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Michael Krauss

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Andreas Droulias, interviewer

Series: Michael Krauss Life History Recordings

Michael Krauss introduces himself. He was born August 15, 1934 in Cleveland, Ohio. He was from an English-speaking house. He was sent to a Jewish Sunday school and started learning Hebrew. That was a serious issue for him and his parents. Hebrew had not been anyone's mother tongue, but it was a national tongue. It was an essential part of the whole culture, ideology and identity. It was passionately cultivated. His parents agreed that it should be an important part of his upbringing. He said nationhood is not an exclusive taxonomic thing. People can be two things at once such as an American Jew. He said the world's politics aren't organized accordingly. He said his upbringing included a language being the essence of a nation and as an object of interest in itself. He heard very little Yiddish. His father was a general surgeon and he was raised in a rather privileged section of Cleveland. You didn't run into other languages for the most part.

His father was Lester Krauss. His mother was Ethel Krauss. They both died in an auto accident in 1960 after he moved to Alaska. He said he had a relatively uneventful childhood. He had a good ear and was oriented to oral experiences. He had musical training. He had a strong interest in other languages when he heard them and remembers stopping to listen to people talking in another language when he was a child. He was always good at English. The other language he had exposure to was Latin when he was in junior high school. Part of his Jewish upbringing gave him a respect for the function of language as a vehicle and essence of a culture and identity as a nation. He said there was no illusion that human kind can be pigeon holed. He is repelled by the sense of arrogance and smug sense of superiority. He talked about basic ideologies of looking at the world he grew up with. Where he was raised there was a feeling of superiority. He rebelled against this in a way. He became less well adjusted to these strictures.

When he was in tenth grade he was admitted to the University of Chicago under early admission. He went off to college in 1950 at the age of 16. He took placement examinations. He skipped another year. He was taking classes which were not interesting to him. He graduated in three years at the age of 18. He spent a year back in Cleveland getting another bachelor's degree in French and Italian. He took a number of jobs during this time. He decided his interests and talents were in the direction of languages. He talked about Raven McDavid who was a linguist. He learned phonetic transcription. He went for a master's degree at Columbia. He talked about his French courses and his Italian instructor. He didn't have any interest in studying Russian.

Droulias asked where he went after Columbia. Krauss said he attended Columbia in 1954-55 and got his degree in one year. He said he didn't have any professional advice at his undergraduate and graduate institutions except a little from McDavid. He said his life was self-invented. Droulias asked what his father did for a profession. Krauss said his father was a surgeon. Krauss didn't want to go into medicine. His mother stayed at home and raised children.

Droulias asked what he did at Columbia University. Krauss said he went there originally to get a degree in romance philology. He did get a degree in that, but he also started taking linguistic courses from Andre Martinet. He did have a course in Greek. He discussed a Greek dialect which had just a few speakers. He went to France after Columbia in 1955-56 to study at the University of Paris. He transitioned to another direction. He was more interested in courses in Celtic. The following year he went to Ireland. He returns to talk about his time in Paris. He was more attracted to Anglo-Saxon conflict with Celtic in Wales and Ireland. And more specifically Ireland. He went to Ireland in summer/fall of 1956. He got a fellowship from the Dublin Institute for Advanced Studies in Dublin to study the dialect of the island of Inishmaan in Galway Bay. He talked about the Dublin Institute for Advanced Studies. He lived in two households on the island. He talked about getting off the steamer and rowing through the breakers to the shore. They didn't have electricity or running water. It was still basically subsistence. It was a formative period of his life. No one spoke English at that time on the island. He described the dwellings on the island. They heated and cooked with peat. Their lives were based on Celtic tradition. He said the people were kindly and tolerant. He had a deep respect for the people. They were patient with him most of the time. When he was on the mainland it was a different world. He returned to the island in 1985 for a visit. He found by the end of the week his Gaelic had returned. While living on the island he lived with a couple. When he was leaving he discovered the wife had lived in Boston for twenty years. She migrated back to the island. He also lived with another family. He lived on the island for over a year.

He applied to Harvard to finish his doctoral degree. He said there were a lot of Irish in Boston and there was a Celtic program there. He was accepted and given a stipendium to finish his degree. He was sad to leave the island. He went to Norway and got a job at the university for the summer. The dorms were turned into tourist housing during the summer. He needed money to return home. He learned Norwegian at that time. He attended the International Congress of Linguists in Oslo. He made several contacts there including Knut Bergsland who specialized in Saami, Eskimo and Aleut.

At Harvard the linguistics wasn't an eye opener for him. He appreciated Harvard for its custodial staff as much as its faculty. A number of the custodial staff knew Gaelic. He appreciated a few faculty members such as Charlie Ferguson and DePaul Frederick. He did interact with MIT people. He didn't think the people on his committee read or understood his dissertation on Irish Gaelic.