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[INTRODUCTORY COMMENTS NOT TRANSCRIBED]

**[BEGINNING OF INTERVIEW. BEGINNING OF DV CASSETTE 1.]**

**MEH:** Erik, tell me how you came to be at Black Mountain.

**ECH:** Well, you see, I left home. I hated school as a child. I left school at fifteen to become a farmer and worked at farming and so forth. And then I came to America because my father was a scientist. He was at the Rockefeller Institute. And the war came to Denmark. A week after I had landed in America, Denmark was invaded so I could never return. And by that time I knew I wasn't a farmer. That this wasn't going to be my life. On the other hand, I had no real education, you know. Leaving school at fifteen. And I even went to a farming college in America, and I was sort of completely—I didn't know what was going to become of me. And then I went on this big bicycle trip out West. I bicycled over a third of America on my bicycle over the—up in Yellowstone Park and so forth. And then I worked as a shepherd out in Montana. And I just didn't know what I was going to do. And then at that time out in Montana my parents sent me a thing from Black Mountain. They were always trying to get me back into their life which was academic. And I looked at that this brochure from Black

Mountain and said, "Yeah, I'll go." And so, that was the reason why I came to Black Mountain. And for me it meant a lot because I'd sort of left behind me my whole life as a farmer, the idea of becoming a farmer. And I knew that wasn't what I was going to become. So, Black Mountain was a turning point in my life. The fact that I was now at a college made all—made it entirely different. My life became entirely different, and my English wasn't that good actually. And, as I say, I left school at fifteen, so my knowledge of academia was very limited. But nobody questioned ever that I was not a fully-fledged academic. That I wasn't—you know, because my father was quite a well-known scientist, so they didn't think for a moment that a well-known scientist would have a child that had no real background at all. And I fitted into Black Mountain quite well. Maybe I was more critical of most of the teachers. I don't think that all the teachers there were Black Mountaineers really. I mean, you had Dr. Straus—I think his name was—who taught Latin and Greek, I think. I didn't have him. But he was certainly a very conservative German and was not at all in favor of Black Mountain really. I don't know why he had ended up teaching there. And then Dr. Jalowetz, who was. I mean, who really loved Black Mountain, and he was totally useless. But we all had to work at Black Mountain a certain amount of hours a week, and Jalowetz insisted that he too would work which was idiotic because he was more in the way. You know, being forgetful and thinking about music and so forth, but he actually had the spirit of Black Mountain and liked it. And then there was Eric Bentley, who was really a youngster. He wasn't that much older than me. And he used to come in every evening for hot chocolate

before we went to bed up in the Studies Building. And he was all right. He was—he was not a bad teacher. And I thought he was in many ways a city fellow. The fact that he had his—he later married the girl—but he used to sit and lecture, and she would sit on his knees, and he would sort of fondle her at the same time as he gave a lecture which I thought was a bit absurd because you're more sort of looking at what he was doing than—I don't know. Then there was a German arts teacher, Josef Albers, who I don't think was Black Mountain material really either. And I happen to dislike the man, and I—he was teaching drawing among other things, and I went down and sat as a—they were drawing my head, you know. And it was most embarrassing because he was lecturing all the time about how ugly I was: "You notice that he has no neck," he would go on, And he would go on like that until you were completely non-existent, And that was very disagreeable. And then a few weeks later there was a girl there who was not pretty. She was an albino which is not very—and she was from somewhere in North Carolina, actually. And he had gotten her to sit for this class, And he had gone on just like he had with me. Well, I was a normal—ugly or handsome—but a normal boy. You know, I had no trouble with girls liking me or anything like that, so I didn't take it very seriously. But she did. I mean, he pointed out exactly that she was albino, and he pointed out everything. Told her the truth about herself, and the truth was that she was ugly. She stormed out of the place and up to my study and was crying and crying and crying because she was pretty ugly. I mean, she wasn't a pretty girl. And I heard her and tried to calm her down. And then I rushed down, and I told him

off, and we never spoke again really except we were polite to each other. But I told him off in front of the class. I said, "You're bloody horrible and what you're doing to these people. Don't you realize it." And especially in this case. I mean, it's disgusting. And so, we never got along. We were polite to each other, but we didn't get along. And I found him extremely German, arrogant, and very concerned about himself and his own fame as a painter. I remember he wanted to make a well-balanced painting, so he divided the canvas in two, and then on each side under the term of milligrams of paint that was on either side. Exactly the same so it was a well-balanced picture. And I must say, I laughed at him. I thought him as absolutely idiotic. And you'll find that in most great paintings if you divide at one point in two, you'll find that it probably is more or less the same amount of paint used on either side. I mean, I thought—no, I didn't like it. His wife was a very good weaver, and they were quite beautiful, some of the things she wove. But as you say, I wasn't—I wasn't in love with Black Mountain. It didn't mean that much to me. And, yet, it meant a hundred percent, a lot to me, because it changed my life. From then on I was no longer a farmer. I was something else, you know. So, it had a tremendous meaning to me. And it's so beautiful. I mean, Black Mountain was in a very beautiful situation. And I liked working. I liked working in carpentry and so forth. So, part of the Studies Building I have built. And—

**MEH:** What year were you there? Can you remember? It was during the war?

**ECH:** Yes. It was '42 and part of '43. All of '42, I think.

**MEH:** I want to go—we're going to come back to Black Mountain, but I want to go back much further. You were born in Denmark?

**ECH:** Yeah.

**MEH:** Tell me a little bit about your childhood and your family and how you came to the United States. How you came to be here. Your family.

**ECH:** Well, my family was very rich. I wasn't born in a ditch like it is modern to be. It's politically correct today to be born in the ditch. Preferably with parents who mistreated you. It makes a better story. Well, my parents were terribly, terribly nice. I was very fond of them. They lived with me—in their old age they lived with me until they died. I was very fond of my parents, but I was a rebel. I ran away the first time at thirteen, I think I was. I ran away to fight in Spain. I didn't make it. Some policeman got me back, and it [was idiotic] [PH]. You know, you do idiotic things especially when you are in your teens. And my parents were ashamed of me because Spain was a long way away. But one has to remember—which people don't today—that once Spain was the center of the world. Madrid was the center of the world because we—and my parents—knew that this was the Second World War, and it had started. But England [UNINTEL WORD] stayed neutral and so forth, and Spain was left to—and I, being a youngster, conceived of the world as black and white. That meant that the black people—the dark side—was born negative and the other side. And to me the Republic was white. It was all made out of all wonderful people and so forth. And it wasn't. I mean, when you read [SOUNDS LIKE: Olbers] book about Spain, he was there. It wasn't that way. But to me it was, so I ran away there to

go to Spain. And I was so involved in the deaths of the world at that time. And I should say, I knew what was coming, partly by my parents, because my parents too were very much on the side of the Republic in Spain. And the world in a way was divided between the people who were for, the people that were against the Republic, and then the great majority who didn't give a damn. I mean, to them the fact—what was happening in Spain wasn't real because they couldn't conceive of what was going to become—what was coming. So, I spent—my whole childhood—I mean, I lived in a big villa. We had a summer house, and I even had a boat. My father had a little sailing yacht and so forth. We were living in a very, very privileged position, But I hated school, so I left school at fifteen and went out to learn farming which was idiotic. But then you do idiotic things when you are in your teens. So, my background was a funny one of being—well, I mean, being very much privileged. I mean, my parents—at that time you didn't run all over the world. My parents had been not all over the world but they had been in many countries and so forth. And so, they had a different life and—than the ordinary citizens of Denmark. And my family was an intellectual family and also related to the Ørsteds family and so forth. And it was a—and therefore also with Hans Christian Andersen. And it was an intellectual family who was wealthy. And my father worked at the Carlsberg Laboratories which were like Rockefeller Institute. I mean, it was pure science.

**MEH:** What was your father's name?

**ECH:** Gottfrid Haugaard. And he was a terribly nice person. He—but my mother ran the home, and if you wanted money for going to the movies on Saturday

afternoon where they had movies for children, don't ask my father because my father's answer to everything was, "Go and ask your mother." And he always said—when we complained, he said, "Well, my child, all my experience you are going to inherit. Now, there's something to look forward to." But when you wanted money to go to a movie, the fact you're going to —his wisdom you were going to inherit—It didn't really work out because you wanted the price of a movie ticket. But he was very nice, and my parents were terribly nice, and they had allowed me to live my own life. I mean, my father wasn't that interested in academia. You know, as if that was the only way you could live. So, I mean, he—he was just amused at what the things I did. But it was a very privileged background.

**MEH:** So, why did your parents leave this very privileged background?

**ECH:** Well, my father got a fellowship—I think, to go to the Rockefeller Institute for a year, and he went and my mother went to America and with my younger brother who was seven years younger than me. My older brother was just beginning university in Copenhagen, and I was out on a farm learning farming. And so, they went to America, and we stayed behind. And then my father went up to Dr. Hastings, who was a friend of theirs at Harvard Medical School, and he got very angry at my parents and told them that it was wrong to leave their two children there because Denmark would be invaded. So, that very night we sent—my mother sent a telegram to our lawyer, "Get the two children out." And he got tickets to America right away, and we left on the last Swedish boat that sailed across the Atlantic—the Drottningholm. And that was quite funny. Well, not

really funny. We were up between Greenland and Iceland, and it was ice in the water. And arriving suddenly this submarine came up—a Nazi submarine—and they pointed a gun at our boat. And, as I've said, you wouldn't live long in that water with ice flakes in it. And then they had the [SOUNDS LIKE: berry] lights, you know, which they could talk across from the two boats to each other. And we had a lot of refugees on board who were absolutely terrified and so on. I wasn't. [COUGHS] I wasn't particularly terrified because I thought, "This is a Swedish boat, and Sweden is neutral. They're not going to sink us." And they didn't. You know, a little while later, the gun was then put back in the canon, and the deck was put back in position and away went the Germans. But it was quite—it was quite funny because what if you have some pretty strange and nutty Jewish, very religious people—who do you seat them with in the dining room because they had to seat the other people. And well, you take somebody—like some kids and put them [UNINTEL WORD]. So, I was put with this group of Polish which was quite fun in a way because it was the first time I met Jews who were religious. I mean, my father—my parents' best friend was Jewish, but he was an atheist just like my father was. I mean, the religion didn't play. And so, I've known many Jews, but they had all been atheists or not at all involved. But here I was sitting with these people, and their father couldn't eat anything really because it wasn't kosher. And so, he ate fruit most of the time across. But his daughter was about my age, and I pointed out to them, as far as I knew, they could eat non-kosher food to survive. That's allowed in the—according to the religion. It's very funny because this girl then married a



Hasidic, religious fellow in New York who the Hasidic [SOUNDS LIKE: confeth] was Jesus returning, and they made—and he became quite famous, and she was his wife. And so, it was very funny. I was reading all about in the newspapers about this, and it was strange to have known her as a child, as a youngster, you know, coming across on the boat. So, in a way I sort of had a lot of fun talking on that. And, you see, in a funny way Denmark was indifferent in that we didn't have any very much anti-Semitism. I mean, there was a very famous comic, and we loved him. And he was in several movies, and he was very good. Very good. And his name was Borge Rosenbaum. Well, he too escaped Germany. He became -- well, he changed the name. You couldn't become famous under the name Borge Rosenbaum, so he changed it to Victor Borge and became very famous in America. But it was typical that it was quite all right to be Borge Rosenbaum in Denmark. That did not—the fact that it was a Jewish name did not affect us. So, I hadn't really known any anti-Semitism at all. I mean, it didn't really exist. Well, I'm sure there was a few, but it was so little that it didn't—ah, so, but to come back to Black Mountain—

**MEH:** Let's—go ahead. Go ahead.

**ECH:** As I said, it was so beautiful.

**MEH:** But you—when you arrived, where did the boat arrive. In New York harbor?

**ECH:** New York.

**MEH:** Okay. Your parents were in Boston.

**ECH:** No, they were still. They were still in New York.

**MEH:** At Rockefeller—

**ECH:** They were still at the Rockefeller Institute doing research. And then they got me to an Essex County Agricultural School on a farm, and, my god, they were morons, most of the other students, and it was pretty horrible. And I was staying with the head of Essex County Agricultural School, and he was a Baptist and very religious. And I was not. I mean, no, I really didn't know much about Christianity because my father was an atheist and didn't—he never even went into a church because he disliked religion. And so, I was really stuck there. And they always wanted me—asked me to go to their church. And I always managed to refuse. But at last they said there was a big meeting in Mechanics Hall, I think it's called—in Boston. It's a big hall. It can seat several thousand people. And I thought, "Well, that might be interesting. I'll go along and see." So, I was at Mechanics Hall sitting, and all of a sudden one man started screaming, "There's a sinner among us. There's a sinner among us." And I looked around because I was kind of interested to find out who the sinner was. It was ME. And they were praying for him and so forth. And I just ran out of the hall. And my parents at that time had moved Boston, and my father was at Harvard Medical School. And I just ran home and said, "This is impossible." And my father and my mother laughed and said, "Well, [UNINTEL] right. There was a sinner among them." But that was a little too much. So, that was the end of Essex County Agricultural School. So, and then I went out West to Stanford where my father had friends. And that was quite interesting because I was in Palo Alto. I went to school for a little while, in high school. And it was so

different from the Danish. It was quite funny. I wrote my first story, and it was printed in their—you know, they had—the school had a magazine. And so, that was the first thing of mine which was in print—this story. But it was—it was so different. Well, I'm sure that the school in Palo Alto was particularly good because of the parents of the children. They probably made certain that it was a good school. But then I went on this big bicycle caper which was three thousand miles or something like that across the Rocky Mountains and up. And then I worked as a—a little while for a [UNINTEL WORD] as a shepherd on a Do Re Mi Farm outside Livingston, Montana. And I loved the West. It was absolutely beautiful. And the funny thing is that now the car. Everybody has not one car, but usually two or three cars. [COUGHS] That wasn't true in '41. Cars were relatively rare, so you could bicycle these roads. I remember up in Norman, California. That's along the Trinity River, and I rode there across northern California. And at one place in the mountains I found a little cabin. And he was gold digging. And he lived there with his wife and two or three children. And one-third of the cabin was simply a bed where they all slept. And I was sleeping in a tent outside. And he taught me how to pan for gold. And it's a very strange thing where for the first time when you time you see these little golden spots in your pan. They're gold. And he'd lived there quite happily and managed to make a living of a sort simply from panning gold in the Trinity River. I stayed there for three or four days with him and panned gold. I gave him the gold I had panned. It wasn't much. It was milligrams, I think. But it was kind of fascinating because you were in—completely in nature. And, as I said, there

weren't that many people around. It was nice. I mean, on Yellowstone Park there were a couple of hundred people or something like that. And I kind of liked the West in that respect. They lived their own—it was funny because we all wore our cowboy boots and so forth when I was a shepherd. You know, you were really dressed as a cowboy. And what did they do on Saturday evening—all these cowboys? Well, they went into Livingston and saw a cowboy movie. And the whole movie house was filled with men in cowboy boots and hats and things and looking up at the screen and all the cowboys doing things. It was really—it was very childish, but it was—I think they were relatively happy. So, I enjoyed that very much. And that was when my parents sent me this thing for Black Mountain, and that's when I—sort of—my life changed completely. And—but it's a fascinating thing. I mean, now there's so much about Black Mountain and really none [all ?] of them were Black Mountaineers. But a lot of—as I say of the teaching staff weren't really Black Mountaineers. They weren't that crazy about the ideas of Black Mountain. There were a few to whom Black Mountain meant a lot. Ted Dreier and so forth. But it wasn't all the—all even the faculty. I mean, I think Eric Bentley was looking for a more prestigious place. I know it's a—well, now we have a tendency to probably make them all into “We are Black Mountaineers. We were all concerned about Black Mountain.” They weren't. Many of them were looking for better places, you know, like being head of art at Yale. I think it was an artist place. So, I had them—I spent a whole year there and then half-a-year—and then I went off to—my father was then at the [SOUNDS LIKE: Manningcott] Laboratory in

Cambridge in Massachusetts. And I went up there, and I got to be very friendly with a man whose name was Henry Wordsworth Longfellow Dana. He was very old. He was Longfellow's grandchild. And I translated some of the letters that Longfellow had written in Danish, because Longfellow had been interested in reading the *Sagas*, and he had taught himself Danish. So, I sat there at the Longfellow House and translated that. And then it was that I got drunk at a party that Longfellow took me along to [UNINTEL WORD] house. Then saying, "I want to fight for my country." The people across in the car from me were [SOUNDS LIKE: Sir Elsworth Lavery] [UNINTEL] was the Canadian Air Force. So, he suggested—and I didn't even remember it, but Longfellow remembered it the next morning—that on Sunday I was to come up to him in Toronto, and on Monday he would take me into the recruiting office and put me in the Canadian Air Force. And that's what happened. I went into the Canadian Air Force, and I must say, I think being in the Army—and I'm not Army man at all—but it was relatively easy. I mean, they were very kind to us. I mean, on the whole, it wasn't, you know, meanness or anything like that. And I remember coming to my squadron in England—it was an RAF squad, but we were both Canadians and Australians and so forth there as well. And the group captain—a colonel—we went in to see him first, and he looked at us, you know, and then he said, "You think I'm going to go and salute a bunch of idiots like you. You're wrong. There's no saluting on this squadron." And there wasn't any saluting. Then he said, "We have to salute the flag because that's an order." And he seemed not to be in favor of not even saluting the flag. And then he said,

“Remember, call the king Your Majesty—not George—if you meet him.” And I thought, “This sounds good. This sounds like a place I can live.” And there was no saluting. I mean, actually, on a squadron there are so many officers around that we would be busy with our hands all the time, you know, and they would be busy trying too returning the salute. So, it was clear that there was no saluting. I mean, it was absurd. But you were very nicely treated, and you were treated as—we had—once or twice a week or something like that we had a meeting where everybody would come, and everybody at that meeting would be of equal rank, even the colonel. And then we would discuss politics and discuss the world. And the colonel was very—that there was no pulling rank on anybody there. It was quite interesting. I mean, we would have somebody give a lecture because many of the officers, especially of the officers—the pilot officers—had been at universities or done things before that of interest. And they would give a lecture, and then we would talk and discuss things. It was very nice. I must say, I was not—I was able to live as a—I was a flag sergeant, and I was able to live quite decently in that atmosphere. It was a big Black Mountain, I would say, in a way.

**MEH:** Where was the ship stationed during the war? Where were you?

**ECH:** Near Skegness. It's over near the wash in eastern England. It's a horrible place and flat and not very nice. And actually, it's not a very good place though most of bomber command—the fifth bomber group—was there because you had fog, and you could go out in a flight and then come back and you couldn't see anything. And, don't forget, we didn't have the things they have today when

they could go down through a—it's much more, much more complicated then. I mean, you really had to depend upon the pilot when you're down through the clouds and hoping that he reach the squadron. And in some cases, it was so bad that we had to go somewhere else because we simply couldn't land. And then we went to a place that had FIDO. FIDO is Fire Intensive Dispersal—Fog Intensive Dispersal Of. That's typical RAF language. And that really only meant that they were burning oil and on the runway, so as you came in, you were into two flames on either side of you, and that did disperse the—more or less disperse the water in the air. But at the same time it gave you a tremendous uplift because it was hot, and so it was a difficult landing. I've only done it once and so—but I mean, I've found in most of my life that people are really quite nice to me. I mean, I don't have any memory of people being hateful to me or anything like that. I mean, it's been—it's been a good life.

**MEH:** So, going back—I want to move forward to your writing. But let's go back to Black Mountain for a while.

**ECH:** Yeah.

**MEH:** What classes did you take? With whom did you take classes?

**ECH:** I took classes mostly with Eric Bentley, and then I took architecture with a fellow teaching architecture.

**MEH:** Was that Kocher?

**ECH:** And—well, he'd been a student of Gropius, and Gropius came down to Black Mountain actually and looked at our things. So, I can always say I was a

student of Gropius in a funny way. [UNINTEL] But then I decided—it was like the farming—I decided that I'm not going to sit and draw in a horrible little bungalow for the rest of my life. I mean, that didn't seem to me the right thing. And I'd started writing by that time. I'd had a play written, and so, it was beginning to—

**MEH:** Tell me about—first let's—tell me about the play you wrote at Black Mountain.

**ECH:** Well, it was called *The Snow Falls Each Year*, and it was very close to the sort of Irish plays in a way. It was about the West Coast of Denmark and the monotony of life. And each year the snow falls, you know. I mean, there's nothing much—anyway, it was there produced. But it was sent to Chapel Hill there, and I got a very nice letter back from the head of it. I forget his name now. But he was a very well-known in the South, and he thought it was—had elements in it which were very good, he said, and so forth. So, I wasn't really—I hadn't started being a writer. I didn't consider myself a writer as I left. Then, as I say, I went into the Air Force, and then when I came back, I went to Mexico [UNINTEL] Mexico. And then I went to the New School for Social Research in New York –

**MEH:** I want to stay on Black Mountain before you go up –

**ECH:** Yeah.

**MEH:** In whose class did you take—did you write this play? Was it Robert Wunch's class?



**ECH:** Yes, I think it was. He was the one that said, “Send it to Chapel Hill.” I must admit I liked him. I thought he was a nice person. I didn’t think he was a genius. He wasn’t a great inspiration to me or anything like that, but he was a very nice person. And he had a lovely room—big room at the end of the student building with a lot of books and so forth. And I used to go to classes there of his and—about drama. And I liked him. I think he was a very—not a great, not a great genius in any sense but very good. And he did love Black Mountain. I mean, he was one of the teachers there who did like Black Mountain very much. Not as much as Ted Dreier, [COUGHS] who really made Black Mountain. But, oh, you could live at that place. It was so beautiful. And I must say, I loved having a study of my own. I mean, this was a great thing to have. I mean, you slept down in the—one of the houses down below, but you could always go up and have privacy. And you had a little bed or cot in your place, so you could always sleep. If you didn’t feel like going down, you could just go to sleep in your own little place, and it was great. I think that’s very important this—that every student had a room of their own. So, they had a kind of privacy, and so you could—well, I put it this way, one could get away from Black Mountain into one’s own privacy, one’s own little world of books and studies and so forth. No, it was just about finished when I came—the students’ building. I did some work on it, but it was more-or-less finished. And it was a lovely building. It was very small. The rooms were very small, but it was adequate.

**MEH:** What did you do on the work program?

**ECH:** Well, I—we had quite a bit of land further up the mountainside, and I was involved in cutting trees down—big trees. And then you cut them with an ax, you know, and a saw, and it was quite exciting. I found that very exciting to cut a big tree, and then finally it falls. So, that was one of those things I did. Then we had also some cows, and I had—I could milk, you see, which nobody else could. I mean, so, I did milk some cows, and I worked a bit on the farm. But I thought the work program was an excellent idea. I mean, it was good. What was it? Twice eight hours or something like that. I forget exactly how long time we worked, but it was a—it was a good idea. Did you ever come across a fellow who was there—Mendez Marks?

**MEH:** Well, I—he died very young, but I know something about him.

**ECH:** Yeah. He was—

**MEH:** Why do you—? How do you remember him?

**ECH:** Because he was a good friend of mine.

**MEH:** Okay.

**ECH:** I liked him very much. He was—he wasn't a great thinker, but he was a kind of person that had that ability to write. I mean, I remember he went to the *New Yorker* and suggested that he would work there. I mean—here [COUGHS] from San Antonio, Texas, and imagine coming into the *New Yorker* which was THE place, and saying, "I want to work here." And they must of been so amused that they sent him down to write up something that had happened somewhere. You know, a meeting or whatever it was. I don't know anything about what it was.

But he wrote—he wrote it up this thing, and they hired him which was quite amazing. And then—he hated Mrs. Roosevelt for some reason. I don't know. A lot of people hated Eleanor, but—and most of them didn't know why they hated Eleanor either. But anyway, the *New Yorker* had these things, sort of—about famous people. You know, I think it ran over two or three weeks, you know. And what happened for Mendez is—what was his job to do one like that over Eleanor Roosevelt. Well, I think he went nuts. I think he was in a nuthouse then for a while. I didn't know whether he ever got out or anything, but I lost touch with him. But he had an amazing ability to write [COUGHS]. Amusingly, just like *New Yorker* journalists. But I always feel terrible. Where was he—he was born in Texas in that place. He said he was the only Jew in Texas. I don't know. Texas, obviously, was not populated by Jews. But Mendez Marks—I liked him tremendously. He was so amusing, you know. He was amusing when he wrote, and he was amusing to talk to. He was a very, very talented person. Not on the—I didn't expect to get a great book, but I could just see him. He was just perfect as a *New Yorker* journalist—on the *New Yorker*. And I don't know the *New Yorker* today. It may—I still think it's an important magazine, but then it was VERY important. You know, that was simply a—when you made it into the *New Yorker*, you were there. But I think he had a complete nervous breakdown or something. I think it was over this Eleanor. Because he liked what he did, and that really made so much trouble, you know. I'm sure that he was sexually devious. He had a lot of problems. Let's put it that way. But he was a terribly nice person.

**MEH:** Who—I'm going to keep bringing you back to Black Mountain bit by bit. What do you remember about mealtimes at the college?

**ECH:** Aaaah, what was the name of our cook? Jack. I think it was Jack. He was an enormous black man. And he was kind of fun because you would sit and talk. You didn't eat at the same table all the time. So, you would sit at other tables and so forth. He was very nice. About the food, I don't know whether Jack was a great cook, but then I was only seventeen, eighteen or something like that, so you ate anything. But the dining hall was so prettily—and you looked out over the lake, and it was a very—I liked the meals. And Jack's wife was kind of interesting. Funny enough, like you had with a lot of blacks in the South, that when they get—he was an important man—partly because they couldn't pay him half the time. I mean, he wasn't even getting his pay because Black Mountain had never any money. [MEH: Actually, the staff were paid, although the faculty often took cuts.] But then we—we didn't dare have black students, but we took in some people that worked, and, you know, serving meals and doing some work. But, actually, they were also students [COUGHS], and they were black. But Jack didn't like them. This is something I've seen. You see, he didn't like them because he wanted to be at the top position as a black man. And these girls—these were girls mostly—because they were also students all of a sudden seemed to him above him. It was very complicated thing, quite interesting. What was the name of Jack's wife? Rubye? Yeah, it comes to me. It was Rubye, and she was more intelligent than Jack. And she wasn't against this—these people. It was mostly people in music—these students, black

students. It was mostly Jalowetz' students really, and—but it was an interesting thing from the point of view of studying the whole problems of the black and the white community. If you want to study Black Mountain, you really have to start in the kitchen with Jack and Rubye. And it's quite interesting, but I remember having dinner there as being absolutely pleasant. And then we had dances, and I know I was probably being silly. I danced with a girl who I didn't particularly liked, but she had a boyfriend who was very jealous. And he went in, and he knocked me out, and I went flying across the floor, and my tooth—one of my teeth went flying all the way across the floor. And I don't like fights. I never had to fight. I didn't fight then. I said—only I said to him, when I picked up my tooth from the floor, I said, "You'll be ashamed of yourself tomorrow." And then I put the tooth back in, and it's still there. I mean, there now is sixty years since it fell out on the floor, Black Mountain dining room floor. And it was funny. I was talking to a dentist, and he said, "What did you do?" I said, "I just put it back in." He said, "You put it in a little wrong, as a matter-of-fact. But it's alright there." And he said, "You're lucky that you were drunk because otherwise you would have gone and washed it, and if you had washed that tooth, it would never have sat in." The fact that, you know, there's a sort of film around the tooth, and that had not been destroyed even though the tooth had been knocked out. And so that's one of my main memories of Black Mountain—that I had my tooth knocked out. It's the only fight I've ever been in, and I wasn't in a fight because I refuse to fight. I hate it. I think it's repulsive. That's why I don't like things like rugby and so forth. I think it's repulsive. I mean, people lying on top of each

other and fighting for a ball. I mean, it seems to me. So,—but it was funny losing my tooth. It's there. [UNITEL WORD]—there.

**MEH:** Do you remember any other parties in particular? Did you have any dress, costume parties that you recall?

**ECH:** No, but I remember we went and played Molière around North Carolina. Also in Chapel Hill and at quite a few high schools.

**MEH:** Was this—?

**ECH:** Two weeks, and I'm not an actor and—but I was along to do the scenery. And which was quite interesting, and I drove the truck. They went in cars. We had an old truck in Black Mountain. It wasn't very good. So, I drove the truck with the scenery around and the costumes. Because we had no money. Actually, Black Mountain had no money, and so, the costumes were made with nearly—the wigs, you know, because this is the time when people wore wigs in Molière's time—were made of cornflakes, and although, you know, they were so brilliant that they were accepted at the Museum of Modern Art [MEH: They were exhibited at the Dalton School. The Museum of Modern Art?] afterwards we had done it, you know. So, we—she was a very—I don't know what happened to her.

**MEH:** Frances Kuntz.

**ECH:** Yeah.

**MEH:** Yeah.

**ECH:** What did she do later?

**MEH:** I'll tell you, but not on the film. I just repeat myself.

**ECH:** Yeah.

**MEH:** But she was very talented.

**ECH:** Very. I mean, and it was fun. I mean, there was always a problem because you had the scenery, and each scene you come to—each school you come to—the scene is different, different in size and so forth. So, one had to make all sorts of ideas of fixing the scenery into another space, you know. Each space was different. But I enjoyed it. I mean, I must say. I loved that couple of weeks we spent going around like that. I think we had—I don't remember if we had any party where we had costumes on. We had a lot—I think every Saturday night we had a dance, and—

**MEH:** What sort of dancing did you do?

**ECH:** Ah, what the hell was his name? Peter. And that was one thing we did, you know, square dancing, and he was the one—[SINGS] “And kiss the girl behind you.” I forget all the lines. And so forth. And “Turn the girl behind you” or whatever it was. And it was—and we did that which was a lot of fun. Some people—I enjoyed the square dancing. Otherwise, it was normal, you know, whatever. And I rather like that. I think I was quite good at it. I remember during the war they always had a big thing in London where we all danced. And then somebody told them, “You get off. You get off.” Until only one couple was dancing. It was waltzing, and that was me, and I won a sweater I think, or

something like that. I mean, the best dancer. I couldn't dance today, but it was quite fun. No, on the whole I don't remember anything really very disagreeable. Well, I told about one thing. I mean, this teacher of art who I found disagreeable, but, on the whole, we got along. On the whole, there was more laughter than anything else at Black Mountain, and you know—

**MEH:** Speaking of some other faculty—you were talking last night about Paul Radin.

**ECH:** He was only there for a year.

**MEH:** Right

**ECH:** I kind of liked Paul. But he was a natural rebellious, and he used to try to interfere with the work program. And—which was idiotic and—but he was quite nice. He was fun. He was amusing. He made coffee for you and sit and talk. I used to go quite often up to his place. And he was sort of—he was—where was he? Out in California, at the University in California. This was just his year of absence from the University there. So, he was there only as a guest for one year, but it was an amusing thing—amusing. His specialty was Indians in—American Indians, as an anthropologist. He was quite—

**MEH:** Was Roman Macieczyk there when you were there?

**ECH:** Who?

**MEH:** Roman Macieczyk.

**ECH:** No.

**MEH:** Okay.



**ECH:** No. And all the great, wherever—the artists and so forth, they came afterwards when my younger brother was there a long time after me, and so we didn't have any—I don't know—because I don't follow more. I don't know if any of us got famous from the year when I was there. I had another friend was Bill McLaughlin. He was a good friend.

**MEH:** I know very little about him. What did you recall?

**ECH:** He was very bright, and he came from an Irish immigrant [UNINTEL WORD]—Irish out from California—out from Pennsylvania, from the mining districts of Pennsylvania. And why he had come to Black Mountain I don't know if [UNINTEL WORD] really knew, because you didn't get many from a mining town in eastern Pennsylvania. It's a horrible place, and even though they can boast Frank Lloyd Wright's house of—the river goes through the house—and so a very famous house he built out there and not far away from where my friend was. He was from Easton, Pennsylvania, it was called. E-S-T-O-N. No, he was just such a nice person. He was—he represented the students on the faculty meetings, so he had a good position. And he was very intelligent, and he was just a terribly nice person.

**MEH:** What did he do later?

**ECH:** I have no idea except that I know that he was teaching in a high school up in Massachusetts. When I went, there was a college there, and I was invited to give a speech there. And I didn't realize he was living in the same town. It was

a small town, and I only realized that afterwards, because I tried to find him because he was my closest friend. And then—

**[END OF DV CASSETTE 1. BEGINNING OF DV CASSETTE 2.]**

**MEH:** For one thing, your parents must have been very pleased that Black Mountain managed to keep you for a year-and-a-half.

**ECH:** Ya, I mean—well, they were pleased that I was off the farming really. But they never knew what the hell I was going to do. I mean, my brother was doing very brilliantly and was brilliant at school and brilliant at the university and so forth. And there they were stuck with this strange child who in a way—everybody liked talking to him because he was very involved in the world and so forth, but he had no profession at all. And for a long time—then I went to the New School and there I met Myrna. And then we had a fight or disagreement, and she went off to Haiti. I went off to Denmark to have my year as a gentleman. And my parents gave me—my mother gave me a year as a gentleman. Giving that much money every month that I could really live as a gentleman. I ate in some of the best restaurants in Denmark and so forth. I mean, she kept her word. I got my year as a gentleman. And toward the end of that year as a gentleman I got a letter from Myrna. And I had gone home really to marry a Danish girl that I had known since my childhood. She was the daughter of my father's best friend and [SOUNDS LIKE: Muegy Kuhn.] But it didn't work out. She really—well, I mean, what was I making my living on? I wasn't anybody. I was just this creature, and so, it didn't work out. And I got a letter from Myrna from Haiti. But she had found Tristan. Tristan [UNINTEL]. She was happy with him. He was an

Haitian scientist who was trying to—they were trying to develop a car which would be suitable for the climate in Haiti. And he sounded very interesting, but he was deeply religious—Catholic. And I know—I mean, I never sort of boast about being an atheist, I mean, because I don't want to hurt anybody's feeling or anything. It doesn't matter to me. But it matters to my wife. My wife was a real atheist, you know. So, I wrote to her in Haiti, why don't you come back here to me because that's not going to work. You're not going to be able to marry a deeply religious man. And she came, and I had a wonderful apartment right in the center of Copenhagen which was a studio for a sculptor. It was seven or eight meters to the ceiling, so that she could make all sort of statues. But she had gone on a fellowship for Rome for that year. So, I rented her studio. It was a wonderful place. Again, I don't think we had a fight because I never fought, but we had this sort of disagreement again. And then Myrna left or rather was going to leave to go to Paris. And I—she was never well, you see. And I said, "Oh, ja. Well, you can't go to Paris. You can't carry your suitcase. I'll go along and carry your suitcase." And so, as a joke, I've been—twenty-seven years I carried her suitcase. And then when we were in Paris and so forth, then we decided to get married anyway because we really did like each other so much, you know. And we liked talking to each other. And so, when we came back to America, we got married in the Waldorf Astoria Hotel with 200 people and a Supreme Court judge marrying us. It was horrible. It was horrible for my wife too. We didn't like this at all. My wife was very angry because she saw that the place in the hotel there said, "[SOUNDS LIKE: Seld] Leather Company

Meeting, or something like that,” because then my father-in-law could take it off his taxes. [LAUGHTER] But actually it was our wedding, and she got very angry about that. I told her, “Don’t be silly.” I said, “I think that’s fine.” I’m very fond of my father-in-law, Joe. I wasn’t in love with his wife. I hated her. I didn’t hate her as much as Myrna hated her mother, because she had been beaten and mistreated by this woman. I mean, she was horrible. She was stupid and domineering. Incredibly domineering. Well, anyway—so, we got married, and the whole thing was how much money would we get because—I remember my my—Joe came to my mother and said, “Should I give them a check for one or two thousand dollars.” And my mother said, “Two thousand, I think.” You know, she’s all on my side. So, we got a letter for two thousand and then we got other presents and money mostly. That’s what we wanted. And so, we left for Europe. That was a funny thing. We left on a little Danish freighter, and there was this Danish woman who was married to an Irish writer, and quite a good one actually, but he was more famous for having written the first critique of James Joyce and saying he was no good. You know, it can make you famous So, [UNINTEL]—and my wife had just been reading *Ulysses*, and she was always asking him about James Joyce and Dublin and, you know, from the book. And he was getting more and more sour about it, and his Danish wife—well, they were very nice, you know. You could only have twelve passengers on a freighter. If you have more than twelve passengers, you have to have a doctor onboard, and that’s too expensive. So, the thing was twelve passengers. And I loved it. I’ve gone on many of these boats. They were very cheap. They were

wonderful. You had twelve days when all you did was read books, and nobody  
[COUGHS] [UNINTEL].

**MEH:** So, where did you go in Europe?

**ECH:** We went—the first month there we went to Rapallo. And I had—your famous man had lived in Rapallo. Who they put it in a nuthouse. He had been fascist and put in a nuthouse in America.

**MEH:** Oh, Ezra Pound.

**ECH:** Ezra Pound, yes. So, I had Ezra Pound's library, and I could use any of Ezra Pound's books when we lived there because there was somebody there who was doing the letters of Ezra Pound, and that is when I got this—in one of the letters of Ezra Pound he referred to the biggest idiot writing a critique of the greatest writer of the century. And the idiot was the fellow I met on the boat. So, you know,—we lived there quite happily using up the money. But then my father-in-law decided he wanted to her back in America. He kept writing about it, "I'll pay you for going back," you know. So, we went back to America, and then he wouldn't pay us for going back. You know, he was—and we had no money, so that winter we sold Christmas trees in New York for some gangsters. And we found out that they weren't paying us correctly, so every fifth Christmas tree we simply stuck the money into our—not into our pockets because they would come and ask you to empty your pockets—but into our underwear. I remember my wife taking off her underwear when we got home—my parents were living then on Long Island—and all the dollar bills falling on the floor. And

we managed to make enough money selling Christmas trees, and—for her to go back, but not enough for a ticket for me. She had some friends there, so she went back to Denmark and had a job of a kind taking care of a child in somebody's home. And I started working as a carpenter, making oak flooring and some new houses built. And eventually my father-in-law felt so badly, and I was making enough money putting these oak flooring down that I had money enough to go back. But he was—he was very funny. I was selling Christmas trees—what is it, the Holland Tunnel? It's the tunnel from New Jersey going over to—is that the Holland Tunnel?

**MEH:** The Holland Tunnel.

**ECH:** It was right—and it was a horrible part of New Jersey. And they had I thought rented this place. But they hadn't rented. They weren't paying for it at all. We had a thousand Christmas trees, and naturally the thing started in the 1<sup>st</sup> of December, but nobody buys Christmas trees the 1<sup>st</sup> of December. The idea was that you were to be there so people knew and seeing it. And there was a coffee place where they had made coffee, and I went in there because it was cold naturally, and I found that the gas could work, so I could heat up this empty place for making coffee, a little house. And then I had all these children, and I can still feel the kind of horror. I mean, they wanted affection more than anything else. You cannot believe their stories. Most of their mothers were whores, and most of their fathers were in jail. And they had—they were living off the street. Ten / twelve years old or younger even than that. And they came to me, and I had them in this coffee shop. The whole place was filled with me

and ten or twelve little children. And it was so important for them. And I tried—I taught them how to write poetry. Now, their language was absolutely horrid. You can't believe the words that they used. I mean, they were dirty words, you know, for anything, and they used language like that, and they wanted to stand close to me. And they—also I thought if I had two / three close to me, then I would next time say, "Now, you have to stand. These other people can —." It was pathetic. They were in such—it was horrible. And it was horrible, and it was nice at the same time. It was wonderful. These children—I really taught them how to write poetry and the purpose of writing poetry and so forth. And they were writing poetry. And there was one little kid who knew all the Christmas songs, and some of the other kids said to me, you know, "His mother is a whore and his father is in jail. He won't have any Christmas at all." And they were very tough these kids at the same time. There was this sort of [UNINTEL WORD] restaurant very close, a hundred meters or something away, and two little kids eight or ten years old—he said, "That bastard over there. He won't give us any food." You know, he wouldn't—"We'll fix him." The next day I came that restaurant had been burned. Two eight-year-olds had done it. I can't believe it. There was one child who carried a revolver. He was ten or something like that. And I was frightened of the revolver, you know, because it was a real revolver and it was loaded. So, I said, I mean, "You can't come." You know. He may have been ten or something like that. And then some of the kids came up to me and said, "Don't be so hard on him. He saw his father kill his mother in their very room." He was in the very room when his father killed his mother. And so, I

learned something from the children about being tolerant, and so, he was allowed even with his gun. [COUGHS]

**MEH:** Erik, I want us to go—I'm afraid we're not going to get to your own work. You have so many stories. You're a real storyteller.

**ECH:** No, but, you see, the reason why I'm really telling you the story is that it meant so much to me, and it meant—in a way I couldn't say I started writing books for children, but it was terribly influential. And when I left after Christmas—you know, on Christmas Day, you know, when you are no more selling Christmas trees, I felt like I had run away from something where I should have stayed. But how could I stay with these children. I had no money and nothing, you know. I mean, I was just selling Christmas trees. And some people came up to me from the New Jersey Department of Welfare—whatever it was—and said to me [IN A VERY NASTY VOICE], "If they're any trouble, you know, we got—just send the kids down to us. We got a stick, or something, and give them a good beating." I mean, they were really brutes, and they were working with children—getting paid for working with children—and they were brutes. And that whole world made an—it made a big impression on me. And then we went back to Europe and with the help of my mother and also my—we then stayed in Majorca. And there it actually—partly my hero of Ibiza again—in Ibiza and Majorca were these children of—poverty-stricken children and so forth. So, this has all been a great influence on my—and I had written one book which was—fascinated me. I had written half of it only, and it was about the last [SOUNDS LIKE: Quokenerd] in Norway who put back the clock. Norway had become



Christianized, and he un-Christianized it and brought back the old gods for twenty years, and then he was killed by a slave. And I had written a book about that, and I sent it to Houghton-Mifflin because I thought that was a nice publishing house. And they wrote back a letter, "This is the most distinguished manuscript we have ever received." And then they explained why they wouldn't publish it because there was no money in it. But obviously everybody read it at Houghton Mifflin, and I got a letter from the woman in charge of the children's literature. She wrote to me, "Well, could you write a children's book from the same time." And then I wrote the *Hakon of Rogen's Saga*. And they published it, and it was an honor book by the *Herald Tribune*, and sort of established me. And I all of a sudden because it was given very good critiques. So, that was really my start as a writer for children. Then, when we were living in Italy, and—I had written then some other books—then I was living in this little place called [SOUNDS LIKE: Scowally]. There was a child that came and begged. And I gave him—I didn't have that much money. I mean, we never had much money. I mean, we were always living on this sort of near collapse of our financial situation. But I would give him, for instance, an old shirt or any—anything, clothes and stuff like that, and he would sell it and get some money from that. He knew where to sell it. I mean, Italy was very poor then. And I had a couple of very nice children's boots that my daughter refused because she felt it was secondhand. You know, it was boots of friends. You know, she didn't like them. So, finally I gave it to this boy, and I said to him, "Now, look, I don't want you to sell them." He was wearing tennis shoes, and it

was snowing. Tennis shoes worn out where you can see the toes sticking out. And so, he came the next week or a few days later, again to beg. He didn't have the boots on. I said, "You have sold them." He said, "No." And I said, "Well, I won't give you anything unless you come back and show me the boots," you know. And he did come back and show them on the feet of his four-year-old brother. I mean, he was about eleven and he was four, and they were living in the ruins of a bombed out house. Surviving by themselves. And they became to a certain extent the hero of—what really made me quite famous was *The Little Fishes*. *The Little Fishes* was a book I wrote about the children that fled Naples for the monastery at Monte Cassino. I interviewed most of the—most of the stories in that book had actually taken place. There was the—but I made this boy in a way—I mean, he was inspiration to the hero of that book. And they end up in a cave in the mountains between the Germans in the English. It was a big cave. There were nearly two hundred people in there. They couldn't escape. They couldn't get out, and there was no food, and as a matter of fact, a child was born in that cave. And was baptized "Bombadino," and everybody saw "Bombadini" because he was baptized with that name because he was under the biggest bombardment. But Bombadino lived, and eventually went to Australia. Maybe, he's still alive with the name Bombadino. But the thing about the cave there—that belonged actually to the father-in-law of my best friend in Italy. His daughter had been in the cave, and actually her brother finally made it through down to the English to explain that there were two hundred people in this cave and that they were starving. But it was filled

with, you know, bombs on the ground. Bombs. So to get down to the English was extraordinarily dangerous because you had to climb and any time these mines could be exploding. And so, these were all stories practically, and my best friend there was a lawyer. At that time was very poor. I mean, it was during the war, and he had made a pair of shoes out of his leather briefcase—and that's the [SOUNDS LIKE: skytoon] for this and all the—these are all people [COUGHS] I knew, and it's the "little fishes" that get eaten, you see. Or die. And THAT was a tremendous success. [INTERRUPTION IN TAPING]

**MEH:** Did *The Little Fishes* win an award?

**ECH:** It won so many awards I can't even think about—six or seven of them. Women for Peace and so forth. The *Herald Tribune* award and the award for the best book printed in Japan that year. The Ministry of Culture Prize in Denmark. I think it won seven awards or something like that. So, it made me very famous, and it is in many, many translations. Not in Italian ones strangely enough, which is very funny. It's never been translated into Italian. No, I mean, it really established me at that point as the—maybe the most important children's writer. I mean, I've written quite few books since. And then the Librarian of Congress came to visit me. I was then living in Denmark. I had this beautiful house that was built in 1850 by the King, and it was an old school he had built. And the Librarian of Congress came along, and she asked what—we were talking about Andersen, and I took down a copy I had of Andersen, and I read her—I forget which story, but seven stories which I thought were not well-known but which should be well-known and so forth. And she was so impressed that she

immediately asked Doubleday—her editor at Doubleday—“You must get Erik to do a translation.” And then it was very funny. The one involved with Doubleday in children’s literature. He came all the way over to Denmark to arrange it. And he was South Korean. He was actually North Korean, but lived in South Korea. And he was actually very sympathetic to North Korea. It was very funny that he should be a head of Doubleday’s [UNINTEL WORD]. Anyway, I said I would do it for \$50,000, and that would be it. You know, they would pay me \$50,000. Doubleday wouldn’t, and so, he said, “I’ll get you 10% instead,” and he said, “It’s much better.” And it has been. I think I must have gotten a quarter of a million or something like that for my Andersen translation, and I would have settled for 50,000. So, that has been very successful, and too. And my wife was—she worked with Piscator, who was a very important German director and so forth—who had a school attached to the New School for Social Research, and she was teaching there.

**MEH:** What was she was teaching—?

**ECH:** Drama. But then she quit her job to work with Bertolt Brecht, the German playwright. And for two years she worked with Bertolt Brecht, and—

**MEH:** What was she doing with him?

**ECH:** Translating mostly. Because his English was very, very poor. He really only had German.

**MEH:** And her German was fluent?

**ECH:** Not so much, but she was a good writer herself, so she could do it, you know. And he—for—when she had worked for Piscator, she had a student there and like everybody at that time had a pet psychologist. They were all into being psychoanalyzed and so forth. And this student was being psychoanalyzed by being involved in this. It was probably his father and so forth. And he would come at any hour, not for sexual life or lovemaking, but just to talk about his problem with his father. And one time he came at 1 o'clock, and that was enough. She kicked him out, and she was sharing an apartment with another girl. And the other girl got so furious at the kicking this fellow out, and—but she said she was tired of it. Well, he was quite a good actor—Marlon Brando. [LAUGHS] So, she kicked Marlon Brando out. But, now, she was very, very—

**MEH:** Where was she living then?

**ECH:** Down in the Village.

**MEH:** Oh, okay. So, you are back in New York, then.

**ECH:** Yeah, that's when I met her first time when I went to the New School.

**MEH:** Okay, okay.

**ECH:** She was attached to the New School, you see. And—but it was funny. Ah, I mean, I remember the first time I came. We went out together. She was—she told me, "I'm going to—I was invited to dinner with —" oh, how do you say? The name has escaped me. He and his wife. He was gay and his wife was a most famous actor. *Mutiny on the Bounty*. He was the captain on the *Mutiny on the Bounty*. And he's [UNINTEL WORD]. He was so famous and wonderful man

actually. Very kind and so was his wife. She was a very great actress, too. Ah, the name escapes me. It'll come back to me. But she was going out to dinner with him. [INTERRUPTION IN TAPING]

**MEH:** Okay, you were going out to dinner.

**ECH:** That's why she was invited to dinner, and I said to her, "Well, with him in his place." I said, "Well, I would have gone—I wouldn't have gone out with me if I was you." And she said, "Well, it's more fun for boys at that place." You know, because he was gay, you know. Oh, he was a wonderful actor, and Peter Lore was a friend of hers. So, she knew all these people—these German famous –

**MEH:** So, this was before you went over to Europe—before you were married.

**ECH:** Yeah, this is before. That's when we were first having an affair together, and she was—she knew so much more than I did, you know. She was much more sophisticated in that respect. I had not—knowing all these actors and famous people. I didn't. But it was quite interesting.

**MEH:** When you were doing the Hans Christian Andersen translations, you were living in Denmark?

**ECH:** I was living in Denmark. It took me a year.

**MEH:** At that point you had two children.

**ECH:** Yeah. And by that time I'd gotten quite famous, on my—you know, *The Little Fishes*, and other books. And they'd all been—I mean, all the critiques have always been kind to me. It's a funny thing with critiques. I've only one bad

critique, and that was two pages in *New York Times*. And the person—she’s dead, thank God—she didn’t like historical fiction. So, the whole two pages was about that you can’t write historical fiction and so forth. It was an attack upon me, and one of my best books, I think. Everybody said to me, “Oh, I saw you had a critique. Two pages in the *New York Times*.” And I said, “Yeah, it was a very bad one.” “Oh,” she said, “that doesn’t matter, you know. They haven’t even read it. But just the fact that, you see, you got a two-page critique in the *New York Times*. That means you’re famous.”

**MEH:** So, going back a bit, you were in Denmark. Did you come back to live in the States at any point?

**ECH:** Yeah, we came back once because my father-in-law was nuts. He had a nervous breakdown—a complete nervous breakdown. Partly because of his horrible wife. We came back, and that’s when my daughter was three years old. My parents were living on Long Island. We came back to help. And my horrible mother-in-law said—because we wanted Joe to go to a decent place, you know. I mean, he was—gotten a bit crazy. He was wasn’t quite, not that bad, but he was—and she said, “Ah, [UNINTEL].” She wanted him to go to the cheap—the local nuthouse and so forth. And me and my wife and my brother-in-law—we went down into the bank and took all his money out of the bank on a—you know, it was quite a lot of money—50,000 or something like that. And then we put Joe into the car, and then we drove on to the Philadelphia Institute of Psychology in Pennsylvania—in Philadelphia—which was very good. And we got him in there, and we were paying—well, it was his money we

were paying with. And they did cure him more or less. I mean, he was still a neurotic, but they did cure him. But my poor daughter was with my parents on Long Island, and I always—we came back quite—every two weeks or something like that to see her, always bringing gifts. And that's the time we came back, "I don't want gifts. I want you." And we decided that this was really too much. These were months with Joe, and Joe was getting better. And he was eventually gotten out. Joe was a hell of a nice fellow. But by that time we had used a hell of a lot of money. I mean the Philadelphia Institute of Psychology is not small money. All millionaires there who were a bit nuts. There was one guy who was a bit nuts—

**MEH:** We have to stick to your life on this tape. We're going to run out of time and tape, and I really want to know more about you. So, you came back—that was really the only time you came back—

**ECH:** We came back, and then when my daughter decided, you know, that they wanted us, and Joe was getting better, we went back to Europe.

**MEH:** To Denmark.

**ECH:** To Denmark at that time. Ja.

**MEH:** Now, where were you living when your wife—when did your first wife die?

**ECH:** Here. In this house.

**MEH:** Oh, here, in this house. So, you had this house then.

**ECH:** Yeah.



**MEH:** Okay.

**ECH:** We—I came back here—I came here—

**MEH:** To Ireland.

**ECH:** Well, you see, I mean, the thing was, in Denmark I had this beautiful house and my parents were living with me. My father died, and then eventually my mother died, and then I could sell the house. And I wanted—I had to decide—you see, I was writing to a certain extent for *Politik* and the Danish newspaper. So, I was writing in Danish as well as in English, and I found it was the one country I couldn't live in because it interfered with by English. Because it was my native language I was speaking. So, when my mother was very ill and so forth, and I knew she was dying, we decided that as soon we would go to England. And when my mother died and was buried and so forth, we went to England. But that was just when the—we were a year too late. They had changed some money—so, there were—10 shillings—20—10 shillings made the English pound into like European money. I mean, it was still a pound, but it was no longer a shilling and pounds and so forth, but decimal. And every price had gone up. And then I said to—the money I had gotten from a house in Denmark—I could have bought a house in England but nothing like I wanted, you know. So, I said, “Well, they speak English in Ireland as well.” So, then we went to Ireland, and the second day we were here we found this place. A ruin in the sea. And I bought it a week later. So, this was bought the second day we were in Ireland. And so, we lived here then from four years. My 25<sup>th</sup> anniversary we had the whole village down here. But my wife died then in '81. So, that was

a terrible thing. Except it was quite beautiful at the same time. I mean, we all—my children came, and we all ate together, and she would lie in the—and in the beginning she could talk. In the end she couldn't talk. And we really made a morphinist out of her. I mean, we knew—I mean, there was no cure. She was dying and in tremendous pain, so mostly my son gave the morphine. I couldn't. I mean, it's an injection. Then she died, and she had then a month or two beforehand, seen an advertisement in the newspaper from the Japanese foundation that there was this fellowship and scholarships for Japan. And Bertolt Brecht had always said to her, "I was only happy in two countries, in Japan and Denmark." So, she said to me, "Apply for it." I mean, after all my *Little Fishes* had been the best book, and I'd seven books translated into Japanese. Seven of my books. And so, she said, "Apply for it." And I applied, and I got the Fellowship. And—but a month or something like or two weeks really before I was to leave—we were supposed to leave—my wife was dead. So, I buried my wife and then went off to Japan. We chose an incredible piece of luck for me because living in this big house, and my children would have gone back to wherever they had gone, and I would have been alone here all that winter. And it would have been terrible in a way. Whereas, coming to Japan, you were immediately in an entirely different environment and I [UNINTEL WORD] that to that. And I met my translator at the airport—he with all his friends or his scholars. And I shook hands with one of them, and her I married two years later. And—so I love Japan. I mean, I felt—and I was incredibly well-treated. And then it was at the time when my Andersen was

giving the most money, and so, I had money galore for a change. I only felt badly that Myrna was never to—and I never learned Japanese. If Myrna had been along, she would have been—because she spoke perfect Danish, and her Italian was and her Spanish was good and so forth. All the languages she could speak. I've never been that good. I speak Italian, but not that good. But, anyway, it was—you can't believe how well-treated I was. I mean, they gave me—I was going to Kōfu because that's where my translator lived. So, I've written these books about Kōfu. Yamanashi-ken and in the 15<sup>th</sup> century. And anything I wanted, they were willing to help. The government. And they gave me—I got a lovely house with a little garden that was kept for me, and I was paying something like \$20 a month for it. You know, I wasn't—I was given it. It was the engineer's house, and the engineers weren't there, so the house was empty. They didn't have an engineer at that time. So,—no, you can't believe it, how well I was treated. And it was so wonderful because I had to adapt all the time to something quite different. Also food-wise and in every way. And I loved it. And I wouldn't say I forgot Myrna, but it was like it was something past. This was a whole new life beginning and entirely different. And I was almost sixty so I wasn't a young man doing it, except I felt young and I ran all over the place. And I was quite capable, I mean, completely capable. So, and out of that I have three books I've written about Japan—historical novels. They've just come out in a new addition, and I think—well, one of them *Samurai's Tale* has sold very well. I think a 170,000 copies, so far. And—and I've gone back to Japan many times, four or five times, and I'm going this year as well to see my sister-in-law

and see my two nieces and then see all my friends in Japan. I don't know—some people don't adapt to Japan, but I did.

**MEH:** Tell me a bit about the writing of the three books—how you went about it.

**ECH:** Well it's—as I say, it's fifteenth century. It's a fight about who's going to be Shogun. There were three people—five people—and one of them was the ruler of Kai of Yaminashi, of that area [SOUNDS LIKE: where] they was living. And Takeda—Takeda Shingen. So, I studied Takeda Shingen. I studied that whole period until I knew it and even to the extent of seeing all kinds of things left over from time and—

**MEH:** Where were you studying?

**ECH:** Oh, I mean, just everywhere. I mean, they got me up to where the gold mines of Takeda Shingen was. I even tried to pan for gold—to find something.

**MEH:** So, it wasn't just book learning. You were going—

**ECH:** Oh, no, no, I wasn't studying at a university. No, this was—I mean, Takeda Shingen's—Takedo Shingen died, and he died of, I don't know, cancer or something like that. He died victorious, and probably he might have become the shogun, but he died. And his son was no good. He was hopeless really. And it's all about the son. You see, there are several things, like the son going somewhere to build a new castle, and I've gone that. I've walked exactly where he walked. So, I know all the places where he had been. So, it was more studying really the landscape, and then reading books about it, you know. I have a character in it. That's a different book—*The Revenge of the Forty-Seven*

*Samurai*. That's 1700, and it was a fascinating time. One of the characters in there who I like very much. His name was Ootaka Gengo, and he was one of the forty-seven samurai that revenge the master. And he had such a horrible temper—it was a dangerous temper—that the head these forty-seven samurais—the whole idea was that nobody was going to know that they were going to revenge themselves because then the killer, the one they were going to revenge themselves [NOT CLEAR], would have—be secured, you know. And they wouldn't have been able to do it. The whole point was to—and so Ootako Gengo wasn't allowed to wear a sword. That was only the hilt of the sword. That was just a piece of wood that held the hilt [UNINTEL WORD]. He really didn't have a sword. And I sat with that in my hand. I sat with the letter he wrote to his mother before he died, before he—after their revenge they all had to commit *harakiri* or *seppuku*. So, I like having these things and seeing them and, you know, holding them in your hands. That means more to me than just reading about it in the book. And so, that's the way I study most, even in my early books. It's about Hakon [there] and Hakonegasaki—I went where these things happened. I went, and so I would know the landscape. I would know everything. So, it's a different way of studying. You're not university studying and going to a library. Feeling closed in there in a library. So, I'm glad—I mean, now that we've come out in the second edition there in paperback. And I thought they were beautifully illustrated [SOUNDS LIKE: seeing them there]. And the Japanese were illustrating them, but I thought they were very well done. And I still feel at home when I come to Japan partly because I know

Japanese history. I think it's very important because I remember going to India. And I don't really know India. I mean, I don't know the history. I don't know—whereas I've been in China—well, I have so many Chinese friends, but that's something else—but I also know the poetry. I know the fight of the Three Kingdoms, their great novels and so forth. I've read them in English, naturally. But I am familiar with it, so it's not to me—I mean, I know their civilization. I know the history of China, and so I don't—I feel more at home when I'm in China. I don't feel that I'm a—someplace where—whereas I [SOUNDS LIKE: expect] in India because I had no knowledge. I was in [goa] and then I took the boat up to—and I was in New Delhi, and I was everywhere. I saw it. I mean, it was interesting, but I was a foreigner. I don't feel I'm that much of a foreigner when I'm in China, for instance. I mean, I—and I certainly don't feel like a foreigner in Japan at all. It is when you come to these countries—I remember an American woman asked me in Europe, and she asked me, "Where are you from?" And I said, "Denmark." She said, "How nice, one of the clean countries." Europe was divided into clean countries and dirty countries. I thought, "Why the hell is she here?" I mean if she—and a lot of people today when they travel, they have no knowledge even of English history when they come to England or French history when they come to France, "Oh, was there a revolution in France? Oh, really, I never knew about that." This attitude, you know. Yet, the French revolution was so important to all of Europe—to all of the world really. And I don't really understand—I mean, I never particularly want to go to Australia because I don't really—I'm not in sympathy particularly with that. It's

fine I'm sure, but I don't feel like going, you know. Whereas there are lots of places I feel like going. I mean, I wrote this one book about Greenland. You know, the Vikings died out in Greenland. We know they were there in the 14<sup>th</sup> or 15<sup>th</sup>—15<sup>th</sup> century, I think, it was—because the ship was blown intowards and they were still alive then. But when we came back in the beginning of the 19<sup>th</sup> century really, they were all dead. The houses were there, and I stood in the house of Erik the Red. And the walls are maybe a meter high but you have—the whole house you can see out over the fjord where he came in. And I actually know all the sagas, and I know both of the Sagas of the Bjarni—of the people who went over to what was probably Canada—maybe Newfoundland. We don't know quite where, but they were over there to get wood because there's no wood in Greenland. So, I've spent, oh, three months or something traveling all over Greenland. So, I have this book about what happened which is only speculation on my part. We know that they were there in the 15<sup>th</sup> century because this boat from I don't know where—somewhere in Europe they have made a—have written about it. And we know that there was no priest alive anymore and that they had—because they had attended the [SOUNDS LIKE: maj] and there was no minister or priest to—so they had to do it in a—so we know a little about it. But we don't really know, so I wrote this book *Leif the Unlucky*. The children take over the running of Greenland in the end. Whether that's true or not, I don't know. But it was fun seeing Greenland and fun to see. I remember one house which was almost—I mean, it had no roof and that has fallen—the woodwork and so forth, but the walls were nearly—it was as if it had

been left. And realizing that this has been left five hundred years ago when people died out, and it was still there, you know. It was very strange because it hadn't changed, you see. I mean, when you are standing in Erik the Red's house. You are seeing exactly what Red saw even though it's five hundred years later. You are seeing exactly the same thing. Nothing has changed on the fjord lakeshore. So. that's a fascinating thing.

**[END OF TAPE 2. END OF TRANSCRIPT.]**