

# Charles Cooper (exhibitor/distributor)

5/6/1910 - ?

by [admin](#) — last modified Jul 27, 2008 02:09 PM

**BIOGRAPHY:** Charles Cooper was born in London in 1910, the son of Russian Jewish emigrants who ran a Kosher butcher business in Stoke Newington. His interest in film began with the gift of a 9.5mm camera and projector. He became a regular filmgoer, although increasingly he felt dissatisfied by the films commercially exhibited. By the early 1930s he was involved in the left wing film-club movement, particularly in the Kino group which distributed 16mm versions of Soviet classics such as *Battleship Potemkin* (1925). He was involved in Kino's 1934 production *Bread*, a short film protesting against the injustice of the Means Test, which includes worker newsreel footage of a hunger march shot by Cooper. Cooper was also an eye witness of the early weeks of the Spanish Civil War, assisting Otto Katz to retrieve material for his book 'The Nazi Conspiracy in Spain'. In the late 1930s Cooper went on a trip to Mexico, and on the outbreak of war in 1939 found himself stranded in America. Through the war he worked in New York in the Film Department of the 'International Workers Order', a left wing group concerned with maintaining cultural links between immigrants to America and their native countries. The Film Department distributed films and filmstrips for non theatrical exhibition throughout the United States. When the IWO's position became untenable due to activities of McCarthy and the House Un-American Activities Committee, Cooper bought the assets of the film department and continued privately for a few years. However, not holding American citizenship, he was forced to return to Britain where in 1950 he set up Contemporary Films, distributing political and art house films, initially in conjunction with George Hoellering at the Academy Cinema. In the 1960s he opened the Paris Pullman in South Kensington and the Phoenix cinemas in Finchley. **SUMMARY:** In this rich and detailed interview (conducted by Sid Cole in 1989), Cooper discusses his family history, his early work with Kino and his interest in social and political film-making. He recounts Kino's problems with the censor distributing Soviet films during the 1930s. He recounts his experiences with the 'International Workers Order' in America, particularly his interest in showing films representing Black communities. Cooper provides a fascinating insight into the working practices of Contemporary Films in its early days, the technical problems of dealing with foreign films, the relationship with the BBFC (particularly with John Trevelyan and the relaxing of censorship in the 1960s) and the negotiations with the BBC and Channel 4 over television and theatrical rights. He details his exhibition philosophy, arguing that cinemas should be centres of entertainment and the arts, providing more than simply a viewing space, and he discusses the exhibition situation as at 1989, with particular reference to Arts Cinema and the BFI regional exhibition network. (Lawrence Napper, BCHRP)

## BECTU History Project - Interview No. 121

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Interviewer: Sidney Cole

Interviewee: Charles Cooper

Tape 1, Side 1

**Sidney Cole:** Copyright recording by the ACTT History Project, Sidney Cole interviewing Charles Cooper, Distributor and Exhibitor, on the 25th November 1989. Well Charles, I've known you a number of years but really I know very little about your early life. When were you born for instance, and where?

**Charles Cooper:** Well I was born June 5th, 1910, in London. My parents actually came over from Russia, from the Ukraine - this would have been about 1893 and they were about twenty-two years of age and they had two small children. They left Russia, never to return, and came to England with the two small children. After coming to England, seven more children were born in England, of which I was the last, so I was the ninth of nine children. The fact, I suppose, of coming to England was to get away from Tsarist Russia. It was a hell-house of nations...it was a hell-house of nations, and experiences there weren't good. I think the main effect of the migration of the large section of the Jewish population from Russia was largely due to the pogroms that took place at the time of 1881 with the assassination of Alexander II. The government more-or-less organised a wave of pogroms across the country and although probably maybe a few hundred, or a little more, people were killed and injured in these pogroms it sent thousands - it meant that thousands were then leaving Russia. So my parents were with that wave of immigrants that left Russia during that period. The period finished in 1914 when the war started.

**Sidney Cole:** You have some interesting things to say about your Grandfather - was it your Grandfather?

**Charles Cooper:** Yes my Grandfather. It was my Mother's Father and I think if she told me the story once she told it a hundred times! Actually he died in 1923 and he was ninety-three, so that I was thirteen at the time and I've always regretted that I never understood the thing sufficiently to really discuss it with him and get the full story. What had actually happened was rather like this - Nicholas I of Russia came to the throne in 1825. He was very much the autocrat, disciplinarian and enjoyed the army and figured he was a great military tactician. His problem of course, one of his major problems was what to do, how to absorb the Jews that were living in Russia. A few years previous to that in the seventeen nineties, Russia with Prussia and Austria had carved up Poland and Poland at that time had a population of one and-a-half million Jews. This section was not part of Tsarist Russia and of course the problem was, what to do with them, how to absorb them. The Greek Orthodox Church was trying to find all sorts of methods, ways and means of how to proselytise them and bring them into the general Russian community. Anyway, as far as Nicholas I was concerned, until he came to the throne Jews were not being conscripted into the Russian army. His idea was, the law was passed in 1827, that Jews were now applicable for the army but should be taken between the ages of eight and twelve so they could be proselytised and so forth. And the army service was a period of twenty-five years, just like the old Roman army.

So that this law was brought in in 1827 and it lasted for the life of Nicholas I. What happened was that they would have kidnapers going round the villages and towns, bringing back their quota of children. As there were no birth certificates they took children much younger than twelve.

**Sidney Cole:** Why were there no birth certificates?

**Charles Cooper:** Well - Russia - that area was not...had not organised the whole question of birth certificates.

**Sidney Cole:** What I meant is it wasn't something specially directed against Jews - the Jews weren't...?

**Charles Cooper:** This was directed against Jews...

**Sidney Cole:** No, I mean the lack of birth certificates?

**Charles Cooper:** Oh no, no, no, this was general as far as...

**Sidney Cole:** Nobody had birth certificates?

**Charles Cooper:** No, you still had serfdom...

**Sidney Cole:** Ah ha, sure.

**Charles Cooper:** You had serfdom in Russia, serfdom wasn't abolished until about 1870. It was very much the autocratic state with the peasants being the property of the landlords. So that - as a matter of fact his story is that he had come out of his 'haider' - Hebrew classes - and they knew that the kidnapers were around and he hid himself in a pipe. Then he heard a voice saying to him in Yiddish that he should come out of the pipe, that he should come out and the kidnapers had gone away. And he came out and of course he was kidnapped! They used - of course that's another story - they used Jews as well to help them in this kidnapping. The parents tended to give up the children for dead when this happened and virtually prayers for the dead were said for them and what-not, they didn't expect them back. My Grandfather went through first of all a rough time, in an effort, they tried to convert them, which he resisted, and he was sent somewhere out to the Far East. And when, I think, he was seventeen - he was brought up in a monastery - and when he was seventeen was drafted into the army. Then of course during the period he was in the army there was the Crimean War...

**Sidney Cole:** What year was that?

**Charles Cooper:** 1855. I figured that my Grandfather was born in 1830, I would say that he was kidnapped about 1840, while he was in the army he served seven months in Sevastopol, for which he was given seven years off of his twenty-five year army period.

**Sidney Cole:** Because Sevastopol was the siege wasn't it, by the British and French armies?

**Charles Cooper:** The siege of Sevastopol, the British and French, yes. There were three battles - Inkerman, Scoram and Sevastopol. So he was allowed to return home, and he came home at the age of thirty. You can well imagine what reaction there must have been in the family, because there was virtually no communication during the period and they gave the child up for dead because so many of the children never survived it.

**Sidney Cole:** Sure. So that was the story of your Grandfather. Could we go now - take a leap forward to where we were before I asked you about your Grandfather, to your being as a boy in London?

**Charles Cooper:** Yes well I was the youngest of the family, of nine children. Some of the memories I have are of course of the First World War. There were two boys and seven daughters, seven girls. My brother was conscripted into the army in 1916, very unwillingly, and was wounded while he was at the front and recovered I think at Scarborough, while it was being bombarded by the Germans at that time...

**Sidney Cole:** Oh that was [?indecipherable] wasn't it? A naval bombardment?

**Charles Cooper:** Naval bombardment, yes naval bombardment in 1917.

**Sidney Cole:** Your brother had been in France had he?

**Charles Cooper:** He'd been in France and he'd been wounded there. And he came back after the war was over. Actually he died in 1920, he got blood poisoning - I would say - we felt it was largely due to his experiences in the army and I was the age of ten when he died and this was a tremendous shock. Because I sort of adored him, he did all the sort of things that I enjoyed watching very much, with all sorts of gadgets and engineering and so forth, and I felt this was really a tremendous shock to me when he died. I started - as far as going into photography and filmmaking, when I was thirteen. I think for my bar mitzvah I received two box cameras, two cameras, and started with photography and set up a dark room and started doing printing and developing films and so forth. And I think I bought my first movie camera when I was about seventeen or eighteen, which was a Pathe 9.5mm, and started shooting films on 9.5.

**Sidney Cole:** So what year would that have been?

**Charles Cooper:** That would have been about 1927.

**Sidney Cole:** Ah ha. Did you go to see movies a lot at that time?

**Charles Cooper:** Yes I used to see a lot of films, I was very much enamoured by film and very excited by it.

**Sidney Cole:** Where would that have been? I mean where were you living?

**Charles Cooper:** Oh where was I living - yes, we were living in Stoke Newington. During that period in the twenties we were living in Green Lanes, Stoke Newington. Because we were a

large family of course I was expected to leave school at fourteen and help my father in the business.

**Sidney Cole:** What was the business?

**Charles Cooper:** The business was a kosher butcher business.

**Sidney Cole:** Ah ha.

**Charles Cooper:** And I sort of had to help, it was expected of me to help him and er, I was a bit frustrated but my parents were both very good people and I loved them very much and I felt this was my responsibility. And of course my brother had died because he'd been helping, so I sort of took on that job as well, to help in the business. My mother was virtually neurotic about uniforms. I remember when I was thirteen, joining the Boy Scouts and coming home with the Boy Scout uniform on. My Mother started screaming and said, "Take it off! You've got to take it off immediately!" And of course I had to take it off and take it back and [chuckles] I couldn't remain as a scout.

**Sidney Cole:** It sort of relates back to your grandfather in a way...

**Charles Cooper:** Yes it does relate back, yes. The family was neurotic...

**Sidney Cole:** The family had a phobia about uniforms. So how did you finally get involved, begin to get involved in actual filmmaking professionally?

**Charles Cooper:** Well it actually started way back in the thirties. Of course prior to that in about 1930 - I was twenty at the time - I was moving politically more and more towards the left and through a friend who I hadn't seen for a few years, who'd had relatives over from Russia, and he'd become sort of converted to communism and I think he sort of converted me. But he didn't take actually an active part, but a year or two later I joined the Communist Party. I was interested in making films and started to join ordinary film clubs that were making films but I found that the sort of stories that they were doing were much too escapist, soporific, had no concern or interest in the society that we were living in. So, with several other people - and this must have been about 1933 - we started a left film group, political group, and that of course was called Kino Films. We decided, after going through a million and one names, we decided to give it the name of Kino Films. What we did in Kino Films of course was both to make films but mostly to distribute. I know in a book that's been written recently about the period, the point is made that Kino just did documentaries. Well I think I would say basically we did documentaries because the people we had in the group, (1) We didn't have the finances to make story pictures and (2) I don't think we had the able people, the able filmmakers that could have really competed on a technical level as far as production was concerned. So as far as distribution was concerned we got hold of the...certainly the Soviet films - October. Of course one of the first films was of course Potemkin and a number of other films and we set up a distributing - Kino was a distributing agency.

**Sidney Cole:** And this is very interesting because a number of questions arise I think out of this, Charles. The actual status of those Russian films you've mentioned, like Potemkin and I Remember, Mother...

**Charles Cooper:** Yes.

**Sidney Cole:** ...which were in fact banned unless the local authority agreed to let them be shown. So what was your legal position in Kino...

**Charles Cooper:** Well the legal po...

**Sidney Cole:** ...you were distributing them on...

**Charles Cooper:** 16...

**Sidney Cole:** 16mm were you?

**Charles Cooper:** Yes, yes. Well we did have a fight - I think the key aspect of the battle was, I think it was one of the people working with us at the time was Ivan Skruyer[?] and I think it was known as the Jarrow Case. Where we were taken to court for showing 16mm and prosecuted under the Bill that covers 35mm. And the person of course that assisted us in handling the case of course at the time was Ivor Montagu. And of course it was shown in court that 16mm film was non-inflammable. Of course the prosecution tried to make out that 16mm would burn and I think the argument showed that, yes it'll burn if you try very hard, it'll smoulder, but so will steel as well. And this was shown at the time, proved at the time, so the case was dismissed and then we went on showing these films like Potemkin on 16mm. As far as Kino was concerned we were all volunteers, I mean I still was working in - I'd opened up - even a butcher's shop and I was still functioning there, but we were functioning in Kino and running the organisation. It was early 1935 that we took on our first full-time manager to manage the company.

**Sidney Cole:** Who was that, can you remember?

**Charles Cooper:** Yes I'm trying to remember his name, he became afterwards secretary of the metalworker's union, I don't know whether you would know his name?

**Sidney Cole:** Well no, but it could easily be found out. We'd better, for the moment, just for the sake of anybody who mightn't be totally aware of this who might listen to this tape sometime, of course the thing about 'flam' and 'non-flam' was very important because in fact the whole censorship of films was based on the question of safety regulations, oddly enough wasn't it?

**Charles Cooper:** Ah hmm, yes.

**Sidney Cole:** It wasn't, as it were a direct censorship of content, it was built - the censorship was built on the basis of...

**Charles Cooper:** The material used, yes.

**Sidney Cole:** ...the material that the film was on.

**Charles Cooper:** Yes, yes.

**Sidney Cole:** Also, another thing that I would like to ask you about is, you must have made arrangements with the Soviet Union or the Soviet Film Organisation to get the rights to show these films on 16mm, did you?

**Charles Cooper:** That's right yes, we had the rights, we were basically showing on 16mm. And the films were being used by clubs and trade unions and party organisations all over the country. They were being used very well and of course at the same time we realised we were in no position to make feature films, but we were making documentaries you know, showing what was happening. It was completely opposite and different to the sort of newsreels, as you know that you would see in the cinema, the Pathe newsreels. And they really dealt with life and conditions. I remember for example going out, we were always filming the hunger marches, and I know in one hunger march meeting that got together in London we went out with our cameras and I think that we had three units, each going to different places. And I was with a unit, three of us, going towards South Wales to pick up the marchers somewhere along the route there. And what surprised us of course was that we just seemed to be going on and on. I forget which towns we were going through, but we weren't catching up with the marchers. Then eventually we found the marchers - they were really two or three days behind their schedule. And what had actually happened with them was that the miners marching had had so many years of unemployment and bad conditions that they were not used to eating the basic food that the marcher's organisation had laid on for them and after the first day of marching a number of the miners just had stomach trouble, they weren't used to eating proper food and were laid-up. Then the marching resumed and they came to London. So it was the sort of film we made. We made a couple of dramatisations, one of them was a film called Bread [1934] you might have heard of - but it was basically documentaries. I worked on a documentary, this was in the late, late thirties, on tenant's conditions in East London, that was used widely in East London, showing the conditions of the tenement houses and so forth. But of course I think what enthused us in that period of course was that - you see after all the only foreign films that one saw in England then were American films which dominated the whole thing, one didn't see films from other countries. Elsie Cohen was trying to do something in the West End and the Academy was trying to do a bit with foreign films, but the...

**Sidney Cole:** There was the Shaftesbury Avenue Pavilion, do you remember that?

**Charles Cooper:** Yes.

**Sidney Cole:** That was a bit earlier of course, that was way back into the late twenties and thirties. It did show German films and Soviet films, but of course it wasn't general at all.

**Charles Cooper:** No, and I think this: that the Soviet films gave us an enthusiasm that we couldn't find, and a motive that we couldn't find so easily with films coming from elsewhere. I mean films like Potemkin we were really [???) greeted with it, but I mean for instance if you take a film like Chapayev [(USSR 1934)]...it was the first time we'd seen in a film the responsibility

of the political commissar. And you know, I remember to this day the thing that affected me most in that film was that the soldiers...the civil war fighters in Chapayev's group come back one day with food that they've commandeered from local farms and the commissar makes them return everything. This is not the way that a revolutionary army works. And it was these things...and then of course a film like *The New Babylon* [Novyj Vavilon (USSR 1929)] that showed us something really of the Paris Commune. These films all taught us something and it was another aspect of life that we couldn't get from the popular cinema - it was a meaningful aspect of life.

**Sidney Cole:** Do any copies survive of the films that Kino themselves made, like the ones you mentioned, the documentaries...

**Charles Cooper:** Yes I think there's a little left. Actually I wasn't in England in [19]39 - we left early '39. But um...Kino wound up at that stage when the war started and I think Montagu had control of the films, Ivor Montagu had control of the films. I think many of the films are with archives that Stanley Forman's organisation has...

**Sidney Cole:** Oh yes.

**Charles Cooper:** ...many of the films are there. I am not sure how many of the actual productions we made are there but some of them are there. And then the British Film Institute, I think, has paid for the regeneration of the short film *Bread* that we made. And there's somebody by the name of Wegg-Prosser - I don't know whether you've heard the name...

**Sidney Cole:** Yes...

**Charles Cooper:** ...has been doing something on it, of Kino in the thirties. What I would say was this, that it did a very important job during the thirties, with films that were meaningful, that were trying to take part in the struggle against fascism. We were aware that we didn't have the technical ability as far as proper production was concerned and we were not to the level of the similar group that existed in the States, which was *Frontier Films* - which made some films on a much more competent level than we were able to make.

**Sidney Cole:** So what happened then? You've got to 1939 and you went to the United States in '39 did you?

**Charles Cooper:** Yes, in '39...of course I'd sold my business at the end of the preceding year and felt that I'd had enough of that and wanted to work at films full-time.

**Sidney Cole:** Which business was that?

**Charles Cooper:** I had a kosher butcher business and delicatessen in Wembley, so I sold the business and decided I was going to spend full-time on film. So with my wife, my first wife, and a cousin of mine... There was a lot of enthusiasm on the left about what was happening in Mexico at the time, under Cardenas. It was a progressive administration and all sorts of positive things were happening. So we decided to go to the States. Actually prior to going to the States, in

March of that year I had applied to the British Air Force for whether I could get in there as a cameraman, and the things was rejected on the fact that my parents were foreign-born. So that I decided then that the next scheme would be to go to Mexico and to make a long documentary on the developments taking place under the Cardenas administration. So I wrote to the Mexican Education department and they were very agreeable and they said they'd co-operate and they'd provide a truck, whatever, so that we could travel around the country. So there was a cousin the same age as myself who was also interested, he'd been living in East London and had actually worked very hard on getting - supporting Phil Piratin at the time. Anyway he came along with us, and my first wife, and we went first of all to New York because he had some relatives there and we stayed there for eight weeks and then decided... First of all we had some cycles with us and wanted to have a bit of a holiday so we thought we would cycle across to Los Angeles. Coming to the States, we saw the distance [chuckles] and we whittled it down and decided we'd do it on the way to Mexico - that we would cycle to New Orleans which was sixteen-hundred miles from New York! One of the misapprehensions was that we felt the country would be a bit lush, more like England. We didn't expect it to be so arid in the south - South Carolina, North Carolina, Georgia. So we set out on our bicycles and lots of things happened, lots of interviews were... Because we actually wanted to see the conditions that black people - what black people were living under in the southern states, which was a form of apartheid that's probably worse than the apartheid of South Africa - then. So we had a very interesting experience cycling south, it took us a month, and we finally arrived in New Orleans. We were then making our plans to sell the bikes and take the train to Mexico City. We then found that as Britain had just gone into the war that we were citizens of a belligerent country and we could no longer get into the States - into Mexico. So the next thing to do was, it wasn't easy to get back to England, there was nothing - no boats were running, so we went back to New York. My first wife, who was a dress designer, got a job and I did a number of jobs, photography and child photography. And then in 1941 through friends and people I knew I was given a job in a large labour organisation. It had it's head offices in New York.

**Sidney Cole:** What was it called?

**Charles Cooper:** It was called 'The International Worker's Order' and it was an interesting development because um - an interesting organisation. I was quite fascinated by it and I was taken on to run the film department - and I've got some pictures here if you'd like to look at them, of that period. What the organisation, 'The International Worker's Order' was doing, it was fulfilling a gap as far as low cost worker's health insurance was concerned. It provided low cost health insurance, but on top of that it provided a social life for the lodge members. But its terms of reference were - within the organisation, the membership - when I was there it was about a hundred and ninety-three thousand and it went across the states, mostly on the eastern seaboard, but on the west coast as well. It was working amongst the nationality groups. In the head office there we had the leadership of the sixteen national groups, this would be Romanians, Slovakian, Italian, Russian, Ukrainian...

**Sidney Cole:** Hungarian?

**Charles Cooper:** Hungarian. Its purpose was - the purpose of the organisation basically was the reverse of the melting pot idea in the States. That you don't have people coming to the States and

having to forget about all their previous culture, but here was an organisation that reinforced their culture. We organised for the groups history, for both the parents and their children, of the countries that they'd come from, the culture, the art, the dancing, the songs - and it was to keep it alive for as long as possible. Psychologically I think it was a marvellous thing because it prevented alienation on the part of these people...

**Sidney Cole:** I was going to ask you a couple of questions, going back over the very interesting things you've been saying. During this time, you know, from the time when you weren't able to get into Mexico on to where you've just been talking about with the IWO, were you involved in filming in any way?

**Charles Cooper:** Um. Not very much, just some personal filming, sporadic filming. You know I just shot up a lot of film on the World's Fair that was taking place in '39 and '40...

**Sidney Cole:** Was that in New York?

**Charles Cooper:** That was in New York, the New York World's Fair. I took a bit of filming there and just around New York, but nothing that I made up into a finished film.

**Sidney Cole:** And the other question was what about a labour permit? Did you have any problems about being able to work in the States?

**Charles Cooper:** Well the question of the labour permit was this - that one just stayed on, and as there was a war going on and there were no boats going, there wasn't much that could be done about it. But what I did have was fairly frequent - well frequent - every six months I'd be called in by the emigration department for an interrogation, as far as that was concerned. So the work that was being done by the IWO was very interesting and of course across the country there were I don't know how many lodges - it was probably about two thousand lodges. For instance as far as the black community were concerned, they could either join a general lodge which would be an English-speaking lodge, or they could join a particular lodge if it was in their own area. But the thing that we did that they weren't getting in the States was that they were getting a history of their own culture. Because in the States the whole educational system was that virtually everybody from Jesus Christ downwards was a white man and they were never told of any black contributions. And our organisation did an excellent job in its classes of teaching them about the contributions that black people have made in the United States. So I ran the film department there, and what we did was to acquire certain feature films - Soviets, American, British - that fitted in with our plans. We also made a lot of filmstrips, which were very popular then. The idea of a filmstrip was that you told your story on about a hundred or a hundred and fifty pictures on a continuous strip of 35mm film. And we had a machine that had a disc on it, a record, and when it went 'ping' you went onto the next picture. So we would send the machines out, supply the machines to our lodges with these filmstrips that we made ourselves on various things.

**Sidney Cole:** And this contained a commentary did it?

**Charles Cooper:** This contained a commentary in English, yes. And we made a number of these, plus, of course, the films that we acquired from various other people and countries that we

distributed, so we carried on with them. Towards - I was with this organisation for about seven years and I enjoyed it and it was, it was a very pleasant atmosphere and it was interesting work there.

**Sidney Cole:** It was right on up until after the war then?

**Charles Cooper:** Well the organisation went on, I'll just come to that very quickly. In 1947, just after the war was over there was a sharp turn in America's foreign policy and I think it was the Attorney General Clerk came out with a list of a hundred and seventeen organisations that needed to be banned, considered un-American - basically mainly on the left. Ours was one of them. You know the organisation had workers assets - had assets of six to seven million dollars and so forth, doing an excellent job, but because it had connections also with Russia, with Hungary, with Poland, with Romania, it was considered an un-American organisation and had to be stopped. So that, seeing the writing on the wall, our treasurer of the organisation came back with a proposal from the leadership, that I could buy the film department if I wished to. So that a very reasonable arrangement was made and I agreed to buy the film department. So in November 1947 I set up for the first time a company called 'Contemporary Films Inc.' in New York, and carried on working there.

**Sidney Cole:** What happened to the rest of the organisation and its money and all that?

**Charles Cooper:** Well what happened was that it went on until 1953 and then the government - the government had been trying to take action against it, to destroy it and they found a method of taking action that, on the basis... As a friendly society it was helping a political organisation - it had been giving funds. And they were able to prove this point presumably and they broke the organisation in New York State and the other States followed. The six and a half million assets were turned over to a private insurance company - and this is - you know, in the States especially, if you want to do a thing [chuckles] you do it regardless of the checks and balances of the constitution and so forth. And it was very, it was really very unconstitutional. The organisation was destroyed as was most organisations on the left - were destroyed.

**Sidney Cole:** But you were all right with Contemporary Films, did you have problems with the authorities?

**Charles Cooper:** No I didn't have problems with the authorities but what was coming up was this - that as I was getting films over from Russia, from Hungary, a bit from Poland, for each country I was going to have to register as a foreign agent. It's almost like registering that you're a spy virtually! I had to register in Washington as a foreign agent. And I had tried from about '46, '47 onwards to get proper residence status in the United States and then eventually discussing it with my lawyer I said, "You must find out, I must be able to travel." I wanted to travel back to England because most of my family were over here. And he checked up and he said, "Yes, they've got down that you were showing" - two years previously - "a Soviet film." I remember the name of the film, called Red Tanks [Tankisty (USSR 1942)], in Wilkes Barre, Pennsylvania, which was a mining area. And I remember going over there myself and showing the film to an audience of about a thousand miners. And in Pennsylvania you had to register your showings and this had obviously been reported back, and that was the grounds. So I said, "Well go ahead and

appeal against it." But we didn't seem to be getting anywhere with it, and I felt I was too hamstrung then.

**Sidney Cole:** I think you've leapt a point Charles, from my understanding anyhow. What were the government doing? They were proposing not to give you resident status...

**Charles Cooper:** Ah hmm.

**Sidney Cole:** ...but your problem was if you left the United States you wouldn't be able to get back in?

**Charles Cooper:** Right, right. So I could have travelled from the United States but without resident status I couldn't get back in again. And I felt what I was doing was interesting and I enjoyed it and would have liked to have stayed on but have been able to come back to England and then, of course, also have made a decision as to what we wanted to do. So that um...in the end we decided not to contest. There was a deportation order issued and we decided not to contest the deportation order, and we left the States. I found somebody else, a friend, and he took over the film library, I sold him the film library. There was a lot of fear then with McCarthyism and you never knew.

**Sidney Cole:** That was what I was going to say, the House Un-American Activities Committee was in operation then, wasn't it?

**Charles Cooper:** Yes that was in operation and of course you know what was happening with The Hollywood Ten, but hundreds of other people what was actually happening was that people were being called in and given a rough time. But either people being called in or even just receiving notification they were going to be called in meant that many people lost their jobs. And you had a situation with so many people that they'd suddenly be reduced from earning five hundred dollars a week to fifty dollars a week - this was what it meant to many people - that other people, some other people on the left began renouncing that it was some childish misconception or something that had drawn them towards communism or whatever and you had that sort of thing. And it was - I must say that the main reason was this unpleasant atmosphere that was generated throughout the country, and there was tremendous hate tied up with it. I know for instance, the bloke I was getting Soviet films from, Nick Napoli at Kino, I remember talking with him, that he had a place out in the country about eighty miles from New York, and I said, "Do they know that you distribute Soviet films?" He said, "No I'd never dare to tell them, I'd be driven out of the village!" I mean there was a lot of hate, a lot of people took it up and there was a lot of hatred being engendered, and I felt that it was going to be difficult to do what I wanted to do, so that um...

**Sidney Cole:** Better to come back to England.

**Charles Cooper:** Better to come back to England. So I sold up, sold the organisation to this bloke, Leo Drakfield. He was afraid to take the more political films, basically documentaries, so a number of those I brought back with me to Britain.

**Sidney Cole:** What year was this then?

**Charles Cooper:** The end of 1950, December 1950. So we came back...this was my wife. My cousin stayed on, he had family there and we brought back with us a daughter of eight years of age, who eventually married Jack Chambers so...

**Sidney Cole:** Oh.

**Charles Cooper:** So we came back and I started out - I knew exactly what I wanted to do and I knew there was a basis for it in England. I knew there was a Film Society movement, I'd also corresponded with Ralph Bond on it, of what was happening, and I set up 'Contemporary Films' in February '51 and took a one-room office in Greek Street. And there continued on with the 16mm distribution and acquired from various distributors their films for 16mm rights and carried on with that. But I found that this was tending to hamstringing us and that one needed to have all rights on the films really to be able to do anything, to launch the films properly. So from about 1954 we were just out for films to get all rights and the theatrical rights, and of course to open them. I did then, I did an arrangement then with somebody who was considered a very hard person to work with, but I didn't find him too difficult and worked with him for a number of years on releasing the films in his cinemas, and this was George Hoellering.

**Sidney Cole:** What was his company?

**Charles Cooper:** George Hoellering, he ran a company that ran the Academy Cinema...

**Sidney Cole:** Ah hmm.

**Charles Cooper:** I think it was called Academy Cinemas his own company. And he'd taken over the cinema - of course Elsie Cohen had run the Academy, I think the cinema had been bombed or something during the war. Hoellering had then come over - he'd worked with Elsie Cohen in her set-up, and he took over this cinema, leased it - I think it must have been about 1941 - came out of a camp (because I think he was German or Austrian origin), and took over the Academy Cinema and very shortly afterwards opened it up. But anyway the arrangement I had with him was - it was a good arrangement - to release our films in the Academy. Because functioning as a distributor and especially, as we would say, in quality films, you needed to have a cinema that was really sympathetic, a cinema owner that was sympathetic, and Hoellering was sympathetic towards the art and culture of quality foreign films. So we started opening up the films at the Academy. The first film - he was very much, very particular on the quality and the prints for example (apart from the film itself) the prints had to be a first-class quality, the subtitling had to be done extremely well. I know the first film that we took on 35mm to release was a film from Japan called 'Children of Hiroshima'. I'd heard of the film from a woman I knew that was the active leadership of the Esperanto movement in England. She'd heard about the film from the Esperanto movement in Japan, that had been made by funds from the Teacher's Union in Japan. It was a story of a teacher who goes back to Hiroshima about five years later and visits five of the children, and you get the histories and the stories of what happened - it takes you back as a flashback. And there was a re-enacted flashback of the dropping of the bomb. The film was an extremely powerful film. We eventually got it over. George Hoellering wasn't too keen on it -

wanted to open it, but said I must get a better quality print - of course he was very much a purist. But we couldn't get a better quality print so we had to release it as it was, and we released it at the Pavilion at Marble Arch, it had a very good run there.

**Sidney Cole:** You mean Hoellering wouldn't accept that print and didn't show it?

**Charles Cooper:** That print - he didn't show it. We put it on at the Marble Arch Pavilion, which was functioning at that time.

**Sidney Cole:** Did you have any censor problems about it?

**Charles Cooper:** No, there were no censorship problems. Um, that's another story - problems hadn't been too great with censorship in Britain, it was in the pre-war period there was much more of the political censorship.

**Sidney Cole:** Because you're already in the period when, I suppose, Trevelyan was in charge of the board was he?

**Charles Cooper:** Yeah, yeah.

**Sidney Cole:** And he was very liberal minded.

**Charles Cooper:** Trevelyan was liberal and we only had one rub, really just one film that we didn't agree on. He was a very reasonable person and we could always come back and discuss a point with him. And he very much - he was very particular to - very concerned to explain to you that his censorship was really judging the feeling of people in the country and all he was doing was expressing that feeling with his censorship. If you like I can go on, just go into the one example of censorship...

**Sidney Cole:** Yes go on, give us the one example on the censorship.

**Charles Cooper:** The one example of censorship we had with him was probably about in the - I should think it must have been in the sixties - was with a Swedish film. I'd have to look up the name, the name escapes me for the moment. There was a short sequence in this film, it's a couple, and a friend of the husband comes to live with them and then there was just one shot of the wife going to bed and she's just preparing herself for going to bed and you see the nude body. The discussion I had... and Trevelyan then said, "That whole sequence must be cut," he said, "Charles, we wouldn't mind if you showed the nude body per say but we can't allow pubic hair." So I felt here was something we had to take him up on, so I said, "Well look..." He said, "If you go round Wardour Street, Greek Street, you'll see all these pictures in the window, you won't see any pubic hair." So I said, "Well this is a load of nonsense. If you show the body as it naturally is that can't be offensive." And it was really - it wasn't out to accentuate anything, it was just the woman on her way, preparing herself for bed and there was nothing really erotic particularly in the film. So he kept to his position and when we had the press show I invited him along to the press show and we showed the film to the press in its complete version and they were all on our side and it made him look a bit silly really with the whole thing but... I know the film had gone

up to Newcastle to be looked at by the council and we had a report back from them. The Mayor said that there was something odd about the film but he couldn't put his finger on it. [Chuckles] And they couldn't see any objection to the film being shown in Newcastle, the local council passed it.

**Sidney Cole:** With the full show?

**Charles Cooper:** With the full show, yes. In London the press came out very strongly against Trevelyan on this and we opened the film with that scene, with the scene cut. A year later he wrote to me to put it back in again. What had happened was that Lindsey Anderson had made a film and I think with the - what was that film, where the school revolts, or something?

**Sidney Cole:** If.

**Charles Cooper:** If - and I think you see the matron with nothing on, and of course he passed that and he felt that retroactively he had to pass it as far as this film was concerned.

**Sidney Cole:** Oh that's interesting.

**Charles Cooper:** But um - it's been that sort of thing. In fact another film, not with him, with the censor that came after him that didn't stay very long - it was a Czech film where the woman goes to her cabinet before going to bed and takes out um - takes out from a jar, the anti...

**Sidney Cole:** What, er - contraceptive?

**Charles Cooper:** Yes takes out a contraceptive from a jar and then you see her later on in the film where she uses a different form of contraceptive. Well he felt that the contraceptive from the jar should be cut and we couldn't see any reason for that and argued it with him and wrote a letter to him and he eventually passed it.

**Sidney Cole:** I would like to pause here for a moment.

**Charles Cooper:** Sure. [Break in Recording]

**Sidney Cole:** Charles, it's fascinating about Contemporary and the way you built Contemporary up from 16mm to 35mm and getting more and more films through different countries. Could you tell me something about your adventures? You must have gone to a good many of the countries, particularly in Eastern Europe to find interesting films to put here and you must have met some interesting people, could you tell me something about all that?

**Charles Cooper:** Yes. Well it has of course been necessary to travel. I think in recent years we tended more-or-less to cover the key film festivals, what are known as the 'Class A' Festivals, where they're festivals of new films. So of course we cover that, we cover Cannes and the Berlin Festival, Moscow Festival that is every two years, and sometimes some of the others, so that one travels around to them. And er, we see some of the directors and of course it's a question of keeping one's ear to the ground sort of thing, as to who's making what, and we're all the time

looking out for films. I mean we were over in Paris a few days - no, I'm sorry, we were in Milan, what they call 'MIFED'[?] which is a film market there, and talking to different people you find out what's being made. For example a film that we certainly would like to get, certainly for theatrical and non-theatrical release is a film being made by Channel Four [chuckles]! We found it out in Milan - on the Paris Commune of 1871 and they're doing a full dramatisation. Yes one - I've been going to different countries, I mean I've been going, to tell you an instance, the festival in Delhi in India. Of course we've got quite a stake there, we've been releasing the films of Satyajit Ray. Ray has made probably about twenty-three features of which we've released about fourteen of them in Britain. He's been ill of course in the recent period and has just finished off a film that we're taking, that we bought before we'd seen it. It's a film based on er - I'm sorry I can't remember the writer's name, it's about um - it's about the holy water, that people are getting ill from it and it's finally located that this is what is causing the trouble...

**Sidney Cole:** Oh it's the adaptation of Ibsen's...

**Charles Cooper:** Ibsen's play...

**Sidney Cole:** 'Enemy of the People'.

**Charles Cooper:** 'Enemy of the People' yes, 'Enemy of the People'[Ganashatru (1989)], and it's a film we're looking forward to releasing - we'll probably release it in about February or March of next year. Certainly from India we've been releasing the films of Satyajit Ray and I've had quite a bit of contact with him. And there's another director - er, um - my mind! [chuckles]

**Sidney Cole:** Oh never mind - we're all...

**Charles Cooper:** Yes, Mrinal Sen is another one, I don't know whether you've heard of Mrinal Sen? And the other one of course is Shyam Benegal. Shyam Benegal makes some very, very - more of a popular type of picture, more for a popular audience, and of course especially in the case of India, he follows through and makes sure that the lab turns him out first-class prints. Because this is a problem that one tends to get with certain countries, we certainly have it from India. Because films are sort of made on a very slim budget, often the final job and the lab work is not very satisfactory and we often have to then get the negative over here and see if we can clean it up and make prints here, and so it causes quite a problem. But yes, I've travelled to different countries. I was in China in 1965 and sort of seeing their latest productions...

**Sidney Cole:** That was before what was called the Cultural Revolution?

**Charles Cooper:** Before the Cultural Revolution. And of course in discussing it with them, discussing their films with them, the point that was made there was that they're making their films for a population of a thousand million and it's only - if the films are suitable for overseas, all well and good, but they're not too worried about that part of it. So that we haven't been taking many films from China in recent years - I would have thought of taking a trip there but I don't think I'd find anything more satisfactory there. They're really not making films yet for home - for overseas release. I think they haven't also had the situation that you had in the Soviet Union,

where you've had some very fine artists making films. I mean in the recent period for instance there was the Russian director, Soviet director who made The New Babylon...um...

**Sidney Cole:** Kozintsev?

**Charles Cooper:** Yeah, Kozintsev with another director, um - the other director's name was... It was a combina... it was a combined...

**Sidney Cole:** Trauberg!

**Charles Cooper:** Trauberg! Trauberg, yes. And Trauberg was over here, this was about three years ago. The British Film Institute had put this film on, The New Babylon, with Shostakovich score, played by about twenty-four musicians, and I must say that discussing it with Trauberg afterwards, he was really crying because he'd never seen - I must say I felt the same way about it, I'd never seen the film so effective as it was with a live orchestra. The British Film Institute laid on about - I think about fourteen screenings at the Queen Elizabeth Hall and then it was shown at a few places around the country. It was an interesting way of presenting the film. But coming back to your point, yes we - really it's a question of keeping one's nose to the ground of who's doing what, and where worthwhile films are being made. We're distributing films I suppose from about - more than about thirty different countries and the effort all the time is to find films that are of good quality and that, um, we feel, that we can feel convinced that it's worthwhile going out and doing a job on them, of promoting them and getting the critics to see them. And when we finally are ready to show the film we like to have the director or somebody over here that can be interviewed by the critics and of course...

**Sidney Cole:** What sort of directors - can you remember any directors, particularly famous ones or well-known ones that came over in that way to your premiers?

**Charles Cooper:** Well we've had for example Satyajit Ray, we've had Renoir over here, we've had Bertolucci. Um, I'd have to go through my [chuckles] my notes to really - but we've had quite a number of the directors over here. And what also happens, for instance now there's the London Film Festival so that on some of the newer films that we might be taking, we've actually got six of our features being shown at the London Film Festival, and some of the directors are over here and of course interviews are being recorded with them that will be subsequently shown on television when the film is ready for release.

**Sidney Cole:** Very good.

**Charles Cooper:** Yes, um...

**Sidney Cole:** So what was your object in basically - I mean obviously you are very wholehearted about the whole distribution thing. Did you have any particular objective in mind when you got involved so heavily and importantly in distribution?

**Charles Cooper:** Well I think it started of course in the thirties when I was involved with Kino. But I have carried on the same principle of course in starting up again here and working here

over what is almost now forty years. February '91 makes it forty years that we've been functioning here. Well I would say that the objective that we set was that the films that we wanted - 1) of course that the films that have been exposed in England have been the American - it's been the American cinema. Seventy, seventy-five per cent of screen time in Britain has been going to American films, probably about fifteen to twenty per cent of British films and about five per cent to foreign films. I think the effort that we made was to get more of the foreign films, more foreign films shown in England. We've grown up in a period where Britain has been an empire and it's now a country amongst other countries and I felt myself um - without being patronising about it - that we have tended to have a bit of an attitude in England that, of looking down on other nations and other peoples. And I felt that um, I've always felt that if we could bring in the best films from these - from other countries, and people would see these films here, and today of course it's also being seen by millions on television as well, that we can move towards a greater respect for other cultures, a mutual respect for other cultures. And I think this has been of value, because I feel that films are the only media that can cross frontiers in this way that it's possible to bring to people. All that we ask of them is that seeing the film in its original version they read - be able to read the English subtitles. And here we're trying to effect always a better standard.

**Sidney Cole:** And of course in relation to this, it was an extension of that approach that made you go into exhibition as well as distribution.

**Charles Cooper:** Yes, yes.

**Sidney Cole:** Could you tell me something about that?

**Charles Cooper:** Yes, well we thought we'd go into - for a long time we've wanted to go into exhibition. We were quite happy with our release situation with the Academy at the West End. First of all it was one cinema and then George Hoellering turned it into three cinemas. But we felt that we wanted to be more in control of the situation, of films that we wanted to release and that if we could have some cinemas in the West End and then gradually to develop in the main cities throughout the country - and I suppose especially in university towns where we had the 16mm audience - this would be at the development of what we had in mind, of bringing the films to the people. We started off then in '67, we bought the Paris Pullman and we were using that as a first-run cinema, and then in about - in '76 we bought a cinema in East Finchley which we called Phoenix One and Two, and about a year later, a cinema in Oxford. The cinemas were doing reasonably, but the thing is that to go further with it, this is the problem we were facing actually - I'd hoped that we would be able to open up a sort of cinema-cum-centre and I'd been very convinced the last twenty years that a cinema on its own, the development of a cinema on its own is not enough in this period. 1) It has to be a comfortable cinema showing good films, but you need these other facilities, like a decent little restaurant, coffee bar, possibly you might have a bookshop, art gallery - the sort of thing that you've got at the National Film Theatre. To be able to develop these across the country - and this was really the objective, showing good films, worthwhile international films. The problem of course that mitigated against it was the problem of how to finance it. I did speak to, amongst other bankers, I spoke to the people at Hambros Bank and they came to see us and they said that they were interested in the idea. And then I suppose the sixty-four dollar question was, "How much do you expect these cinemas to make?"

And I said, "Well I would think that the running of these cinemas could show a margin of profit of about ten to fifteen per cent per annum." And their immediate answer was, "This is not good enough for us. If it can show thirty to forty per cent per annum, this is meaningful." So that what mitigated, what's really prevented being able to go ahead with specialist or art cinemas around the country is that in a situation that we face today, where you're competing for finance, we can't show enough - we can't show a high enough profit margin. Although we can show that this is something that would help generally - it would help young people, older people to see the best of world cinema in these sort of surroundings - that you just couldn't get the finance. Plus of course on top of this, the cost of money was running at about eighteen to twenty per cent in this recent period. So this is what I found. I found it very frustrating and that it really wasn't possible to go ahead with this sort of extension of developing cinemas. What has also happened of course in recent years is of course there was - because of television there has been this decline in cinema audience. For instance if you take the Board of Trade figures between 1956 and 1982, American cinema lost sixty per cent of its audience in that period. West European cinema lost seventy-five per cent of its audience and British cinema lost ninety-three per cent of its audience in that period. So that we were facing up to what is a general situation of decline in people going to the cinemas.

**Sidney Cole:** The conventional thing has always been over those last twenty or thirty years or more about the decline in cinema attendances, to make the main villain television - would you agree about that?

**Charles Cooper:** Well I think it's been - yeah to a large extent television, and in recent periods it's been video. The British public prefer often the comfort of their own homes - cinemas have to be made more comfortable of course - prefer the comfort of their own homes and will accept the smaller screen, plus not having to go out. I think from a sociological standpoint, I think what happens is that by people staying home, 1) they don't meet other people if they don't go out, 2) we've had the feeling over recent years that the streets become - because nobody's using them, the streets become more unsafe. I think it's important for people to be able to - young and older people and women, to be able to go out at night without having any anxiety about the safety of the streets. And of course you see what also happens is the audience staying home watching television and, today, video - we've found for instance an audience that we enjoyed, which was the Film Society audience, The British Federation of Film Societies had a total of about seven-hundred groups at the height of it's situation - starting of course with the first Film Society that was, I think, opened up by Ivor Montagu and some other people.

**Sidney Cole:** Yes.

**Charles Cooper:** Well it developed over that er - over fifty, fifty-five years, it developed to seven hundred groups that were functioning in the country, about two-thirds of them in the universities. Now we found the very satisfying thing about the Film Societies was that you'd send them out a film by Bertolucci or Satyajit Ray or Eisenstein or whatever and there would often be discussion on the film. There was a real film art and often they saw more in the film than the film director himself had ever seen in it. And this was very, very gratifying going to their - where they'd have their weekends in London, we would have also, once a year in our own home, we'd have the Federation, the London area of the Federation, which was about forty

societies coming together and we'd show them a special group of films. We feel we've lost that. The Film Society movement, the number of societies in Britain has gone down to not much more than two hundred at the moment, from seven hundred. And many of those two hundred are showing - well because they occupy - they're in towns where there are no longer any cinemas, they'll be showing mostly English language films, so we've lost that audience. However, we've gained a much larger audience, by the films being shown on television. We preferred the Film Society audience because it was an audience that sat and discussed the films and we had a comeback from them. But this television audience - what happens today is that when we're buying a film we're looking over our shoulder and often we're having the opportunity to speak to the people at the particular festival, the representatives from BBC, Channel Four and so forth, as to what their degree of interest is in the film, you see, which has also a degree of conditioning about. If we want a particular film and a vast sum is asked, we know that at the end of the road, maybe one and-a-half years, two years after release, we'll be able to have the arrangement with Channel Four or BBC 2.

**Sidney Cole:** Yes I was going to ask you about that. At what stage when you were negotiating for the shown of foreign feature films here on the 35mm version, how early on did you take to including television showing rights in your contracts?

**Charles Cooper:** Well as far as possible, all the way from the beginning, when we started taking 35mm we've wanted to include the television rights. Because, although in some cases, a few cases we've taken films where the television rights have already been negotiated, but they give us what's known as a 'window' - a period in which we can open the film, run it theatrically, before it's shown on television. But by and large we have to, as far as possible, include the television rights in taking a film, because the theatrical situation is uncertain. Now if we're going to take a film and we can't get away with, in the launching of a film - I mean we depend very much, and I haven't gone into that, on the critics and how the critics evaluate the film. And there are certain critics that we know and like, who support quality films and so forth.. [pause] I've just lost my thread...

**Sidney Cole:** Influence of critical judgements on what happens to the films?

**Charles Cooper:** Yes. The point I'm making is we wait for the critical judgement and we depend very much on that, um...

**Sidney Cole:** Even more, I suppose with the kind of films that you're interested in showing than with the general run of commercial films?

**Charles Cooper:** Yes, yes, our films...

**Sidney Cole:** Because people who go to see those don't even read the criticisms, I think, a great deal any more?

**Charles Cooper:** Yes, yes - no, we depend - and no, the point I wanted to make here was that in launching any film we've got to spend in the region of about twenty thousand pounds. This is what it amounts to, in launching a film. Now this is posters, poster displays, leaflets, advertising

in the press, national press, local press and so forth, and can run to about fifteen, twenty thousand pounds or more. Well we have no knowledge, there's absolutely no certainty that we're going to get anything worthwhile back from the theatrical release, so that it's in a sense an insurance. In buying a film and putting up 'x' amount of money - and buying a film, the amount we put up can be very considerable - we have to know that we're going to get the... that if it doesn't work out we'll fall back on the television and the television income.

**Sidney Cole:** And what form do the contracts about television take? I mean companies - or do they vary? I mean sometimes would you have the right to just sell the rights to a certain number of showings or sell the television rights outright, say as far as the BBC or ITV were concerned - or how does it work?

**Charles Cooper:** No, you buy the film and the television rights are thrown in. You get the television rights and as far as possible you try and get the video rights, although foreign films haven't gone particularly well on video. You try to get all the rights, and you would get the rights - usually it's for a seven year period, it's exclusive for the territory for a seven year period...

**Sidney Cole:** Ah ha.

**Charles Cooper:** ...this is how you would buy the rights. But then, having said that, you advance a certain amount to the producer on the basis of what he's going to get back in the future. It can be ten thousand, fifty thousand, seventy-five thousand, depending. And we're looking over our shoulder to see what we're going to get and trying to negotiate an agreement at the same time with television. But the percentages you're getting are different. A sort of average percentage might be er - you work on a fifty-fifty deal on the theatrical and the non-theatrical and you might work on a seventy-five, twenty-five basis for instance, with the producer getting seventy-five per cent of the television money. But you would have that control within your contract, that if your film doesn't make it theatrically, that you don't get the return of your investment, you can get - you square it up on the television.

**Sidney Cole:** Ah ha.

**Charles Cooper:** So it makes...

**Sidney Cole:** So it's a variable percentage allocation according to how it does theatrically?

**Charles Cooper:** Yes how it does - so that basically if it does reasonably as expected theatrically, you'd be fifty-fifty there, say seventy-five, twenty-five on television, it might be sixty-forty on video...

**Sidney Cole:** What I was interested in is if the BBC says, "We'd like to show film 'x' that you're distributing," what sort of arrangement and money would you say is a typical example of what might happen in that arrangement with the BBC?

**Charles Cooper:** Well the BBC or Channel Four - you know at one time when it was only BBC, but it was a different period and there was much more in the theatrical, I mean one might get say

a thousand or two thousand for a film being shown on television. It would be usually an arrangement that over, say, a three or five year period they can have two screenings of a film - they probably wouldn't want more.

**Sidney Cole:** Ah.

**Charles Cooper:** So this is how it would tend to work. Today most films sold to television would bring in as a gross anything upwards of fifteen, twenty thousand, sometimes it can be fifty, seventy-five thousand, sixty thousand - depending on the - it's depending on the film and how important the TV company thinks it is. I mean two films that we've sold to television this year that um - one was the film, (I think it was BBC that took them), one was La Marseillaise and the other one was a film by Scola...the name escapes me, but it was a film by Scola dealing with a carriage full of people following Louis XVI and Marie Antoinette who are trying to escape from the country.

**Sidney Cole:** Oh this was part of the...

**Charles Cooper:** La Nuit de Varennes...they were trying to escape to Varennes. So it was two films that they wanted, particularly this year, being the bicentenary of the French Revolution, which we were able to supply them the television rights on. Um...

**Sidney Cole:** And they would want those just for - what, just two showings?

**Charles Cooper:** They would want them for two showings but I don't know that they'll necessarily show them more than once.

**Sidney Cole:** Ah hmm, ah hmm.

**Charles Cooper:** It sometimes happens they do take a film and - mind you they don't show it - but they tend to, if it's coming towards the end of their lease period, they'll try and bring it into some programme.

**Sidney Cole:** Oh. Reverting for a moment to the cinema attendances. I have the impression, just from personal experience and from my grandchildren for instance, that the younger generation, you know the ones that are still at school or just leaving school are getting more and more interested in going to the cinema...

**Charles Cooper:** Ah hmm.

**Sidney Cole:** ...because it's you know, it's getting away from home and they're probably beginning to get so blasé about television that they still watch, but they regard going out to the cinema as quite an experience. But I suppose with the much smaller number of cinemas it's not too difficult to find cinemas which are getting good audiences now?

**Charles Cooper:** Well I suppose cinemas will tend to get perhaps a good audience on Saturday night on certain good nights. Its er - I'm sorry would you just say that - what was the last point that you made?

**Sidney Cole:** Well do you think there is any sign of recrudescence of cinema going?

**Charles Cooper:** Well yes, yes. I'm sorry, yes it has gone up. And whilst we were down to somewhere in the region of about one and a quarter visits per year per head of the population - this is probably about seventy-five million attendances - it's creeping up now to about ninety to a hundred. And they're hoping that within this next year it'll creep back to two visits per annum per head of the population.

**Sidney Cole:** Hmm...

**Charles Cooper:** But when you compare this say with talking with the Russians, they're feeling the effect of television now in the Soviet Union, as far as their cinemas are concerned. And it's gone down from roughly over the last two or three years, from fourteen visits a year to just over ten visits a year...

**Sidney Cole:** Ah hmm.

**Charles Cooper:** ...and we're hoping to creep up to two visits a year!

**Sidney Cole:** Gosh, yeah...

**Charles Cooper:** So that we're still [chuckles] we're still quite a way behind. I think this - that we will get more people back to the cinema but my contention is that it has to be a different type of cinema. It's got to be a comfortable place, it's got to be certainly good projection, comfortable seats, and I think you need these other amenities with your cinema, on whatever level. If it's on a particular level you might give them an art gallery and a bookshop, on another level you might, I don't know, you might give other things as well, but I think that I would see cinema as very much part of a centre.

**Sidney Cole:** I think that's an interesting point because my impression personally all down the years has been the trouble with the generality of cinema exhibitors - I don't mean, you know, the specialist people like yourself - the ordinary commercial cinemas was that they, the exhibitors seemed to have a feeling that the audience would always be there, and would be used to the not very good conditions which all the cinemas had down the years.

**Charles Cooper:** Yeah, hmm....

**Sidney Cole:** And of course, apart from the competition with television, exhibition as a whole rather paid the penalty for that and the fact that that there was a growing number of competing leisure interests available of all kinds. Um, one other thing, going back, tracking back quite a way in terms of the chronology - you did have some experience I think, right at the beginning, of the Spanish Civil War. I know you distributed some films about the Spanish Civil War, made on

behalf of the government - but you had some personal experience didn't you, right at the beginning?

**Charles Cooper:** Yes that's right, it was actually in 1936 that four of us, that was my first wife and Ivan Serreya[?] and my wife's sister, we drove down to Spain. We were actually - the Olympics were taking place in Berlin and of course as this was Hitler's Germany, we didn't want to go there, and we understood there was going to be a worker's Olympics in Barcelona. So of course we drove through France and as we got south we began to hear more and more about fighting having started in Spain, and then we crossed the frontier into Spain and we felt, well we'll go on, and we went on to Barcelona. And we were stopped continuously going through, probably about seven or eight times, and had to report to the local Town Hall. And then eventually we got to Barcelona and reported to our hotel. They said that yes, we were welcome to stay there but they had no food. And they referred us to the largest hotel in Barcelona that had been taken over by the Socialist and Communist parties. And we went there and discussed - they sent in somebody that had just come to visit them, a man by the name of Otto Katz from the Commintern. And we discussed with him and we said that we wanted to do a bit of filming there. And he said, "Yes you'll be very welcome to stay here." Then he asked me whether I would drive back to the frontier - come with him back to the frontier, as one of two cars, taking some material. They'd actually raided the German Embassy and he wanted to prepare - do a book on the Nazi conspiracy in Spain and had all this material. So we went back, I agreed to drive back one of the cars and we drove through the night with another car in front of us with the books in and so forth, the documents. And we got to - I think it was on the - I forget the name of the town, on the Spanish side of the frontier, we got to there sometime in the morning, and then I think the Mayor of the French town on the other side, I think Portbou came over and they took the two cars with the material over into France. And then I think Otto Katz eventually published a book called 'The Nazi Conspiracy in Spain'.

**Sidney Cole:** Oh that's interesting. And of course you did distribute, as I said, a number of films about Spain after that?

**Charles Cooper:** Yes, yes...well there was Ivor Montagu's film , Defence of Madrid and there were some other films. Of course Spanish Earth I'm not sure whether we in Kino distributed at the time Spanish Earth or whether that came through later...?

**Sidney Cole:** I think that was probably later, yes.

**Charles Cooper:** Probably, yes, yes.

**Sidney Cole:** Did you distribute the ones that I did with Thorold Dickinson and Ivor in - I can't remember when that was - Ivor's company was Progressive Film Institute, I suppose he'd handled them himself, those ones - you know Spanish ABC and...

**Charles Cooper:** Ah hmm, yes he probably did, yes.

**Sidney Cole:** Yeah, I don't think you handled those, yeah. Of course now, your cinema ventures came to an end not so very long ago didn't they?

**Charles Cooper:** Yes, yes well we decided...

**Sidney Cole:** You gave up because of the problems involved?

**Charles Cooper:** Well, yes. Various problems were involved and I suppose also due to the high cost of money - with the Paris Pullman I'd had two other partners and they wanted to pull out and the cost of money was high, and of course a lot of cinemas were no longer viable financially. And this applied of course to the Paris Pullman. There was an EMI cinema at the bottom of the road that suddenly changed from a single cinema to five! And putting on new programmes which was very competitive to us, and we decided to sell that. Unfortunately that's been turned into luxury flats. With The Phoenix up the road here at East Finchley, there the story was that I was called in by the GLC to discuss - because they knew that we would like to develop and enlarge it and do a few things there. And I was called in by - I forget the man's name, who was in charge of their arts programme at the GLC, and he said you know, the proposals - well the proposals we had were to twin the cinema, put in a restaurant and bar and, of course, what is needed locally, to have a sort of video centre for about eighteen local community groups that could use it as a video centre. In that way it would be - it would become a sort of cultural centre for the area. We got our architects to draw up plans on this and then presented them to the GLC. They were interested in the whole idea but as they were beginning to be on the way out, they came back to us and said that there was not very much they could do. The best they could offer would be to um - to take over the cinema from us, pay us for it and we would set up trust - um, what do they call it, an unpaid trust?

**Sidney Cole:** A non-profit?

**Charles Cooper:** A non-profit trust. So that we set up a non-profit trust there and they took the cinema over, but that was unfortunate because we'd have liked to have seen that developed as an arts centre.

**Sidney Cole:** Hmm, what about the one in Oxford, what happened with the one in Oxford?

**Charles Cooper:** Well the one in Oxford, well we had a lease on that and we - what tends to happen is if you're running a number of cinemas you can afford to sort of have the super-structure of controlling them. It becomes much more difficult if you've got a single cinema. And we felt that we would possibly try and work in other areas and perhaps dispense with the cinema side. Cinema actually in a sense, if you're doing it and you're doing a number of them, it begins to be practical. But it's like running a shop, you've got to be there and around all the time, even if you've got staff there, you've got to be watching it all the time. And so that we felt that we'd relieve ourselves of that and concentrate more on the distribution side and obtaining other films, new films and possibly going to other ventures.

**Sidney Cole:** Final, perhaps final thing. Of course you weren't actually, there was no reason to be, a member of ACTT, but you presumably had quite good relations always with the union?

**Charles Cooper:** Oh yes, yes.

**Sidney Cole:** And with George Elvin and people like that? Anything you want to say about that connection?

**Charles Cooper:** Coming back to a - if I can come back to a previous point you made about the question of centres around the country. I'd just like to say this, that the British Film Institute is to a degree doing what we would have liked to have done, on a much vaster scale.

**Sidney Cole:** Right.

**Sidney Cole:** And that's their regional film theatres - you know they've got one in Bristol, one in Edinburgh, Glasgow, Manchester, Birmingham. They've got about a dozen of them around the country, where they're showing fairly - we book our films into them - they're showing selective films and quality films. And they also have this bar-restaurant idea and bookshop and whatever, and this is something. But they're doing it on a slightly subsidised method in a sense - they do it in conjunction with the local authority. That if the cinema, if the centre makes a loss, they make it up on a fifty-fifty basis with the local authority. So the thing is happening to a degree, we'd have liked to have seen it on a more substantial basis around the country. As far as ACTT is concerned, no - only to the extent that I would have liked to have seen, I'd like to see ACT and unions generally more concerned with the media. I think the problem we've got with the media, and our side of the story we have to tell - amongst progressives and on the left, is not - is being told more now than ever before, but more could be done. And I suppose if you asked me what's the most important thing that I would see ACT and the other unions, would be um, accepting that film is a media and to see what could be done about it, to assist it in it's development.

**Sidney Cole:** Good, OK, well thank you Charles, that seems to be for the moment anyhow, the end of a very interesting and instructive interview with you, thank you very much.

**Charles Cooper:** Well thanks very much for coming and devoting the time to it and hope it's been productive.

**Sidney Cole:** It has, yeah. OK.

[Tape Ends]