

Interviewee: FELIX KROWINSKI  
Interviewer: MARY EMMA HARRIS  
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**[BEGINNING OF SIDE 1, TAPE 1]**

**MEH:** [GIVES IDENTIFICATION]. Felix, you went to Black Mountain in the fall of 1948?

**FK:** Yes. It was the fall of '48 [UNINTELL].

**MEH:** How had you heard about the college?

**FK:** Oh, I had just gotten out of the service about a year ago, and I was working in a steel mill in Niagara Falls. And I was interested in going to college, and my former brother-in-law was also thinking of going to college. So we sort of sat down and went through catalogues, and we came across this article about Black Mountain College. And it sounded like what we were interested in – liberal and the arts, literature, music, and something which I felt quite poor in – almost deprived in the sense that I wanted a broader background in these fields. So we wrote to the college and they said, "If you want to come down for a visit, please do, and we'll be very happy to show you around and explain, and talk to you about the philosophy and the kind of college it is." My brother-in-law Herb and I, we drove down in the summer. So it was late spring or early summer we drove down in a [LAUGHS] beat-up old car. And we paid a visit there, and – I liked it and I filled out an application, and I was accepted and decided to go there that fall.

**MEH:** Were you particularly interested in studying the arts, or were you interested in studying something else, but the idea that the arts were there appealed to you?

**FK:** Well, what initially appealed to me was the arts. Like I said, I felt such a tremendous need to read and see and listen, and the faculty sounded like – and just the whole idea of Black Mountain appealed to me rather than just a conventional college. And primarily that was the reason I went there. And I think it fulfilled its purpose.

**MEH:** What did you study?

**FK:** Oh, for one thing [LAUGHS] – I don't know why but German language, which I thought that I was interested in poetry. And someone suggested that "Oh, you know, Rilke's got beautiful poetry in German." So I said, "Well, why not learn to read German and read it in the original," which, of course, is what happened. And I like music, the classics, jazz, and – Of course, everybody seemed to have been interested in music there, and everybody seemed to have a hi-fi set, so that was no problem, and, of course, the faculty there were topnotch people. And, oh, let's see. There

was sociology. I took English literature. American literature. For some reason I didn't take painting, although – Not in a course or anything, but I went to the classes. But somehow I never did sign up for an art course as such. Philosophy, of course. Took physics. Became interested in photography there, because there was such good photographers.

**MEH:** Who was there when you were there, doing photography?

**FK:** A very fine photographer from the West Coast by the name Leo Krikorian.

**MEH:** You aren't still in touch with him by any chance, are you?

**FK:** No, I've kind of stopped corresponding with him, but I know he's out on the West Coast. And some of the instructors were also good photographers. So it was a matter of – the nature of the college was such that if you were interested and someone – someone was experienced or knew about it, you sort of latched on and that was your course, and that was the beauty of – And they had dance [LAUGHS], and some did modern art dancing. Ballet wasn't a lot in my line (?), and I loved ballet. And it was really an exposure to a tremendous amount of material.

**MEH:** Were you accustomed, had you ever been in a situation like this that was so really free and without structure or –

**FK:** No. Everything up to that point in my life was pretty much structured. I had started going to parochial school, which, of course, is very rigid, and then after a while transferred to the public schools which was a little bit more freer but I guess in the '30s there was still pretty much of a rigid type of education that even public school kids got. And then I went into nursing school for three years, which is extremely regimented and structured. And then being in the U.S. Army in World War Two. That in itself is extremely structured and kept under a thumb all the time. So when I got out of service, then I worked in a steel mill for a while, and then I felt that, you know, I was being smothered, and I wanted to kind of expand and see what the hell the world was made of.

**MEH:** Who were teachers that you can remember that you studied with at Black Mountain?

**FK:** Oh, gee, there were so many. Natasha Goldowski, physics, chemistry; John Wallen, psychology; Bill Levi, philosophy; Mary Richards, literature; Max Dehn, philosophy. Oh, what a wonderful man. Josef Albers. Let me see who else was there. Dreier in literature, again. Rice for – let's see, I forget what he was teaching – English or –

**MEH:** Was that Frank Rice?

**FK:** Yeah.

**MEH:** What was he teaching? He was working in the Print Shop and he taught –German.

**FK:** German. I took German with him. And then there would be visiting people come in. Oh, Ilya Bolotowsky, painting. Who else? We had a wonderful guy played the clavichord.

**MEH:** Oh, Erwin Bodky.

**FK:** Bodky, yeah. So he gave – There was a tradition of a concert or some sort of entertainment every Saturday night, and he would give concerts or we'd

have a dance. John Cage was there, and I think this has been written up where the first Happening took place, you know, where [LAUGHS] we all got a handful of nuts and bolts and we threw it on the floor? Well, you're familiar with John Cage's music. [MEH: He confuses the spring 1948 visit when Cage performed on the prepared piano, and the summer 1952 happening, when Krowinski was not there.]

**MEH:** Yeah, yeah.

**FK:** And Merce Cunningham was there. Oh, he offered, you know, anybody that wanted to step in and dance with him. He was perfectly welcome. It was a lot of fun. It was a lot of fun. So it was nice to do all these things, you know. Not have formal sort of, "Well, I'm going to take this. I'm going to take that," but you could do whatever you were interested in. But, of course, you let the instructor or person know that you wanted to sit in.

**MEH:** You were there for one year. You left at the end of the summer.

**FK:** One year. I left there at the end of the summer. It was one year and the summer.

**MEH:** Why did you not stay longer?

**FK:** Oh, it was, as usual, one of the big rifts, some kind of a dissension was going on. And it was a very unsettling kind of thing. We didn't know whether it was going to be open in the fall or not. And I think also I had reached a point where I think it had served my purpose, so essentially this is why I left. And then I felt that perhaps what I needed too was I needed a formal degree, and, of course, Black Mountain did not give a formal degree.

**MEH:** You did not yet have your nursing degree?

**FK:** Oh, yeah.

**MEH:** You had your nursing degree, but you wanted a regular academic degree.

**FK:** Right.

**MEH:** Where did you go after you left Black Mountain?

**FK:** Here to New York City, and a whole bunch of us ended up living in a basement apartment up on [LAUGHS] 149<sup>th</sup> Street and Third Avenue.

**MEH:** Who were the bunch?

**FK:** Oh, it was Leo Krikorian, Knute Stiles, Dorothy Albers. There was the redhead. Can't think of her name. And people'd come and go. And so it was like sort of a home base for a lot of people. People'd come from somewhere and then stay with us and then they'd leave, so –

**MEH:** And you attended school?

**FK:** Yeah, I decided that I needed to go, so I applied to Teachers College, Columbia, and I was accepted and I got my Bachelor of Arts degree. No, it was Bachelor of Science, Bachelor of Science. And I continued on in nursing, because I felt this is what I wanted to do, and I felt it was more satisfying to me at the time.

**MEH:** And you've continued in nursing – psychiatric nursing, you said, particularly, or all kinds?

**FK:** Actually I've had quite a varied career [LAUGHS] since then. Do you want to hear?

**MEH:** Yeah, I'd be curious generally what you've done since you left the college.

**FK:** Well, I think one of the philosophies of Black Mountain College was that you – you should be happy in doing the work that you want to do. And so when I became unhappy in one aspect of my work, I decided that I wanted to go and do something else. So, for example, I finished my degree at Columbia, and I guess I also wanted to see some of the world again so I applied for a job in northern Greenland, up in Thule when the armed forces were building some kind of a defense base up there, and I ended up in Thule, Greenland for one year. And I became Chief Nurse of their small hospital, and when I left, it became a full-fledged military installation. But the beauty part of it is before it was military, it was nice to work with the Greenland Eskimo and the Danish population that was there and to go out on the icecap with the Eskimos and to live the long night and to live the long day, and it was just a beautiful experience for me. And came back and worked in Bellevue Psychiatric Hospital for a while, and then I also worked in the V.A. Hospital as a psychiatric nurse in Montrose. And then I became dissatisfied again, and I felt I needed more education so I went to N.Y.U. and got my Master's degree in psychiatric mental health nursing and from there I – Again, it was kind of varied. I worked aboard an oceanographic research vessel, the Chain. It was one of the very first – it was the first vessel –

**MEH:** Were you doing nursing on the vessel?

**FK:** Yeah. Yeah, I was the nurse. We worked out of Woods Hole Oceanographic Institute in Woods Hole, and that in itself was a beautiful experience because it's kind of like working aboard ship where, you know, you go from Point A to Point B and you sort of forget that the ocean is there. Well, we went from Point A to Point B, but to get to Point B we had to go to Z, X, and M and –

**MEH:** The whole purpose for being was because the ocean was there.

**FK:** Yeah. And it was interesting, because actually there wasn't that much work for me to do as far as the nursing, the medical end of it, so I was made official, unofficial fisherman and my primary responsibility was to catch sharks and all kinds of fish that were around. I autopsied sharks [LAUGHS] and noted the contents or lack of contents, saved specimens for the laboratory, and stuff like that. So it was quite interesting. And, of course, the oceanographic scientists are a terrific bunch of guys and women, and it was a, I think a – very nice experience for me. And to see the ocean and enjoy the elements. We were on a very, actually a very small ship. It was an ocean-going tugboat which was converted to a research vessel. It took us, would you believe, eight weeks to get from Boston to Cadiz, Spain. [LAUGHS]

**MEH:** Eight weeks?

**FK:** Eight weeks, yeah. Because we'd stop and be on station, and then all of a sudden someone would spot a pod of whales. Somebody says "Okay, let's go, and we'd chase the whales or dolphins or whatever was on the horizon," so it was tremendous. It was a tremendous learning experience.

And I don't know why I left, but – Then I worked on the cruise ships for a while as a crew nurse. Then I went to Indonesia and worked for an oil company, Caltex, in Sumatra, and – I didn't think they knew what the hell to do with me. The medical staff was all British, and I was the only American nurse there, so they says "Well, what the hell, we can't – we don't want him in the main camp." So they sent me out to the bush, which was the most beautiful thing they could have done for me because I had learned the language here in New York before I went there, and then to go out in the bush and work with the nationals and some of the aborigine tribes and go hunting with them and fishing and take care of their illnesses and their wounds and stuff. That to me was – for two years it was a beautiful experience. Then I came back and I've been here ever since.

**MEH:** Why don't we look at some pictures, and then I'll put this on and off because it will probably stimulate some conversation, some memories. Maybe I'll just leave it on.

**FK:** Why don't we look at the black and whites first. This is kind of mixed in with family and other – Here's a picture of my dad.

**MEH:** You're of Polish background, I assume?

**FK:** Yes, my parents are Polish. They come from what was the Russian part of Poland [UNINTEL] Polish, yeah. This is Herb Henry (?), my former brother-in-law. He and I became interested in Black Mountain.

**MEH:** He's the one who didn't go.

**FK:** He didn't go. No. Because he decided to go to another college. This is my mother. [INAUDIBLE] Ah, here we are.

**MEH:** I began to notice the landscape over here.

**FK:** Yeah. This was taken in '48 when my brother-in-law and I went down, various scenes. This is the –

**MEH:** Studies Building.

**FK:** On Eden Lake.

**MEH:** Taken on the porch of the Study Hall, on the deck.

**FK:** Right.

**MEH:** That's the sign.

**FK:** The entrance.

**MEH:** Is that you?

**FK:** That's me. Is the sign still up?

**MEH:** No, but you know what I have. What I started to say – is that an exclamation point after Black Mountain? [LAUGHS] At some point either – I'm not sure whether what I have is this sign or whether it was one that was across the end of the Studies Building here. But it's this width – At some point it was repainted so that it was white letters on black. And I was at the campus rumbling through the woodshop about six years ago, and I found the bottom half of this sign. It had been split. And the guy who owns it had used the top half to repair a bridge, and so I have the bottom half. I got it as far as Washington, and these friends have it in their basement at Washington. I've got to get it back up here. [LAUGHS]

**FK:** Those are [INAUDIBLE], Dining Hall. [INAUDIBLE] farm.

**MEH:** [AFFIRMATIVE]. The farmhouse and these are the Charlot murals.  
**FK:** This is the library.  
**MEH:** The library, right. Is this your sculpture or somebody –?  
**FK:** No, this is, oh, I forget his name. I'll think of it.  
**MEH:** Harry Holl, by any chance?  
**FK:** Harry Holl, yeah. Yeah. I wonder where Harry Holl is.  
**MEH:** He's up on the Cape. He has a ceramic studio there. He does ceramics. I have his address, if you want it.  
**FK:** Yeah, because I go to the Cape very often.  
**MEH:** Yeah, I can give it to you. I can't remember right now.  
**FK:** Just stick –  
**MEH:** I'm bending it so much [UNINTEL]. Boy, it's really clean down there. I've never seen a picture where it's so clean. A double exposure. Is that your brother-in-law?  
**FK:** Yeah. This is the –  
**MEH:** Music –  
**FK:** Music Building.  
**MEH:** Asheville, is that Asheville? Bristol, the Tennessee-Virginia line?  
**FK:** That's where our car gave out and we had to get rid of it.  
**MEH:** [LAUGHS] You had to get rid of it – going or coming?  
**FK:** After we left Black Mountain, we went back to Niagara. This was taken with an old Kodak. It was the days before self-timers, so we pulled a string.  
**MEH:** I wondered what that was! It's wonderful.  
**FK:** Yeah, I still have the camera.  
**MEH:** Back at Niagara Falls.  
**FK:** My sister. This was on her way to Toronto. They used to have a ferry. Oh yeah, here's Black Mountain. .  
**MEH:** Oh, this is the famous football game.  
**FK:** You heard about it?  
**MEH:** Yeah. I have a copy of the program. I've seen a copy of the program – the Cro Magnons against the -- who was it? Neander – no, against the something Neurotics or whatever. Anyway – Oh yeah, no these are great.  
**FK:** And this is me. And all these people.  
**MEH:** Who is that with the beard?  
**FK:** I had his name. We'll come across his name. But here's Arthur Penn.  
**MEH:** Right there in the background, or here?  
**FK:** No, right here. Here's Leo Krikorian. Bill Levi.  
**MEH:** I recognize Bill Levi [UNINTEL]  
**FK:** John Wallen [LAUGHS]. This bastard broke my leg in that game.  
**MEH:** Oh really? Broke your leg?  
**FK:** Yeah, he broke my leg.  
**MEH:** Oh, my goodness.  
**FK:** Oh, he was really gunning for me.  
**MEH:** These are wonderful. Yeah, I hear it really turned into a knockout thing.  
**FK:** Oh –

**MEH:** It was supposed to be a spoof, but everybody really went for blood.  
**FK:** Oh, everybody went for blood, I don't know why. This is Gregory Masurovsky.  
**MEH:** All these repressed energies.  
**FK:** God, it was – What a horrible game that – [UNINTEL] Everybody had such good intentions when we started, but, boy, it ended up with blood, and the worst I think was me.  
**MEH:** Broken leg.  
**FK:** Broken leg. [LAUGHS]  
**MEH:** Here's a circus somewhere.  
**FK:** Asheville. We went to a circus in Asheville, yeah.  
**MEH:** And this is Black Mountain. Who is that?  
**FK:** That's John Wallen.  
**MEH:** Who is that?  
**FK:** Oh, Tack –  
**MEH:** Tack Howard. Tasker Howard.  
**FK:** Tasker Howard. Economics. That's another course I took.  
**MEH:** That's not – Who is that?  
**FK:** That's Frank Rice. Yeah. And Tasker Howard. He married one of the students.  
**MEH:** Lorna Blaine. He's no longer living. He died.  
**FK:** He died. Yeah I knew. That's my ex-wife. That's a guy I was in the army with. Oh, here's Leo Krikorian, out in California.  
**MEH:** This is Leo Krikorian.  
**FK:** That's Leo.  
**MEH:** It's beautiful. Is that your photograph?  
**FK:** No, Leo gave it to me as –  
**MEH:** It looks like a professional camera.  
**FK:** This is one of his photographs.  
**MEH:** Not from Black Mountain though.  
**FK:** No, I think this is California.  
**MEH:** California. I really would like to get in touch with him. I guess I'll have to push it – press a little.  
**FK:** I think he's in Fresno.  
**MEH:** I'd like to come back to these because there's some I'd like to have. Do you have negatives?  
**FK:** I do have negatives in the museum (?). Now this one is—[UNINTEL]  
**MEH:** I'm writing Krikorian, check Fresno. Okay. [INAUDIBLE]  
**FK:** This I think is a postcard.  
**MEH:** Yeah, there was one that was similar to that.  
**FK:** This was taken with infrared film. This was a British gal –  
**MEH:** Oh yeah, what was her name? She had a hyphenated last name, I think.  
**FK:** Right.  
**MEH:** Oh, Bolotowsky I think was crazy about her. Whenever I showed him a picture he'd say "Ohhhh!"

**FK:** Yeah. She's very, very sweet, that girl. All those people were nice. That's a winter scene.

**MEH:** When it snows, yeah.

**FK:** It's so beautiful there.

**MEH:** It really is.

**FK:** Yeah, this is the library again. And this is the road from the farm going toward the lake. The Study Hall would be there, and I forget what creek this is. We used to take so many –

**MEH:** Walks up the mountains.

**FK:** Walks and rides.

**MEH:** [LAUGHS] Some lone soul.

**FK:** Look at that. That was a scene out of my study window. This was the Music –

**MEH:** Aerial photos?

**FK:** Yeah, Leo and I decided – or was it Stanley Hebel? There was a little airport just outside of Black Mountain, and I guess we'd just gotten our G.I. checks or something. and so we said "What the hell. We'll take a plane ride and see what the area looks like." So we did.

**MEH:** Off you went. Lee Hall.

**FK:** Right. I think Black Mountain was originally there.

**MEH:** Right.

**FK:** And that's the V.A. Hospital.

**MEH:** Reconnaissance photographs.

**FK:** [LAUGHS] Yes.

**MEH:** Early reconnaissance. Do you think that's the Jalowetz' house?

**FK:** Yep. I think this is Bolotowsky in his car.

**MEH:** Yeah, it looks like his beret. He has a son who looks now just like he did at Black Mountain.

**FK:** Yeah. Andrew.

**MEH:** Andrew.

**FK:** Andrew was this young –

**MEH:** Color transparency or something?

**FK:** Yeah, this, you can take out the photograph to look at it.

**MEH:** Is this a painting or – Is it yours or someone else's?

**FK:** No, it's somebody else's.

**MEH:** There's that postcard.

**FK:** [AFFIRMATIVE] [INAUDIBLE]

**MEH:** Bill Levi.

**FK:** Right. This is Chick. Chuck. Chick Perrow. Arthur Penn. Bill Levi. What's her name? She – I noticed her credit on one of Woody Allen's films. She'd edited – God, I wish I had that list of names.

**MEH:** I wish I could –

**[END OF RECORDING ON SIDE 1, TAPE 1]  
[END OF INTERVIEW]  
[END OF TRANSCRIPT]**