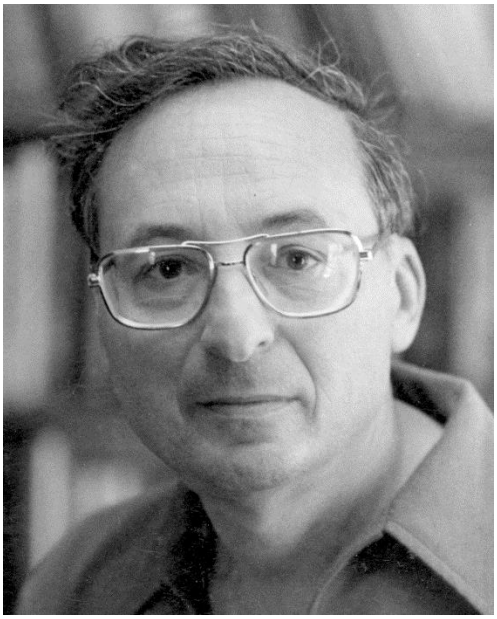

Photo taken in 1979

OSCAR MANDEL
(b. 1926)

INTERVIEWED BY
SHIRLEY K. COHEN

October 26 & 31, November 7, 1994

ARCHIVES
CALIFORNIA INSTITUTE OF TECHNOLOGY
Pasadena, California

Subject area
Literature

Abstract
An interview in three sessions, in October and November 1994, with Oscar Mandel, professor of literature in the Division of Humanities and Social Sciences. Dr. Mandel received his BA from New York University (1947), his MA from Columbia (1948), and his PhD from Ohio State University (1951). He came to Caltech as a visiting associate professor from the University of Nebraska in 1961, joined the faculty the following year, and became a full professor in 1980 (emeritus, 2003).

He recalls his childhood in Antwerp, where his father was a diamond dealer; family's escape to New York after Germans invaded Begium; his subsequent education at Forest Hills High School, New York University, and Columbia. Recalls his army service 1953-55; five years at University of Nebraska; Fulbright to Netherlands, 1960. Marriage; recruitment to Caltech. Joins faculty after a year

as a visitor, 1962. Recollections of Humanities Division in 1960s, chaired by Hallett Smith, and of his colleagues. Interest in foreign-language programs. Changes in the division wrought by Robert Huttenback; Huttenback's attempts to deny tenure to Jenijoy La Belle.

Recalls his establishment of Spectrum Productions and enlistment of Shirley Marneus as director of plays in Ramo Auditorium with professional casts, 1971-1978. Comments on current inadequacy of literature department; his establishment of programs in art history, music, and creative writing, taught by lecturers; his sense that Caltech undergraduates are shortchanged by high degree of specialization in the humanities. He concludes the interview by describing his recent research on Italian painter Alessandro Magnasco and Dutch 17th-century art.

Administrative information

Access

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CALIFORNIA INSTITUTE OF TECHNOLOGY ARCHIVES

ORAL HISTORY PROJECT

INTERVIEW WITH OSCAR MANDEL

BY SHIRLEY K. COHEN

PASADENA, CALIFORNIA

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ORAL HISTORY PROJECT

Interview with Oscar Mandel **by Shirley K. Cohen**

Pasadena, California

Session 1:	October 26, 1994
Session 2:	October 31, 1994
Session 3:	November 7, 1994

Begin Tape 1, Side 1

COHEN: Good afternoon, Oscar. I'm delighted that you're here and are going to give us this interview.

MANDEL: Very pleased to be here. I'm at your disposal, more or less.

COHEN: Well, it's good to start from the beginning, so perhaps you can tell us a bit about your parents—the circumstances of your growing up, a little bit about what your father and mother did.

MANDEL: Let me ask you first: You don't feel that this material is pretty much covered in this book of mine, *The Book of Elaborations*, which is in part an autobiography?[1] You feel that in spite of that, you would like to have it on tape?

COHEN: Yes, because, don't forget, this will be your own words as you say them. The book, I'm sure, came with a good bit of editing and thought and things like that. So no, I think we'd like to have this.

MANDEL: Well, I was born in 1926 in Antwerp. My father was a diamond dealer. He had been born in a very poor family in a Polish village. He went to Vienna to join, I believe, an older

[1] *The Book of Elaborations: Essays* (New York: New Directions, 1985).

brother when he was a little boy; went to work he used to tell us, in a sausage factory. Anyway, he had a rough childhood, but he was a very intelligent man, and even without a formal education—he would tell us—he went to the opera and things of that kind. Eventually, he went to join another older brother in Holland. One way or another, this older brother had established himself in the diamond business, and my father joined him there—I suppose in Rotterdam, I'm not sure. Later they moved to Antwerp, where he became the most prosperous member of his family. He had two brothers and one sister. The sister married a very wealthy Dutch diamond merchant, I must say. But my father did very well. And I was born into, I would say, a higher bourgeoisie.

COHEN: This is interesting, because he must have had to learn many languages along the way.

MANDEL: No, I wouldn't say that. My father forgot his Polish pretty much. The best he could do was at the dinner table, if there were some secrets from the children. He certainly knew enough Polish to speak in Polish to my mother, who also had been born in Poland. But otherwise he pretty much forgot his Polish. Having gone to Vienna as a very young child, his language was German. Now, being in Belgium and being in the diamond business, he had to cope with Yiddish, which he never learned very much.

COHEN: Was that strictly a Jewish trade there at that time?

MANDEL: Pretty much so, yes, except at the highest reaches. The highest levels were controlled by, I believe, non-Jewish English people and Dutch. And of course he learned enough Flemish to get along, and a very little bit of French. But no, he was not a linguist. When he came to the States, he certainly learned English, but nothing outstanding. We lived rather elegantly in Antwerp, and I was raised by a German governess, and there was a maid besides. I very seldom saw my parents until I was six years old; and the governess was dismissed because my mother began to fear that I wouldn't know her at all. I was very attached to my governess. She was German—I tell all these stories in *The Book of Elaborations*. And so I went to school. Now the interesting thing about immigrant families in Belgium, or Jewish families in general, is that they had what I would say now was a very reprehensible distaste and contempt for the Flemings. The Flemings are now top dogs in Belgium, but in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries the

Flemings were poorer, less educated. They were strictly Catholic. They were peasants. The French-speaking were the aristocracy and the industrialists and the commercial classes; they were socialist and anticlerical. So there was a very sharp division. The Jewish element was contemptuous of the peasant Flemings; and the Flemings paid them back in kind, as I think they deserved. So of course the Jewish families sent their children to French-speaking schools. Or at least to the French classes in the schools—either private schools or public schools.

COHEN: You see a bit of a replay of this in Canada, actually. Only it's the other way around.

MANDEL: Yes, that's right. As a result, during the Second World War the Flemish population became—to a large extent, not entirely—pro-German. And we had our Quisling, a man by the name of [Léon] Degrelle, who I believe was executed after the war. [Degrelle died of cardiac arrest in Spain in 1994.—ed.]

So we were in the French classes. But already in the 1930s—that is the period I'm talking about, the 1930s—there was a great deal of resentment against people in the French classes.

COHEN: So this was not only [resentment against] the Jews? This would have been [against] all French-speaking—

MANDEL: All French-speaking people, but they were largely Jewish, I must say. That was very much part of the picture. So it was rather tense. As I say, after the war, all this really turned upside down. Now the French, the Walloons, are in an economic pickle, with outdated coal mining and metallurgical industries all in deep recession, and the Flemish have all the high-tech new industry, and they're in the majority. They are really very dominant at this point.

Anyway, we fled when the Germans invaded, in 1940, May 10th. A few days later, we fled and had the usual odyssey through France and Spain and Portugal. Finally landed in New York.

COHEN: Now, at this point you were French-speaking?

MANDEL: I was French-speaking, yes. In the last months before the war broke out, my parents

decided to give me English lessons, and I had an English tutor who came to the house. But I'd just gotten through the "I am" and "I have" conjugations when the war broke out.

COHEN: So they were already anticipating that they were going to go to New York?

MANDEL: No, not at all. That was simply part of an education. I forget why they did this, because in the normal course of things I would probably have taken English classes in high school. I had gone through the second year of high school when the war broke out, and I was just doing Greek and Latin at the time—I should say Latin, not yet Greek. Maybe the idea was that I was going to go on with Greek and Latin, because there was a classic section of high schools and a modern. And I guess the idea was that I would go on with classics, and my parents then decided to have me take English at home. Of course, German we already spoke.

COHEN: Now, these were all state schools? These were not private schools?

MANDEL: Yes. They were called athenaeums, as a matter of fact. So that was the schooling then. My parents had also, for five or six years, given me Hebrew lessons. I'm a little embarrassed to tell you this, but I detested Hebrew and I detested Judaism from my very earliest infancy, so of course I never learned a damn thing. But they did make me go through my Bar Mitzvah, and I guess I learned just enough to do that before giving up on the whole thing. They also tried to teach me piano, and here I regret to say that like so many children, I hated it. They told me I would live to regret it, and of course they were right—that they were right about.

So that was the story of my childhood in Belgium.

COHEN: Mostly it sounds like it was quite pleasant.

MANDEL: Yes, I had a very pampered childhood. I had a sister three years older than I but thoroughly subordinated to me. I was coddled and admired. And of course I was beginning to write and hold forth, and so on. Yes, it was pleasant; except I was an extremely nervous child and so I was hypochondriacal. I had hallucinations, and once I'd been taken to Luxembourg for a cure. So it was not happy, because I was such a nervous bundle, but it *should* have been happy, because I had loving parents and everything that anybody could have wanted.

COHEN: Right, so, nothing to blame it on.

MANDEL: Absolutely not. Exactly.

COHEN: So in 1940 your family did go to New York. Now, your father must have been anticipating this. Was there some money sent ahead?

MANDEL: No. No, it wasn't that way. It's true that when there were the first alarums of war in 1939, when the—what do they call this war, when nothing happened? With the Maginot Line. There's a name for it. It was a kind of cold war. The Germans had taken Poland.

COHEN: False war? Quiet war? Yes, I know what you're referring to. [Commonly, the Phoney War.—ed.]

MANDEL: But of course a lot of people did get scared, and my father did obtain a visa for Brazil. It was his firm intention, indeed, to give up everything. Preparations were made, and we had tickets already for the ship. He got cold feet at the last minute. My father was scared about a new life in Brazil. Things were going well economically in Belgium, he was doing very well, and he just got cold feet, and at the last moment he gave it up. That must have been in the last month or so of 1939. My best childhood friend and his family did go—a friend I've stayed in contact with all these years. They settled in Brazil and became immensely wealthy in the diamond business there. We, instead, were caught on May 10, 1940, and fled really without anything, except my father managed to stick a bunch of diamonds in the handles of two suitcases, and that's the way we traveled, all the way to New York. And that's what he had to start out with.

COHEN: So he came with a little bit?

MANDEL: A little bit of something. But he never acquired the status that he had had in Belgium. He did all right in New York.

COHEN: Still with the diamond business?

MANDEL: Still with diamonds, all his life. But not brilliantly. I think the family came down—not sharply, not dramatically, but substantially. We lived well, in Queens, in Forest Hills, but nothing like in Belgium.

COHEN: Well, that way of life was going anyway.

MANDEL: Yes. Yes. My mother learned to cook. We had a maid only once a week. She adapted to that quite well.

COHEN: It was a different world, although there was a great community of people like yourselves there.

MANDEL: There were. The group in high school, Forest Hills High School—the class I was in was full of refugees. So of course we were, I have to say, a rather brilliant wave that went through Forest Hills High School in those two or three years.

COHEN: So you finished high school, and you did very well, of course.

MANDEL: Yes, I did very well in high school. Of course, I had to learn English from scratch. Really, I didn't know a word of English. So I went through high school and went on from there.

COHEN: Did you already, in high school, think in terms of being a writer?

MANDEL: Yes, that was always in my life. That was always an absolute part of me. There was never any doubt. Even as a child, and even in New York, I began to write in French. But then I fell in love with the English language and simply mastered it and quickly went over to English. I made a point of mastering English. I was never without a dictionary at my side. No matter how tedious it was, I always had a dictionary by my side.

COHEN: So that was really a conscious effort?

MANDEL: Very conscious. Very conscious. In those days, I was an Anglo maniac. And I

imitated the English accent as best I could. I dressed as English as I could. I read P. G. Wodehouse in order to learn English. I was totally involved in British English, though I'd never set foot in England.

COHEN: It was British English that really attracted you.

MANDEL: Yes, attracted me. I don't know why, or I don't know how. I think, without knowing it, I'd always been an aesthetic sort of character. I was quickly repelled, I suppose, by New York English and attracted by the English. It was pure aesthetics.

COHEN: That's very interesting. Now, how about your sister?

MANDEL: My sister is a sort of neutral, pale person, without any particular temperament. Just a nice woman, that's all I can say. My mother was a phlegmatic, very good-looking, and very kind person. Very calm in everything, without great personality. My sister takes after her. And my father was a bundle of nerves. Very intelligent, without formal education, but very intelligent. Dynamic, in a way. Scared of everything. And I take after him. Everything terrifies me, and I'm nervous, and so forth.

COHEN: Well, I mean, he had good reason to be. I think the whole diamond trade was, I mean, from what I've seen—

MANDEL: Nerve-racking.

COHEN: Yes. It's a gambling thing.

MANDEL: Yes, exactly. That's what I always understood. That you buy—at his level—you buy blind from the English monopoly. De Beers and all these people. And then you take your chances. The margin of profit is extremely small and all things hazardous. My father died at the age of seventy-nine. I think he could have lived much longer. I think the work killed him, because he was constantly in a state of frazzled nerves. It was really pitiful.

COHEN: Well, he really did need a calm wife at home.

MANDEL: Yes, I guess you're right.

COHEN: So you finished Forest Hills High School. But you, I gather, remained in New York and then went to—

MANDEL: Columbia. No, excuse me, I'm sorry, I didn't go to Columbia then. I went to NYU [New York University]. I have no idea [why]. I've quite forgotten why or what made me go there. I had a friend, also from Antwerp, who lived in the same apartment house, and he was at NYU, and it may well be that I went there for that reason. I have to say that at that time neither my father nor my mother, obviously, could guide me in any way into the system of higher education—not anywhere in the world, but certainly not in the United States. And I don't think I had any particular guidance. But since my parents had the means, they could certainly send me to a school with tuition.

At that time, my father was quite worried as to what I would do with my life. He was a wonderful person, by the way. Sweet, kind, and never did it enter his head that I would follow him in the diamond business. He was horrified by the idea. Nevertheless, since I didn't know what I was going to do, what was going to become of me, he did, just to be on the safe side, apprentice me to a diamond-cutting establishment with which he did business. And so for a year or so, while going to school, I learned how to cut diamonds. When I say I learned, I learned how to reduce diamonds to powder, I guess. I was sort of the clown of the factory. He also sent me to topography school. I learned for a while how to make maps. He was very worried about what kind of career I would have.

COHEN: That's right. Well, trades were important in those days.

MANDEL: And then he would say, "Well, I think Latin America is going to become very important," and so for a couple of years, or even longer, I majored in Spanish at NYU, not knowing what to do. So I know Spanish pretty well. I took a course in Latin American history and economics, and then—gradually, I guess—I discovered myself. After those courses.

COHEN: Were you already writing at this time?

MANDEL: Yes, I was writing, but of course nobody dreamed of this as a career. Yes, in those years, I began to write poetry. I even remember the first time I wrote an English poem. For some reason, it has stayed in my memory—the subways during Christmas season. But I began to take courses in philosophy and psychology and English literature. For a while, I decided to major in psychology, but of course I found—I shouldn't say "of course"—I found out I could get A's on all the exams without ever looking at a book. I quickly realized that psychology was just common sense.

COHEN: You knew it already.

MANDEL: Yes. Of course, we psychologized like crazy in the coffee shops and so on. But after two years of taking psychology courses, I began to despise the field. And I finally went into literature, where I really felt—

COHEN: You were home.

MANDEL: Yes, I was home, that's right. It's true. Certainly as a child I had been fanatical about French literature. I repeated the poetry of Verlaine over and over again, memorizing them. And also I had a little book in which I did the same thing then that I was to do in English: I'd put in words in French which I didn't know, and so on. So there's no doubt that I had to run around, with this and that and interruptions of war, to finally, as you put it very well, to land home again. Yes, it was sort of an inevitable trajectory. **[Break in the tape]**

Actually, something you told me just now reminded me of one of the things my father and mother did when I was a child, which was to send me to a Zionist Boy Scout/Girl Scout type of club—you know, where you tie knots and all that, but under Zionist auspices. But I really had a revulsion against the whole thing, so I used to play hooky and go to the movies instead. I remember very well that once I was tried; I was actually [put] on trial by this club, and they formally threw me out. Of course, they were right—I didn't show up for anything. But it's one of my very remote, cherished memories. I think there's always been something against the grain, because I was also thrown out of the equivalent of Phi Beta Kappa in high school. In New York,

it was called Arista; it was an organization for the best students. And they had meetings also. And since I had a good record, I became a member of this. And also I failed to attend meetings. I was also thrown out of that.

COHEN: Well, you're not a team player.

MANDEL: I'm not a team player. And of course at Caltech I haven't been a team player. I haven't been thrown out, because I have tenure.

COHEN: But it's not demanded of one, here.

MANDEL: Yes. I've been isolated and a loner here. I just don't seem to join things unless asked. And usually people don't ask. I mean, that's another story. [Laughter]

COHEN: Well, this is a particular kind of place, which we'll get into. So, anything in particular you want to say about NYU before we go on?

MANDEL: Well, no, things went very well at NYU. No problems there.

COHEN: There were no individuals—teachers or professors who stand out? Who inspired you in any way?

MANDEL: Yes, I had a couple of teachers who inspired me. There was a woman—she may still be alive—by the name of Lillian Hornstein, who taught comparative literature. [Lillian Hornstein died in 1999.—ed.] She made a funny impression on me. She was a very learned woman, I think; published important things. But while she was talking about the classics, she did it in the thickest New York accent that you can imagine. You know, lower Delancey Street. For me, it was a very odd and amusing contrast between the subject and the expression of the subject. But yes, she was very good. And it was she.... Now that you mention it; I'd forgotten it. Once, sitting by her desk in this huge room that they had for the professors, I talked to her, not knowing what I was going to do. And it was really she who led me to apply to graduate school in literature. I may be wrong, but as I look back I don't think I knew about graduate

schools even then. Somebody had to tell me that that's what one did. So, in other words, even in my third year at NYU I was really still very much at sea. I didn't know what one did.

COHEN: Well, being a loner, you weren't probably part of the conversation set.

MANDEL: Well, there was certainly lots of conversation, in the lounges with friends, and so on. But it seems to me that Hornstein had to guide me. Maybe I'm misremembering, but that's the way I remember it. And that's how I applied, took my master's degree at Columbia that way.

COHEN: Ah, so you did go to Columbia?

MANDEL: Yes, I went for one year, or a year and a half, whatever, to Columbia. That's where I took my MA [1948].

COHEN: Did you think of being a teacher? Because, I mean, one still had to think of earning a living.

MANDEL: I couldn't tell you at what point this entered my mind. I just don't know. But I suppose it must have by that time.

COHEN: And you were living at home?

MANDEL: Yes, NYU and Columbia, those were commuter—

COHEN: So your way of life really had not changed particularly?

MANDEL: That's right. Yes. It was a subway kind of thing to NYU. At Columbia, my father would allow me to take the car, which was very nice of him. But yes, it was the kind of thing—you went and you came home in the evening. And you had your circle of friends. So it was not at all like the life at Caltech or at the typical campus, where your whole life is part of the college. Not at all. You had a completely independent life, independent friends, away from college. I don't remember any particular college activities I was ever involved in.

COHEN: So you finished Columbia, and you then.... How did you get to Ohio State?

MANDEL: Well, again, I was still in a deep state of ignorance for some reason. I didn't know, as far as I remember, about the difference between prestigious schools—you know, Harvard, Yale. I knew something, but not very much. I did send for the application forms from one of them, I guess Harvard or Yale. Then I saw it was about fifteen or twenty pages long, and I threw it away. I wasn't about to fill out that many pages. And it was, by the way, I think, a difficult time economically. But anyway, I managed to get a graduate assistantship at Ohio State. I'm trying to remember. I have a very bad memory by the way, but I'm trying to remember why—

COHEN: Was this after the war?

MANDEL: Yes, we're in 1948. After the war. Why Ohio State? I probably applied to a lot of places, but I don't remember why I went to Ohio State.

COHEN: Well, there were a lot of New Yorkers at Ohio State. There really were. I mean at that time, New York didn't have a state school.

MANDEL: Oh, I see.

COHEN: SUNY didn't exist, I don't believe, and so people had to go elsewhere. We always had a lot of New York people, and that must have been true in all the Midwest—I don't know.

MANDEL: I wish I remembered more. I think, again, it was perhaps a friend who went there or something like that. It's not that important. I liked Ohio State, and there I took my PhD [1951]. And yes, I must say, people who were studying there in the English Department were very good. There was nothing to be ashamed of. It was a very good school, with very good people. I think many of the professors came from Chicago and that area. They were a very brilliant, very very prominent lot. Long after I left, there was a big brouhaha about political or free speech or something. I know the whole bunch of them went to [UC] Irvine here—some big explosion or other. I didn't keep in touch, as I've never kept in touch with anything. So after I left, I left. But I certainly made good friends there and was very productive. I got through it in three years. Of

course, I learned a lot and did a lot. At that time, for no particular reason, I was specializing in nineteenth-century English literature—I think for no better reason than that I had taken several courses in this as an undergraduate and knew already more about it. And then the idea came to me of writing a thesis on tragedy. And it quickly became apparent that, really, it was too provincial to stay within the Victorian English novel or narrative poems. I branched out on my own to do my thesis. So even though officially I was still in Victorian English and took my exams in Victorian English and had as my advisor somebody, a certain Professor Logan, who was a specialist in Coleridge, who kept a bottle of whiskey hidden in his drawer—

COHEN: On state land, yet.

MANDEL: Yes, he was probably a disappointed man, I would imagine. Anyway, he was my advisor, but I'd gone way beyond him by going into literatures and languages that I knew.

COHEN: Now, could I backtrack a little bit? At this point, you must have been a citizen. Your parents must have become citizens. Is that correct?

MANDEL: Yes.

COHEN: And so what did you do about the army?

MANDEL: Well, I was in the army *after* I got my PhD.

COHEN: Oh, OK. We haven't gotten there yet, because in those years that was an inevitable part—

MANDEL: Yes, I was called for a physical regularly. But I should say, first of all, that I was a skinny child. We didn't eat much for about seven or eight months during the exodus, and I was extremely thin. And I remained extremely thin for quite a few years. So I was called and I was always underweight. I was rejected for being underweight. Rather bizarre.

COHEN: Oh, OK. Everything has its advantages.

MANDEL: Yes. Well, it was not only that, because in 1953 they got me. By that time, I'd put on weight, and so I was in the army from '53 to '55.

COHEN: I didn't realize it was afterwards, so I don't want to get out of context here. So you had three years in Columbus, and the intellectual learning part was not a disappointment.

MANDEL: No, not at all. And that's where I began to teach. I tell the story in *The Book of Elaborations*—it was very nerve-racking at the beginning. But of course it was a necessary experience. I continued to be an extremely nervous person, and it was actually terror—terror!—to go into class as an assistant. And it remained a terror, and I tell that story. It all went away in the army, because in the army I was given the opportunity to do some teaching—some French teaching. And of course in the army, it was such a relief—going in at the end of a day of basic training to teach a class mostly of officers.

COHEN: A world you knew a little bit.

MANDEL: Yes, and of course, it was a marvelous oasis. And so from that point on, I've never been nervous.

COHEN: I see. So you developed a real affection for teaching?

MANDEL: Yes. It became an extremely easy thing to do. But it took that experience, I think, to make that change. Throughout my years at Ohio State, it had been really nerve-racking.

COHEN: That's interesting. How could the army have a program of teaching French?

MANDEL: Well, yes, the army has, not French, but all kinds of things. I was stationed at Camp Gordon, near Augusta, Georgia. It was an enormous camp, and the University of Georgia had an extension system there. And since I had my PhD, I must have applied or whatever, and—

COHEN: So they used you?

MANDEL: They used me for it, yes.

COHEN: Well, that's good.

MANDEL: And I suppose they must have paid me, too, I imagine.

COHEN: That was extra. So how long was your army service?

MANDEL: Well, almost two years. Minus three months, because I was discharged early, because I pretended that I was going to go back to school. Actually, I did go back for some Italian courses at Columbia. You could get discharged earlier, if the beginning of a semester happened to be within three months of your discharge date. I was due to be discharged in April 1955, and I had applied to the Italian Department at Columbia. And so in January I was discharged. I was in Japan during that time.

COHEN: Oh, so you did do some travel.

MANDEL: Yes. I spent about a year in Georgia and a year, roughly, in Japan, where I was in information and education in Camp Fuji, on the slopes of Mount Fuji. And then I applied for and was transferred as editor on *Stars and Stripes* in Tokyo. So I did that for about six months in Tokyo.

COHEN: So it doesn't sound like it was a complete bore.

MANDEL: Well, I thought it was horrifying and detestable. And like a prisoner, like somebody in jail, I kept a book with the number of days left, because I hated every moment of it. But it's true, as always happens, when you look back—

COHEN: You got something—

MANDEL: Of course, I got something out of it. Certainly a year in Japan. It was interesting.

COHEN: You did learn Japanese there?

MANDEL: I learned a little Japanese, because we were allowed to live off base, and so I rented a room in a little house. I had a Japanese landlady; I had a book of grammar; I learned a little Japanese.

COHEN: Well, it sounds as if you had an interesting experience.

MANDEL: It was interesting, yes.

COHEN: When you came back from the army, were you already applying for jobs? Or positions?

MANDEL: Yes. Again, it was a bad time. When I came back in January, I had no intention of actually going back to Columbia; it was just a way of getting out of the damned army. But I had no job. I had nothing to do. Again, living at home. So I decided I would go to evening classes, and I took Italian literature. That's where I met my wife.

COHEN: Oh, well, see, everything has its advantage.

MANDEL: Yes. She was getting her MA in Italian literature then. And at the same time, I decided.... For a while, I had thought that I would not go back to the academic life. I forgot to tell you, there was a year or so when I was working in the civil service, before I was drafted. In other words, I had my PhD, and I got sick and tired of academia, as happens to many people. I went into the civil service in Philadelphia. There I was drafted. But by '55, I decided that I wanted to go back to university life, and then I applied to lots of places. I think I applied to seventy or eighty places. It was a very difficult time. And the only job I got was in Nebraska.

COHEN: Now, this is in the early fifties?

MANDEL: '55. And that's how I came to be at the University of Nebraska for five years.

COHEN: That must have been a real change for you.

MANDEL: Yes, that was a change. Actually, I had no idea where Nebraska was. But you know,

I looked it up on a map, and my father had given me a car. And I simply started driving west. [Laughter]

COHEN: Go west, young man. Now, had you gotten married at this time?

MANDEL: No. No, I wasn't married until 1960. My wife, Adrienne, was engaged at the time to somebody else, so it was a difficult situation. She married this man, and they moved to California. They moved to Los Angeles. And the marriage didn't last more than a year or so. Then eventually, since she knew where I was, she wrote to me, and we renewed our contact. In those days, divorce wasn't easy, and both she and her husband were Catholics, and it was sort of difficult. So that dragged on. We weren't married until 1960. At that time, I'd gotten a Fulbright, and we both went to Amsterdam. But she had a very good job in Beverly Hills High School, and she couldn't take a year off. So she went back to Beverly Hills High School and I remained in Amsterdam as a Fulbright.

COHEN: Was this the first year you'd gone back, after all these years?

MANDEL: No, I went back as soon as I came out of the army. In fact, they drafted me—they found out about me—because in 1953, when I was in the civil service, naturally I wanted to go back to Europe. You had to notify your draft board. So I notified my draft board that I was going to Europe, and they immediately called me in and slapped a uniform on me. [Laughter] So that was a great catastrophe.

COHEN: Well, you had to do your time, see. So you had a whole year as a Fulbright?

MANDEL: No, I had six months, because I got very lonely for my new wife. And so I concocted some story or other, and in January I came home.

COHEN: But you did—I noticed in reading some of your books—you did do a lot of scholarly work in Nebraska.

MANDEL: Yes. The five years were very productive, seems to me—scholarly work and other

work. I wrote some of my plays, naturally, and I also wrote *Chi Po and the Sorcerer*, at least the first draft—my little Chinese novella, which I sometimes think is the best thing I ever wrote.[2] That was published in the early sixties, but I certainly wrote the first draft of it in the late fifties, while I was in Nebraska. In my little garret.

COHEN: But you must have had a very heavy teaching load.

MANDEL: I guess we had. We must have had a nine-hour load, I imagine. Yes.

COHEN: But that still gave you time to write?

MANDEL: Oh, yes. Especially not having a family, and then long vacations. The whole idea of becoming a professor was to have three months' vacation.

COHEN: Which of course one used in scholarly work—a misconception on the part of most of the world.

MANDEL: Yes. Well, when I was on *Stars and Stripes*, naturally I was tempted to become a journalist, but I quickly gave this up. I needed to have time to myself. So again, it was a matter of landing home, I think, for the second time.

COHEN: It was obvious that's what you wanted to do.

MANDEL: That's right.

COHEN: Well, you were very fortunate. Some people never find it. So you had your five years in Nebraska.

MANDEL: Yes. It was nice. And of course being a bachelor, I never had to spend my summers or even Christmas.... At Christmastime, I would meet my future wife either in Colorado or in Los Angeles.

[2] *Chi Po and the Sorcerer: A Chinese Tale for Children and Philosophers* (Tokyo, Japan: Charles E. Tuttle, 1964).

OSCAR MANDEL

SESSION 2

October 31, 1994

Begin Tape 2, Side 1

COHEN: Good afternoon. We left you in Nebraska. Could you tell us how you wound up your affairs there, and then what came next?

MANDEL: OK. We had talked about the Fulbright, I think, in Amsterdam. I should add that it was a very wonderful experience. I was teaching American poetry, which is not at all my field, so I had to learn a lot myself. I was teaching that at the University of Amsterdam to what were, I think, going to be future English teachers or professors. Maybe high school, maybe college—I'm not sure that I remember. They were not a very impressive group. I concluded then that the most intelligent people go into the literature of their own country. And I think that's been confirmed since, when I look around at foreign-language departments in this country, where the most intelligent Americans will go either into English or American literature, and if there are extremely intelligent people in foreign literatures, they often tend to be foreigners themselves.

COHEN: That's very interesting.

MANDEL: In other words, the same rule. If you're really interested in literature and have that capacity, maybe you have the tendency to go primarily into your own. Well, this is an untested hypothesis but, let's say I was not terribly impressed with the group in Amsterdam. I was also—I guess this was normal—I was made to give a series of lectures at the University of Leiden, which was quite wonderful in those days. We're talking about 1960. At Leiden, it was still the custom for everybody to rise to his feet at the entrance of the professor. I was just a kid, so naturally I was absolutely delighted with this situation, not being terribly democratic by inclination. [Laughter] And I was also giving some lectures in Utrecht. So I got around quite a bit. In other words, saw three universities and made some interesting friends and saw interesting things. In short, I really worked. I love Holland; I loved it then and I love it now. In fact, I'm now these days working in the field of Dutch art—seventeenth-century Dutch art, which has

enabled me to return to reading Dutch.

COHEN: So you knew Dutch?

MANDEL: You know, being born in Belgium—even though, as I mentioned last time, I was in the French section of the schools—still, one learned naturally the other language. I'm not intimate with Dutch. I need a dictionary, but, you know, I have an extremely good feeling for it. So even if I don't understand the sentence, I have a kind of feeling for it. I know what its nature is; I know its essential nature.

COHEN: I think there's enough old English in there so sometimes you can catch—

MANDEL: Well, not for me. You see, for me it's really the fact of having been raised in a Dutch-speaking country. I have a kind of a home feeling for it. It's a language I like. So even if I don't speak it very well and don't read it very well—I mean sufficiently well to be able to work even in seventeenth-century Dutch, which ain't easy. It has, you know, the same kinds of difficulties that Shakespearean English has. But I managed. Anyway, so much for the Netherlands. When I came back, the idea was that we were going to move to Nebraska. My wife would have had to give up her position at Beverly Hills High School. She later got her PhD and became a college professor, but at that time she was teaching in the high school. And, of course, teaching at Beverly Hills High School is a very pleasant and lucrative position. She had a nice little house in West Los Angeles, and I arrived there in January.

COHEN: This is 1961?

MANDEL: Yes, yes, '61. I was on a leave of absence from Nebraska. At that point, the basic fact was that my wife had absolutely no inclination to go to Nebraska. [Laughter] I can even wonder what would have happened to our marriage if I had had to return there. Anyway, at one point I'd been given the name and address of a scholar, someone who had taught at Nebraska, or had been at Nebraska, or was a friend of someone at Nebraska. I completely forget. I think it was a man by the name of [W. H.] Werkmeister, who taught at USC. Anyway, it was the standard introduction: If you're in Los Angeles, call Professor Werkmeister. Which I did, and they

invited us to dinner one evening at their house. And at the dinner, one of the guests was Professor Bowerman. Paul Bowerman had been for many years a professor [of modern languages] at Caltech. I guess you didn't know him—that was maybe before your time. He was an older gentleman, who was a full professor and who taught French. And at that time, there was a little group of people. I remember there was a man by the name of [Robert] Wayne—I forget his first name—who taught German. So I talked to Bowerman and told him that there was a little problem: My wife was not enthusiastic about going back to Nebraska with me, and so on and so forth. And he said, "Well, come to Caltech. I'll introduce you." I think at that time the Humanities Division was run by Hallett Smith. And it was composed of gentlemen; most of them had PhDs. Bowerman didn't, as far as I know; if he did, he carried it very lightly. Hallett, who was himself a very noted scholar, didn't require it of anyone else. So I don't think that any scholarship emanated at least from the literature segment. But everyone came from the very best schools—the Eastern universities or, at worst, Stanford or Berkeley. But I mean, only the best.

COHEN: The old boys.

MANDEL: The old boys, that's right. Hallett Smith himself was from William and Mary, I think. [Smith taught at Williams College before coming to Caltech.—ed.] Anyway, Bowerman somehow introduced me to Hallett Smith, who invited me to lunch with a historian, Cushing Strout, who left a few years later.

COHEN: For Cornell.

MANDEL: Cornell, exactly. Oh, you knew him?

COHEN: I've met him.

MANDEL: You've met him, yes. Very bright, very bright fellow. I think it was a great loss, but he wanted to go where there were graduate students. Now, I should say that at that moment, my first book had been accepted by New York University Press.[3] It was essentially, as often happens, a revision—I must say, a very thorough revision—of my thesis, which was on the

[3] *A Definition of Tragedy* (New York: New York University Press, 1961).

definition of tragedy. And this book, by the way, has remained—it's out of print now, but it remained in print for many years and I think has become a kind of a standard book in the field. I don't think it had come out yet, but I had a contract—perhaps it *had* come out. I don't think so. But I had already also a couple of articles, including an essay in *The American Scholar*. So I had something to show.

COHEN: What you had done was more than anybody there had.

MANDEL: More than anybody except one person; that was George Mayhew. George Mayhew was the one productive scholar. He was a Swift man. He worked at the Huntington [Library]. Now, he didn't produce anything of any importance; he was the kind of scholar, you know, who finds out that a certain poem by Swift was published in October rather than in June, 17-something-or-other. It was that kind of thing.

COHEN: Investigative.

MANDEL: Yes. Modest philosophical dimensions, let's say. But at least he was an active scholar. He was maybe a couple of years older than I. He was actually the only person who was active. You know, of course, Kent Clark, who has since published a pretty important biography but who has always been sort of the buffoon of the division.

COHEN: Many people enjoy that.

MANDEL: Enjoy it, yes. Very nice. Then we had Beach Langston, a lovely gentleman who spent all his life being a Faulkner scholar, but it never came to more than that. After he died [1979], I know that [professor of literature] Jenijoy La Belle was thinking of trying to do something with an eternal manuscript that he had. But there was nothing to be done with it. Then there was Eagleson—Harvey Eagleson, I think, was his name. Quite old—homosexual, I think he was—also with the best background. And a few others of that kind, who probably did far better teaching than any of us have done since. You see, they loved books, and they knew how to talk to students. They were not kept busy grubbing around with articles and books. And as I say, they were gentlemen. Intelligent, sensitive, and I'm sure taught very well.

COHEN: That's probably what they were wanted for at the time.

MANDEL: Yes, that's right. We were an ancillary group—a service group for the scientists. That was all changed by [Robert A.] Huttenback—to whom we'll come later.

COHEN: So you were asked to join them?

MANDEL: Well, I was invited to lunch, as I was saying. And they had read, at any rate, my *American Scholar* essay, which is called, I believe, "Nobility and the United States." Anyway, they were impressed with it. As I later found out, I was really number two on their list.

COHEN: So they actually were looking for someone?

MANDEL: Yes. They were looking for someone to replace someone who was going off on a year's leave—in fact, I think, on a Fulbright. A man by the name of [Henry Dan] Piper, I believe. So it was a replacement for a year, and I was, I think, number two. I think there was a Harvard man who was number one, but he didn't come. So, as luck would have it, I was asked to teach here. I was a visiting associate professor.

COHEN: Now, had you terminated your—

MANDEL: Well, at that point I terminated, when I had this, even though it was meant to be one year. I must have been given some hope, I guess—I'm a little vague. One would have to go back to the archives. I don't know.

COHEN: But you were moving into an area where there was a lot of possibility in that year.

MANDEL: Yes, I suppose at that time there was, although I don't remember trying anything else. So, in any event, about halfway through the year, Hallett called me into his office and made the job permanent. Was it because he thought well of me and/or because Piper or whoever he was decided to leave? I guess there was really an opening, now that I think of it. Yes, the opening became permanent. The man did leave. He went someplace in the Midwest, where he became

dean. [Piper became a dean at Southern Illinois University—ed.] Now it comes back to me. So there was an opening, and I was asked to stay.

COHEN: Were you enjoying yourself?

MANDEL: Oh yes. I loved it here from the beginning. There is no way one could pry me loose from this place, I think. Like most people here. At that time, of course, we were all in Dabney Hall—the old Dabney, with that beautiful library down in the basement. There was a lovely library, very modest. You know, things were done in a very modest way in those days.

COHEN: I see. Not where the auditorium is?

MANDEL: No, the library was—you went down a charming little spiral staircase to the library, down below. I don't know what's there now—what they've done with it.

COHEN: And you continued to live on the Westside?

MANDEL: Yes, we always lived on the Westside. That was before there was a Santa Monica Freeway. I just drove downtown on Olympic every day and took the Pasadena Freeway. At that time, I lived near what is now Century City. That's where we lived, and then we moved to Bel Air, and I've commuted all my life.

COHEN: So that doesn't bother you?

MANDEL: Yes, it does bother me. [Laughter]

COHEN: But you do it.

MANDEL: I do it. After all, when I consider people cramming into subways in New York or in Tokyo or in Paris—I sit for forty minutes, sometimes more, in a car. It would be really foolish to complain.

COHEN: There are some people who walk.

MANDEL: Of course. I envy that.

COHEN: It's nice living on the Westside. The weather is better, too.

MANDEL: My wife teaches in Northridge, Cal State Northridge, so to live here would be an extra fifteen miles for her.

So that's the story of how I came to Caltech. Through Paul Bowerman, who eventually retired and who died only quite recently. But he was such an inconspicuous, gentle man that I think nobody noticed.

COHEN: Now, did they continue the German? I don't know if they—

MANDEL: Yes. Oh, yes, German is doing very well. We have, you know, French, German, and Russian. I remember that I began to take an interest in these programs. I brought in Galina Moller, who had come here as the wife of a young Danish visitor. She divorced him, and she managed to get a visa and stay here, and she taught Russian here for a while. And then at a dinner party I was introduced to our current Russian teacher, Valentina Lindholm, and I got her hired to replace Galina, when Galina left.

COHEN: So you had some tie to the people doing language, even though you were doing literature.

MANDEL: That's right. I had some tie. It was natural that I would be involved somehow or other.

COHEN: You were a cosmopolite.

MANDEL: Yes, I guess. Yes, that's right. But always informally, very informally.

COHEN: So at that time, Hallett Smith was head of the division?

MANDEL: Hallett Smith was head of the division.

COHEN: We're in the early sixties now.

MANDEL: Yes, we're in the sixties. At that time—here I have to say something about my role at Caltech, and it's quickly said: It's zilch. I mean, I've never had any interest or ability to hobnob with the administrators, the chiefs, the presidents, and not even with the chairmen. I was a little boy. Of course, I was thirty-five years old, but I was really a little boy in that division. And I had no idea. I assumed, at that time, Hallett Smith ran it. I used to see Beach Langston and Kent Clark at his side, with him. It never occurred to me that anybody would ask my opinion about anything, and in fact nobody did.

COHEN: Well, did you have some choice over what you taught? Did they give you freedom of that, or was there a curriculum of sorts?

MANDEL: Yes, there was a curriculum, but from the beginning, I think, I taught my specialty, which was history of drama. But of course we all taught general literature courses. Yes, things were much more structured than they are now. It's been a catastrophic collapse, after '68. And it remains that way. Occasionally there are velleities to pick up the pieces and restructure. But since all the tenured people are prima donnas, there's nothing to be done with—with anybody. There's no authority.

COHEN: I'd like to hear more about that. And that happened in '68?

MANDEL: Yes, in '68. Prior to that, every student had to take two years of literature and two years of history. And once a month in that auditorium that used to exist in Dabney Hall, one of us would— There was an hour—I think it was an eleven o'clock hour, on a Wednesday, maybe—where all the students, all the undergraduates, would be assembled and listen to some speech on some topic by one of the professors.

COHEN: That was required of them? There must have been several hundred people.

MANDEL: Yes, a couple of hundred, I would say. Yes, it was a large hall. So everybody went through a structured, basic curriculum. That was taken for granted, and we all taught in it. So

everybody taught two years of literature, plus their own specialty. I think at that time we taught six hours and not the three or four hours that we do now.

COHEN: Six hours a quarter?

MANDEL: I think so, yes. I think everybody did. That was then diminished. And again, it was diminished, consciously or unconsciously, at a time when it was thought that we should become like the rest of the Caltech faculty and be productive.

COHEN: And start to do research?

MANDEL: Start to do research.

COHEN: Besides the teaching?

MANDEL: Yes. And that was also a Huttenback innovation.

COHEN: Now, what year would that have been?

MANDEL: Well, we would have to find out when Huttenback came in. I couldn't tell you. It's all very vague in my mind—and that, of course, we can look up. [In 1971, Huttenback, a professor of history, became acting chairman of what by now was called the Division of Humanities and Social Sciences; he was chairman of the division 1972-1977.—ed.]

So to go back to my being hired: Certainly I should say that, don't forget, I had a PhD—I had an MA from Columbia, a BA from NYU, but a PhD from Ohio State, which, as far as they were concerned, was a hick college. And then I had taught five years in Nebraska. Now, that, I have to say, for Hallett was a unique event. It has never happened before or since that anyone with that kind of background would be hired by the Humanities and Social Sciences Division. We are incredible snobs. Incredible! I see what happens in the sifting, you know, when hiring is being done. I mean, anybody who comes from that kind of college doesn't stand a chance.

COHEN: Even if? Well, you of course had produced scholarship.

MANDEL: I produced something. At that time I didn't know, but since then I've been really amazed that they would actually pick somebody—I suppose they picked me because it was for one year.

COHEN: They didn't have to think too much.

MANDEL: That's right. And of course the other thing I have to say is that in those days the chairman made the decision. He decided whom to hire. I'm sure he had some advice, but it was not the perfectly idiotic system today, where, if you hire somebody to put in paper clips, you have to have twelve letters from scholars all over the country. God knows what bureaucratic mass of papers have to pass before anybody gets hired. What a contrast! In those days, the chairman had a talk with you, looked at your dossier; I suppose consulted with a couple of people, if he wanted to; and then hired you. And I suppose fired you also. And in my opinion, although there is something to be said on both sides of this manner of proceeding, that first is the better way. It will mean that some departments will simply sink, because some stupid tyrant is in charge, but others will be especially brilliant, because somebody very bright.... It's the same thing in theater—one person in charge and you get really something brilliant going on, but you can also get total disasters. So either way, you have to choose. I certainly find myself very uncomfortable with the hiring process there is now, where I find myself perfectly capable of making up my mind on reading somebody's thesis and a couple of articles, and talking to him or her. I don't feel the need to have twelve letters of recommendation, which are worthless anyway. The same thing with promotions. I don't know what the secret ways were, but at a certain point I was promoted. I don't think anybody in the country was asked to write papers, letters, substantiation, other opinions.

COHEN: Would you say those were the simpler days?

MANDEL: It was simpler days. Hallett decided, I guess, that I'd done enough at a certain point and I deserved to be promoted. Again, if it was a stupid tyrant in charge, then you could keep back somebody whom you disliked for some perfectly irrelevant reason. But at a certain point he promoted me. I suppose it had to be OK'd by the faculty whatever-it's-called. But that's the way it was done. And now, to give tenure to someone—I mean, it's an endless process, hedged

about with typical American legalisms.

COHEN: Well, that has hit all phases of things. Maybe it's a phase. But anyway, what year were you given tenure? You came in as an associate professor, without tenure then?

MANDEL: I must admit, I was a visiting associate professor. And then I was made a tenured associate professor [1962], and I didn't go through any rigmarole. I suppose—I don't know—maybe I would never have become tenured, let alone a full professor, on the basis of my.... Certainly my colleagues, as I said, had not been called upon to do any work, and they were full professors.

COHEN: So then you made your decision. You loved it from the beginning. But it wasn't because of your colleagues. I mean, was it the students, or was it just the atmosphere? What attracted you so much?

MANDEL: Yes, well, the atmosphere. Yes, the atmosphere is what attracted me. The fact that we had small classes, few hours after all. And lots of facilities. Encouragement to work. It's like being in a five-star hotel.

COHEN: OK, that's a good point.

MANDEL: And it was very very pleasant. And of course, having lunch with extremely intelligent people at the Athenaeum, and so on. The prestige of being at Caltech. In every way, even though I've never really contributed to running this place, I certainly have enjoyed being part of it.

COHEN: Well, you've probably contributed more than you think. And the students?

MANDEL: The students, of course. Yes. Naturally. Somebody like Cushing Strout left because he wanted to train historians. But here's something I should say. I was not bothered by not having graduate students. Quite the contrary, because I've always considered myself a writer. And for a writer, it's the ideal place. You feel you're doing some good—some real good with

students who know very little but who are very intelligent, very receptive. So you feel you are doing something worthwhile, and at the same time you have this freedom to write. You can be a poet or a playwright, essayist, fabulist. These are all things I've done.

COHEN: So you think that's the sort of people they attract here, then? To Caltech. Some who aren't going to [necessarily want] graduate students? Although you *can* do a graduate degree in literature.

MANDEL: No, you can't. No. You can in economics and political science. But I don't know what attracts people here. I don't think it's the same thing. I couldn't tell you.

COHEN: But you did enjoy your teaching?

MANDEL: Oh, yes, always. My god, yes! That's why I'm not retiring. Yes, the teaching is very pleasant and stimulating and rewarding. It's really rewarding. You really feel that there are big empty vessels that you begin to fill a little bit. It's very nice.

COHEN: I understand. If one isn't overworked.

MANDEL: That's right. Yes, exactly. So you really have time to devote—

COHEN: [Overwork] kills a lot of teaching.

MANDEL: Yes, that's true. So that's been quite pleasant.

COHEN: And at this time, your wife was continuing her studies?

MANDEL: She went back to UCLA and got her PhD there. And then taught—

COHEN: Italian literature.

MANDEL: Well, Italian to start with. She switched to Spanish, as being more practical. But she's in romance languages and literatures. And she taught French here for a couple of years.

COHEN: Oh, so you came over together then, for a while?

MANDEL: Yes. But of course the language [position] was always, at that time, non-tenurable. And she wanted to be.

COHEN: I remember some years ago—and I can't remember how long it was—there was a real scandal about languages. Wasn't [Robert F.] Christy the acting president—or was he the provost—and he suddenly decided that they wouldn't teach languages here?

MANDEL: No, that was art. Wasn't that art?

COHEN: No, that too. But there was also—you see, I know Mary Zirin very well. I remember people getting very upset.

MANDEL: Is that right?

COHEN: And it had to do with Christy's decision that if people wanted to take more languages, they could go to PCC [Pasadena City College].

MANDEL: I see. I don't remember. No, I don't recall that. I don't.

COHEN: I only know about it because then Mary stopped teaching [Russian] here.

MANDEL: I see, I see. That's quite a long time ago, then. Either I've forgotten or I was unaware.

COHEN: That was two presidents ago that Christy was acting president [1977-1978]. That would have been after Harold Brown left.

MANDEL: On the other hand, what I do know is that all these years I've been on our committees, and several times there's been the question of all these people who've been here for very long—some of them—and who remain lecturers. And the budget doesn't allow— Caltech, in other words, doesn't want to create professorships in languages or in art or in music.

COHEN: Let's go back to what you said about 1968, when you felt that things had lost their cohesiveness as far as curriculum—

MANDEL: Yes. Now, I'm sure that at that time Huttenback was in charge. [Huttenback was influential in the division, but not yet chairman—ed.] And what had happened was, there was a, I suppose, a coup d'état, or a palace revolution. And again I was totally, completely out of it—I've no idea. But apparently people were dissatisfied with Hallett's high-handed way of running the division.

COHEN: Now, he ran the whole division—history and whatever social science there was also?

MANDEL: Yes.

COHEN: Was there a lot of social science yet at this time?

MANDEL: Not as much as now. So, typically, I found out about this much later. And I still don't—I don't know who's left who could tell you more about it. You'd really have to ask Huttenback himself or—who's the tall economist who was chairman for a while?

COHEN: Roger Noll.

MANDEL: Roger Noll would know. He would of course know. These people who were really in the politics—in a good sense—the politics of the thing. It's really one of these things. Nobody's ever asked my opinion about anything here, so I've never given it. Anyway, one day I found that Hallett was no longer chairman, and at that point he retired and became a scholar at the Huntington. And then an entirely new spirit came over the place, with Huttenback.

COHEN: He was enthusiastic.

MANDEL: Yes. Enthusiastic, innovative. He did the same thing in our division that he was going to do later in Santa Barbara. He decided that our division should no longer be a service division—that anybody hired from that point on should go through all the rigorous screening and

be expected to produce worthwhile scholarship, not just anything, before getting tenure. And it seems to me that he succeeded fully in this. And of course he was also instrumental, I guess, in developing the social sciences. And in fact, from that point on, it became expected of us that we would produce things. Now, I had no problem with this, and so—

COHEN: You were doing this anyway.

MANDEL: I was doing this anyway. I've always done this for my own enjoyment and satisfaction, so I coasted along without any problem. The people from Hallett's generation eventually retired and died out. Naturally, Huttenback had no intention or power or desire to fire anybody. So that just played itself out.

COHEN: These people who thought they were reaching the point where they would retire didn't do anything.

MANDEL: Yes, that's right. George Mayhew, I should say, who was really essentially my age, had several strokes and was reduced to a vegetable. And his wife took him back to New England, and there he eventually died. So that was a very sad event. But the others went on. Chuck [Charles] Newton taught at that time, to give you an example of the kind of thing that was done. Very casual, leisurely, without any great expectations of scholarship. And there was somebody else in the administration—a man with a very red face. What was his name? He was always at the Athenaeum. A very small mind, but a jolly old fellow. And he taught literature part-time also.

COHEN: I see, so there was work for everybody there? [Laughter]

MANDEL: Yes, and he was in the administration.

COHEN: You don't remember who that was?

MANDEL: No. Of course, I would recognize the name immediately. But he had some post in the administration, as had Chuck Newton. And eventually Eagleson died [1967]. Beach Langston

died [1979]. Now, Dave Smith was another situation. David Smith was already here when I came. He'd been here a couple of years.

COHEN: And was Annette [Smith] here also? Or was she still in Claremont?

MANDEL: No, Annette was in Claremont. She came much later [as a visiting assistant professor in 1970 and then joined the faculty as a lecturer in 1971—ed.] She, by the way, came as a professor, and I was very instrumental in seeing that she would come as such. So for a while, we did have someone tenured, in the professorial rank, in the languages [Annette Smith did not become a tenured (associate) professor until 1982.—ed.] But then when she retired [1993]—

COHEN: They did not replace that.

MANDEL: No, they did not replace that. And David Smith, you know—since these oral histories are candid—David Smith was certainly programmed, you might say, to be also a productive scholar but somehow never managed it. In all his life, he produced a couple of little things on Joseph Conrad, which was his specialty. But really little things. Little notices. And then he wrote a book on a woman poet [Diane Wakoski]—one of these confessional poets. I wish I could remember her name just now. I'll try by next week to remember her name. She's very much alive and kicking. A younger woman. And he wrote a book on her poetry, which I've read, or read in part. It seems like a perfectly honest, decent book on an actually horrible poet. But she had a reputation, and she was lecturing everywhere at that time. Now you don't hear from her anymore. But he couldn't find a publisher for that. David Smith was kind of a Hemingway type. He had been a Marine and he had had horrendous experiences in the Pacific, and so on. So you know, he—I think he cultivated that image, more and more.

COHEN: At what point did he become so interested in the arts?

MANDEL: Yes, he was very active in the arts, also as head of student houses. And then the [Baxter] art gallery. Yes. You see, there's a good example of someone who did contribute a lot to Caltech—the art, head of student houses, and so on. And so eventually—and I remember pushing very hard for that—he was rewarded, as was Beach Langston, with a full professorship

for those activities. Now you know, in all candor, these are called charity promotions, which is, you know, an ugly way of talking about it. But it's a recognition that now and then someone who has served an institution very very well, in many ways, deserves to have that position also. Now, Beach Langston I think was granted this thing after retirement—an emeritus professorship—because unlike David Smith he had not been active in many things. But David had. You know, he created this wonderful gallery.

COHEN: Well, I know that we were here already by that time. Actually we came in '68 or '69. [Shirley Cohen's husband, radio astronomer Marshall Cohen, joined the Caltech faculty in 1968—ed.] We must have come when all of this was going on, although we were not aware of it.

MANDEL: I see. Yes, so he [David Smith] was very good at this. And he was involved in the art courses, but mostly in the gallery. And then of course, a very tragic death [1990]. And then, what happened—well, you want to know something else. Remind me about the art business later, will you?

COHEN: OK. Let's just do the changes.

MANDEL: Yes. There were many good things that Huttenback did, but Huttenback was also part of the '68 revolution. And he abolished the structured curriculum. Under him, it became what has usually been called a smorgasbord. The students had to take a certain number of credit hours in humanities and social sciences, but they were essentially left free to choose whatever they wanted. We've gone back a *little* bit on this, but nothing worth dwelling on. And to me—and it's important that this should be said—we are really radically failing the students by giving them contextless courses which they can choose. If you consider any discipline like a ladder, they can take rung #15. Then they can take a course on rung #2. And then on rung #65. And there's no cohesion or connection. There's no systematic progression. Well, I think the high schools work like this, and we have given in to that.

COHEN: Now there's a coming back?

MANDEL: There has been a coming back, and now all the students have to take humanities courses, which I suppose would be very broad courses. But now the prima-donna effect takes place, so that many people who are teaching the freshman humanities are also teaching rather narrow topics. And again, there's no cohesion among these topics. And so it's something that needs to be absolutely revolutionized, but nobody will do it.

And here we get to one of the other weaknesses. My impression is that the social sciences are doing extremely well, because they are structured. But since the departure of Hallett Smith, there's never been a chairman on the literature side or any of the other arts. Which means that, with the best will in the world, we've had a series of chairmen who really don't know enough about the arts to take the thing in hand and exert real leadership in saying, "Look, we've got to organize this in some way"—the teaching. There's been no one.

COHEN: Well, you do have an executive officer in charge of literature.

MANDEL: They're not in charge of anything—the executives have no power whatsoever. They call meetings. They preside over meetings. There's no power whatsoever. In fact, the prima-donna system is such that no one has any power. And as a result, at least in literature, we have a situation of pure chaos.

COHEN: Do the students complain?

MANDEL: How would the students know this? There's no way they can tell. They cannot tell anything about the harm that's being inflicted on them.

COHEN: But of course they come in at a level where many of them don't know literature, but at least they know the mechanics of English, supposedly.

MANDEL: I think in general they do. At least the students I've had; I've seldom had any major problems in that way.

COHEN: Let's be a little more chronological. So then starting in '68, things really began to change radically.

MANDEL: I think so, yes.

COHEN: Did any new colleagues come in whom you interacted with? How did you continue your own work?

MANDEL: That's part of my peculiar situation. It also evokes the question of why I'm being asked to do this. [Laughter]

COHEN: For a very good reason.

MANDEL: No, I consider it really bizarre. I never interacted with anybody. I've always done my own work, in my own corner. For example, we have postdocs who come in, and we're asked to nominate candidates for the postdoc situations in literature. And my colleagues nominate people with whom they will interact. But I've never had any occasion or inclination to do this. I don't need to interact with anybody.

COHEN: But, Oscar, don't you have another life? Your theater life? What were you writing in the sixties or early seventies? What were you working on?

MANDEL: Well, I would have to look at a chronology of what I was writing. Of course, I've been a playwright all my life, but I can't say that I've had a theater life, unfortunately. In fact—

Begin Tape 2, Side 2

MANDEL: Let me finish this thought. No, I was very active as a playwright, and so on. And naturally I've had productions, little productions, really minute productions, here and there, but nothing worth beating a drum about. So, I've been busy writing plays and I've published plays, most of which I had to subsidize myself—let's be honest. But I've published them. But I've been a failure at it, and I'm certainly not a famous playwright. I'm not a famous poet. I'm not a famous anything. But I've produced a lot of different things. In the sixties, I was undoubtedly writing plays, poetry. I was doing some scholarly work. I was writing, I guess, my book on Don

Juan.[4] This is my least important—although my thickest—but my least important book. Yes, it's thick because it's just mostly an anthology, but there's a lot of historical stuff and critical stuff by me. That's the only book that was ever commissioned from me, and I was not terribly interested in the subject. It's a very good book. It's in print. It's my best known book, and my least significant.

COHEN: Did you ever work at the Huntington on that?

MANDEL: No, I've done very little work at the Huntington, because, living as I do in Bel Air, I've used the UCLA library.

COHEN: Which is very good.

MANDEL: Very good. Very friendly. And it's easy for me to go there. In recent years, I've used it less, because interlibrary loan has developed—or maybe I didn't know about it then.

COHEN: I hear talk about that now. People sit in their office and request what they want.

MANDEL: Yes. But I used to spend a lot of time in the stacks at UCLA, much more than at the Huntington.

COHEN: Were you already going to Europe in the summers?

MANDEL: Yes. That I've done all my life. Yes, that's always been a part. And naturally has been part also, very legitimately, of my activities here, because as a writer, scholar, translator, and of course teacher I deal with an international scene. It's really essential that I should go and immerse myself as often as possible in the international scene. So I've done that every year.

COHEN: Now, coming back to the theater scene here. I mean, you are a writer, of course, and a playwright. How about the theater arts, say, that Shirley Marneus has developed here over the years?

[4] *The Theatre of Don Juan: A Collection of Plays and Views, 1630-1963* (Lincoln NE: University of Nebraska Press, 1963).

MANDEL: OK. That's an interesting chapter in itself, because when [Ramo Auditorium] was built, I got involved in that early on. In what way? Naturally, nobody asked me how to build it or what to do, but when I saw it being erected the idea came to me of doing theater there. Just when I saw the building go up [Donald E. Baxter Hall of the Humanities and Social Sciences.]. And I forget whom I contacted then, but I think Roger Noll, or was it still Huttenback? I forget who was chairman then.

COHEN: Roger was always interested in the arts.

MANDEL: Yes. Anyway, that was 1971. That I can date. And I came forward—oh, well, wait a minute! I was a member of the programs committee [Institute Assemblies and Programs] from the beginning, specializing in theater. I was always the subgroup of theater. I've been the longest-lived member of that committee. And one day, I came to a meeting of that committee and suggested—it was really very spontaneous. I hadn't premeditated at all. I do things that way. I said, "What would happen if I created a little production nucleus? And got a subsidy from my division, and did unusual and interesting plays?" In other words, I would form a production unit of three or four people, and in my capacity as member of the programs committee, I would then hire myself—book myself, as they say—to perform at Caltech, with, naturally, the agreement of the committee as a whole. And that was accepted.

COHEN: This was meant for professional people to do this?

MANDEL: Yes, for professionals. Although non-union professionals, which would include amateurs also. But not students.

COHEN: It would strictly be a program for the institute, not an activity of students.

MANDEL: That's right. It so happened then that Shirley Marneus—I have to go back to her. I had had a play produced, believe it or not, at the Pasadena Playhouse in the sixties. A play called *Dance to No Music*, which I've since thrown out of my corpus. And Shirley Marneus was the protagonist. She had the lead female role, and she was also the costume maker. And then, years later, I found her in the public affairs library. She had taken a job as a librarian in the Public

Affairs Room, which was still then in Dabney. And it was partly *because* she was there, in other words—and she wanted to direct. And she had directed. And having her there I think is what encouraged me to go before the committee and say, "Let's do something." Maybe I wouldn't have done it if I hadn't had a director at hand, because I've never directed. I wouldn't know how to, and besides it bores me to death. So then that was agreed upon. And of course Shirley was very enthusiastic about being able to do this. And then we put an ad in *Variety*, looking for someone to do sets and costumes. Anyway, I got somebody from Beverly Hills High School, as a matter of fact—someone who would be a stage designer. And later when he left, we got somebody else. To make that story short, I did put together three or four people as a permanent production unit.

COHEN: Here?

MANDEL: Here, yes.

COHEN: Now, your division then did give you some money?

MANDEL: Yes. What happened first was that Gerry [Gerald G.] Willis [manager of public events] or somebody gave me a lawyer. With the lawyer, we went with the proper papers, so that Spectrum Productions—and I'm sorry for the name; I had to come up with a name within five minutes, and I couldn't think what to do, and I said "Spectrum," which is really a crummy name, because everything else in the world is called Spectrum.

COHEN: No, that's very good for a scientific institution.

MANDEL: I know, maybe that's why I thought of it. But it's such a vulgar, trivial name. Anyway, I'm stuck with it. So Spectrum Productions became an independent, nonprofit production corporation registered in the state of California. I pay five dollars every year, because it's still alive. The thing still exists as an entity. I'll go back to that another time. But then Caltech was able to book productions, mounted by Spectrum Productions as an independent entity. So there was a kind of legal fiction involved in this. We rehearsed at Caltech. And of course, I would submit to the committee the play that I wanted to do next.

COHEN: I see. So how many plays a year did you do?

MANDEL: Two or three. Very little. And the division gave some money for it, but you know, not much. And then Gerry Willis and the group did the publicity for it.

COHEN: What year are we talking about?

MANDEL: We're talking from 1971 through, I believe, 1978. By 1978, I'd gotten really terribly weary of the thing. And I could never shake off the public image that since this was done at a university, it must be student performances. There was no way of overcoming this deficit. So we never had great crowds.

COHEN: Where did you do your performances?

MANDEL: We did performances here in Ramo.

COHEN: Oh, so this was already built?

MANDEL: Yes. It was not well equipped, but it was adequate. And there I did something which California has not seen since. My idea was to do first-rate drama that has never, or very seldom, been seen in Southern California. So I did productions of things that indeed nobody had ever heard of. For example, my first production was the *Amphitryon* of Molière. Now, the *Amphitryon* of Molière hadn't been translated in a hundred years, and I did the translation. But that was not the reason. It was Molière, but it was something that was unknown. I did Sophocles. I did the *Electra* of Sophocles, which was, you know, probably never done. I found a Tennessee Williams, *The Eccentricities of a Nightingale*, one of his best plays, which had seldom if ever been done. Certainly not in Southern California.

COHEN: These were full-scale productions.

MANDEL: Yes, they were full-scale productions. I brought Marivaux, whom I had translated for Cornell University Press, for the first time to Southern California. I brought a play by Lope de

Vega, which had never been performed, needless to say, called *Dog in the Manger*. I had a Bertolt Brecht, *Puntila*, which had never been done here. So I had a series of really strikingly innovative productions, which Shirley directed.

COHEN: Now, do you feel you ever got any sort of credit from the institute for this, or just—they felt they gave you the opportunity to do it?

MANDEL: I never heard anything, any yes or no, about it whatsoever. My colleagues never came to any of the productions, but that was typical.

COHEN: That's at Caltech?

MANDEL: Yes. Well, some scientists came, but certainly nobody from Humanities. Or almost nobody—except I think Jenijoy. And of course we didn't pay the actors. There was no money to pay actors. This meant that we lurched from one crisis to another. We would get some fabulous people at auditions, but then they'd get a job. They'd disappear. And of course, on a limited budget, I had to learn how to drive a truck.

COHEN: You must have worked very hard.

MANDEL: I worked very hard, and I'd spend evenings here. You know, sort of melancholy to have dinner alone here, and waiting for the rehearsal time. And then since our stage designer was, for a few years, at Beverly Hills, I trucked the stuff over, you see. But for me, it was tremendous. For the first time in my life, I was a producer, and I got my hands wet—my feet wet, or whatever the expression is. The French say, *Mettre la main à la pâte*—that you put your hand in the dough. And you see, I learned things. And I'm sure, although I can't put my finger on it, I'm sure it's had some bearing on my playwriting. It was certainly extremely useful.

COHEN: Shirley Marneus still continued?

MANDEL: Well, then what happened, when I broke it up, to everybody's sorrow, around '78, I had had enough. I never could get more than a fifty- or sixty-percent crowd. It was a

tremendous amount of work for six performances, as you can imagine. All these crises. One crisis after another, as always happens in the theater. Always at the very edge of the abyss. Once, when we did the *Puntila*, one of Brecht's most interesting plays. The full title is *Herr Puntila und sein Knecht Matti—Mr. Puntila and His Servant Matti*—which he wrote while he was in Finland, and it has a Finnish setting. Well, we auditioned as always. We auditioned fresh, although we had a stable of good actors, but we got an Australian actor to do the lead who was fabulously talented. But then after the third or fourth week of rehearsals, it turned out that, for all his talent, he had no memory.

COHEN: He couldn't learn his part?

MANDEL: He couldn't learn his part. And by opening night, we were in a horrible funk. I mean, the thing was horrid. The man forgot his part. And you know, we had some kind of a prompter in the wings, whatever. But the other actors were of course frozen by fear of what he was going to forget next.

COHEN: He didn't learn his part.

MANDEL: He was terrible. Even though, you know, we passed; it was OK, finally. It was a tremendously ambitious undertaking in every way. But that was the kind of crisis—so, finally, I'd had enough. And to be quite candid, I had hoped also, if I may be perfectly selfishly honest here, that through these activities I would also make myself known in the theater world in Los Angeles. Didn't happen. Another failure. It just didn't happen.

COHEN: Well, they thought it was a student production.

MANDEL: Yes, and we remained on the margin in Pasadena, and it did not give me an entree into the theater world. So that motivation lapsed also. Now, to go back to Shirley Marneus. When I broke this thing up, with a lot of weeping and gnashing of teeth, fortunately Shirley was kept on by Caltech.

COHEN: I think Murph [Marvin L.] Goldberger [Caltech president 1978-1987] was very taken

with her.

MANDEL: Yes, and she has remained here ever since.

COHEN: They gave her a full-time job. I'm quite sure of that.

MANDEL: Yes, that's right. She has remained active in the student productions. And we no longer have these professional, or semiprofessional, productions.

COHEN: So it's just an activity for students at Caltech.

MANDEL: Yes. I don't play a part in that.

OSCAR MANDEL

SESSION 3

November 7, 1994

Begin Tape 3, Side 1:

COHEN: Well, good day. I would like to have some of your recollections of the changes that came about when Huttenback came on board, as they say. He started to make some changes in the division.

MANDEL: I think we did cover some of it last time, and so there'll probably be some repetition here.

COHEN: What year are we talking about?

MANDEL: You let me know. Whenever Huttenback came, that's on the record, so we should be able to look that up. I have a very poor sense of time, and so things that happen in the past—whether it's my trips to Europe or whatever—it's in the past. That's all I can tell you. So—as I said last time, I'm sure—it seems to me that it was under Huttenback that the division went on a level of parity with the rest of the institute from having been a service department. And then at some point or other, a PhD program developed in, I think, economics and political science. For some reason—I couldn't tell you why—this was not done in literature—or in history, either, as far as I know. I may be mistaken about history; I don't think so. So we began to be very tough on newcomers, demanding.

COHEN: You mean newcomer faculty?

MANDEL: Newcomer faculty, yes—tenure-track people. Demanding of them very high qualifications: proof of productivity; a promise of future productivity. And that's when—we didn't talk about it last time—that's when the famous Jenijoy La Belle case came up. Huttenback hated her, and I can't tell why. And the feeling was reciprocal.

COHEN: I see.

MANDEL: I don't know why and what happened, but it was a mortal enmity. And Jenijoy has never forgiven him and still takes a gleeful pleasure in anything horrible that happens to Huttenback.

COHEN: Who brought Jenijoy here?

MANDEL: Well, Hallett Smith brought Jenijoy. And so when the time came for her to get tenure or else be dismissed —or whatever euphemism one uses for this—there was a tremendous amount of controversy and threats of lawsuits. And all of Caltech was agitated by this. It was really a celebrated case. It never came to a lawsuit. She was denied tenure, and then she threatened lawsuit. [Dr. La Belle filed a complaint with the Equal Employment Opportunity Commission.—ed.] It [the tenure issue] was reconsidered. What I recall is that for the only time in my life here, I was involved in something at the Caltech level, in that there was a Caltech-wide committee appointed. We met in the Millikan Library boardroom in which, needless to say, I'd never set foot. I was deeply impressed by the great chairs and cushions, and so on. I felt very important. I guess I represented the division, and I think I was perhaps the only one. Our division was divided, if I can so put it. I remember that people like [associate professor of history] Dan [Daniel J.] Kevles thought that Jenijoy didn't meet the standards, and so he and others were against her being kept on. And I was on, how do you say, on the edge. Or what's the word?

COHEN: Neutral?

MANDEL: I was neutral. Let's say I was in between.

COHEN: Perhaps that was why you were asked to—

MANDEL: Maybe that's why. And I felt that Dan and others had a very good point. I couldn't say that there was a prejudice against women, or whatever. That was out of the question. I've always been impressed—may I say, parenthetically—by how very Anglo-Saxon our proceedings are, in that I think it's an incorruptible group. Whatever, things are always considered with the utmost sense of fairness and justice.

COHEN: Wasn't there something about somebody who did get tenure who had even fewer qualifications than Jenijoy?

MANDEL: Yes.

COHEN: That was part of it.

MANDEL: That was part of it, now that you mention it, because Stuart Ende had been promoted. That was one of Huttenback's typical high-handed acts. During one summer, he promoted Stuart Ende on the basis of really nothing. And Stuart Ende turned out to be a disaster because, although he had come in as a very promising scholar in romantic literature, he became involved in psychoanalysis. He took five years at USC in some psychoanalysis institute and then hung up a shingle at home and began to make a lot of money. And forgot all about romantic literature, and simply used us, you know, like a milch cow.

COHEN: Did he continue to teach?

MANDEL: Well, he continued to teach. And actually his courses were popular, because he taught psychology, in effect. But he never produced anything anymore, as far as scholarship was concerned. And here we had this associate professor, and it took many many many years to ease him out. And many stormy meetings, in which we were all involved in seeing this really scandalous situation of somebody coming in, doing his course, earning his salary, making his real money as an amateur psychoanalyst, and so on.

COHEN: Would you come back to Jeni?

MANDEL: So that was—you're right—something that was evoked also. So anyway, I felt that she was marginally on the right side of things. Marginally. And Dan felt she was marginally on the wrong side of things. So there were very great sessions. I remember that [chairman of the faculty] Rob [Rochus E. ("Robbie")] Vogt was involved in that, too. I used to have conversations with him about it. And I think finally she did get tenure. [Jenijoy La Belle received tenure in 1979—ed.] And eventually she wrote another book and became a full

professor. But the conclusion of it is, I think, that Dan was right. [Laughter] And it's not the only mistake I've made, because I'm a very bad judge.

COHEN: To come back to this, wasn't there something about the institute being advised that they would not win the lawsuit.

MANDEL: I think so. Sure. The institute got scared.

COHEN: A lady trustee, what was her name?

MANDEL: Yes, a very prominent woman. [Shirley] Hufstedler?

COHEN: Hufstedler. I seem to recall that. They were saying, "You won't win." I mean, there were no other women professors here.

MANDEL: That's right. Yes. And so you know, since these are very candid reflections—yes, Jenijoy did eventually write another book, of very very small value.[5] I remember very well that [professor of literature] John Sutherland and I read the book, or the manuscript. And I remember writing to him, confidentially, a scathing review of it. He thought very little of it also. And of course the book has not made an impression anywhere. And she's really done nothing much since. So in a way, Dan, I think, was right—that she was marginally on the wrong side rather than on the right side.

COHEN: Well, she gives a certain glamour to your department.

MANDEL: Oh, she does, yes. And she has very strict standards. There certainly have not been any catastrophes—far from it—in having her in the group. So that was that story. What else would you like to know?

COHEN: You also made an observation that you might want to say a little more about—that the method of teaching changed. People just going off on their own tack.

[5] Jenojoy La Belle, *Herself Beheld: The Literature of the Looking Glass* (Ithaca NY: Cornell University Press, 1989).

MANDEL: Not the method, the curriculum. The curriculum has changed from, as I mentioned last time, a very structured, disciplined education. The general trend is toward liberty, if you want to call it—or chaos, if you want to call it—where there is really an unstated assumption, maybe a kind of Rousseau-istic assumption. But anyway, an unstated assumption throughout the Western world that at the age of seventeen or eighteen a young person knows what's best for him or her. That's the philosophical basis of this, which is never stated. Of course an absurdity. And so we have that collapse, as far as I'm concerned, in history and in literature. I have no idea what's going on in economics, but I think economics, like the sciences—I don't think they *can* be unstructured.

COHEN: Well, you have to have a certain basis—

MANDEL: You have to have a basis. You have to go step by step. This idea of going step by step was abandoned, you see.

COHEN: Was that done so that people knew it was done, or is it just that there was less supervision?

MANDEL: I think they knew it was done. The old program was consciously abandoned.

COHEN: Who was your executive officer at this time?

MANDEL: Well, I don't remember that there was such a beast, under Huttenback. If there was, I've forgotten. But that personage doesn't have any power.

COHEN: No, but the faculty itself discusses—

MANDEL: Yes, this is always discussed in the faculty. And I remember for years and years and years and years, these things have been discussed in the faculty. So this was all very conscious. No question about it. Then—to stay with this but going to an area that perhaps you don't know so much about—at a certain point when the tenured position in art history was deleted—

COHEN: And that was just by fiat?

MANDEL: Yes, that was done by fiat, also during the summer. And I think I began to tell that story last time, and that's an interesting story. Marty [Martha] Ward had been hired—I forget how; I'm sure I was probably a little bit involved in this—a very good woman in nineteenth-century French art. She taught those courses, and she may have taught one or two other courses. But I remember very well asking her, quite informally, at one time whether she wouldn't teach other courses in art history, and she said no. That was her niche, and that was it. This stuck in my mind. So when that post was abolished, I went to see whoever was chairman then. I think it was David Grether—but, again, it's the past and I can't swear to it. [David Grether was division chairman 1982-1992.—ed.] I think it was David Grether; I'm almost sure. And I said to him, "Look, this is too bad this happened. But if the money is still in the budget, why don't we in a way take advantage by hiring part-time lecturers and giving a wider program?" So actually some good might come of this evil. Instead of having one associate professor willing to do only French nineteenth-century art, we might, with the same amount of money, hire several people and cover the field. One thing led to another. Grether was quite sympathetic to the art program, I think, and he put me in charge. I became informally, without any title or anything, charged with art history, and then, somehow or other, with music history, musicology, and creative writing. So these three programs have been now, for seven or eight years, under my direction, but informally. And what has happened is that these courses are taught by lecturers—un-tenurable lecturers.

COHEN: How does the hiring process come in?

MANDEL: The hiring process is that I look for people, advertise, interview, tell my colleagues, "I'm interviewing for this and that next week. Who would like to come to join the interview?" Nobody ever comes, so I've been alone in it—although gradually one of the people I originally hired, Elizabeth Howard, has become, in a way, my right hand, and so she comes with me to interviews, so I have somebody to bounce things off.

COHEN: So you have all three programs?

MANDEL: I have all three programs, so I'm teaching a bit less than the others. And I interview, I hire and essentially fire—you know, I make recommendations to the group and to the chairman. Since everybody thinks I'm doing fine on it, nobody pays any attention. The result of it is that, ironically and paradoxically, these programs, which are taught by non-tenurable people, are the only structured and disciplined programs in our division. Whereas the literature and history go helter-skelter, anybody doing whatever they want to. In art history, we have, over a two-year period, the whole cycle from ancient art through medieval and Renaissance and baroque and eighteenth-century, nineteenth-century, twentieth-century.

COHEN: So every semester, every quarter, you will have some offering.

MANDEL: Oh, two offerings every [quarter]. And there was even some money left over to have Far Eastern art. So that we have, and in music the same thing. We have a systematic two-year cycle in which the whole field of Western music is covered. And so this is the rather scandalous result—that by having slave labor, and one person running this, we have a structured program. And this is really my contribution to Caltech. Nobody had ever before taught a course at Caltech in which Raphael or Michelangelo or Gothic cathedrals were mentioned. So now [we were doing this] for the first time, you know. That was a scandalous situation—a university like Caltech.

COHEN: Did your art program ever have anything to do with the art league [Pasadena Art Alliance] or the museum?

MANDEL: Nothing whatsoever. No. No.

COHEN: Or David Smith's gallery? That was completely separate?

MANDEL: Completely separate, completely separate. By that time, yes, David Smith was aware of this, and so on, but— Well, I forget when he died, but he was not involved in it. I've been doing this since 1987, or 1986—I've kept very good records on this.

COHEN: So it had nothing to do with the commotion over the [Baxter] art gallery.

MANDEL: No, nothing whatsoever. So these programs are being carried on, as I say. And they're very popular. I keep a very sharp eye on them, and I visit the classes at the beginning, when somebody's hired. I come a couple of times. I've had to let some people go.

COHEN: Sounds like a very big job.

MANDEL: No, it's not such a big job, but at least it's something solid. So that's been the only countermove to what I consider a degradation in our curriculum. This is no reflection at all on the quality of individual courses as they are being taught. Far from it. Each one is good in itself. It's just that the students are not made to follow a coherent discipline or a coherent program. Or a choice among programs. I've always been in favor of—since undergraduates can't cover everything, obviously—that they have a choice of three or four coherent programs.

COHEN: Now your writing program—that also is just a choice? That's not something that the students have to take?

MANDEL: That's a choice. Absolutely. By the way, I saw to it that these courses would not get credit. In other words, I was not about to build my empire or anything like that. So these are nonacademic courses. They get institute credit, to make the students happy. And these are very popular courses. So I have one person teaching nonfiction, essay writing. I have another person teaching poetry writing. And another person teaching fiction writing. The budget allows us to have one course every quarter. And they're oversubscribed.

COHEN: Are they all kept on, or are you always taking new people?

MANDEL: Essentially we keep them on—unless, you know, something unsatisfactory happens. But yes, they're kept on. This creates for Caltech a very bad situation. That we have people—leaving aside the creative writing, because that's really nonacademic—but for art and music, which are as important in our civilization as literature, we have this injustice and this disequilibrium. We have all these people who are not part of the family here.

COHEN: There's a lot of talk going on now about the new core curriculum. Does any of that fit

into this discussion?

MANDEL: I don't know. As usual, nobody asks my advice, so I don't volunteer anything. I feel Caltech should know what I'm doing. I'm available for putting in my advice, and let them come and ask me. [Laughter] The same thing for everything else here in the.... You know, if I'm qualified for anything, it's for the aesthetics of the place. Nobody asked me about the atrocious Millikan Library, the hideous fountain in that pool, the water spout in front of this building [Beckman Institute], and so on.

COHEN: Have you seen the model of the new art that's going to go up?

MANDEL: No, I haven't.

COHEN: For the Gordon Moore building [Gordon and Betty Moore Laboratory of Engineering]. You should see it. It's in the lounge of the Athenaeum. The model.

MANDEL: Oh, I see. I must go take a look at it.

COHEN: Because evidently they have to put some percentage of the money spent into art. Something demanded by the Pasadena Heritage organization, which is very nice.

MANDEL: Well, that's good. I've never been consulted on any of these things. I do the work that I'm asked to do. [Laughter]

COHEN: But you've been happy?

MANDEL: Yes, right. [Laughter]

COHEN: So anyway, these things happened gradually. Huttenback came, and then how about when he left?

MANDEL: Well, when he left, it simply went on the same way. And [they were all] economists. John Ledyard [division chairman 1992-2002] is an economist. So with the best will in the world,

they're not able to do what's right for the arts programs. Furthermore, the literature group, such as it is—I take it it's the feeblest group at Caltech.

COHEN: Whom are you talking about now, when you talk about the literature group?

MANDEL: The literature group consists of Ronald Bush—

COHEN: Who's not here.

MANDEL: Who's not here, and who's, of course been involved in this litigation. And who was disgruntled to begin with, because he didn't want to leave Harvard, and he's always been unhappy away from Harvard. Now he's gotten into this horrible lawsuit, which he lost. So he's—

COHEN: Actually, it's his wife [who lost the suit].

MANDEL: But you know, he's very uxorious. And so he's openmouthed in front of his wife and very much at her beck and call. He's deeply involved in this. And so here's a disgruntled gentleman. Then we have Jenijoy, who's essentially nonproductive at any high level of scholarship or anything. Then we have.... David Smith died. Who else is there? There's myself, in a corner. Mac [George W.] Pigman. Mac Pigman is perhaps the most intelligent of us all—a scholar's scholar. A tremendously gifted person. Unfortunately, he also has been sucked in by psychoanalysis and has spent years in the same programs Stuart Ende was on, except Mac Pigman is a deeply honest person and Stuart Ende was a deeply dishonest person. So *his* going into this psychoanalysis has not at all impinged on his functions here. But he's a slow worker, and so he's been working for ages on some Renaissance project, editing an obscure poet. And he's a brilliant, splendid scholar. He knows a hundred times more than I do about everything. But he hasn't really produced a lot.

COHEN: Is he a good teacher?

MANDEL: I can't tell; I have no way of knowing this. Then we have two young people, Kevin

Gilmartin and Cindy Weinstein, who are a completely new generation. And they are completely, they are totally, uninterested in what you could call aesthetics—the artistic side of literature. They consider it an élitist, imperialist white plot against oppressed minorities. So they're really with a new wave of sociohistory. Cultural history, which is all this sort of belated, left-wing do-goodism—you know, where you're trying to bring the scribblings of the oppressed minorities into the canon. Whether it's feminism or Chicano graffiti or American Indians or the blacks, and so on. The Jews are no longer a minority, and so they don't count. And the working class has been forgotten. Totally forgotten. While in the 1930s everybody was, you know, worrying about the working class.

COHEN: We were good socialists.

MANDEL: Totally forgotten! Now it's these other things. So in the literature group, these two young people really have it in hand, because Mac Pigman and Jenijoy have simply bowed low before this, even though they don't do this kind of work. They're in a state of what I would call spiritual collapse, in front of these powerful, very powerful, forces that dominate the profession, the graduate schools, the professional meetings. And so these two young people have the thing in hand. And this means that the literature group has become a kind of minor adjunct to the political science or sociology group.

COHEN: Sounds disastrous.

MANDEL: It *is* disastrous, for the students, because this means that they get less and less of the one thing they really need to balance their science program. They need what I always call great sensuous baths. They need immersion in the pleasures of the senses, which are offered by music and poetry and the arts. Not deprived of the intellectual side, of course—a high-level intellectual sensuousness. Well, that is now considered an imperialist macho Anglo white plot against minorities. So that's the way the literature group has been going, and the young people are hiring other young people in their image. And I can say here in the microphone, although no one else knows this, and you must keep it confidential—I've asked, actually, my chairman to remove me from the literature group altogether.

COHEN: You're unhappy with this.

MANDEL: This is like living on another planet. I'm a poet myself, a playwright, and for me literature is one of the arts; it's not a social science.

COHEN: I should think there would be sympathy in other departments, if this were known.

MANDEL: I think there probably would be. But this is a very very powerful tide, which, like all these tides, will of course be replaced by something else. But that will happen in five, six, seven years, from someplace or other. Whether from France or from within here. Or some other country. Somebody with great prestige will arise and will reduce this trend into the past—will make it obsolete. That's the way these things happen.

COHEN: So here you are. What group would you be part of, if you're not part of the literature group?

MANDEL: Well, I've asked that the work I do in art and music and creative writing—and by the way, I'm also in charge, for some mysterious reason, of the appointment in Latin American literature—that this be recognized and be given an informal title of its own. And John Ledyard, who, by the way, is very sympathetic to my position but who hasn't had the strength of mind to oppose this tide—

COHEN: He has many things to do.

MANDEL: Well, he does. But he's actually very sympathetic, and this may happen or it may not happen, you know, for my last years here. It's not terribly important. By the way, before I forget, two things about some of the things I've said here. One is, I couldn't think of the woman poet about whom David Smith wrote a book. And that was Diane Wakoski, who used to be a very visible poet, but I haven't heard anything about her for years. The other thing I want to correct, because I sometimes get carried away with my speaking: I said in the first session that I detested Judaism. This is now on record, and it's really very bad.

COHEN: Did you say that into the tape?

MANDEL: I think so. I think so, and that really gives, naturally, the wrong impression. You know, sometimes I like to dramatize things, and that's absolutely false and will give people, really, the wrong impression. I have my views, you know, to use a French expression, *sentiments d'antipathie*—a feeling of antipathy, a feeling of sort of dislike for these Middle Eastern religions, Judaism or Islam. But "detest," of course, is way off. Some antipathy, that's right. That's all I meant. [Laughter] Yes, let's carry on.

COHEN: OK. Let's go on a little bit, just a little anyway. Not about Caltech, but about your own work.

MANDEL: Yes, well, what would you like to know?

COHEN: Well, what are you working on now? Let's go backwards, perhaps.

MANDEL: Yes, we can go backwards. I think that having been given charge of the art history program, that led me to begin to do some work in art history myself. I'd spent so many years writing literary things. And I became interested in some problems in art history. Do we have time?

COHEN: Oh, yes. We've got lots of time.

MANDEL: Yes, OK. And so I had been interested for many years in a very mysterious seventeenth- and eighteenth-century Italian painter by the name of Alessandro Magnasco. I had looked at his work in many museums, and I was very fascinated by it. And then I decided to explore a little bit—see what had been written about it. I couldn't make out what these paintings really were trying to convey. And one thing led to another. I found out that there is nothing about him in English, aside from entries in reference books, naturally, and a few little museum notices of new acquisitions, and so on. And so over a period of ten years I wrote a book, a study of the works of Alessandro Magnasco, which is coming out in the next couple of weeks.[6] And it

[6] *Art of Alessandro Magnasco: An Essay in the Recovery of Meaning* (Florence, Italy: Leo S.Olschki, 1994).

gave me a chance to open certain, you might say, basic problems. The problem here being why we bother—why we spend so much time and effort to recover lost meanings in works of art. Why don't we just look at a work of art and think about whatever it means to us today? That doesn't satisfy, so we want to go back and see what was really meant in the artist's own time. And I ask that question and try to answer it. So in a way, my study of Magnasco's work becomes a vehicle for answering—for looking reflectively at—why I and others spend so much time and effort doing that kind of work. And in the course of this, I did something which I think is unusual, or unique. I presented a reproduction of one of the paintings of Magnasco that is at the Norton Simon Museum here. I gave it to about forty people to look at—forty people whom I consider interested in the arts and knowledgeable in the arts, people who go to museums, occasionally read an art book, but who are not professional art historians. And I asked them to tell me what they thought Magnasco meant to convey in that particular painting. So I call this empirical aesthetics; it was an experiment in aesthetics. And I took these forty answers and put them into categories and then contrasted them, percentage by percentage, with the views of professional art historians. That's part of the book also. So it is in many ways also a theoretical book, in addition to trying to solve the particular enigma of what did this artist mean.

Well, that work is finished, and then I went on to another problem. A problem of symbolism in Dutch art of the seventeenth century, which has given me the chance to read Dutch again after many years. I'm in the middle of that work.

COHEN: Do you do this mostly in the summer when you're in residence?

MANDEL: No, I do this all year round. Of course, going to Europe is very important. I like to look at a lot of things, but no, I do this in between other things all year round. And of course interlibrary loan is extremely useful for me in this respect. And so after that, I'll go back to literature, if I go back to anything. But those are two long-term excursions into art history.

COHEN: Well, it sounds very impressive. And are you doing any more plays?

MANDEL: Well, I don't know. I wrote my last play a few years ago—I think in the late eighties—and I haven't done anything since. Of course, plays have the advantage that they are always alive. One can always try to find producers for them. But I can't say I've had much luck.

COHEN: Well, you only give it a little bit of your time.

MANDEL: Yes, that's true. That's true, yes.

COHEN: So just in summarizing a little bit. I think you've given me your views of the department. There's just one other question. Why don't they separate the humanities and the social sciences? Make it into two separate—you know, so that John Ledyard doesn't have to think about everything.

MANDEL: Yes, that's right. And I brought this up a number of times. And curiously enough, Eleanor Searle [Wasserman Professor of History, d.1999] was in favor of that also. But apparently a big obstacle is that the historians don't want to be with the political scientists and the economists. They want to remain with us in literature.

COHEN: Well, is that a problem?

MANDEL: Well, it doesn't make sense.

COHEN: They should be with the other—

MANDEL: Yes. In every other university, history is one of the social sciences. And the whole point would be, if one did divide it, there should be a group that deals with the arts. An arts group. But not only do the historians not want it, but, as I said, our literature group has become social-scientificized themselves and wouldn't want it.

COHEN: So they've entered into the new technologies.

MANDEL: Yes. They are very much inclined to being social historians. For example, take Kevin Gilmartin, who's our youngest member—no, he's not the youngest; we've hired somebody else, who's a feminist. He's doing work in early-nineteenth-century newspapers—dissident newspapers of the early nineteenth century. Well, that's pure history, you see. So the literature group, with this new wave, doesn't want to be thought of as an arts group. They think it's too

élitist, you see. So in principle, yes, there ought to be a social science division including history, political science, economics, and anthropology. And sociology and psychology, if we had them. Those are all social sciences. Then Caltech ought to provide money so that there would be an arts and letters division, where we would have a literature group and tenured people teaching art history and music—perhaps theater, I don't know. But anyway, music and creative writing and whatever other art we would want to go into. You see, that would be then a normal and, I think, desirable division. And it would have to be budgeted. Naturally you couldn't do it with lecturers. It would have to be—

COHEN: Wasn't there, for a while, some professorship that brought in visiting scholars of one kind or another in the arts?

MANDEL: In the arts? I would say no.

COHEN: Or was it literature? Because I remember that Saul Bellow was here [spring 1980].

MANDEL: Well, in literature, yes.

COHEN: That was in literature?

MANDEL: Yes. Now and then, of course. Oh, we have visitors, yes. But not in the arts. You see, since we don't have a tenured person in the arts, we have no one to support that kind of thing. And as you know, [professor of physics and applied physics] David Goodstein brings in these Michelin [James Michelin Distinguished Visitor's Lecture] people. We had somebody—we had David Hockney. But you know, these are—

COHEN: That's, in a sense, for the wider community.

MANDEL: Yes. So that, in my opinion, ought to be the division. Now, another criticism that I would make now of the social sciences is that in my opinion they are much too much involved in what we can call current events—current affairs. They are very impassioned about current affairs. The situation—political and economic and social—here and now in the States. Or even

in the Western—but, you know, let's say the States. In my view, a good department in the social sciences ought to spend seventy-five to eighty percent of its energies on the background, on the basics, on the things that mankind has done in general. On the past. For example, we have a department of political science, but I don't think anyone has ever taught comparative government—how the Chinese ran their affairs 5,000 years ago; Greek institutions; African institutions. They're all involved in, say, voting patterns in Northern California in 1985. It's all right now. They're tremendously involved in current things. And I think a university ought to be, to some extent—but not beyond twenty or twenty-five percent. And so I find our offerings in this respect really shallow, really intellectually shallow.

COHEN: Is no one presenting this view to the core curriculum people?

MANDEL: Oh, no. No, there's no one to do that. And I'm so—well, you've heard of typecasting. I'm really typecast in this division [laughter] as the reactionary curmudgeon. Or the clown, in fact.

COHEN: You feel you have no voice?

MANDEL: None whatsoever.

COHEN: But yet you run these effective programs.

MANDEL: Yes. Everybody is happy that this is happening. [Laughter]

COHEN: Well, is there anything you want to add? We have a bit of the tape left.

MANDEL: Not unless there's a topic we haven't taken up.

COHEN: How about finishing on a good note. You've really produced so much over these years. And you say you've been happy here, although you see the problems.

MANDEL: Yes. I see the problems—the problems, I think, for the students. They're not

problems for me, because I've been extremely well treated here, so I certainly have no problems. Well, and Caltech gives me wonderful students—especially this term, I'm extremely happy. You have really bright, lovely students, and so that's a beautiful part. That's why I feel a certain sense of loss for them.

COHEN: That they aren't getting more—

MANDEL: They're not getting what they should, and they don't know it, of course. For myself, yes, I've had a chance to do a lot. And I mentioned at the beginning that I don't know why you called on me to do this, because, unfortunately, I really have remained unrecognized. And I'm destined to be nobody, or else maybe your hunch is right and after I'm dead something will occur. Now, I don't know. And one of the reasons, besides—I may have written trash. But if not, then, as I've always thought about it, the reason that I've remained nobody, really, is that I've done many different things. I've jumped from one thing to the other. I've never stayed with anything. I see my colleagues stay for their whole careers in one area. And I have jumped too much. I've had no *Sitzfleisch*. And I've bounced around—essays, poetry, plays, art history. Different periods. Translations, fables. And I've never sat around long enough.

COHEN: That's OK. In that sense, you're like a scientist—a good scientist. As soon as the problem looks like it will be solved, go on to something else.

MANDEL: Yes, but it has caused me to remain anonymous. Unfortunately. [Laughter] We'll see what the future holds.

COHEN: Well, as I said when we started, you are Caltech. So it's important that you're here. It's important that we know what you've done.

MANDEL: Good, good, good. I'm glad.

COHEN: So thank you.

MANDEL: You're most welcome.