRuta: My first Iolas show.

SRuta: That, I don't know, sweetie. But those paintings you showed at Schneider Gallery, those beautiful paintings of people, that you did around 1952. They were Venetian baroque influences, very dark backgrounds.

PRuta: Yes.

SRuta: People with big sleeves, but they were beautiful portraits. I have a couple of them here.

PRuta: I mean, my painting was very influenced by the Renaissance, very Venetian painting. And he gave me a show in New York, in [19]49, and one in [19]51, so I went back to New York, for the shows.

But since my wife had left me, I was in charge of a small baby. I tried to bring her, a young child.

Zapol: So you were still based in Europe but coming back just for the shows?

PRuta: Yes. And actually stayed. I had friends—My daughter was born, what, in [19]47?

SRuta: What was it? I'm sorry, what? Alex was born in [19]48. December [19]48, in Rome. And her mother left in the summer of [19]49.

PRuta: [19]49, the same time I met Edward in Venice.

SRuta: Well here, Melcarth, et cetera. That's just the one Melcarth painting.

PRuta: And I did these big Romantic paintings, which, he never gave back.

SRuta: I have some of those.

Zapol: Who never gave back the painting?

PRuta: Iolas.

Zapol: Ah, ah.

SRuta: He kept everything.

PRuta: He was a crook, but an interesting crook, because he loved art, really. And he was a dancer, during the war he was dancing in South America with a daughter of Roosevelt. The old one, what's his name, not FDR—

Zapol: Teddy.

PRuta: Teddy.

SRuta: Yeah, this is one of those portraits. [00:44:58]

PRuta: He got involved in much in the art world, and loved the art world, and then he started showing paintings, and it was a very important gallery, for a long time. He was always slightly dishonest, but since he was German, because he loved art, really, he was serious. He was not a crook. [Zapol laughs] Anyone would forgive.

Zapol: So did you come back to New York because you were offered a position? Was it in publishing? Or how did you end up—

PRuta: In publishing.

Zapol: —moving back to New York?

Was that in the 1960s, when you came back to New York, so the [19]40s and [19]50s you were mainly in Europe? Or, sorry, the [19]50s.

SRuta: Are you trying to remember? [laughs]

PRuta: Yes. Well, the [19]50s I was mostly in Venice and Positano. In Positano because it was easy. We rented a house for, what, 200 dollars a year. Now it's a Best Western hotel, costs more a night. [laughter] And bringing up a child, when there was a charming local woman who would take care of her. It was an interesting public, changing international public of painters, coming. I spent winters in Positano and summers in Venice with Peggy Guggenheim and her circle. I met basically every painter of the [19]50s and [19]60s.

Zapol: Missing the 1950s in New York maybe was—

PRuta: And, among other things, I met the—when did?

SRuta: I'm sorry?

PRuta: When did Erica—

SRuta: Erica left in [19]49, sweetie. Summer of [19]49.

PRuta: Well, in the summer of [19]49, first of all I got a Fulbright. Secondly, I met Stella Adler.

SRuta: The actress.

PRuta: She became a great influence in my life. Through her I met a whole world of Jewish intellectuals of that period in New York. Playwrights—

SRuta: This is beautiful.

Zapol: So your ongoing connection to New York was through people who are coming to Europe and also your trips back for shows?

PRuta: Yes, at the beginning, but later it was through Stella. I really got involved in New York life. But I had to bring up a child, which is very difficult. Finally she went to boarding school in England. Then I could come back, between terms, between Christmas and Easter somehow, get to New York and make some money to pay for rent. For schooling.

Zapol: You were connecting with these Jewish intellectuals through Stella Adler. What was your sense the zeitgeist at that time? What was exciting about those connections? What were some of the ideas that were exciting to you?

PRuta: Oh, theater, and the political world.

Zapol: This is the time of McCarthyism, too. A lot of those Hollywood people were—

SRuta: Yeah, actually, Peter's father was a real victim of that, in 1949, and it provoked a terrible arthritis attack, rheumatology, probably, because he had been shot in World War I and had shrapnel wounds that had never healed, because they had no way to heal them in those days. He was left totally paralyzed, and on the verge of a nervous breakdown, and while Peter was trying

to look after him, his wife ran away. So that was: first World War, second World War, Cold War—I mean, they really— [00:50:31]

But, here, I just want to show you. This is sort of transitional, between—this is Venice, that dark sort of work, and this is a woman in Positano in 1953. It's a diptych. Peter had a beautiful show at NYU with the Casa Italiana, a year ago, with a whole bunch of these portraits from the [19]50s.

Zapol: A year ago, uh huh.

SRuta: And then all of these bright things, too. Here, there's another woman in that time. That's from the same year.

PRuta: [PHRASE UNCLEAR—00:51:03]

SRuta: Yeah, but you don't have a catalogue of that show. That's Ravello, not of NYU. Anyway, we didn't do a catalogue there.

This one I love also. So it was all these dark things, and then suddenly this burst of light as the Mediterranean light sort of seeped in. And this is very, very beautiful. It's a still life.

Zapol: Mm.

SRuta: But you talked about a school. It's funny, cause there was a critic, this friend of ours who really rediscovered Peter in Positano.

Zapol: It's fine, I have it, it's fine, don't worry about it.

SRuta: Oh. He got to write a little catalogue piece about Peter, and he pointed out, like in 1948, at the Venice Biennale, there was a guy, Marchiori who said, "We don't want ideology. We don't want history." Everything the Fascists tried to ram down people's throats. "We are painting what's right in front of our eyes, day to day, the banality." So there were a lot of people who were painting this kind of still life, and Peter painted many, and extremely beautiful, and the older they get, the better they look, because they're an Italy that doesn't exist anymore.

This.

And also, it's funny, because he had them all piled away in a basement in Brooklyn where they began to rot. We got them back here, and in 2006, we met, through other friends, this man in Positano who wanted to see those paintings again. They were fifty years old. He did a show for Peter in his own restaurant, he got him a show in Salerno with a good gallery, and then there were museum shows in Germany, and Italy, and suddenly this naïve early work became something that people really valued. And here they are, I mean, this one, for example, we still have it, it's very beautiful.

Zapol: They're very beautiful.

SRuta: Why is there that broken dish? I told Peter, "Is it a symbol of a broken heart?" No, he says, it's just cause it was in the house. [laughs]

PRuta: Happened to be around. Or it broke when I painted.

SRuta: And this one, and these people, they want us to come back this year, too, but I don't know. And look at this: this is a woman on a terrace, that's the woman who fell off a balcony—

Zapol: Oh, wow.

SRuta: —she's lounging on the terrace. But look at that, it's not abstract, but it's very, very beautiful.

Zapol: Uh-huh.

SRuta: And then this guy sold them, and a bunch of them were donated to different museums, that gave little shows. It's nice that at least that period of his life has really been rediscovered to a degree. And this one is very, very beautiful too.

Zapol: Uh-huh.

SRuta: And this is right next to the house that was 200 dollars a year, and now it's a Best Western hotel, where you can pay over 200 a night.

Zapol: It's a beautiful Positano painting.

SRuta: Yeah, it is, very. Very simple, but somehow, it just—and this one of Capri, which is nice, from 1948. Look at that, with the laundry.

PRuta: We look much better there.

SRuta: What is it?

PRuta: It looks much better there than in reality.

SRuta: In the reality? No, I don't know.

Zapol: The digital paintings.

PRuta: No the color slightly, tone has changed, like Venice.

SRuta: This is also a different palette. And this one. But the other thing is that he was broke again at that point, cause the black market [laughs] and the Fulbright and everything were gone, and he never bought yellows and reds, and the expensive f colors, so there are even people in Positano who say, "How could you paint Positano in such dull colors?" But it doesn't matter, it's the composition, totally.

PRuta: No, besides, a whole group of painters were against buying colors from companies. You make them yourself. Particularly the grounds. We all went back to Renaissance grounds. And tempera painting, tempera white. I realize now how interesting it is to paint with those colors instead of— [00:55:10]

Zapol: Making your own paints.

PRuta: Making your own paints, or using tempera as a pigment.

Zapol: Uh-huh.

SRuta: This is very charming, also.

Zapol: How did you get those ideas? Who was talking about that?

PRuta: Well, first of all, maybe it's partly it's lack of money. Or, in Venice, you couldn't find paints.

SRuta: What, in [19]48, [19]50 you mean?

PRuta: Very few. There were no paint stores anyway. You had to go to Rome.

Zapol: So you learned to make your own.

PRuta: Well, certainly now, I prepare my own grounds very often.

SRuta: The grounds, but not the actual paints.

PRuta: No, I don't use tempera white. Mix with varnish, all that, that is a big nuisance of course. [laughs] But [laughs]—

Zapol: So you talked about Stella Adler, that relationship in the [19]50s. Then how do you get into Pop art? What brings you back to New York?

SRuta: Here we go into the Pop art. There were the Pop ladies, here we go.

PRuta: Well, I mean, I used to go to New York quite often, actually. For years, I spent the summers with Stella in Europe.

SRuta: Wait a minute, here, all those Kennedy paintings. The day Kennedy was shot, Peter bought a roll of canvas, and he painted photographs of Kennedy's career for two or three years.

PRuta: And then I went, began photographing with Dorothy Hales [phonetic] [00:58:18] on some photographic books. On Asia, and in the Balkans with Byzantine art, and Greece, I mean, so many things [laughs], so many different lives and different people. I mean, [PHRASE UNCLEAR—00:58:59] tie to New York all the time. It's not—

Zapol: Yeah. Always, also, this relationship with Europe, too.

PRuta: Well, after my daughter became more or less independent, when we went to Europe it was a different kind of relationship with Europe. I mean, I spent a great deal of time in London, for instance. And most of the time there was some woman involved. Who would help me, connecting me to other artists.

SRuta: Anne, oh, Anne Sanger! Yeah, that was a friend who had a house in the country, and she was like a surrogate mother to Peter's daughter.

PRuta: Well, she had a house in London. She had been married to Ivan Morris—

SRuta: This is one of the Pop nudes, it's very sweet. [01:00:00]

PRuta: —and was teaching Japanese at Columbia, and brought the first Hiroshima babies to America. I mean, to make life, so many side issues, and side people—

Zapol: Yes.

PRuta: —it's difficult to generalize.

Zapol: Yes. Yes.

I mean, I'm interested—

PRuta: I mean, I can hardly remember it. I know, I mean, chronologically at least.

Zapol: Right, right.

PRuta: But in, I think [19]71, I came once, I'd been on a Greek island—

SRuta: It was [19]61.

PRuta: My daughter came. I'd been in Venice, and then, in Dubrovnik, and then I head to Kosovo, and Greece, to Hydra and that house. That summer my daughter came, and I took her back to school in London, and then I went to New York to make some money, and had some drawings, some paintings I made of Hydra and—

Zapol: Of Hydra in Greece?

PRuta: In Greece, and—

[END OF THIRD AUDIO FILE 'Ruta_PeterGVSHPOralHistory3.mp3;' BEGINNING OF FOURTH AUDIO FILE 'Ruta_PeterGVSHPOralHistory4.mp3']

PRuta: —liked them as a cover. Eventually I was in New York, yes, also looking for work. Maybe next year, with some drawings, I went to Radio City to show my drawings to the *Ladies Home Journal*. Waiting there, at Radio City, a woman came and said, "What are you doing here?" I said, "I wanted to show you these drawings, maybe you can do something here." And

she said, “Do you want to work for me?” I said, “I don’t know anything about magazine publishing.” She said, “I’ll teach you.”

She was a fashion editor of *Ladies Home Journal* for thirty years, a woman in her late fifties, I suppose, and she was fighting the owners of Curtis’ because the year before McCall’s had become very contemporary in the design. *Ladies Journal* was very stuffy, had a circulation of six million or so. The budget for that department was 7,000,000; that was quite a lot. Anyway, she wanted to show the owners how it could be different. More contemporary. She put me to work, and I worked once thirty-six hours at a time. It was interesting work, very interesting, but, a completely different world, certainly. And that’s how I got involved in publishing generally.

Zapol: Uh-huh, and from there you published arts magazines after?

PRuta: No, I went back to New York and then off and on I was looking for part-time jobs. Then I was running a gallery in Newport, Rhode Island. I think it was through a *New York Times* ad, looking for somebody to run a mansion in Newport, who knew about art, and it was one of the largest mansions in Newport. Other mansions in Newport belonged to some art societies, you had to buy a ticket to visit them. But the owner had a fight with them, a family fight, so this big mansion was empty. It had belonged to the Astors with a huge park and gatehouses. I had to take care of it in the summer. Minimal pay, but it was a fantastic place. So I moved there with a girlfriend, and—

SRuta: And you organized some shows, no?

PRuta: I organized a number of shows, too. Contemporary, or for my friends, or somebody in New York who had a number of old paintings that he wanted to sell or show. It was very interesting. Had to pay a dollar, a dollar and a half to come visit me, but it was a wonderful summer. [laughs] And it opened up a whole world of southern—

Zapol: New England?

PRuta: New England, yes. Rocky! Very beautiful. I don’t know if you know it, Newport.
[00:05:08]

Zapol: So, I’m interested in getting to some of the stories—

PRuta: It's difficult to say, year by year—

Zapol: I know.

PRuta: —or episode by episode, people by people, year by year, as if it were to place—

Zapol: We don't have to go year by year. We can go story to story; we really don't have to go chronologically. I mean, I'm interested in talking about your stories of the Village and how, for example, at the beginning, we talked a little bit about when you were living on Washington Square, and then moving to Westbeth, but I'm also mindful of time now, because we've been sitting for some time, and—

SRuta: Yeah. Well, you must be tired, huh?

Zapol: Maybe I'll pause this for a second.

[RECORDER WAS PAUSED, RESUMES MID-CONVERSATION]

PRuta: *The Death of Marat.*

Zapol: The death of—

PRuta: Marat.

SRuta: Was that Belkin?

PRuta: Yes, [Jacques-Louis] David. So the idea of the death of—

SRuta: But who was painting *The Death of Marat*?

PRuta: What?

SRuta: Who was painting *The Death of Marat*?

PRuta: David.

SRuta: David. Oh, David, I know. But who was doing that, I thought that was Belkin—

PRuta: Yeah, Belkin.

SRuta: Yeah, but Belkin did that later, didn't he? Well, whatever, it doesn't matter. It's the same kind of—anyway.

Zapol: But you were saying that when Kennedy was assassinated you wanted to paint that.

PRuta: Yes, and I got involved painting, which is mostly based, naturally, on photographs. For a year or two, a whole period, the Kennedy period.

SRuta: This one is great, too. All these Senators. Look at that. [laughs]

Zapol: Yes.

SRuta: I mean, they're Pop, but they're something else, too.

PRuta: Partly [WORD UNCLEAR—00:07:07], partly, I don't know who.

Zapol: What was the moment? How did you learn that Kennedy had been assassinated? Where were you, and what was that moment for you?

PRuta: I was living off of Madison on 72nd, a small apartment on the third floor. Tiny room, but wonderful view inside the block, beautiful trees. And below, on the street level, there was a gallery. The Grillo Gallery, Grillo?

SRuta: I don't know, sweetie, I wasn't here in [19]63. I was in Europe, but, look it up.

PRuta: A friend had the gallery.

SRuta: Sidney Simon was in the show.

PRuta: Sidney Simon came—

SRuta: The sculptor. Did you know? Bedford Street, did you know Rene?

Zapol: I know because I've worked with Skowhegan. So I know—

SRuta: Oh really. Oh, yeah, really?

PRuta: With what?

Zapol: With Skowhegan, yeah.

PRuta: With whom?

SRuta: Skowhegan school.

Zapol: With Skowhegan school, where Sidney was one of the founders.

SRuta: Directors, yeah, right, oh dear.

PRuta: Anyway, Sidney Simon was having an opening that night, and he came up for lunch. We heard it on the radio together. And of course, the opening was cancelled. [laughing] The show was cancelled. And, it happened to me sometimes too, with your Pope dying and something happens, like once I had a show in Sicily in Aci Trezza near Catania, arranged by a gallery. Fifty foreigners in Italy, we went there to paint Aci Trezza for two weeks, wined and dined and there was going to be an opening with TV cameras, and the TV came, and that moment, the Pope died. Every camera went away. The show was dead! [laughs]

SRuta: So anyway, but you and Sidney. You weren't laughing.

Zapol: Yeah, you and Sidney, you'd heard the news that Kennedy was assassinated.

PRuta: Yes. And then as soon as we got pictures, TV pictures, a touch of reality and how it could be painted and so on. Or, in the beginning you could hardly get any photographic material, until you found the tape by Zapruder. Photos this man had made. They were published first in Paris. [00:10:25]

Zapol: Published first in—

PRuta: In France. And then—

SRuta: The *Paris-Match*, they had a big series.

Zapol: Uh huh. And those images made an impression on everybody, right?

PRuta: Yes. A collective experience.

Zapol: Yeah. So what do you think it was at that moment of a collective experience that was interesting to you?

PRuta: Well, I was involved in painting reality, or before, I mean, from Renaissance, from museums. [Peter Paul] Rubens took historical moments to paint something. I mean, I wish I were Rubens. I was named Peter Paul after Rubens. There was a picture of *Man with a Golden Helmet* in Dresden. My mother used to go in front thinking the child would look like him. [laughter] So they called me Peter Paul. My father was more prosaic, and he called me Peter after Prince Kropotkin.

Zapol: Peter?

SRuta: Peter Kropotkin, yeah. [laughter]

PRuta: Do you know him? A Russian count, anarchist in the 1870s. Anarchists were published in all our books.

SRuta: He was quite well known. Lived in England.

Zapol: So, it's interesting, that moment, then, you felt like was a way of bringing something that felt—

PRuta: Yes, like a beginning of a war, too, was when I didn't paint, but it was one of those moments. My brother was a conscientious objector. I mean, he said, "Let's do something, let's talk to someone who knows about it." So he tried to—

SRuta: Pennsylvania, you're talking about?

PRuta: To Baltimore, wasn't it?

SRuta: Yeah. Who was it you went to see?

PRuta: No, at the college, there was a former German minister, of the Weimar government. I went to see him and talk to him. What can one do? He said, "There's nothing you can do, you have to wait until Russia gets into the war, then you can see change." And actually he was perfectly right.

Zapol: Yes, yes.

So since then, have there been—how long were you exploring this moment of the Kennedy assassination? What was the reception of those works at that time?

PRuta: Nobody was particularly interested. Then, as work was, after all, two or three years later, and there was such animus against any representation of the period. I mean, now, it's perfectly acceptable, you don't realize how isolated somebody who wasn't abstract or modern was.
[00:15:20]

SRuta: Although Andy Warhol painted all those things.

PRuta: I think now we're—

SRuta: Car crashes and things.

PRuta: —looks much better now than they looked when I painted them, from today's perspective. Even to myself. It's strange, yeah.

Zapol: Why, how do you think that is?

PRuta: Paint has to dry forty years before the painting's becoming alive. After painting them.

Zapol: What do you think brings that life, before the painting comes alive?

PRuta: Yes, because the atmosphere changes. Of the viewer, or even yourself, actually.

Zapol: Uh-huh. Well, I'll be interested to continue the conversation when we do, you know, about other moments, which may have come to the fore like that.

SRuta: What's nice, too, is the old fashioned technology.

PRuta: What's this?

Zapol: This is de Gaulle—

SRuta: That's de Gaulle with the press and all those hands.

PRuta: Interesting. Now, for a long time, I thought it was phony, more or less, because I based on an image in the newspaper.

SRuta: And if the photographer saw it he'd probably sue you.

PRuta: Now I realize that it's very interesting, actually.

Zapol: Right.

SRuta: And here's Kennedy with Willy Brandt in Berlin. Early [19]63.

PRuta: *Ich bin ein Berliner.*

SRuta: Yeah, when Kennedy said "*Ich bin ein berliner,*" which literally in German means "I'm a jelly doughnut." [laughter] "*Ich bin Berliner,*" you have to leave out the article. You know that? Ok. No, somebody told me that earlier, in Switzerland.

Anyway, ah, Peter has had many periods in his life. Those paintings, though, had a nice little show, in 2003, in Tribeca. It was Banning Gallery, and he liked political art and posters and things, and we had a very dear friend, whom Andrew knows. He was working with Greenwich Village Historical Society, who died recently, but he had set that show up for Peter.

But I should give you a catalogue of this one show that we have lots of catalogues of. The Museum of the City of New York did a beautiful show in 2004, would you like a catalogue?

Zapol: I would love that, yeah.

SRuta: And it's got a lot of information, also, that

PRuta: Which?

SRuta: The one from the Museum of the City of New York. From the time we moved into Westbeth, Peter was painting out the window, from the roof, you know, and it was all of that stuff. And suddenly, after 9/11, all these views of downtown became very precious.

Zapol: Yeah.

SRuta: Here, I'll give you a copy of that catalogue --

Zapol: Yes, I would like that.

SRuta: I have like twenty copies left, let me see, they're all stuck away here.

Zapol: I mean—ok.

[END OF FOURTH AUDIO FILE ‘Ruta_PeterGVSHPOralHistory4.mp3’; BEGINNING OF FIFTH AUDIO FILE ‘Ruta_PeterGVSHPOralHistory5.mp3’]

Zapol: We’re here in the hallway of the Westbeth, and we’re looking at your paintings, and I had asked you about a decision you’d made in a piece, in the reflections.

PRuta: Reflections I made. We were living close to the pond, and the children were playing in it, and I started doing a few paintings like that. I don’t know why I did it, I don’t know. The subject chose itself, more or less.

Zapol: That idea, the subject chose itself. Does that happen with many of your work?

PRuta: I have a disposition for certain views. I see New York, for instance, what interest me most are reflections of white, silvery white that the sun has in New York, which is unique. Buildings and trees. What I like to paint, let’s say, a street scene, it’s the light, the whiteness, and also there’s a complexity, let’s say, of the trees. Versus now, we happen to have blossoms, for instance. The blossoms hit back the sunlight, against the dullness of red buildings. It’s interesting. And so I go there and start painting it, I mean [laughing] that’s all I can say.

Zapol: But you were saying, also—what are you thinking about when you’re painting?

PRuta: I don’t think much. I just do it. It’s like many things, you eat, you don’t think about food, you eat it. You make love, you don’t think about love, you experience it. And it’s the same way. You experience or see what you didn’t see before. When I had a subject, I’m sure I didn’t ever think about this tree, or this or this little house. It just happens to be there, and becomes part of a picture, and it coordinates each other, somehow, with the rest around it. Or the shadows.

The shadows are interesting, seeing, of course, they disappear after an hour. And in a certain way, maybe its inability to do background, to the sides, since it’s acceptable today to leave areas unpainted or changed, so you react more quickly.

I also didn’t think about this or this. It happened to be there. It’s supposed to be a tree, or tree branch. Maybe it doesn’t look like a tree branch, but it hits my eyes like a dark object.

Zapol: So what's the relationship between your eyes and the brush? What happens in between?

PRuta: Yes. The brush, you hope you have a good brush. [laughs] That can reproduce, or you have the right color. You do the best with what you have. I don't know what to say, but it's not will. It happens. [00:05:22]

Zapol: These little touches of blue are interesting. Just tiny moments. Down there.

What do you see, when you're looking at this?

PRuta: When you're there? Well, you see light and shade, of course. It's light that matters, if you're doing. Or lack of light. That one seems to [WORD UNCLEAR—00:06:28] too, naturally, the darkness. Because it's a valley full of garbage, actually. Close to where we used to live, once, in Santa Fe. But the sky—the reality is so much better. Or you can just approach it.

Zapol: You said the reality is better?

PRuta: Yes.

Zapol: Really?

PRuta: The sky, it's wonderful. You do your best to reproduce reality.

Zapol: It's pretty nice experiencing it through your painting. These, the light and dark here is interesting. Shapes. Ok.

END OF SESSION 1

START OF SESSION 2

Zapol: This is the Greenwich Village Society for Historic Preservation Oral History Project. It's Liza Zapol. It's May 9, 2016, and I'm here in the Westbeth in the home of—if I can ask you to say your name, please.

PRuta: Peter Ruta, R-U-T-A.

Zapol: Thank you, and—

SRuta: Suzanne Ruta.

Zapol: Thank you.

So, if I can ask you to describe for me how you first moved to Westbeth.

PRuta: Well, after Westbeth was organized, my application was reviewed by a person I knew, actually. The wife of a German painter. And since I was on the waiting list, they called me one day and said, "There's an empty apartment. Somebody took the place but didn't want it." And did I want it? So I rushed over, and I was given another place in front of the building, but it was too small. At that time, I wasn't even married, but I said I was married, and we were expecting a child. Anyway, then they showed me this place, which happened to be empty, too, because somebody didn't want it. Had applied for it, seen it, and then didn't move in. So I took it. At that time, early, even the steps here weren't done yet. It was rubble all over. I moved in nine months later. And I was one of the first people who moved in, and my son, who was born in January, was the first child born here. [laughs] He's now, what, forty-six, forty-seven? How old is he?

SRuta: He was born in March 1970, and we moved in a couple of months earlier.

PRuta: Yes. I've lived here off and on, legally, ever since, but with many trips and stays abroad. I was even sued off and on by my neighbor for not being here, some local committee of neighbors who would become friends later on. Not particularly close friends. I went to court twice, and the court ruled in my favor. I think the second time because they'd forgotten to ask if I had been a veteran. Which was legal at that time, for applications.

Zapol: So you mentioned before we started recording that there was a desire to have some kind of artist housing before Westbeth was created, that there was some connection between the publication you were working for—

PRuta: Yes.

Zapol: —and Westbeth being created. Yeah.

PRuta: My publisher, who was a tall, handsome Polish émigré, looked like a Polish officer but actually was Jewish. He loved art. He published a small art magazine, then he married a really wealthy woman, worth hundreds of millions, and suddenly he had money, and he started funding *Arts* magazine. And I became part of the staff. Versus art department later on, Editorial. And I was editor there for six years. I always wanted to quit, but it never worked out, and finally definitely quit *Arts* magazine and New York and the whole art world, and we went to Mexico. And lived on nothing. [00:05:02]

Zapol: So what was the connection between the *Arts* magazine and the Westbeth?

PRuta: That editorial artist housing, pushed, for instance, representative, I think it was Brademas? Became the head of NYU later on.

SRuta: Brademas, was that his name?

PRuta: What's his name?

SRuta: Brademas?

PRuta: Brademas, yes. To push the Nixon government to back their initial foundation. There is a Kaplan family, who offered 500,000 dollars in seed money for this project. The family was connected to the arts, and then the government gave a loan for 10,000,000 dollars to finish the job. And the building! The building had been empty for ten years, and Zeckendorf, who I knew at that time, too, because he was connected with the art world, had it, and he sold it to them.

Zapol: And why did you decide to apply?

PRuta: Oh, I was living in a one-room apartment on Madison Avenue, on 73rd, and there often were three, four people living there. Including a daughter of mine who lived in England and came to America. I needed room!

At that time, I used to have a studio downtown, on Broadway and—what's the name?

SRuta: Union Square?

PRuta: No, the bus goes through—

SRuta: I'm sorry, what?

PRuta: On 8th Street, extension—Astor Place!

But it's difficult to work in a studio with many other people. Before I had a studio with Paul Resika on Washington Square, which was large. But he needed it, too. For all these reasons, having a large apartment, of two floors, where I could paint and live, would be wonderful. And actually, it has been.

Zapol: Tell me what it was like when you first moved in here.

PRuta: The neighborhood was completely rundown. Across the street was a factory, Superior Ink, and a parking lot for Superior Ink people that came from New Jersey. And at night, it was full of prostitutes and dark and everybody said, "You shouldn't live in this neighborhood, it's dangerous." [laughs] However, because the Westbeth, and a photographic modeling agency took over—what's the name?

SRuta: Commerce and Industry, they called themselves, across the street. That was one of the first—

PRuta: What building?

SRuta: Right here, across the street.

PRuta: No, no, big fashion place. Where Barbuto is, that building.

SRuta: Where, whom?

PRuta: Barbuto.

SRuta: Oh, the Barbuto, yeah, that's—

PRuta: What's the name of the place?

SRuta: It's called Fashion and Industry, or something like that.

PRuta: No, it's a different name.

SRuta: Well they've been there for many, many years; it's one of the oldest.

PRuta: Anyway, started with fashion—

SRuta: Shoots.

PRuta: —photos, because they had space, and because of that many other photographers started coming, and painters; the area slightly changed from being rundown to residential. At least for artists. [00:10:03]

Zapol: And in the building itself, what are your first memories of arriving here?

PRuta: You mean about the neighborhood?

Zapol: Or this, in the Westbeth itself. Your first memories coming in, or of neighbors, or celebrations, just during that first year or two, any events that happened.

PRuta: Well, we met many new people. I made friends I suggested to come here, and they moved in here, too. Friends from the school, and later. There were many older people from the WPA project, a completely different generation, and from the tenements of the East Side who were fighting landlords and were still fighting landlords of Westbeth, and started rent strikes, and this and that. It was given to them as a favor, and they couldn't accept a favor from anybody. [laughs] But eventually, either died out or quieted down, and everyone started being here. I mean, such a change of attitude. It was a generation of older New York artists who had been poor initially, homeless, and had a chip on their shoulder. Had a big rent strike once with banners out of her window, all this. What was it about? I don't know. Do you remember?

SRuta: Well they promised very low rents, and the first time they tried to raise the rent, and then there was one guy who was very rude to Joan Davidson, who was the niece of Kaplan, and who was sort of liaison between their money and Westbeth, and they called her the Great White Mother. She stopped coming around. And even now, she's very polite, but she keeps her distance. And that was so gratuitous. That was 1972.

PRuta: Joan Davidson had been New York State Commissioner?

SRuta: Later, she became.

PRuta: She became? Later?

SRuta: Uh huh.

PRuta: Oh.

And there was Michael Strange --

SRuta: Uh huh.

PRuta: —who somehow connected to, was strange enough, I think her family. Michael, his family was backing an avant garde boarding school in England where I sent my daughter, twenty years earlier. [laughs] There was another project like Westbeth, but agricultural, and—are you interested?

Zapol: Was Westbeth interesting to you because it was a project, as a utopian project or as a special project, or was it really particularly because of need? Because you wanted space?

PRuta: No, it was a need! Because I had a tiny apartment, and I mean, I couldn't work there. I was expecting to get married and have a child, I couldn't do that either. A definite need, that's why I have a larger apartment. Normally, gets an apartment, smaller space, the place, more or less half the place. But people with children, two children, a half-child, also.

Zapol: Do you remember the first paintings that you made here? Or even your first memories of whether it was landscape, of making landscapes here?

PRuta: Not really, but my view from this apartment, before this building was built, was vast and there were big, tall chimneys from a factory. It was a different landscape, a very interesting landscape, and I painted many paintings like that. Which now [coughs] are most historical. There were two huge— [00:15:15]

SRuta: Show you later.

Zapol: Yeah, you can show me later. What were the two chimneys of? What were those factories?

PRuta: Well, the building's called Superior. But the factory was called Superior Ink. It was an ink factory. With a low building, maybe two stories. And huge chimneys. And a parking lot. Workers came mostly from New Jersey. It had a rundown, old, adjusted feeling.

Zapol: And what was the rhythm—I imagine you were observing what happened during the day. What did you notice? What was the rhythm of the day, of people in the neighborhood, too? Who else was travelling around here?

PRuta: Nobody, practically. A friend of mine, a dealer, said, “How can you live in such a neighborhood? Nobody would, no dealer would ever come down here.”

SRuta: Not a dealer.

PRuta: What?

SRuta: The dealer, David Herbert, may he rest in peace, said, “You've got to move to the Upper East Side, nobody's going to come look at your paintings here.” It was very, very rundown. But on this block, there was a lot of—the early [19]70s was a time of great trouble for New York economically, and there was a great outpouring of activism in the different block associations, and one friend in particular, at 30 Bethune Street, was a leader.

PRuta: Yes.

SRuta: Joan McClure.

PRuta: In the middle of the next block was a woman who made a campaign to plant a tree. And needed permission. Everybody was against it. She made a campaign, and she met somebody she

finally married. She had been the model for a woman in front of the Waldorf Astoria, a naked woman there, [laughing] a long time ago. A wonderful woman, and she bought a house for 20,000 dollars, five-story house. Last time I heard it was sold for 3,000,000. And with a wonderful backyard, and garden, and there are many paintings I made of her backyard. I should show them to you, but I don't know where they are.

SRuta: I can find them if needed. [laughs]

PRuta: Of a garden, with trees and the buildings. Really old Village, kind of memory.

Zapol: What do you think of—why does that show the Village? What is the Village? What, why does that show the Village, or what is it about that view that makes you think of, “Oh, this is the Village”?

PRuta: I mean—

Zapol: What did you see in that? What did you paint in that painting?

PRuta: It's the middle of a block. The whole block is really gardens and trees being encroached on more and more by the buildings between this—

SRuta: I'm sorry, can't hear you, darling.

PRuta: Between here and Jane, West 12th Street. Because the old Village had that feeling of old English, American type of gentility. But actually, the buildings used to be boarding houses for the sailors. Of the harbor behind us, during the period of ships. Anyway, this woman organized. She saw that area in front of Abington Square, in front of, what's his name? [00:20:31]

SRuta: Mrs. Green.

PRuta: Mrs. Green was empty, and she said, “We should plant some trees.” The city didn't want to. So she organized a demonstration, covered by TV, and all of four people came, I was one of them, [laughter] carrying signs: “The city's unfair to Madison Square!”

SRuta: Abingdon Square. And her husband looked and he said, “Joanie, the [19]60s are over.” This was 1980. [laughs] No, she was a wonderful woman. She's gone now, but, later she was in favor of Westway, and that was a real can of worms, if you know the history. But she had done a

huge amount. For example, the D'Agostino's on our corner, she persuaded them to move in here. She always had the neighborhood at heart.

Zapol: And the piers that you painted, those were not in use anymore. This wasn't a time of shipping. 1970, when you came, shipping industry had moved elsewhere. What was happening on the river, as you saw the river?

PRuta: Elevated highway, for cars.

Zapol: Uh huh.

PRuta: And underneath, disastrous. Dark, parking lots mostly. The police used to come and give you tickets, for one reason or another. And unpleasant, somehow. Then they tore down the highway, and suddenly brought light. And there was a big campaign, brought by Mrs.—

SRuta: By Joan McClure. And other people.

PRuta: Yes. Against the idea of building Westway.

SRuta: No, she was in favor of Westway. That was Mr. Leopold.

PRuta: No, but the original idea was to be underground.

SRuta: Yeah, and there'd be park land on top of it.

Zapol: Uh huh.

PRuta: No, but they were afraid they were going to have more buildings in front—

SRuta: Which we have anyway. [laughs]

PRuta: Now we have the park. Which we owe in great part to, what's his name?

SRuta: Who?

PRuta: That man—

SRuta: Ortenzio.

PRuta: Ortenzio.

SRuta: He was one of the first Hudson River Park people.

PRuta: Do you know about him?

Zapol: No.

SRuta: And what was it called?

He was a meat dealer also, in the meat market.

PRuta: Yes, yes, meat dealer, and my son who was eighteen—his summer holidays at Columbia, he worked at the meat market at night. But Ortenzio—

SRuta: He was one of the group, yeah.

PRuta: And other people, naturally. Finally tore down the superhighway, started building, planting trees and—but it took a long time to change, and finally they made Riverside Park. Which—

SRuta: Hudson River Park, yeah.

PRuta: —Ortenzio was one of the co-sponsors, more or less.

Zapol: Tell me more; you said that this commercial space nearby also helped bring artists and investment to the neighborhood. Besides the Westbeth, when did you start to see more artists coming to the neighborhood?

PRuta: Well actually not many, because rents were too high.

Zapol: Now.

SRuta: No, but even—

PRuta: Even then.

No, I knew some people on 11th Street, for instance, a few artists. And at one time, a French company making artists' prints, lithographs, had a place. Doing some beautiful work, but— [00:25:23]

SRuta: Mourlot [phonetic] [00:25:21]?

PRuta: What?

SRuta: Mourlot?

PRuta: Yes.

SRuta: They were right in Westbeth to begin with.

PRuta: What?

SRuta: They were right in Westbeth to begin with, I think, no?

PRuta: I don't know, maybe they were. No, and then a kind of open house, too, inside, there were long tables, and it was like France, eating bread, with wine. It was a very fine feeling. Very pleasant. Later, on Jane Street, naturally. Across from them was a theater school of, was it?

SRuta: Uta Hagen.

PRuta: What?

SRuta: That—

Zapol: HB?

SRuta: HB, yeah. Bergdorf, yeah, you should see. Are they still there? You always saw people hobbling, reading over their lines. It was a nice feeling also.

Zapol: And that had been there since the [19]40s.

SRuta: Had it, really?

Zapol: I think so.

SRuta: It could very well be, yeah. Anyway.

Zapol: The theater school.

So, it sounds like there are little clusters. And tell me more about the community here, at Westbeth. Is there a way in which you think living here has affected your art? Dialogues or conversations with other artists? It's a hard question.

PRuta: No. No, other artists—first of all, there are 400 apartments. It's supposed to be ninety-seven percent visual artists. But right now there might be a third visual artists. But it's performing artists, or phonies. No, I have no artistic ties, really, to any people here. No, I suggested no more people to come here, and prepare you from school, like, what's his name on the top floor?

SRuta: Fabian?

PRuta: What?

SRuta: Fabian?

PRuta: No, one from the school, art, War Resisters' League.

SRuta: Oh, Bissinger!

PRuta: Bissinger.

SRuta: Did you send him here? You sent him here, too?

PRuta: I don't know.

SRuta: No, he was a fantastic photographer. But he'd done his best work in the 1940s. [laughs]

PRuta: He took a wonderful picture of me and my wife in 1946. In Venice. He was a painter, and a photographer. As a photographer, particularly, in the early [19]50s, he worked for FLAIR magazine, was fashionable, was involved in in war resistance activities.

SRuta: The War Resisters' League, which is moving now, too, did you read? No.

PRuta: And he had that place on the roof.

SRuta: No, a very sweet guy.

Zapol: And talk to me about your routine. When you're painting a landscape here, when do you like to paint during the day, how do you prepare your space? How would you spend your day also juggling—maybe in those early years, when you also had family, beyond Suzanne, you also had children here. Tell me about how you structured your day painting landscape here.

PRuta: Well, usually, I paint in the afternoon. And usually it's four hours before sunset. And the fading light of a day pushes me to work more and more, and so that work becomes automatic; without thinking, it just happens. The morning, there were many routine things to do, also art-related: sketching, buying colors, going to galleries. [00:30:34]

When our children were young, it was very difficult to live here, so we lived in Mexico, and in France. Two of our children were born abroad: one in Mexico, one in Provence. But they went to elementary school at PS 41. And, from then on, they went to school in New Mexico, and then our daughter became an activist in New York when she was seventeen and involved in the AIDS program. She became very well known, finally, first in Yale and then in Harvard. All by itself!

Zapol: She was involved as an activist—

SRuta: With ACT UP.

Zapol: —in ACT UP, right? Which was also around here, was that—

SRuta: At the Gay and Lesbian Center. She came to New York at the age of seventeen, in 1988, and she made a beeline for that place, and they were just organizing ACT UP, and she fell right into it. And she really got a whole education. Because she was a high school dropout, she got a whole education from people who'd been activists in the [19]60s or whatever, and she did a huge amount of work. And then a couple of years ago there was a movie made called *How To Survive A Plague*, and she's in every scene of that movie wearing a different hat, of her own design.

Then Larry Kramer sent her to Harvard, because he knew people there. So she did two years at Hunter, and two years at Harvard, and then she came out of it a rather different person than she'd gone in. When she first came to New York, she wanted to be a hat designer, and she went out and she ordered some little labels that said "Millinery for the Millennium." She designed fantastic hats, and they wrote them up in the *Village Voice*, and this and that. Then

finally one day, when she was finished with all that, they were having some kind of a rummage sale at the Gay and Lesbian Center, she put all her hats in there. And that was the end of them. [laughing] Now I wish we had them.

PRuta: And she was photographed also nude in different places.

SRuta: Thank god it was before the Internet, she said! [laughs]

PRuta: And the *Village Voice*. Musto? Was it?

SRuta: Michael Musto, yeah, all those people. And every time—

PRuta: They'd say, "The most exposed young woman in New York."

SRuta: What did they call them? Activante! Instead of debutantes, they were activantes. She and this group of women, they were arrested at a demonstration stopping traffic on the Brooklyn Bridge in 1989, and a group of women were hauled off to the police station and strip searched! And all they'd been doing was blocking traffic. So they sued the city, for abuse, and they each got a payment of 8,000 dollars, which they all plowed back into ACT UP. They didn't keep the money.

Zapol: And that protest was around ACT UP as well?

SRuta: Absolutely, it was an ACT UP thing. I wrote about it for a magazine. Oh, anyway, the magazine founded by that guy who lived on West Street.

Although, if I could just say something—

PRuta: It's a different kind of Village.

SRuta: Yeah. If I could just say something more about Joan McClure. Her roots in the Village going way, way back, like the [19]50s. She remembered the sailors sleeping in the lobby, outside the doors of her building, they would leave her flowers. Anyway. She had come into money by marrying this guy who had that townhouse on the other side of the street. She'd always been poor. And she wanted to do things for people, so she asked one of the women in Westbeth, whom she knew, "Which painters should I patronize?" She wanted to buy paintings by people—it was this kind of solidarity that was old Village, I think, no? Maybe? I don't know. [00:35:11]

Anyway, the friend introduced her to Peter, and she began buying paintings of Peter's. Not for very much money, but still. And she had this garden with the tulips, and every year around Mother's Day, the tulips were out, she gave a party and she invited a whole bunch of people from Westbeth, along with other friends. And Amy Clampitt, the poet, do you know? Well, she's gone now, but she was a real Village poet. And she wrote a poem about the locust tree that hung over Joan's garden.² There was such a fusion of things, you know. Peter painted the yard, Amy wrote the poem. It was very beautiful. And she introduced me to my first literary agent, also. She was just always wanting to do things for people.

Zapol: I'm interested—as you were talking about painting in the afternoon, and, if there's a particular painting that comes to mind. If you can describe to me how it might take shape over several days, or weeks, or months. How a particular painting or landscape, what time you might try to paint, and how. And maybe one from your earlier time here and then maybe one from more recently.

PRuta: I don't know. I look. A canvas—no, I—earlier, before Westbeth, in New York, I spent a decade in Italy, and England, painting landscapes. Objects, simple objects; there is a picture here. And I came to New York, first without my daughter, then with a three-year-old daughter. I mean, my parents in Switzerland had escaped from the Holocaust. But I couldn't live as a single father, with a small child. If I have to make money, I have to put her somewhere, it's impossible.

So I went back to Italy, young, early childhood, most of the time, because that was easier. The house, the place, at that time, unknown, inexpensive, although it's the most expensive part of Italy [laughs] but, not here. A local woman helped me at a local school, too; she learned Italian. Then I tried to send her to learn English after all, not only Italian. And I went to English boarding schools, schools in Rome. It was very difficult.

My whole life was difficult in the past, but when it happens, it just happens, you don't think about it. [laughs]

Zapol: So it sounds like that moment was particularly challenging, and then perhaps coming here made things easier for you, to paint, when you moved here?

² S. Ruta noted in October 2016 that the tree is a Catalpa tree.

PRuta: Yes, definitely. We had space. And a view, either the roof, or the window, or the neighborhood. And, luckily, it was away from the art world, which was on Madison Avenue. It [the art world] followed me to Chelsea. [laughs]

It's true, only, even five years ago, many galleries were still against moving to Chelsea, in favor of Madison Avenue. [00:40:06]

Zapol: Was that piece painted here? Is there a particular painting that you can talk about? How do you paint? Can you take me through the process of painting a landscape here? What do you prepare first? Do you sketch first and then—

PRuta: No, no.

Zapol: Ok.

PRuta: No, I paint what they call *alla prima*. No, I start with a line, I don't know. It just develops by itself, I don't think about it. And change, and—I mean, you start with a landscape, it interests you in color, naturally. Like yesterday I went out, I saw fantastic lights, glitter of the sun, and on the railing, on the street, and so on. It's enough to want to paint it. I mean, you see something you want to paint!

I mean, if you're a trained painter, you just do it, you don't think about it. You don't plan it. You start with the [laughs] line, and if you don't like it, you can cancel it, after all.

Zapol: And often how long does it take you to complete a canvas?

PRuta: Depends on the size, naturally. A smaller canvas might take a week. Or even, say, four days, it depends. I've had canvases that sometimes take me three or four weeks. Early in my life, I went to Mexico, and later on I worked with Mexican artists. I was trained as a fresco painter, after all. And I have a feeling for simplicity, and simple objects. Against, a [WORD UNCLEAR] period. I mean, I was an early friend of de Kooning, for instance. Or, later on, of Matta. With their own modern style, but certainly I couldn't—I was an outsider of that world. Even now I feel I'm an outsider. Could have a different sensibility than most other people. About nature, and the world. Visually.

Zapol: How would you describe that sensibility? How is that different?

PRuta: There's a certain kind of attachment to older European painting. And possibly a more literary sensibility than pictorial, necessarily. Certainly not plastic painting, like most other painting. I'm really completely opposed to plastic art, contemporary. But I was not opposed to Pop art, for instance. Certainly, simple objects that I was painting in Italy, for instance, became simple objects in New York, seen from an American point of view, which I found very interesting. And the whole end of abstract expressionism was due in great part, was sensibility of Pop art. [00:45:30]

What's being done right now in painting I find horrible. Either insincere, or retrograde or commercial.

Zapol: Can you tell me an example of an encounter maybe you've had with a contemporary artist here, in the Westbeth? Seeing someone's work, or agreeing or disagreeing about work?

PRuta: Well, I have a friend who came here, a German refugee too, who actually had been in commercial art before. And was the boss of—

SRuta: Warhol.

PRuta: Warhol.

SRuta: At I. Miller shoes. [laughs]

PRuta: He was making drawings of some shoes. And he had to fire Warhol, and he threw out all of the drawings that Warhol had done. [laughs]

SRuta: This was about 1950-something.

PRuta: Anyway, he was interested in German, or had the feeling, let's say, of German art of the 1920s. Which is interesting, but certainly it was a completely different world. As it was for my parents, but even my parents were rejecting it already.

But he died, but actually, he did have something interesting. Despite what is unknown. Another schoolmate, Nick Carone, he used to be the model at the League when I was there, in the 1940s, and a matchmaker in Rome. Exchange apartments, Rome, Venice. I met him once in the street. He was renting a place. You know of Schlumberger?

Zapol: Of?

PRuta: Schlumberger, the old people that were backing art in the 1950s, 1960s.

SRuta: The Dia Foundation comes from their money.

Zapol: And what's the name of the—

SRuta: Schlumberger.

Zapol: Schlumberger.

PRuta: They're holding, idealists. No she backed other galleries like Hugo Gallery.

SRuta: I'm sorry?

PRuta: The Hugo Gallery was also backed by them.

SRuta: Yeah. Anyway.

No, Nick was a great character.

PRuta: Anyway, so I told him to move in here, and he never had any success. Except at the end he started painting like de Kooning, in a certain way, and had a big show, big success. Most people don't work that much, or produce that much.

Zapol: But I'm speaking to someone who produces a lot. I'm surrounded by paintings here, and an enormous amount of canvases, in this space. So what keeps you? You said, when, before we started recording, you said, "I work each day, so it accumulates." What keeps you working?
[50:00]

PRuta: Well, you know, character. I suppose it's my character to work. I suppose my feeling of the reason of my existence is to work. I mean, not to work, to produce. My father was a writer, he worked every day at it too. You're involved in something and it's part of your life, you do it.

Zapol: Is there a question? Is there something you are trying to discover, or figure out? Do you have a thought, Suzanne about this question too?

SRuta: There's something that he's trying to—the unattainable ideal? No, I think he just—it's almost habit. He sits down, and then, like yesterday, Mother's Day, my daughter and her husband brought this huge bouquet, rather garish, and after they left, he put it in a vase, and he put it on the table, and he started painting it. So.

PRuta: Unfortunately, I don't have the right canvas now. I have to size one, size several canvases.

Zapol: For this bouquet—

PRuta: Yes, or generally [CROSSTALK]—you need canvases, new canvases—

SRuta: —but he only had a little canvas ready.

Zapol: I'm going to pause for one second, but I want to continue the conversation.

So tell me again what you were just saying, Peter was the first to—

SRuta: Ok. Well, it was actually 2013, the fiftieth anniversary of the Kennedy assassination, and Peter had done all these paintings, his Pop paintings, based on news photographs, and we thought they should be shown somewhere. So, couldn't find anywhere else, we decided to hang them in the lobby. And they couldn't figure out which part of the lobby. Finally Peter said, "Well look, there's this hallway right behind the guard's desk." So we put them up there.

And then this lovely woman Christina Maile, who you might want to talk to sometime, she's terrific—she said, "Well the beautification committee has made money with our rummage sale, we're going to install proper lighting there." And they did that. Now Peter's had three shows there. He showed his Kennedy work, then he showed a bunch of still lifes. Christina said, at the beginning of the winter, "Well, we need some color; give us some landscapes." So he had this whole series, did you see them? Anyway, they just came down. But people are also more aware of Peter, because of his age, and because they've seen more of his work. So that little thing—but that made me think how long it took! We were there forty-something years before people realized that you could make that into a gallery. I don't know why.

I think it's also because people would like to have their success in the outside world, and there was something a little bit *infra dig* about Westbeth, because it was like socialized medicine

or something, I don't know, socialized housing. You didn't want to say this is where you had your show, but they have done some wonderful shows. And Jack Dowling is someone who's been running the gallery, he was helpful. So, just to have those people, you know—how many people in the elevator told you how much they love those paintings? No?

PRuta: Yes. On the street, too.

SRuta: Oh, on the street too! [laughs]

PRuta: Many people I didn't know.

SRuta: They either complimented his suspenders, or they complimented his paintings. [laughs]

PRuta: No, my suspenders.

SRuta: Anyway. And Stefanelli. Oh, but there are many tragic stories as the building ages, too, you know, we're New York, you know what that is. So, like, there were a couple who were painters, and it was his first marriage, and it was her second. Leatrice Rose was a very good painter, and she had taught at the Art Students League, and Joe Stefanelli, who was terrific, he was like second-generation abstract expressionist. He had been discovered in Germany. He would come back and say, "Oh, they love me in Germany, they put me on TV, and a Duke invited me to his—" Anyway, he was this rough guy from Philadelphia. And once, didn't he ask you on line at the supermarket, "Did I miss anything by not having children?" [laughing] And he was so funny, I don't know. Anyway. [00:55:13]

But at one point, she was in a wheelchair, and he was sort of bobbing along behind, in various stages of dementia, and now she died, and he just disappeared! What happened? We don't know. And they were both fantastic painters.

PRuta: At the studio building here too, after all. With the brick building attached to it.

SRuta: Have you ever been in it? Or you want to go in and see? [laughs]

PRuta: It's all, except the top floor, rented.

SRuta: Is it? I don't know. We can't keep track of the deals and things, you know. Anyway, Stefanelli had a studio there. And Bob Fabian too, the German refugee from Berlin. Oh, he was

such a tragic figure! I wrote three short stories. And he's in my novel, too, on page one of my novel! It begins with him, and it's a novel about Algeria. There's no place in it for a German refugee, but I couldn't leave him out, somehow. He had just died. So the whole book is like a memorial for him. Anyway. But he lost his memory. To everybody in the building, he said, "This building is very difficult," and what he meant is he knew so many people, and they would come over and say "Hey, Bob, how are you doing," and he couldn't remember who they were. So he had a little list of like sixty names, all smudgy, in the back of his daybook. Oh, boy. Sad.

Zapol: So it sounds like, that this is very much a community here.

PRuta: Well our neighbors—

SRuta: Who? Lenny?

PRuta: Lenny, for instance.

SRuta: Oh, Leonard Freed is a great photographer, but you must know him, he's in Magnum and his wife was a German, real bundle of energy, and she really launched his career, over many generations, and now that he's gone, she produced a beautiful book for the anniversary of the march on Washington called *This Is The Day*. And she was there with him in August [19]63, taking pictures, and the Library of Congress gave it a show, and she made parties for all the people who had been in Washington, and brought them to her house upstate. But at one point, his fellow tenants tried to evict him! This great photographer, because they wanted his—these duplex apartments are very—

But balancing that, then, there's so many people who do things for you, like when Peter put those landscapes up in the hallway. Christina Maile, who had the idea to put the lighting there in the first place, she got her husband, and he got on a ladder, and he spent three hours hanging them just right! Such a sweet guy, Parvis.

And then there's a very, very frail woman, who must be about ninety-nine, living on the ninth floor, Gea Koenig? She's a widow. She can hardly go out by herself anymore. There's a group of women who look after her. They bring her meals, they take her out, I always see when there's an event. And then there's a wonderful man named Bobby Harden. He sings rhythm & blues and soul and everything. He was doing that in Sweden for a long time, and now he came

back here. He and his wife—maybe it’s a Swedish thing, but they’ve made parties for the building. And a couple of them, she cooked! It was fantastic food, like at Christmas time, and now they do, once every two or three months, a tea in the community room. All the old ladies come, and he sings a little bit, and they serve. And he has his daughters, who are like thirteen and twelve, and other little girls, because there aren’t as many, serving tea and cookies to all these old ladies. It’s so sweet! He’s just such a nice guy! And he’s a very, very gifted musician besides. So, I mean, the perks in this building, plus the low rents! That’s the thing, I mean, our rent is like – ok, HUD.[00:59:51]

PRuta: Evans.

SRuta: Oh, Evans, yeah, that’s something else. Gil Evans, who was Miles Davis’ arranger, lived two doors down. He, [laughing] his sons and Lenny Freed almost came to blows once, because Lenny had a toothache and they were making noise. Oh god! And they called him a racist! Oh boy, there was practically blood on the floor [laughing] in Westbeth! All those things. There are a lot of characters in the building.

And then there was a woman on the seventh floor who wound up sleeping on a grate outside the Chinese restaurant. Mama Buddha—now that’s before your time, probably. There was a lovely Chinese restaurant called Mama Buddha on Hudson Street, which is now the HSBC bank. That’s what happens, restaurants are replaced by banks. Anyway, but she had a doctorate from Yale, but she must have been schizo. She was sleeping on a grate. I used to take her things, and people took her things, and then finally, it was bitter, bitter cold, and finally somebody from the city called and said, “You’ll be glad to know we took Elizabeth in. We didn’t let her freeze to death outside.” And I don’t know what happened to her finally.

Oh, boy, you know—and then there was—oh, the suicides I’ll spare you. I mean, I don’t even know the full stories, but it’s an aggregate of stories too, you know. Right? And gossip! [laughs] Once we had sublet the apartment and we came back from, where was it? I don’t remember. And there was a couple making love in our bed! [laughing] And we didn’t even know who they were! They said, “You can’t come in, you can’t come in!” Because we had sublet it, and then somebody had given the key to this couple. When was that? That was a long time ago. Nobody has that energy. [laughs]

PRuta: Had to wait until they finished.

SRuta: Was it, wait till they finish? I don't know. So anyway, I don't even know who that was. I couldn't remember. Too, too funny. But Brigitte Freed is somebody so fantastic. And Lenny Freed did a series, in the early days of Westbeth, photographs of people parading around nude in their apartments and things like that. Parties on the roof and everything. The real spirit of the early '70s in Westbeth, and it was in *Evergreen* magazine. But Brigitte Freed, I could give you her email, she probably has all the photographs. If you're interested to see.

And then Shelley Seccombe, do you know her? Yeah, you know her work, that wonderful book, about the piers. Ah, boy. Anyway. But go ahead, Peter, you tell—Peter's had three beautiful shows in that little—which is sort of ridiculous, he should be showing at Pace or somewhere, but he's showing there. So, anyway.

Zapol: So, Peter, you told me that you think of yourself more as someone with a literary sensibility. What does that mean to you?

SRuta: I thought you said the opposite.

Zapol: He said not a literary?

SRuta: I thought the opposite, actually; he meant that other people have all these ideas that they want to project in their painting, and he just likes to paint what he sees.

Zapol: I see.

SRuta: I think that's what you mean, a visual rather than a literary sensibility? Wasn't that it? What you just said a little while ago? That's what I understood.

PRuta: Yes, literary—

SRuta: I've written so much PR for him that I know the drill by now.

Zapol: I'm sure you do, I'm sure you do. [laughter]

SRuta: I paint what I see, says Peter Ruta! [laughs]

Zapol: Thank you, thank you for clarification.

SRuta: Sorry, I'm sorry, I don't --

Zapol: No, not at all.

PRuta: But you have an emotional response to a landscape, too. I wouldn't have one, although it might be interesting to paint underneath—

SRuta: What?

PRuta: Either a subway, or the lower floor of something. If I—

SRuta: No, but you had this wonderful view. Actually, some of the first paintings he did in the [19]70s, he painted the bars of the windows, and the view outside the window, so you really got the feeling he was [laughs] he was finding his way into that landscape. And you also said once that the World Trade Center was like the anchor in all these paintings, so when he started with a vertical line—no? The Towers were the first line in the painting that you put on canvas? No? You said that once. I don't know, anyway.

Zapol: You have to start with an emotional response, you said. For example, what you were working on this morning, how would you describe that emotional response? Or yesterday, sorry, with the—

SRuta: With the flowers? [laughs]

Zapol: —flowers. [01:05:01]

PRuta: Well, the color, the placement. See, they say emotional response is easy. I mean, I see blue, the shape, the net. I mean, I respond to objects. I mean, sorry. If opened up, it would be much less interesting. Like this heavy piece, this is also a wonderful subject, if you paint it. The plains, the color, a lack of odd—I mean, just to look at it, you see a wonderful, interesting subject. But you have to look at that. Or see it. And most people don't see. I don't have to talk about it, either, actually, it's a wonderful subject.

SRuta: I'm sorry, what?

PRuta: It's a wonderful subject.

SRuta: No, you did all those wonderful bread paintings in Italy, too.

PRuta: Other people had the feeling, too. Di Chirico, for instance, early di Chirico. Many contemporary artists have seen it, a piece of bread; [Salvadore] Dalí painted pieces of bread which are fantastic. Or smoked fish, who—

SRuta: What is it? Fish?

PRuta: A smoked fish.

SRuta: You never painted a smoked fish, did you?

PRuta: No, but some were painted by Dalí, or by de Chirico, too.

SRuta: Uh huh.

PRuta: Anything versus that more obvious subject, but it's very interesting, too, because it's obvious.

Zapol: This flower, it's a—

SRuta: I brought it in from the green market on Saturday. Got to have some little color. I didn't know that big bouquet was coming. [laughs] Anyway, oh.

Zapol: So tell me about the changes you've seen in the landscape. What has changed since came in 1970?

PRuta: Well, this building here was a brick building, painted in the Tuscan style. Built in the 1990s with crenellated—it was a warehouse, but they changed it into apartments, completely different. At that time there was enormous change, actually. From fourteenth century Florence to twentieth in New York. But it was interesting, too, naturally.

Zapol: Why? What was interesting?

PRuta: Well, it was red brick, and it was crenellated. Like a fortress, more or less.

Zapol: Do you find this interesting?

PRuta: Yes! Different times of the day, there's many paintings like that.

SRuta: There's a painting over there that you made. Is that gonna screw things up?

PRuta: Oh. I'm sorry.

Zapol: It's ok!

PRuta: Well, if you were in Manhattan, from a window before—

SRuta: That was actually a Nabisco factory.

Zapol: Uh huh.

SRuta: But that's the building right across the street, that they painted white when they turned it into apartments.

Zapol: Hmm.

SRuta: Oh boy.

Zapol: Well—

SRuta: That's an interesting thing. Ask him about that.

Zapol: Yeah. What do you mean? What would be the prompt for that?

SRuta: When they started building the Superior Ink, a lot of us were really up in arms. Westbeth negotiated with the builders and the community board, about the setbacks and the height and everything. They wanted to build a whole street of, you know—then they settled for those little townhouses so they wouldn't take away the views. There was so much resentment at losing our view, but Peter was so philosophical about it; that we didn't have any *a priori* right to a view of the river. Right? [01:10:21]

PRuta: No, they wanted to have a glass building, in the beginning.

SRuta: They wanted to make it into a glass building. That's right. And they were persuaded to make it brick, in keeping with the—but you were accepting of the changes, more than some people.

PRuta: What else can I do? [laughing]

SRuta: Right. He was born in a city that was completely gutted in February 1945 by fire bombing. Yeah, true. What could you do? But they made so much noise building it, that was terrible.

One night, when they were about halfway up, and it was a very windy winter night, the police came knocking on all the doors of the building and telling us to move back from our windows, because they hadn't secured the stuff that was in the construction, and things were flying loose and hitting people. They were not allowed to go on working for several days, until it was inspected and everything. You know, you felt bad; they weren't risking our lives, but maybe they were. Who knows. That was just in the *Times* the other day, about how many people have died in construction jobs. Ugh. Alright, that's irrelevant. [laughter] Not really, but—

Zapol: So—

PRuta: And the first restaurant that was interesting, was Pastis.

SRuta: Pastis? Florent.

PRuta: Oh, Florent.

SRuta: Florent, you know Florent.

Zapol: Did you go to Florent?

PRuta: Yes.

Zapol: What are your memories of that place?

PRuta: [laughs] Crowded!

SRuta: July 14, they did sort of a drag Marie Antoinette. But also Lex Kaplen, that was where he ate all his meals, so I went with him. It was very charming. He's in Bushwick now, Florent. Have you found him?

Zapol: I've heard that.

SRuta: Yeah, boy. Well, that was great.

PRuta: And that empty place.

SRuta: Which one?

PRuta: On West 12th Street. Empty. It has a—next to—

SRuta: Next to whom?

PRuta: A friend of ours.

SRuta: Next to Lex? Oh, are they filling that in now, too?

PRuta: What?

SRuta: Are they filling that in now, too?

PRuta: No, but it used to be a restaurant.

SRuta: Oh, did it? I didn't know. Anyway.

PRuta: A Texas restaurant.

SRuta: Oh, I don't remember. Anyway.

PRuta: Now it's just enough room for two cars.

Zapol: Was this part of the Highline dismantled before the Westbeth came in?

SRuta: No. 1991. The United States was bombing Iraq, and the Highline was coming down at the same time. And you felt, this is what Iraq, Baghdad must sound like right now, you know? Did they actually bomb—no, they did bomb Baghdad, too. But they were working their way up from Kuwait. Remember? That's when they took down the last strip of the Highline, was in 1991.

Zapol: The part here.

SRuta: The part here, so that they could put these buildings in, whereas if they had left it, we would have a park right outside our—but I forget who it was, that man who owns so much property in the Village. I don't know. Now it's all—it's terrible.

And then there's so much plan now for Gansevoort Street, and for, what else?

PRuta: The Whitney.

SRuta: Oh, the Whitney is a whole other thing.

PRuta: Now most of these buildings were affiliated warehouses. Now they're expensive apartments.

Zapol: Right, yes. All the brine under the streets.

SRuta: There was a demonstration by Westbeth parents one year against all the prostitution that was going on, just outside, because you couldn't rear your children among all that. And then there was a gay rights group that took the other side. They were yelling at each other, and they were calling us breeders. It [laughing] wasn't very nice! When was that, about 1980? Who knows.

Zapol: There was a gay rights association within Westbeth that was fighting—

SRuta: No, that came from outside. They felt that these people had the right to be—but there was always the feeling that whenever some convention came to town and they wanted to clean up Midtown, they shoved all the rough trade into this neighborhood, which might have been true. And the piers was a real home away from home. Did you ever see that movie *Paris Is Burning*? About the voguers? Oh, that was such a moving film. A lot of those people hung out in the piers.
[01:15:27]

Zapol: And it sounds like, was your daughter also involved, or knew of those --

SRuta: Well, some of that, because one of the things that ACT UP had was a needle exchange program, so I don't know if she went to the piers, but she went elsewhere. She worked as a patient advocate at Bellevue. People would come in, and they'd get tired of waiting, and leave, and she would run after them and say, "Come!" And one night there was a man who had stabbed somebody, and the victim, and the police, and she was involved, and they were all hitting on her!
[laughing] Anyway, it was very, very—

PRuta: But then —

SRuta: What?

PRuta: This pier.

SRuta: Which pier?

PRuta: The one now that has the—

SRuta: The park?

PRuta: Yes.

SRuta: Yeah, what about it?

PRuta: Well—

SRuta: It was a garbage dump, no?

PRuta: A meeting place of the gay world.

SRuta: Was it? Yeah.

PRuta: I'm sorry, can't find the name.

SRuta: What is it?

PRuta: Brigitte's husband.

SRuta: Brigitte. Oh, Lenny!

PRuta: Lenny said he went to take photographs.

SRuta: Oh really.

PRuta: He said the whole building was slimy with sperm.

SRuta: Oh really, he said that? [laughs] He had a way of putting things.

But even now, a lot of kids come from all over to Christopher Street. It's like a mecca. Then there's another generation. There's a hairdresser on Christopher Street who resents them so

much. He says, “We worked so hard for what we got and now they’re just—” You know, it’s funny how within the movement, there’s generations, races, social classes.

Zapol: Uh huh.

SRuta: Oh dear, oh dear, oh dear.

Zapol: So before we end, because I’ve taken a good deal of your time now—

SRuta: I suppose.

Zapol: I just wonder if there’s anything else you wanted to say, either of you. I know there are many many stories, but about what it feels like to be an artist here in the Village. What changes you’ve seen, and also if that’s a part of your identity.

PRuta: No, I mean, in the 1940s it meant more than now. I remember I told my parents, I live here, and I can’t walk around with a canvas on my shoulder without being noticed. Which is nice. And now nobody cares if you have a canvas on your shoulder here.

I mean, an acceptance. Well, naturally, it’s a changed world, and one accepts, for much better, this part of snobbism and so on. No comparison.

Remember, we had some friends from Switzerland about ten years ago, [WORD UNCLEAR] and I took them to Florent. It was dark, and they said, “How can you live in this section? Isn’t it dangerous?” Well, still. I mean, I was mugged on 14th Street in the subway, and—

SRuta: Oh, that’s right.

PRuta: What’s the name?

SRuta: Who?

PRuta: Our friend here. A woman friend, who has a house here. [01:20:02]

SRuta: I’m sorry, what? Joan.

PRuta: Joan was mugged in front of her house.

SRuta: Was she? Well, Joan was so positive. Her response to a mugging was a campaign. She started selling very strong whistles, and everybody was to wear a whistle, and if ever you felt in danger you were to blow your whistle, and then everybody else blew their whistles, and it scared people away. She was always looking for community nonviolent responses to the fear of crime. Because there was a time. Somebody was mugged in the elevator, and they tried to set them on fire. Do you remember? I don't know.

PRuta: Somebody was raped down here.

SRuta: Raped? I don't know about that. Maybe. But [CROSSTALK]—even recently there was a talk about when you're coming home late at night, come down Eighth Avenue, don't come down the side streets. But that was maybe five years ago. There's such an intense traffic, of the scene from the meat market.

Zapol: It's shifted, it's changed things.

SRuta: Yeah, I think so. I don't know.

Zapol: Yeah, yeah. Peter, you were saying that before, the difference was being seen as an artist. It meant something to have a canvas, to be carrying around your easel, and now people don't notice at all?

PRuta: No. [PHRASE UNCLEAR] or whatever. [laughs] Or on the bus, who cares. But in the 1940s, it was strange.

Zapol: Now, just as a closing image: imagine your canvas. If you were to sketch for me a closing image of the West Village, now, what would the image be?

PRuta: Well, it's much more European, for one thing. We didn't have this kind of English, traditional garden-building-and-garden atmosphere. No, forty years ago, walking down Fifth Avenue, down 12th Street, 11th Street, I certainly feel for the old Village, where some are going to the Club, and those buildings with the whole world of 1890s art, but something also like the Arts Club on Gramercy Park. It's a different world. At that time, the world of Gramercy Square was kind of upper class art. In between, Max's Kansas City sort of changed everything. [laughter]

SRuta: That's where we had our wedding breakfast. [laughs]

Zapol: Was it really?

SRuta: Well, we went to get married early in the morning. Oh, don't ask why, but we had to go early in the morning to City Hall. We got married, and then we went to Max's—

PRuta: We were both working.

SRuta: And then we went to Max's, and you told Mickey that it was your wedding day, and he gave us a free lunch, and then you went off to the *Arts* magazine office, which was right nearby, and I was working at *Esquire* at that time, as an assistant to the fiction editor, and I went back there. Was it a Friday? I think we left early. I don't know. It was very --

PRuta: A typical New York wedding! [laughs]

SRuta: I don't know. Oh my god. Oh, dear.

Zapol: And so the Village now is more European? Or, it is European?

PRuta: More European, yes. It isn't European, because the light is so different. New York light, American light is different. You feel it right away. Young people—well, young people are more or less the same. Now it's a cosmopolitan city. At that time it was an immigrant city, which is very different. [01:25:11]

SRuta: You mean this neighborhood.

PRuta: What?

SRuta: This neighborhood, you mean.

PRuta: Well, yes, this neighborhood. I don't mean Queens, something completely different. The Village.

SRuta: It's called money.

Zapol: And what is the light, what's the quality of the light here in New York?

PRuta: Well normally it's a very golden quality. Yesterday exceptionally, it was very silvery. But the house was still very light. Paris is very silvery, but a soft silver. When you used to go by boat, just two days before you arrived in America, suddenly the light changed in the sky. It becomes this American orange light. On the plane you don't notice anything. [laughter] Except the people going to the bathroom.

Zapol: What pigment or what paint do you use for that gold? Is there one? Or are there some?

PRuta: Ochres. Maybe cadmium, but not really. Light cadmium, I don't know.

Zapol: Well here we are —

PRuta: What you have at hand.

Zapol: What you have at hand, yeah.

Well thank you for—

PRuta: What I can afford, at this point. [laughs] For a long time I couldn't afford cadmiums.

Zapol: So how did you get that quality of light?

PRuta: Well, you can with earth colors, too.

Zapol: So, thank you for explaining that, and also, thank you for your time today. I'm going to wrap up now. Is there anything else that you wanted to say, Suzanne?

SRuta: No, except that this neighborhood has changed so much, and that the rents are so high now.

PRuta: Well, elegance! I mean, I went to a playground yesterday afternoon, over the pier, and I've never seen such a well dressed, elegant group of young babies, young people, young fathers, young mothers. Not a fashion show, but a certain level of sophistication and money.

SRuta: To the point where it's kind of comic. These little townhouses across the street—one of them belongs to Marc Jacobs. One of them, I don't know who it belongs to, had a huge crane come in. It was like ten stories high, to deliver a piece of Italian plumbing. It said "Made in Italy" on the side, which somehow they got into the top floor. And for the last two years, they've

been tinkering with some special kind of plumbing arrangement on their roof, with extra pipes and this and that and the other, and we don't know if it's a sauna or a jacuzzi or the baths of Caracalla [laughing], it's very funny. Meanwhile, Westbeth [CROSSTALK]—rummage sale in two weeks, so we can install some more plants and more lights and things. So, I mean, we certainly can't complain that we're poor. But there are a lot of people here on fixed incomes who are, you know, so—and then across the street there's that. So it's strange, very strange. Anyway, but that's—

PRuta: Anyway, I'm very happy that it happened, I mean, Westbeth. I'm very grateful to the original sponsors, the Kaplans. And I met some of them when one was, what's her name?

SRuta: Joan Davidson?

PRuta: Joan Davidson.

SRuta: Yeah. She's well on in years now.

PRuta: Her sister, too. Kind of a Washington Quaker type—but they're connected, somehow, to a Puerto Rican—not Puerto Rican—

SRuta: Uruguayan. [01:30:10]

PRuta: Montenegro painter. [Joaquín] Torres García.

SRuta: You mean Fonseca?

PRuta: What?

SRuta: Fonseca? No, nevermind. It doesn't matter. Anyway.

PRuta: I don't know the name Fonseca. The painter was Torres García.

SRuta: Oh, I'm sorry, that's somebody else. No no no.

PRuta: But Fonseca too.

SRuta: Anyway. They're married into different artist families, too.

Zapol: I see.

SRuta: Anyway, that's all.

PRuta: There's an elegant sculptor, partly in Pietrasanta in Italy. A marble-ist. Pietrasanta is the marble region of Tuscan, where many sculptor for marble sculptures.

Zapol: Well it sounds like, from looking at all the canvases here, that this has been a space that has also allowed you to be prolific, and it's allowed you to have your artwork also around you.

PRuta: Yes, and luckily our children, who had a strange upbringing, are very successful in their fields.

Zapol: Wow. I want to thank you for today.

SRuta: Well, thank you. And this goes into the archive of the Greenwich Village—

Zapol: It does. Yes, yes. So, I'm going stop now.

SRuta: Ok.

[END OF INTERVIEW]