

2020-05-05 PT. 2

Michael Krauss

March 18, 2004

Fairbanks, Alaska

Andreas Droulias, interviewer

Series: Michael Krauss Life History Recordings

This actually appears to be PT. 1. Audiocassettes were misidentified.

Andreas Droulias said Michael Krauss will be talking about his lecture in Quebec.

Michael Krauss said he will try to reconstruct his informal autobiographical talk he gave at a conference in Quebec [no conference title or date specified]. He said in a sense it was being held in his honor, but more importantly it was a conference on the theme of reciprocity, circularity in the relationship between indigenous knowledge and western academic knowledge combining as a two-way reciprocal, circular process as opposed to the traditional academic investigator linguist or anthropologist who collects information from indigenous peoples in such a way that it benefits academe, but in no way feeds back to the people to benefit them. This is a new direction in linguistic and anthropological work which is not widespread yet. The older paradigm still reigns almost exclusively supreme. It is barely beginning to become common yet alone acceptable. His main interest in this whole enterprise is to try to make this kind of progress in the anthropological linguistic field so that indigenous life and academic life may become mutually enriching and engaged in something that leads to open ended progress instead of a one-shot deal where one merely exploits the other.

Krauss said he was born in 1934 in a very comfortable, affluent suburb of Cleveland, Ohio. His father was a general surgeon. They were part of a Jewish subcommunity of the suburb. He grew up speaking English. He was taught some Hebrew as a child in Sunday School. There was a strong respect for the traditional roots, values and behaviors of their Jewish ancestors. He said many people do not have the benefit of that. Their roots are discarded in their Americanization. He learned there's diversity in the world, in the American world and they have their own very important contributions to make. They had a great respect for learning the ancestral and liturgical language. It was his first exposure to another language. They had their own identity within being Americans. He said there can be combinations of identity and overlap. He could see that language had a great deal to do with identity. He talked about grammar and social hierarchy. He had Latin later in school. He didn't quite abide by the values of the social structure. He felt lucky to be admitted early into the University of Chicago in 1950 when he was 16 years old. He took placement tests and was able to skip a year of courses. He felt this had him skipping any education in the fields he had any talent. He graduated a well-rounded scholar with no ability to

do anything in any area where he had any talent. He graduated in 1953 and returned home. He took language courses at Western Reserve University. He took French and Italian courses. He didn't take languages which he considered imperialist languages. He graduated with a second B.A. with a major in Romance languages in 1953-54. He went to Columbia University for a master's degree in romance philology. By then he realized his real talents and interests lay in language itself instead of language to gain access to a literature or a culture. He explained what romance philology was. He also began taking courses in linguistics taught by Andre Martinet. He also took a seminar in Greek from Martinet. Martinet was the most inspiring teaching he had experienced up to that point. Martinet went back to the University of Paris and Krauss followed. Krauss became interested in Celtic languages. From 1955-56 he studied in Paris. He was interested in minority endangered languages. In 1956 he traveled to Ireland and went to the Institute for Advanced Studies where he was in the School of Celtic studies. He had a stipend to visit Inishmaan Island in Galway Bay. People there were dominantly Gaelic speaking. There were 200-300 people there. People were hospitable to him. He described the two places he stayed while on the island for a year. The culture was almost entirely self-supporting. He developed strong relationships with the people there. There were still young people there who did not speak English. He said they were the kind of people he enjoyed. He had a hard time leaving. At the end of that year he found out Harvard was giving him a fellowship to get his PhD there in the Department of Celtic Studies. After fifty years he can still remember his Gaelic. He had to earn money to return to the states so he got a job in Oslo at the dormitories. That summer the International Congress of Linguists took place in Oslo and he attended. He met Knut Bergsland who he worked with later. Krauss took a boat back to the states. He started his program at Harvard, but became more of a misfit for academic life. He found more education there through the custodial staff than the faculty. Many of the custodial staff were Gaelic speakers who knew more Gaelic than the faculty. He talked about Noam Chomsky who was a couple of miles down the road at MIT at the same time. He was frustrated at Harvard. He signed up to go to Iceland on a fellowship at the Scandinavian American Foundation. Halldor Kiljan Gudjonsson had left money for American students to study in Iceland. He had defended his dissertation at Harvard in September 1958. He talked about his interest in the Icelandic language. There were a few foreigners there at the time. They were from the Faroe Islands. He said the Faroese had their own language. He was able to spend about a quarter of his two years on the Faroe Islands. He met a few Greenlanders while he was there. It was his first contact with an Eskimo type language. He talked about the resurgence of Gaelic with people learning it as a second language. After two years in Iceland and the Faroes he returned to the United States. He felt he could use his talents on the indigenous languages of his own country. He had an offer for a position at the University of Alaska while he was still in Iceland. He had always had an interest in the north. In 1960 the university had gotten a series of funds for visiting professorships in new disciplines. He was hired to introduce the discipline of linguistics. It was Carnegie Foundation money. He also taught French. French had been taught at the university every year since 1923. He was always reminded he was at the university to teach French. He had a good relationship with the administration at the beginning. He thinks they were impressed with him because he had a PhD from Harvard. President Wood came into the university at the same time as Krauss. He was supposed to be at the university for two years. On September 30, 1960 both of his parents were killed in an automobile accident after he had been here for one month. He flew back home for their funeral. He met up with an old friend of his, Jane, who he married.

Krauss said the university was a much smaller place in 1960. There were 800 students enrolled. He said the university was proving that civilization could conquer the wilderness. He talked about the anthropology department. Linguistics was alien to the anthropology department. The university conceived of itself as the crown jewel. His interest grew into dealing with Alaskans. He was appalled with the situation with Alaska Native languages. The children were forced to go to schools and only English was allowed. Children were punished and dissuaded from speaking their own languages. In many parts of Alaska, children were no longer speaking their native languages. The Russian period lasted from the 1730s until officially 1867. Although the Russians did some harm to the population the people who survived them were still all Aleut speaking when the Russians left. Some of the languages had been made into literary languages and introduced the idea of bilingual education through church schools. After 1867 Alaska was neglected. Krauss thinks if it hadn't been then the fate of the Alaska Natives might have been the same as the Indians Outside. Alaska missed out on this era of active genocide and displacement of the indigenous populations. The main culture changers were the missionaries/school teachers who unleashed the American system on the Native population and forbid the use of their own languages.