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Michael Krauss

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Andreas Droulias, interviewer

Series: Michael Krauss Life History Recordings

Michael Krauss returned to talking about his Irish experience. He was attracted to Ireland because of his resistance to the Anglo-Saxon conquest which is still going on. The spoken language on the island was still very much Irish.

When he was in Boston, he wasn't a good specimen of a Harvard man. One of his friends was Harry Rowe who later taught at the University of Toronto. One of the most important influences on him was Hreinn Benediktsson. In the summer of 1958, he finished his writing his dissertation in Cleveland. He came to Boston to defend his dissertation in the fall. He described his defense.

The very next day he was off to Iceland. He had a fellowship from the Scandinavian American Foundation. The money was left by Halldor Kiljan Gudjonsson for American students to study in Iceland. He had a Fulbright grant. He talked about the nation of Iceland. It was a small nation that could keep its own language and traditions. He spent two years there and could speak Icelandic. It was good training for him for Alaska. At the same time if he had it to do it over again, he might reverse the amount of time he spent there versus his time on the Faroe Islands. They had also kept their own language and were one fifth the size of Iceland. The speakers of Faroese had kept alive their ballads and also the Danish ballads. He spent two summers in the Faroes. He met some Greenlanders and other influences were directing him back to his own country. The Faroes and Iceland are countries of high literacy and education. He started thinking about Greenlandic and languages in his own backyard in America. He started becoming more aware of Eskimo and the kind of contribution he could make. He heard about a position at the University of Alaska Fairbanks in 1959-60. He officially got his Harvard degree in the winter of 1959. He talked about how a small nation like the Faroes can succeed. The Shetland Islands lost their language instead of having it flourish. He described the nature of the Shetlands and the exit of people to the mainland.

He applied for and got the job at the University of Alaska Fairbanks as well as given a Carnegie Visiting Professorship because the university had received money from the Carnegie Foundation to establish new disciplines one of them being linguistics. He said there were some forward looking deans like Bill Magee and Charles Keim who felt that linguistics could be used for Alaska Native languages. His assignment was to teach French. He talked about the idea of having French bringing culture into the Tanana Valley.

Droulias asked if he had started to establish his name in linguistics at this point. Krauss said not really. He said the University of Alaska was Siberia and considered the pits and the bottom of true civilization of all American universities. His salary was 7,000 plus free housing.

00:28:35 [a few minutes of an unrelated recording by Droulias]

00:30:14

Krauss said he was attracted to the university because it really was Siberia. He wanted to put his work into a place where there were 20 languages and not even one linguist to work on them. He felt he could make a contribution. He was hired to teach French. It was the first foreign language to be taught at the university in the Department of Linguistics and Foreign Languages. There was another person in the department, Rudolph Krejci. Krejci taught German and Russian. Krauss was also the department head. He was well known in Iceland, the Faroes, Ireland, but not widely known. He was twenty-six years old when he was hired by President Patty. He arrived in late August-September 1960. Krejci was a little older than Krauss. The university couldn't afford to hire well knowns in the field except in anthropology and geophysics.

The department developed quickly and flourished. Krauss taught a linguistics course. There were two ladies in the class, Irene Reed and Martha Teeluk. Teeluk was from the mouth of the Yukon. Reed was a third generation Finnish American and fluent in Finnish. Reed was living next door to Martha in Fairbanks. Irene was trying to do something with Martha's Central Yupik. They got Krauss interested in doing something with the language. In the spring of 1961, he taught a special topics course in the Eskimo language. Martha Teeluk's Central Yupik was the source target language. Martha was the chief source of information. Irene was a student, leader, organizer and supporter. Irene now lives in Minnesota and Martha Teeluk died last year. He said he would go into the prehistory of the study of Alaska Native languages. The university did not contribute to anything like that. They started with the one course and through the years it became his main occupation.

Droulias asked about the history of Alaska Native language study before he arrived. Krauss said he would talk about the role of the university and his role in it. Alaska Native languages were studied, quoted or written down by the very first contacts that took place here with the Russians. He said it goes back to 1732. The first century of study is largely Russian and some others. The earliest missionaries established literacy in writing systems for Alaska languages in the early mid-19th century. After the American take over it was continued by the Anglicans, the Moravians and the Catholics to some extent. It was opposed under the likes of Sheldon Jackson. The government policy in the late 19th century was the use of the Native language in a religious setting but English was to be used exclusively in the schools. The school system imposed on the people was anti-Native. It has devalued and traumatized the people. The people now for the most part are speaking English only to their kids and stopping the transmission of the language to the kids. This was already in progress when he arrived in Alaska. The university was a part of that. The education system trained people as though English was the only language worth knowing. They were part of the assimilation of tradition. He opposed this. He felt if the university didn't address the problem then they were part of the problem. He talked about the idea that the gentlemanly thing to do was to document what is being obliterated. He said the skeletons of the

people were treated as important in understanding the peopling of the Western hemisphere. He said the Native languages were not the least bit primitive or technologically inferior. Droulias asked if the attitude changed by the 1960s. Krauss said no. The idea of allowing the use of Native languages by the education department was not beneficial or practical. The Russians incorporated the Native language into their education system they were developing. There were laws passed to not allow written materials in Native languages in the schools. The university had done archeology work. Language work was not done. Scandinavians were working on the languages. Gordon Marsh, Father Innocence and Albert Heinrich had done some work with Alaska languages in the 1950s.