

Interviewee: GREGORY MASUROVSKY
Interviewer: MARY EMMA HARRIS
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[BEGINNING OF SIDE 1, TAPE 1]

MEH: [GIVES IDENTIFICATION]. Gregory, how did you come to be at Black Mountain College?

GM: I came to be there because my older brother, Disraeli, somehow had learned of its existence and had actually had it in mind to enroll there. But he was caught up in the turmoil of the Second World War. He was a very brilliant student and a very gifted artist, very talented, and in a sense he was my mentor. He was my first teacher, so to speak. I was following in his footsteps, literally. He had enrolled in the High School of Music and Art in New York, and when it was my turn to graduate from public school, I submitted my work for approval and acceptance. I was also able to attend the High School of Music and Art. This was in the late thirties, early forties, and when the War was declared, he and his fellow students who were getting ready to graduate were actually interviewed by military personnel to see if they had special abilities to enter particular branches of the armed forces. It came about that he had a gift for navigation, so he was going in all likelihood, when he was inducted, be placed in the Air Force. Well, what happened was he graduated with his classmates, and they were all being called up, and he wasn't. Physically he had been

declared fit, and so he was at loose ends. He was a very sensitive guy and he enrolled momentarily in City College, but the courses were not particularly exciting. He realized very quickly that he'd already studied, certainly in the arts had advanced in high school to a level that was superior to what was being offered in the college. What happened was he gradually began to become depressed because he was dangling. He would literally go to the Selective Service, to the draft board and ask, "Why just when are you calling me up?" They'd make a joke of it. They'd say, "Oh don't worry. We'll get you." But he was suffering, and he was suffering because of this uncertainty. It was gaining control of his being, and our family – my parents were not aware, none of us were, that he was really suffering from this situation. One day he walked into a hospital in New York and said, "Help me." They began treating him for a nervous breakdown, and this led to – at the time, they were using insulin shock therapy and it had very disastrous effects on him. But my parents were terribly unhappy. At first they were pleased that he was being spared, but they didn't realize how it was undermining his morale and his whole being. He had a nervous breakdown. What happened eventually, he was released from the hospital. He was given a medical discharge from the army. Then he began doing his own work, and he'd go off to various places to live and paint. He had a way of being aware just through investigation on his part, of discovering where things were happening – like to Cape Cod. Eventually, he went to Sarasota. There was an artists' community there, an art association, and it was on the Gulf of Mexico. He was suffering from asthma, but it was probably

psychological. He was having problems that way, so my family, our parents, let him go off. What happened was he died there of a heart attack at the age of twenty. This was the result possibly of the insulin shock therapy which weakened his heart. He had taken a job moving furniture because he felt guilty all the time asking financial help from the family. He wanted to be independent. But along the way, as I said, he had learned about the existence of Black Mountain, and he really was seriously considering going there, but he never did. So I wrote to BMC, and they accepted me. That's how I came to be there.

MEH: Was this directly – Were you directly out of the High School of Music and Art at that point?

GM: Yes. It was 1947. Yes. I was there for the year of 1947 and the first six months, I guess, of 1948.

MEH: Actually, I had that you were there '46-'47 spring. Did you enter in the winter, in the middle of the year or something, do you remember?

GM: I think I may have gone down in January.

MEH: That's what I had. '47.

GM: Yes. In '47.

MEH: And so you were from New York?

GM: Yes. I was from the Bronx, New York.

MEH: And Masurovsky, is that – What nationality is that?

GM My father was born in a small village in the Ukraine, and he was Russian.

When I came to Paris with my wife and we decided to live here, I was entitled to some GI Bill from having served in the armed forces during the Korean War. At

that time, the only accredited school in Paris was the Sorbonne, so I enrolled in the Sorbonne and I met Polish students and they told me I had a typically Polish name, which was interesting to learn. Eventually, I had an occasion to visit Poland. I had been awarded a prize in the First International Biennial of Printmaking – in Kracovy (Cracovie). This was 1966. In 1967 I took advantage of it, and we drove there. I had what they call a Deux Chevaux, a little French car. I think in America they call them "mosquitoes." [LAUGHS] They were declared unsafe on American highways. They may have been more frequently seen in colleges on campuses. In any event, it was the least expensive car, and many French people had one, and I was able to afford it, and so we drove to Poland. Part of my intention was visiting the Mazurie, because I learned my name means "someone who comes from the Mazurie." Masurovsky, *fils de*, son of Mazurie. So eventually we drove to the Mazurie, and it's actually a country of farms, lakes and forests where many Polish people go on holidays. But it wasn't the best epoch. It was the Warsaw Pact period. There was a gunboat on the lake, there were sailors with machine guns in the street, and I turned to Shirley, and Marc my son, and said, "This isn't the time for me to look for family roots." But I did discover, because I purchased a book on the history of Poland, that in the 17th century, my father's village was part of what they called the Great Poland, and in the 18th century there was the division of Poland, and so the region in which he lived was incorporated into the Ukraine. But this would explain why the name was Polish, and it's apparently a fairly typical name. In fact that's the country of the music that's called "Mazurka."

MEH: Okay. Do you remember how you traveled to Black Mountain the first time?

GM: I went by train. There was a train station in the village of Black Mountain, and I believe I was picked up in a – it might have been the jeep [LAUGHS] – and driven on the roads, the dirt road I guess it might have been, to the college campus. I don't recall how far the station may have been from the college, though.

MEH: Do you remember anything about the application process?

GM: No, not really. These were forms I had filled out in New York and mailed and whatever. I can't recall any of that, really. I've even forgotten most of the names of the people. There was a – Perhaps you can bring it back to my attention.

MEH: Had you been in the South before?

GM: Yes, I'd lived in Orlando, Florida at one moment, and then when I was discharged from the army, I went to live with my mother, who had moved to Sarasota where my brother had died and been buried. She had taken – she rented a small house, and I joined her there. I worked for a while in a restaurant, and then I got a job working for the circus. It is the winter quarters of the Ringling Brothers Circus, so it had a very special flavor, Sarasota. That was quite interesting to me.

MEH: Now was that before Black Mountain?

GM: No, that was already afterwards. When I attended Black Mountain, I was between seventeen and seventeen and a half. I was among the very youngest people. Most of the students were former GIs, and it wasn't just a difference of four or five years. It was also the fact that many of them had been through the

War physically, in the battles. So there was a big difference in that sense, as well.

MEH: How did that work? Did you find that you could relate to these guys or they could relate to you?

GM: Well, I made friends with certain of them and with others, less so. But that would have been in almost any situation. It didn't seem to be a deterring factor in their relationship towards me. Maybe I was like a younger brother to them. This I don't know. But I made some rather good friends, and when there was the reunion organized in '95, I believe, I arranged to go there. When I met certain people whom I hadn't seen – it was forty-five years – we all recognized each other and certain, especially Knute Stiles and Jerry Levy, we just started talking as though we had gone out for a coffee and come back, only it was French coffee [LAUGHS]. No, it was quite lovely and a warm feeling. In fact, I've corresponded specifically with Knute Stiles, and – We had befriended each other. We were art students. We were a small group that were appreciative of Ilya Bolotowsky, who was teaching. He was teaching when I arrived, and then he was joined, if I can use that term, by Albers and his wife, Anni, who had been on a sabbatical. Then it was revealed to me – I was totally unaware of anything in the arts, not having any kind of a background except an older brother who was talented. I saw these two factions were formed, the Albers people and the people around Bolotowsky. So it was an introduction to what happens in the Real World [LAUGHS].

MEH: What was Bolotowsky like as a teacher?

GM: He was a very open-minded person, and he wasn't trying to impose a particular theory of art. His work was an outgrowth of his contact with Mondrian, but he was someone who had – because of his generation – passed from figuration into a kind of Geometric Abstraction and then it became more specific in its reduction because of the contact with the Neo-Plasticism of Mondrian, when Mondrian came to New York. He did his version. But when it came to teaching, he didn't impose that on anybody. He permitted people to discover themselves. He made us aware of what was possible that was going on in an image, that we were learning a kind of language, a visual language. When I began to teach much later, I thought of my experience with him and also with Will Barnett, with whom I studied graphic art in the Art Students League afterwards. They both had this very open approach, but at the same time they were, they were very demanding in their criticism, so there was a kind of informality but also a rigor, and I appreciated that. We would meet in a rather regular way in Bolotowsky's home, and he'd be showing us various art books. I was learning everything because I was, I was totally unformed and so I was approaching art really as a beginner.

MEH: Had you been to the High School of Music and Art?

GM: Yes, I'd been there. My original ambition, when I was a boy, was to be an illustrator, and I would subscribe to magazines, I believe it was the American Artist, which was a magazine that was more in the academic tradition and also featured illustrators, interviews with them, book illustrators. It was illustration, either in advertising art or, on a higher level, illustrating the classics, so to

speak. That direction was of great interest to me. But as I continued learning – and Music and Art was the beginning – discovering what was implied by creating an image, I began to drift away from that particular ambition. When I got to Black Mountain, it practically – it disappeared – the desire to be an illustrator. I wanted to investigate creating, creation, artistic creation.

MEH: Did Bolotowsky have like a class? Did everybody meet and paint or draw? Or was it basically individual criticism? Do you remember?

GM: There were drawing classes very often. I think it was mostly drawing. The students would pose, in their underwear, and he would criticize works – I think I did almost – whatever painting I did in my studio in the Studies Building, and he would come to look at it. Yes, he would give criticisms of the work.

MEH: What was he like outside of class, just as a member of the community?

GM: He seemed to have his place there. I don't think he felt like he was living marginally in relation to everybody else. It would be difficult for me to really speak about that aspect of his personality. He was joined eventually by a young woman to whom he was betrothed, and they married. He became a very good friend. When I would be in New York on different occasions, I would seek him out. Once I met him by chance on 57th Street. It was in 1969. I had been invited to do lithographs at Tamarind, in Los Angeles, and I'd come to New York because it coincided with an exhibition, a first exhibition, at the Betty Parsons Gallery of my drawings. I had been introduced to her in Paris, and she eventually organized a show of my work. I was walking with my wife and son to the gallery, and I bumped into Ilya, and it was a very joyous occasion. We

spontaneously went into the Russian Tea Room [LAUGHS] and had a vodka together before going to the opening. That was among the last times I – But he was very interested to discover how my work had evolved, and it was a very warm – It was a very sympathetic meeting. No, I always liked him. I appreciated his humor and just his general experimental attitude. When I met Knute at the reunion, he more or less filled me in to a large extent, because he had had a more ongoing relationship with Ilya and especially that which concerned the creating of films, which was a side of Ilya that I didn't know but was important to him.

MEH: Yeah, that came later.

GM: Yes, apparently, but I had lost touch with him. I didn't go back to New York that frequently, so it was rare that I saw him afterwards. Then I learned that he had this very strange death.

MEH: Who were other students, besides Knute, that you really identified with at Black Mountain as art students?

GM: Identified with?

MEH: Or were part of the group who were studying then.

GM: Well, there was Leo Krikorian. He took a solarized photograph of me in my studio. [LAUGHS] He had come specifically to continue his research in photography, and he decided it might be a good idea to do some painting, because he was interested in color. So, he joined Bolotowsky's class. Yes, in fact we did paint, besides draw. Bolotowsky said, "You know, you have a very refined sense of color. Did you ever think of developing, just painting?" That

more or less got Leo started in a serious way to concentrate on painting. As we were more or less a group, a loose group around Bolotowsky, we became friendly. Then, of course, I met him much later in Paris. He had settled here for awhile, and we saw more – we saw each other. It's as though it was just a continuation of Black Mountain, the nature of the relationship even, and it was very pleasant. I liked Leo very much. He had a sense of humor and a way of getting on with life and probably more streetwise than I am. [LAUGHS]

MEH: What do you think was the effect at Black Mountain of having your own little study?

GM: The effect on my personality?

MEH: On your studies, on the way you worked at the college, whatever?

GM: It introduced me to a whole other approach – to studying and certainly to becoming a little more aware of my desire to be an artist. It made it more believable as a life that I could lead, by being next to older people who were more or less involved. Of course, in more intimate contact with an artist, such as Bolotowsky, or with Mr. Albers, even though I wasn't enrolled in his classes. I had gone to one or two of his classes, and I decided it wasn't the way I wanted to go. It wasn't that I didn't even appreciate his work, but at that time Bolotowsky seemed a more interesting personality and closer to my spirit, so I was more at ease and more comfortable with him. I felt Albers was a little too authoritarian as a personality, and he was giving projects to people like folding a piece of paper, unfolding it, dropping it on the floor. He had a whole kind of system worked out to develop awareness, I suppose, of materials and their

possibilities. But I didn't feel a need to do that. They would hammer a nail in a piece of wood. But I was part of the carpentry crew, and so I knew what happened when you drove a nail in a piece of wood. [LAUGHS] No, it was like he was teaching people an alphabet, and it was very important and many people were enriched by this contact. But my spirit had a need to be with something much more open and unformed, so to speak, because that's the way I was and perhaps I still am. But that's my way of going through life. So, I was more comfortable with Bolotowsky. Now Ken Noland was part of the group around Bolotowsky, but when Albers came he decided to go with Albers. It was very positive for him in terms of his work. That's the way I see it – I presume, because he remained with Albers, that he felt the same way. But it was closer to his way of creating an image. Bolotowsky was still in a more Western tradition of a plastic construction, and somehow Ken's work, his concept, was uncomfortable with that, but when he was with Albers, Albers wasn't thinking that way. He was saying "Let's see what happens when you place one color plane next to another," and that's it. That was just right, I think – I don't know if you interviewed Ken Noland, if he'll talk like this, but this is how it looks to me, with a certain distance, you see. But there was, if I have a memory, there was a certain falling out, like he was a traitor, I guess, to Bolotowsky – because there was this sort of dividing up, you know, what tendency do you represent? This is constant in the arts. But it was an initiation for me into this diversity and division and whatever.

MEH: Was it possible to study with both of these?

GM: This I don't know. I don't think so. There might have been a certain social pressure: "You're either with us or you're not." [LAUGHS] We're actually all involved in the same struggle of creativity, but these things seem terribly important, especially the less you know about life and creation. But these are patterns that keep repeating themselves. But, as I say, it was an initiation for me into this kind of thinking and what happens – the taking sides, so to speak. I wasn't really interested in taking sides, but I was part – I wasn't with Albers, therefore I was with Bolotowsky. But being with Bolotowsky didn't feel like I was waving a flag. It just seemed like the natural thing to do. I'm sure the Albers' people felt the same way.

MEH: Were there any serious – Were there any women students studying seriously with Bolotowsky, or was it basically a guy thing?

GM: It seems to me there were some women students as well. I believe – Well, I believe Joseph Fiore was one of the students, and his wife was also painting and I believe she was in the class. Yeah, there were a number of women students, but I don't recall their names. One woman student, whom I remember because I ran into her in California when I was at Tamarind in Los Angeles was Ruth Asawa – but she was an Albers person. But I liked Ruth. I mean it had nothing to do with whether I liked people or not. I wasn't angry at people because they were with Albers. [LAUGHS] I just thought it was regrettable that it became a problem for being relaxed together.

MEH: I was noting – I'd made a note that you worked with Molly Gregory, in the woodworking?

GM: Yes, I probably did work with her. Yes. But I was on the lowest echelons of carpentry. I was learning how to be a carpenter, as well.

MEH: What were you doing in woodworking? Do you recall?

GM: Well, I wasn't really doing woodworking. I was part of the carpentry crew. I was like nailing planks on the walls and doing some flooring and shoring up foundations. It was all basic work. One person who, with whom I befriended, was Stanley Hebel, and he was a very – He had natural gifts in this area. He was a very good carpenter. I ran into Stanley afterwards in New York. He was living at the time with a girl who had actually been in high school with me. That was sort of a grand reunion. [LAUGHS] But he had gotten a job, he told me, doing architectural drafting. He said he'd never done it before but he walked in and he just talked himself into the job and he sat down and he was doing acceptable work. But he had this kind of knowledge, and he could do it. He was one of the art students and he was working also with Bolotowsky.

MEH: Did you take any general curriculum courses?

GM: Yes.

MEH: Do you remember any courses in particular?

GM: Well, the poetry classes with M.C. Richards are memorable.

MEH: How do you remember those classes? What do you remember about them?

GM: It was an introduction to the world of poetry. She played records – recordings – of a number of the poets reciting their works, which was a revelation, because it's something I never would think about when I'd be reading. To hear the author reciting. And very often it was disappointing. I would have thought that the voice

would have been otherwise. But these are things you have to learn to accept. [LAUGHS] Poetry, especially contemporary poetry, was as much a revelation as what I was discovering in the arts. Since I was relatively unformed, everything was new and it was exciting. M.C. Richards spoke with a lot of knowledge and sensitivity, about the poets and drew one's attention to the music as well as the language, and the typography, how it would affect the way one responded to a poem, especially e.e. cummings. Most of these poets I'd never heard of, because I wasn't someone who would be reading that much. I wasn't a well-read person when I came to Black Mountain.

MEH: Who are some of the poets that she was talking about?

GM: She was talking about T.S. Eliot and e.e. cummings. Then, of course, there would be comparisons. I think Ogden Nash, for other reasons. But it was an introduction, a general introduction I suspect, to contemporary poetry. I can't recall all the names, but those particular come to mind at first, possibly because "The Wasteland" was a poem that I responded to. Then e.e. cummings, especially, I really took a great liking to his work.

MEH: Did you take any science or math courses?

GM: I don't believe I took mathematics. No, I took – I may have taken some history. I definitely took an economics class. I guess it would be a history or maybe it was – with Mr. Niebyl, Karl Niebyl? Yes. He was a Marxist – very Germanic.

MEH: Were you there when the whole issue came up in terms of his teaching? What do you remember about him?

GM: Well, I remember he was a very – My idea of a Prussian. There was something very militaristic about him, and I suppose he would be called "a militant" for this reason. Of course, he made it very clear he was a Marxist. It was my introduction to Marxism. He even complimented me on a term paper because he said "Considering you're not a Marxist, you did a good job." [LAUGHS]

MEH: Did you get at all involved in the politics of the situation? I mean, I think there was an issue – there were several issues that came up in terms of some meetings students went to, and a concern that he was trying to convert people to the cause – whatever "the cause" might have been.

GM: I wasn't involved in that. It may well have been going on. What I'm more aware of is a certain debate on whether the college should be isolated or open to the surrounding community. There was a difference of opinion. I think they made certain efforts, finally, to make the college available to those on the outside who might wish to come and discover what was going on. This occurred specifically when they organized certain plays that were directed by Arthur Penn. They were one-act plays. I have a vague memory of those.

MEH: Did you take part in any of those plays?

GM: No, I was never a performer. I don't even know if I helped with the sets. It could have happened, but I don't remember. I might have. I remember painting part of the building. [LAUGHS]

MEH: Which building?

GM: It might have been the Dining Hall. Yes, I was doing some of that. In fact, that brings to mind a fellow student named Louie Core, who was there at the time. I

don't know – He actually came to Paris when we were here, and we bumped into each other on Montparnasse Boulevard briefly, but that's the last I saw of him. He said he was doing something with lights, but in a very practical way – selling lamps, I guess. We passed some lamp store, and he was interested to see what was being sold here. But that was it. We may have had dinner together. But he was – he had become a rather close friend in Black Mountain, and he was a painter. He had a talent, as I recall, and he was very good at house painting, because I helped him. He was also someone a little closer to my age, as was Jerry Levy, actually, when he came. He may well have been the youngest. He was a year or two younger than I, I believe. He had this very sophisticated education, so I was learning from him. His father was Julian Levy, the art dealer. Once when we were in New York at the same time, he took me to his father's gallery. Julian, actually, became a good friend later in Paris. He came back to live here with one of his last wives. Well, he had been here before the War, and he actually was rather close to the Surrealist movement. He was very involved with these people, and he was a collector as well. He opened this gallery in New York because of the War. He was exhibiting their works. He was among the first – He became the dealer for Gorky. That was his major American artist. Once I had the occasion of being invited to his Connecticut home on a visit to America with my wife and son. There were many Gorkys hanging in the house, and Max Ernst sculptures on the grounds around the house. It was in Connecticut, a very charming site.

MEH: I was thinking about something else. I lost my train of thought. Well, it'll come back – this is not what I was thinking. What did you do on the Work Program at Black Mountain?

GM: Besides the carpentry crew? Well, I seem to recall doing different chores like unloading coal. [LAUGHS] Yes, we couldn't have been all that far from the station, because we needed coal, and everybody was there to unload a coal car. I suppose I did work in the kitchen – probably – and in the dining room. Probably things like that. Yes. I don't remember too many other things at the moment. I have more vivid memories of the work on the – I must have done some work on the farm, but not much. I was mostly on the carpentry crew.

MEH: And that was basically just doing upkeep and repairs.

GM: Yes. Yes. And literally finishing the paneling of walls, like in the Studies Building. It all hadn't been installed yet. There were parts of the hallway that I'm responsible for.

MEH: Oh really. That wormy chestnut paneling is still there.

GM: Well, when I returned with Knute, we walked up to the Studies Building together to look for our old studios. He seemed to find what must have been his, but when I looked for what must have been mine, it turned out it was now a shower stall. [LAUGHS] I told Knute, "You know, it's great being back here, but for the people. But for what it looks, how it's been modified by this Christian boys' camp –" There are these certificates at the entrance from the National Rifle Association, and I think "My God!" Then all this phony American Indian and totem pole and other decoration. I said, "I'd prefer to remember what it looked

like and be able to talk with you people. But what I'm looking at is disturbing to me. I feel better looking off at the hills and the lake." But I gather the director was arrested shortly afterwards for pedophilia. [LAUGHS]

MEH: Think he was. Very different place.

GM: So I have no idea what Black Mountain has become since. Perhaps they simply changed direction, directors.

MEH: So you were there for the spring of '47, semester, and then you didn't stay through the summer.

GM: No. No. I returned to New York. In retrospect, I regret not having remained for the summer sessions. There was one in particular, when – In fact one of the vivid memories was when we auditioned John Cage and Merce Cunningham to decide if they should come to the college. Cunningham sat down at the piano, at the first opening, and putting in wooden pegs and screws –

MEH: You mean Cage.

GM: John Cage, yeah, excuse me. Yeah. He performed his works for prepared piano, and Cunningham danced solo, and it was very impressive. So we said "Yes, of course. They can come." But unfortunately, for reasons I can't even recall – it was just a habit of going home, probably, more than anything else. It would have been a summer that I should probably have experienced, because I believe – well, Rauschenberg had come, of course. I believe de Kooning came that summer and possibly also Kline. Well, maybe not. He had come one summer. Maybe it was further down the road.

MEH: But De Kooning and Cage and Cunningham were there that summer.

- GM:** Yes. Yes. So I regret having missed that, but –
- MEH:** But you went home for the summer.
- GM:** Yes, I went home, like a good boy.
- MEH:** Were you and your brother only children? The two of you?
- GM:** No, I have a younger brother and an older sister. My younger brother is a scientist. He does fundamental research on the nervous system. I said, "Why do you work on the nervous system?" He said, "Well, when I first saw nerves, with the electron microscope, they looked so beautiful that I wanted to get to know them well." He thought some of my drawings recalled some of the images he sees. I said, "I guess we're both very nervous people." [LAUGHS] "You're studying nerves and I'm trying to touch a nerve." [LAUGHS]
- MEH:** And so at Black Mountain, do you have any particular memories of mealtime? How meals were conducted.
- GM:** I remember when we just ate mush. That was for budgetary reasons. I really have a problem recalling what else we ate.
- MEH:** I think the mush thing had to do with sending money over to Europe to help feed people or something. The Mush Days.
- GM:** That's possible. There was a young woman there named Vera Something, who was very politically active. She was with Paul Williams, the architect. No, it's quite possible that she was the cause of all that mush.
- MEH:** Do you remember Peter Nemenyi? I think he was really the cause of the mush. She helped cook it, though.
- GM:** Yes, I believe so.

MEH: I think. Yes.

GM: We had it three times a day. It was colder at night, I think.

MEH: That was like one day a week you did this?

GM: Something like that, yes.

MEH: Another question I was thinking about was when you were talking about the concern with the college being more closely related to the community. I think the person who really was involved in that was John Wallen.

GM: That's possible, yes.

MEH: Did you take any of Wallen's classes that you recall?

GM: Yes. Yes, I did study with him as well, yes. Yes, I learned from him.

MEH: What?

GM: Psychodramas.

MEH: Is that right? How did he conduct his class? I mean, what do you remember about the psychodramas?

GM: He would ask us to be part of a situation and see how we'd act out the rules, and then he'd comment on it. So, it was learning how to relate to other people and also to affirm oneself. Something as simple as your neighbor is playing their phonograph too loud, and they're preventing you from concentrating on whatever you're doing. So, just how would you go about telling this person without creating unnecessary ongoing tensions. This is the sort of psychodrama he would suggest, and then different people would give their version. They would act out the part. You know, knock on the door, et cetera, et cetera. Or not

knock on the door – pound on the wall, whatever. Then we'd discuss all this. It was helpful. It was certainly helpful.

MEH: Did you take any classes with Max Dehn?

GM: I may have. I can't recall. It's possible. I had a rather diverse academic curriculum, and, of course, I was majoring in my art work. I seem to remember working on fences, now that you bring up John Wallen. I seem to remember. I have an image of him – helping on the fences.

MEH: Did you ever leave the campus to go into Black Mountain, the village, or to Asheville or the area?

GM: Actually not, I think once or twice I'd go off to some bar down the road, but it wasn't at all of interest to me. I even felt uncomfortable, as I remember, because there were some local people there who were pretty rowdy and they looked pretty tough. I wasn't up to coping with that. But people like Leo – You know, we'd drive down in his car. He had a beat up Model-T Ford. He'd driven I think from California in it. No, he was quite a resourceful fellow. There were a number of resourceful people there. I learned a lot. In fact, because I was part of the carpentry crew, when I settled in Paris with my wife, I actually built almost all my furniture and shelves. And, you know, I was thinking, it's really useful, a college education. [LAUGHS]

MEH: Maybe we'll come back to Black Mountain, but why did you leave? Why did you – in the summer of –

GM: I think I left because Bolotowsky left. Yeah, I think I decided I have to go on to other things. I was someone who – certainly more so in those years, it may still

be part of my temperament – was quite unsure about what he was doing and where he was going. There was a fundamental insecurity, or lack of self-confidence. Black Mountain helped develop a direction and a confidence in my possibilities. But the fact that I was coming from a background that was totally ignorant of the world of art – there was no support from that side, and no way of learning anything. At the same time, my parents wanted to help me, but they didn't know what to do except financially, at most. I mean, they couldn't really help me that much financially. We weren't a wealthy family. Far from it. In fact, well, my father's situation improved over the years, but when I was born in was the moment of the Crash. It was literally a month after Black Tuesday. I was born the 26th of November, 1929. As I was subsequently to learn, my mother was totally traumatized as must have been many many people. They never got over it. It marked them. It marked their personalities, and she was always worried about money. This is probably what instilled a certain guilt in my brother and myself about asking for money. She was – Even when there was "security," in quotation marks, she would walk extra streets just to buy a can of peas that was one penny less. It was a mental that had gotten a grip on her. But because my father was out of work when I was born, we were eating oatmeal all the time. I remember oatmeal. I can't remember anything else. I probably had milk as well. But I was born in a black neighborhood in the Bronx, and I learned afterwards we were there because my grandparents had apparently been able to buy that building when they'd come from Russia. They had a general store of sorts on the Lower East Side, I guess around Hester

Street, a Jewish neighborhood. They were successful enough to raise five children and invest in an apartment building in the black neighborhood of the Bronx. When the Crash occurred, my grandmother was still alive, and she housed her children who had family in this building. So, the first four or five years of my life, I thought the whole world was black except my cousins and our family and the Italian who delivered the ice. Otherwise, all – I played with blacks. I mean they were all my friends. We were playing very rough games, as I remember, and it was pretty violent. But there was also a side that was quite humorous, finding old bathtubs and sliding down hills, because it's sort of hilly terrain in the Bronx, at least that neighborhood. But we would build all our own toys. Everything – It was just the way it was, and this is a first awareness of the world. Since first impressions are apparently very important, it may explain why I only work in black and white. [LAUGHS]

MEH: So, what did you do when you left the college?

GM: Well, my cousin, who is a musician – he eventually I guess by family pressure went into business, but his dream was to be a jazz musician. He played the clarinet rather well. But I think he ended up becoming a manager in an Alexander department store. But he brought my attention to the fact that we should join the army. So we went down, and I ended up joining and he never did. [LAUGHS] So I was in the army, and this was in '48-'9, I guess, or '49-'50. It was in that area. Then there was the Korean War, and I was still in the – I had been transferred to the reserves and then recalled because of the war. I never was sent to Korea. I was always Stateside. I was part of a unit that – a hospital

unit – because I had a medical MOS. I had been originally sent to Texas, and I was in an engineer corps. Then I was in the medical corps of this engineer corps, which is why when they recalled me I had a medical MOS. They assigned me to this hospital, general hospital unit, and we were shipped off to Fort Lewis. It was totally empty because everybody'd been shipped off to Korea. We said, "Well, we're next." But what happened, we never were next, because we had a commanding officer who was probably an alcoholic, and he had this idea that we should be some sort of combat medic. It was a contradiction in terms. We'd have these long marches with full field pack and whatever, and he caused a tremendous amount of demoralization, because finally there was a hospital unit composed of technicians, laboratory, X-ray, whatever, and medical personnel, and here they are being marched off like infantry. What happened eventually was we failed every Inspector General test. We were never considered fit. Finally, just about everybody was shipped off to Germany to do occupation duty in different units, and I was eventually discharged from Fort Lewis. I was working in the hospital, taking care of the wounded, mostly broken bones. That's what I had more or less developed as a specialty, making casts. It's all part of being an artist. [LAUGHS] You have to make sure the bones are well lined up. Well, I wasn't – I was taking care of it after. [LAUGHS] Giving injections – shots – to people and whatever. But it was mostly rehabilitation – medical treatment and rehabilitation of the wounded. Yeah.

MEH: Did you study art after Black Mountain?

GM: Well, yes, I studied at the Art Students League. There again it was a class in which my brother had been enrolled. It was with Will Barnett. It was in lithography and etching. But I always felt a natural attraction to all things graphic, and so I enrolled in his class and I became his, well – This was prior to going into the service, actually. I became, I was his class monitor, which meant that I was responsible for the class. He would come in twice a week, Will Barnett, to give criticisms. It was a job that permitted me to do my own work, and I also had a small salary. Then when I'd been recalled into the army, when I came back, I went to live, as I said, with my mother in Sarasota. I had this job with the circus, making props and floats for the opening of Madison Square Garden. But once the circus left to begin their season, I decided I'd like to go back and resume my studies. So I contacted Will Barnett and he proposed to give me back my job, which was very nice – in the fall. He said, "I have promised it to a girl, but I'll fix it up with her. I'll give her a scholarship." Well, there I am, and a few days later the girl appears, and she's mad as a hatter. It turns out that she's going to be my future wife. [LAUGHS] We got off to a very strong emotional start.

MEH: So, she got the job one way or another.

GM: She said, "I couldn't get the job, but I got the guy who got the job." [LAUGHS]

MEH: How would you compare study at the Art Students League with study at Black Mountain?

GM: Well, it's a very different situation, and the people – at least the time I was in the Art Students League it had the virtue of having still a number of former GIs.

These classes tend often to have many women. They enroll in art schools. So they comprised a good part of the class, but it didn't exclude the fact that they were serious and some of them did some very fine work – like Ann Arnold, who went on to a career as an artist. Her husband was printing. Arnold Singer, I believe. Yes. He was printing the lithographs, and Ann was one of the students and we had other people like Donald Budd – no, not Donald Budd.

MEH: Judd?

GM: Judd. Donald Judd. Yes. He was doing lithographs of trees in Central Park, without leaves. He was already becoming a minimalist [LAUGHS]. Then the trees disappeared. No, there were some promising people, so it was a stimulating situation in terms of the talents. I was learning. I was continuing learning. Finding my own direction. Working in the graphic arts. I was more and more conscious, it was natural, for whatever I had to say as an artist. That it was going to be in these mediums. But at that time, it was still in terms of printmaking, but printmaking in black and white. I never felt attracted to color or the use of color. It was getting down to that more and more. I was still painting in my apartment and my wife – because we got married – she was doing a lot of prints but she was painting as well. Then we went off – One day she said, “Let’s go to Paris.” I had told her I’d saved a little money when I was in the army, believe it or not, but I wasn’t one for going about drinking or whatever, carousing about, so I actually saved some money. She said, “Well, let’s go to Paris,” I said, “Oh, yeah, why not?” I didn’t know the first thing about leaving the country. So, we had of course to get passports. I think at that time she had to

be on mine. They didn't have separate passports for wives. That didn't appeal to her. But eventually the regulations changed. Then I went looking for a boat and we booked passage on a boat, the Holland-American Line. It turned out it was a one-class trip. Took ten days to cross the ocean. Very interesting trip. There were a group of artists from California and it was a lot of fun. The ocean was very calm. It was like a big lake. Even so we arrived too late for the boat train to Paris. They put us in buses in buses and drove us into the city and we got there like –

[END OF INTERVIEW]

[END OF TRANSCRIPT]