

Regional Oral History Office
The Bancroft Library

University of California
Berkeley, California

Carl Rakosi

A CENTURY IN THE POETIC EYE:
CARL RAKOSI ON POETRY, PSYCHOLOGY, AND WORLD AFFAIRS
IN THE TWENTIETH CENTURY

Interviews conducted by
Kimberly Bird in 2002

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Carl Rakosi at his 100th birthday party, November 7, 2003. Photo courtesy of Marylin Kane and the estate of Carl Rakosi.

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Interview History—Carl Rakosi

In 1910, Carl Rakosi arrived in the United States from Baja, Hungary, at the age of seven, settling with his father, stepmother, and brother in Kenosha, Wisconsin. Rakosi found his voice as a poet at the University of Wisconsin, Madison, by the time he graduated in 1924. He became a well-known poet in the early 1930s even as he continued his studies and took jobs in psychology and social work. In the poetry world, Rakosi is best known along with Louis Zukofsky, George Oppen, Charles Reznikoff, and, later, Lorine Niedecker as a member of the “Objectivist” group of poets.

After his associations with the Communist Party and New Deal social programs in the 1930s and the New Directions publication of his first book, Rakosi stopped writing and reading poetry altogether. He continued on his career path as a social worker, a psychotherapist, and an administrator and raised his family. He did not start writing poetry again until 1965 when a graduate student in England wrote to him, wondering what had happened to him. From 1965 until the end of his life in 2004, Rakosi was first and foremost a poet, writing, publishing, speaking, and, at times, teaching the craft. He moved to San Francisco by 1980 where he could be closer to his friends, the poets Robert Duncan and George Oppen, and participate in the Bay Area poetry scene.

Rakosi’s poetry is lyrical, at times meditative, often satirical, and humorous. At its most political, his work combines biting wit about the state of modern society with deep compassion for human struggle and suffering. His poetry highlights hypocrisy and corruption, but it is not world-weary. Rakosi’s poetry demonstrates a fascination and amusement with human character and it embraces the world even in all of its contradictions and outrages.

The interview began in July 2002 and came to a close three months later. During that time I visited Rakosi at his home in the Sunset District of San Francisco almost every Wednesday for a few hours in the afternoon. The interview is a record of Rakosi’s extraordinary memory and historical analysis looking back at his ninety-nine years as a son, husband, father, grandfather, poet, social worker, psychologist, and citizen of the world. Rakosi gave other interviews that focused on his life as a poet and an Objectivist. This much longer oral history illuminates Rakosi’s life as a poet in relation to all these other parts of his life and also provides a sustained glimpse of his impressions of world events and societal changes he witnessed in his century of living and what he hoped for for the future.

Rakosi’s epigrammatic prose style, his aphorisms, and his short poems evidence his love of the concise. It is no surprise then that the stories he tells in this interview lack neither depth nor meaning, but neither are they sewn up neatly for the reader. Throughout, Rakosi demonstrated his unique ability to place the final punctuation mark, in the form of a now invisible smile and shoulder shrug, of a particular story exactly at the point where others might begin to explain or interpret the story for the listener. Like his poetry, Rakosi’s oral history demands that we slow down, think, and draw our own conclusions and connections.

This oral history continues ROHO’s *Arts in California* series, which explores the experiences of writers, poets, painters, musicians, composers, and architects that have contributed toward the thriving San Francisco Bay Area cultural scenes.

The interviews were recorded on mini-disc and transcribed. Rakosi reviewed and moderately edited the transcript where he felt he could clarify or beautify the language of his responses and sometimes of my questions.

Anyone wishing to learn more about Rakosi's life and work will want to visit the Mandeville Special Collections Library at UC San Diego where his papers are held. Those papers contain detailed information on his extensive education, a collection of the articles he wrote relating to social work and psychology, his correspondence, and notes he used for various literary speeches he gave and articles he wrote or intended to write. Particularly interesting are letters from George Oppen who used a collage technique to praise Rakosi's poetry using lines from the poems themselves. Andrew Crozier's original letter that brought Rakosi back to writing poetry after his hiatus is also there.

The Regional Oral History Office was established in 1954 to augment through tape-recorded memoirs the Library's materials on the history of California and the West. Copies of all interviews are available for research use in The Bancroft Library and in the UCLA Department of Special Collections. The office is under the direction of Richard Cándida Smith, and the administrative direction of Charles B. Faulhaber, The James D. Hart Director of The Bancroft Library, University of California, Berkeley.

Kimberly Bird, Interviewer
Regional Oral History Office

Berkeley, California
March 2005

INTERVIEW WITH CARL RAKOSI

[Interview 1: July 30, 2002]

[Begin Audio File Rakosi 1 07-30-02.wav]

01-00:00:12

Bird: Okay, great. So, I think we should start with an easy one. Let's start with when and where you were born.

01-00:00:23

Rakosi: Yeah, sure, I thought you were going to start there.

01-00:00:24

Bird: It's a shocking question, I know.

01-00:00:25

Rakosi: Very logical. Well, I was born in Berlin at the beginning of the century, in 1903. My father at that time was a partner with two other Hungarians in a firm that manufactured walking sticks, canes. Every middle-class person used a cane in those days. Well, looking back on it now, it looks like an elegant thing to do, because the men used to twirl their canes and swing them as they walked. Well, that made you a gentleman then. If you read that piece, the autobiographical piece, I think I have in there a great mystery about my mother.

01-00:01:01

Bird: Yes. That's the autobiography piece in *Contemporary Authors*?

01-00:01:08

Rakosi: Yes.

01-00:02:10

Bird: And the mystery is why she didn't stick around or why she got a divorce?

01-00:02:15

Rakosi: No, the mystery is why I have no memory of her. What I remember instead is always being alone. At least that's the way I remember it. I was really terrified. This is from birth to my first year. Now, whether this is an actual memory or not, I'm not sure, but it feels like a memory of being utterly alone, in a huge room. That has left me with a fear to this day of being alone in a house. I had a couple of experiences later that were almost amusing. This was when I was working in New York. A friend of mine had a farmhouse and he said, "Well, you could use it." So, he drove me out there and then left. I couldn't see any other houses around for miles. I was really alone, and it was like plunging me back into that same situation. As it started to get dark, I got more and more terrified, and I left. I fled, really, before it got too dark for me to get back to the city. I have no memory whatsoever of ever having seen my mother.

We moved back to Baja, Hungary, when I was one year old. Baja is a city in southern Hungary, near the Serbian border. There were a lot of Serbs in the city because of the closeness to the border. The houses were all one-family houses. It was a city of about 50,000. There was a gate in the yard, and then the house, and then in back of the house,

there was something like a barn, because in those days you had horses. Even there, I don't ever remember seeing my mother.

01-00:06:21

Bird: You moved back there with your mother and you lived with her parents, right?

01-00:06:27

Rakosi: Yes.

01-00:06:28

Bird: And she moved from Berlin at the same time?

01-00:06:29

Rakosi: Yes, yes she did. Now, the only thing that I can think of is that she had a postpartum psychosis of some kind. Maybe extreme melancholia. It was called melancholia in those days. It might have been dangerous for her to try to be with us, so they kept her in the back somewhere. So, I was really brought up by my grandmother.

01-00:07:27

Bird: Do you know much about your mother's life, before you and your brother came along?

01-00:07:43

Rakosi: No, I don't. I know something about my grandmother and grandfather and that whole family. My grandfather, who is quite a dignified person, had built up some kind of successful business in Hungary. They had three sons and a daughter. One son, whom they all liked, was named Karoly, the Hungarian name for Carl. I was named after him. He lost his life very early on in the collapse of a building. The other two sons went to Munich, and apparently my grandfather subsidized them, and they just ruined him. They were irresponsible, apparently. The family was Jewish but they married out of the faith; they married Catholics in Munich. So, that part was very strange.

Later on in this country, my stepmother and father always spoke about my mother with great respect and sympathy, which puzzled me, but they really did with a sense that they felt it was tragic that she had lost her children. Now, going back to Baja, if you are looking at it from a social point of view, there were only Hungarians and Serbs there. The Serbs were more the working class. Where we lived may have been a small Jewish area. I remember terrific battles between the Serbian kids and the Jewish boys. There were big rocks flying all around.

01-00:11:35

Bird: Do you think that that was a symptom of the climate in general? Do you think that the Serbians and the Jews were clashing at all levels?

01-00:11:51

Rakosi: No, no, I don't think that they attacked us as Jews; they attacked us as Hungarians. It was a strictly Serbian-Hungarian conflict. The Jews in Hungary were extremely assimilated the way they were in Germany and in Austria. You couldn't tell a Jew from a non-Jew. They looked the same, they talked the same, they thought the same. The culture was the same. It was very different from the situation in Russia, and in Eastern Europe—very different. It couldn't have been more different, in fact. So, my grandmother was a very warm loving woman, and I came through the experience—

apparently—in a very wholesome psychological way; I don't think I suffered because my mother wasn't taking care of me.

01-00:13:30

Bird: I've read a specific quotation about you in a couple of different places about your grandmother being more than a mother, and her smile. I know you were very young at that time, but if you have any stories that you remember about her, any kind of examples of the way she related to you?

01-00:13:53

Rakosi: I really don't. I remember my grandfather more, because he had been reduced by his two sons' extravagant behavior to a little shop, where he repaired umbrellas. Now, that was a terrible comedown for him. My grandmother used to take me to his shop to visit him. "Don't disturb him; be very quiet." He was already sickly and a little nervous, so that I don't remember a personal relationship to him. It's all to my grandmother. They were very good to me. Well, my father had divorced my mother, as you know.

01-00:15:29

Bird: I actually wanted, before moving to when you came to the United States, I was wondering more about your father and his background, what kind of education--

01-00:15:43

Rakosi: Oh, I can get into my father's background, because I know much more about that. It's an interesting history, that family. His father, whom I never met—he would be my grandfather too—was a grain merchant, in Transylvania. Transylvania used to belong to Hungary, and after World War I at the Treaty of Versailles, Hungary had been on the losing side and lost Transylvania to Roumania, but Transylvania was the heartland of Hungary. That's where the original Magyars settled. That's still an iffy situation there. He used to travel all over Hungary selling grain to farmers, and farmers called him Father Abraham because apparently he had a big white beard, but they liked him; he was an honorable merchant, dealer. Now, he had two sons and several daughters—two or three daughters. The oldest son, since they were living in a small town, couldn't get a higher education. There were restrictions on Jews entering the university. There was a limit to the number they would take. The Jesuits became interested in him and paid for his education. In gratitude to them, he converted to Catholicism. He eventually became a professor of philosophy at the University of Budapest. He was distinguished because he was the first man in Hungary to set up a movie studio, (there were no movie studios then), and he married a movie star. I saw photographs of her. She was really something. She was beautiful.

01-00:19:27

Bird: Did they stay together?

01-00:19:30

Rakosi: Oh, yes. My father always had great respect for this older brother of his, but my father took a totally different course. His father had sent him to Budapest to learn to be a watchmaker. Now, in those days, there was an apprenticeship system. You started as an apprentice and then a journeyman, and eventually, you became the master watchmaker. That took about seven or eight years. I don't know the exact number, but at the end of that time, you were really a master at the craft. You could make every single piece of a watch or a clock on your lathe. Nobody in this country could do that. So, when he

emigrated to the United States, he was grabbed up by a firm. I guess you would call them a jobber, a distributor who also handled difficult repair jobs. So, my father wound up in Chicago in this firm repairing chronometers. Do you know what a chronometer is?

01-00:21:43

Bird: I don't know what a chronometer is.

01-00:21:47

Rakosi: A chronometer is a complicated clock that they used to have on ships. So, he had a job right away. Although when he came to this country, he said he only had about twenty dollars in his pocket, and enough fare to go to Chicago. Now, why Chicago? I think that part of the reason was that there was a small colony of Hungarian Jews there already. So, Jews tend to go where there are other Jews, like Poles go where Poles are already and so on. So in the meantime he married someone else, my stepmother, who is Jewish, but who came from a different part of Hungary, the part that is now Slovakia. Now, you have different status levels among Jews. The Slovakian Jews were not quite as educated, not quite as assimilated as Hungarian Jews. So my dad used to tease her always about being just a Slovak.

01-00:23:47

Bird: That he was somehow marrying beneath him?

01-00:23:51

Rakosi: Yeah, but he wouldn't go quite that far. She was very important in my life. Now, it is interesting, I was in Baja, and so far as I knew, I had never even seen my father, because he left so quickly, and I had never seen this strange woman. You traveled by boat then. She came there to pick me up. She was not a woman of great natural warmth, but a tremendously gutsy, courageous woman, very solid in her feelings and thinking. Not much of a thinker, but enough. Did I know I was going to be leaving my grandmother forever? Of course not. It was just like being picked from one place to another. I just submitted. They outfitted me in little boys' clothes, in Budapest. We traveled third class, my brother and I.

01-00:26:13

Bird: Do you remember it being exciting at all, being excited to go on the boat, and going to some other place, or horrifying?

01-00:26:25

Rakosi: Well, no. On the contrary, I used to throw up every single meal. Every single meal. Well, we used to run around on the deck, of course. We went to see what it was like, but it wasn't that I was particularly disturbed, but I must have submerged some of my feelings about having to leave my grandmother, so I assumed that it came out in my throwing up always. She was a good scout. She took it in stride always.

01-00:27:35

Bird: In your autobiography, in the article, you talk about your curiosity about going to see how the first-class people were faring better than the third-class people.

- 01-00:27:45
Rakosi: Yeah sure, you'd climb further and further up until you'd see the first-class passengers. Yeah, that was fun. I wanted to see what sort of people they were—second class, third class. Boy!
- 01-00:28:02
Bird: Do you think you had a budding awareness of class at that point?
- 01-00:28:08
Rakosi: Oh sure, oh yeah. There's a definite sense of class in every European, oh yeah.
- 01-00:28:20
Bird: What about your grandparents? It seems that they were doing very well, and then they were suddenly not doing very well, because of their two sons. Was that a drop in class?
- 01-00:28:35
Rakosi: Well, you don't drop in class among Jews, no, but in the general population, oh yes.
- 01-00:28:46
Bird: So, within the Jewish community, surrounding them, there wouldn't have been any perception that they lost face or anything?
- 01-00:28:54
Rakosi: No. Well, Jews, because of our history, we were always at the bottom of the ladder. We were always the lowest class, and we had to fight our way up. Although in Eastern Europe, among Jews, when you read the literature, there is a difference in social class, but it is based on wealth. In other words, if you are a Rothschild, you are at the peak. As a matter of fact, in this musical—what's the name?—this Jewish musical, the—
- 01-00:30:13
Bird: Is it *Fiddler on the Roof*?
- 01-00:30:15
Rakosi: *Fiddler on the Roof*, yeah. He's singing "If only I were a Rothschild." Is there anything more to say about my--?
- 01-00:30:41
Bird: I'm wondering if you know why your father went to the United States, why he made that decision to go?
- 01-00:30:49
Rakosi: I think for opportunity. It was a puzzle why I didn't talk more with my dad about why he did certain things. He would have told me. But, it's understandable. This was the land of opportunity. Of course, if he had stayed in Budapest, I wouldn't be here, because my mother and grandmother were killed in Auschwitz. Although, I don't know whether that is in my autobiography.
- 01-00:32:00
Bird: I don't think it is.
- 01-00:32:01
Rakosi: That's something of a story. I've been back to Hungary twice. Once I was there as the guest of PEN [Poets, Essayists, and Novelists], the international organization of writers.

I gave a lecture to university students, I think on American poetry, and I turned on the television, and that was the exact moment that I beamed in on a meeting of the Communist party, and that was also the exact moment when they decided to change their name from Communist to Socialist. I couldn't believe my ears, and they were asking each delegate--

01-00:33:26

Bird: This is in Hungary, at this point, deciding?

01-00:33:27

Rakosi: Yeah.

01-00:33:28

Bird: Okay.

01-00:33:30

Rakosi: They acted just like dummies. They had been briefed already, I imagine, for months that this was going to happen, but that was fascinating.

01-00:33:50

Bird: Do you think it changed much in the country?

01-00:33:49

Rakosi: Well, I wouldn't know. I wouldn't know that. The houses in Baja remained exactly the same as I remembered them. They don't tear down buildings and put up new ones in Europe the way they do here. In some big cities they are doing that now, but not then. Now, the second time, and that was more recent, I went back with my daughter and son-in-law, and we went back to Baja, partly in order to find out what had happened to my family. So, we went to the city hall, but during the Communist regime, they had transferred all of the birth records to Budapest, so I couldn't find out anything, but when I was walking down the street, I immediately recognized the houses, the kind of houses they were. So, we were walking down the street, and all of a sudden I see a synagogue there, a very handsome, rather new synagogue. Well, after the Holocaust, how could there be a brand-new synagogue in a city? So, we went inside and it turned out that they had transformed it into a library. So I was talking to the librarian who—I didn't remember much Hungarian anymore. So I tried talking in German, and we got along fairly well. So I said, "How come there's a synagogue here?" She said, "We thought that the Jews would come back."

Well, they had all been killed. There was only one single Jew left in the whole city of Baja. Everybody had been killed, sent to Auschwitz or other places. But, it shows—and this will interest you—that not everybody there was anti-Semitic, interested in killing Jews. They really thought that Jews had gone away to work somewhere, and this was the way to invite them back. It was an eye-opener for me. This is a dramatic story actually. Just one Jew. They had set up a tabernacle at one end of the library, and this single Jew, who apparently didn't have a family anymore, used to come to Friday night services and perform the rituals.

Bird: So the rest of the synagogue was a library, except for that one little area?

01-00:38:41

Rakosi: Yeah. So my daughter and I, and Dan, my son-in-law, walk outside, and I see there's a wall there and some names inscribed—carved into the wall, and just for the hell of it, I looked to see who's there. Well, that's how I discovered that my mother and grandmother had been killed in Auschwitz. Apparently my grandfather had died before that.

01-00:39:25

Bird: When was that trip? When did you find that out?

01-00:39:40

Rakosi: Jeez, maybe fifteen, sixteen years ago, something like that.

01-00:39:44

Bird: Do you know how that one person that was still going to the--?

01-00:39:48

Rakosi: I called him. He didn't want to talk to me. Now, from a historical point of view, it was interesting. At the hotel that we were staying at, in the lobby, we were talking to some of the young people there, and I asked them where the Jewish cemetery was, because I thought maybe there was something there of my family. They looked at each other. "Jewish cemetery?" They had never heard of a Jewish cemetery in Baja. They were serious. They were not anti-Semitic. They just had never heard of a Jewish cemetery. It shows that for successive generations, it just passes out of the consciousness.

01-00:41:14

Bird: Would they have assumed that everyone was together in other cemeteries?

01-00:41:19

Rakosi: Oh yeah. Oh sure. There were Catholic cemeteries all over the place. Hungary is primarily a Catholic country, although there are some Protestants there.

01-00:41:40

Bird: It seems that there was a pretty large Jewish community.

01-00:41:48

Rakosi: Actually, about 10 percent of the population in Hungary was Jewish. That was a large percentage, because the percentage in this country is only about 3 percent. Jews in Hungary played a powerful role in the culture of the country. Budapest would have been just a very ordinary city without Jews. They supported the opera, they supported the arts. The same thing in Vienna.

01-00:42:35

Bird: But it was still the case in Hungary that Jews were considered low on the totem pole of the hierarchy of the country?

01-00:42:45

Rakosi: It depends when. One of the best-known Hungarian playwrights was Ferenc Molnár, very popular. He was Jewish. A lot of the prominent actresses were Jewish. The Jews were very assimilated in the early days. When the Germans occupied Hungary, during the Nazi regime, it really was a satanic kind of trickery that they played on the Jews. They knew that the Jews were very assimilated and that in the non-Jewish Hungarian

population, they were respected, so they set up a system whereby they had the Jewish leaders themselves assume the responsibility for deciding which Jews would be deported. In other words, they were putting the burden on the victims. And, of course, they lied. They told the Hungarian Jews that they wanted them to work in Germany. So, this was this horrible, unspeakable situation, where Jewish leaders had to pick Jewish families to deport them. Of course, Hungarian Jews didn't know immediately that they were going to be killed, sent to Auschwitz, but eventually they had to know. So, my mother and grandmother, of course, were among them who were sent in boxcars to Auschwitz.

01-00:46:08

Bird: Do you know what the basis was, why they were chosen?

01-00:46:14

Rakosi: Hungary had a million Jews. They lost 900,000. Only 100,000 survived, and they survived by hiding, of course.

01-00:46:37

Bird: So, it was a trick that the Jewish leaders would start to send people, but eventually pretty much everyone-?

01-00:46:39

Rakosi: Oh yes, they themselves were finally sent, sure.

01-00:46:48

Bird: Did they do the kind of setting up the ghetto areas, like they did in Belarus or other places?

01-00:46:58

Rakosi: There was no ghetto in Hungary. That was only in Poland and the Ukraine.

01-00:47:21

Bird: So, you didn't have any contact with that family while you were young and in the United States, right?

01-00:47:30

Rakosi: With which family?

01-00:47:29

Bird: With your family in Hungary.

01-00:47:33

Rakosi: Well, years later, on one of these two trips, I did visit my father's two sisters. They would be my aunts, and they were widows then, living together in an apartment building, and they were lovely women, very nice. They were going through financial hardships, and finally one of my aunts said something about their having a hard time financially, and the other one squelched her. She didn't want to make it seem as if they were asking me for financial help. But I got to see what an apartment in Budapest was like. The Communists had built the most awful looking apartment buildings, new buildings. Oh, they were ugly as sin. Anyhow, it was fun being in Budapest.

01-00:49:36

Bird: Why do you think that the Communists built such bad—they had bad architects or--?

01-00:49:41

Rakosi: I don't know the details. They were cheap. They were probably put up in a hurry. Who knows? I don't know.

01-00:50:07

Bird: Just going back for a second to the Holocaust. I'm wondering if when reports of what was going on, of what Hitler was doing, reached you in the United States, whether you remember being worried or even being able to imagine that this might be affecting your grandmother and your mother's family?

01-00:50:31

Rakosi: Well, sure, I was already in my late thirties. Oh, absolutely. That just occupied my whole attention. You bet. That was about the time when Jews were trying to escape, and I remember there was a ship that tried to land in New York, and Roosevelt was president then, and he wouldn't allow it. No country would take it in, and I think the ship sank eventually. Then, of course, the state of Israel was created and I donated heavily to that, and even thought of moving to Israel. It was a big, big event in the life of every Jew in every part of the world.

01-00:52:10

Bird: What made you decide not to move there?

01-00:52:24

Rakosi: I don't know, because—I had been married by that time, and I don't think that my wife would consider it. I know she wouldn't consider it. But, I visited Israel and had a great time. It's a great experience to be in Israel. To be in a country that old, that ancient. You have no idea what it does to you. I had a similar experience just being in Rome. History is wonderful. But the city of Jerusalem is even more profoundly moving than Rome.

01-00:53:33

Bird: When did you go to Israel?

01-00:53:40

Rakosi: Well, I had been invited to be a guest by the mayor of Jerusalem. They have a retreat for artists and writers and composers. It's like Yaddo here. We stayed there for eight days. That is the only time I've been to Israel. There, we visited a kibbutz.

I must tell you that—this is my political self—it has to do with my father. It is probably in that autobiography. When he was in Berlin, at noon he used to stroll out into the Tiergarten, which is a place like Hyde Park in London. There would be guys, men and women, on platforms haranguing the public and talking about different things. He heard two speakers one day who were radical socialists. One of them was the famous Karl Liebknecht and the other was Rosa Luxemburg. Up to that time, he hadn't been thinking along political lines at all. It just came as a revelation to him, what he heard, and it transformed his whole character, his whole personality. So, in Kenosha, Wisconsin, where we had a jewelry store where he repaired watches, I used to listen to him recount his life in Berlin. I apparently absorbed his profound socialism. Socialism, to him, was simply a matter of being fair with everybody.

- 01-00:58:00
Bird: Now, Wisconsin was quite a socialist-thinking state at that time, I think, wasn't it?
- 01-00:58:04
Rakosi: Well, it was liberal, not really socialist. It was very liberal.
- 01-00:58:14
Bird: Was he a member of a Socialist party or active in that?
- 01-00:58:18
Rakosi: No, but I was active in the Communist party. The socialists were a little too mild for me.
- 01-00:58:25
Bird: I was thinking of your father.
- 01-00:58:27
Rakosi: Oh, my father. No, this was a small town. There was no Socialist party there. He talked a good line, but that was all.
- I remember Kenosha as the city where Simmons bed factory used to be, and the old big Nash automobile factory. I think it was—I've forgotten if it was the predecessor. Anyhow, two big factories at both ends of town. The working men there were mostly Polish, first-generation immigrants. They came from peasant stock. Peasants traditionally are very wary of city people. I remember long talks my father used to have with these Polish working men about socialism, about fairness and so on. So although I can't say that these Poles liked Jews, they came to respect my dad. For one thing, he didn't look Jewish at all. As a matter of fact, he looked like a Swede. He had a very straight nose and blue eyes and fair skin. So socialist ideas were with me very early on in life.
- 01-01:00:48
Bird: What were his socialist ideas? What was the main thing? What would he talk to the workers about?
- 01-01:00:58
Rakosi: Well, socialism is really very simple. It's social justice for everybody.
- 01-01:01:08
Bird: I was wondering if he was talking to the workers about organizing or fighting for justice for their--?
- 01-01:01:17
Rakosi: No, he would never get into that. It just didn't occur to him. I think if he had been in a situation where that came up he would have spoken up, but as a matter of fact, I don't remember any political action in Kenosha ever. No, nowhere.
- 01-01:01:45
Bird: It was a city? Is Kenosha very big?

01-01:01:48

Rakosi: About fifty thousand. It's a very industrial place. It's close to Chicago. In a sense, you might say that it's an industrial suburb of Chicago. I think it was about sixty miles from Chicago.

01-01:02:10

Bird: Just to get the story straight, as I suppose we should, you didn't go straight from Chicago to Kenosha, did you?

01-01:02:26

Rakosi: No. My dad was interested in having his own business. We tried out Gary, Indiana, first. Gary is even more of an industrial city than Kenosha. Gary is where the big United States Steel Corporation had its plants, so it was all industry. Gary was a tough, tough town.

01-01:03:17

Bird: I bet it still is.

01-01:03:19

Rakosi: I guess so. You know something about Gary?

01-01:03:23

Bird: I just know that they have a very high crime rate there.

01-01:03:24

Rakosi: Oh yeah. Well, my school experience in Gary was interesting. I started out not knowing one word of English, not a single word. I remember in Gary I had to pick up English immediately, and a little kid picks it up on the playground. I remember a couple of kids starting to tease me about my accent. I got mad, and I chased them. They ran. Gary at that time had a very progressive education system. They would test you and put you in the grade the test showed you belonged. So, I was—I don't know, in second grade, third grade, I don't remember now. It doesn't matter. Anyhow, one day someone comes into the classroom and says they want to see me in the principal's office. So I go to the principal's office. The principal tells me, "Well, we're going to change your class; we're going to put you in this other class." This other class was a year ahead. After about three or four weeks, I get another call to the principal's office. This time I'm put into another class, a still higher class. So, I'm pushed around two years in just a few weeks time. I'm now in a class where I'm the littlest guy. There are quite big fellas there. Of course, I survived okay. I was always a good student, but as a result of that, I wound up at the university when I was only sixteen. I say progressive, because it was wonderful that they did that. It would have been too boring for me otherwise.

01-01:07:11

Bird: Were there other students like you who were promoted quickly?

01-01:07:15

Rakosi: Not to my knowledge. Now, on the playground in Gary, it was a terrifying experience, because the steel workers were big guys, and they had big sons, and they were mostly black at that time, I remember, and these guys would come running out with brickbats, or wooden bats with nails in them and come at you, and they would take over the whole playground. You wouldn't dare go out to play there.

- 01-01:08:16
Bird: Did they steal people's lunches or did they just mark their territory?
- 01-01:08:18
Rakosi: I don't remember that. I think I used to go home for lunch. Gary is not a big city. It's funny how you remember these experiences. [laughter]
- 01-01:08:39
Bird: I've heard of kids threatening each other with baseball bats, but not with nails in them. So, how long did you live in Gary?
- 01-01:08:50
Rakosi: I think just a year or two.
- 01-01:08:54
Bird: Did you experience a climate of racism there at the time? You said a lot of the steelworkers were black.
- 01-01:09:07
Rakosi: No, I don't think there was.
- 01-01:09:12
Bird: Why did you move from Gary to Kenosha?
- 01-01:09:20
Rakosi: I think it was too poor a neighborhood. I don't think my dad was able to make it. Gary was a booming town at that time. There were a lot of available lots, and if my dad had invested in a lot or two, he would have been a millionaire. There are probably skyscrapers there now.
- 01-01:10:05
Bird: So he was still selling jewelry and doing watch repair?
Rakosi: Yeah, he wanted a little store of his own.
- 01-01:10:22
Bird: Do you know why he chose Kenosha as the next stop?
- 01-01:10:30
Rakosi: Well, Kenosha too is in the general area. I don't know why he made the selection. Maybe by word of mouth. He was probably inquiring from other businessmen which city was a good place to locate in.
- 01-01:10:56
Bird: I guess I'm asking these questions because I'm interested in a conversation that you relate in that autobiography that you had with Ed Dorn. Ed was going to move his family to San Francisco and you asked what work he had lined up and he said he didn't have a job there.
- 01-01:11:12
Rakosi: Oh yeah.

- 01-01:11:15
Bird: But he wasn't worried. He'd find something. And it bothered you. But, it sounds like your father was more like Ed, that he would go somewhere and then—
- 01-01:11:23
Rakosi: Oh, I don't think so. He was looking for safety. No, I was flabbergasted when Ed said, "Well, I'll get something." I never went through life that way. No.
- 01-01:11:52
Bird: [chuckles] Just the carefree attitude of knowing you'll find something.
- 01-01:11:56
Rakosi: Oh no, I was too scared for that.
- 01-01:12:03
Bird: So your father had it figured out before you left, you think.
- 01-01:12:07
Rakosi: Well, he always knew that he could make a living as a watchmaker.
- 01-01:12:18
Bird: Well, I know one question I did want to ask was, how did your family come to be Rakosis? That was not their original name.
- 01-01:12:28
Rakosi: It's the other way around, my family name was originally Rakosi.
- 01-01:12:34
Bird: Did I read that correctly that your father's brother changed the name?
- 01-01:12:40
Rakosi: No.
- 01-01:12:39
Bird: No> Oh, okay.
- 01-01:12:42
Rakosi: Well, if you go back far enough, Rakosi is also a made-up name. If you go back to my great-grandfather in Hungary, his name was Rosenberg, which is a Jewish name, and the reason that name was changed is simply because they became assimilated. They wanted to be Hungarian and to have a Hungarian name. So, it was changed to Rakosi. Now, Rakoczy, which is spelled a little differently, is a very famous Hungarian name. A big boulevard in Hungary is called Rakoczy Utsa, after Prince Rakoczy. The Rakoczy family really had a lot to do with the establishment of Hungary. So, it's constant name changing here. Then, I changed it. So now, Rakosi is my pen name, and Rawley is my legal name.
- 01-01:14:35
Bird: What do your friends know you as?
- 01-01:14:41
Rakosi: [laughter] Well, my friends—it's usually Carl Rakosi, because my friends are literary people, usually.

- 01-01:15:00
Bird: Now, your legal name is Callman Rawley?
- 01-01:15:03
Rakosi: Yeah.
- 01-01:15:03
Bird: Does anyone call you that?
- 01-01:15:09
Rakosi: Nobody calls me Callman, but when I was a writer in residence at the University of Wisconsin at Madison, they all knew me as Carl Rakosi, but I rented an apartment and had gas and so on, so I had to use my legal name, and the bank used my legal name. So, I had to remember where did I use which name. I could get into trouble if I didn't remember.
- 01-01:16:06
Bird: This sounds like a stuffy, academic question, but do you think all of the name changing affects the understanding of your identity? Does it have any impact on you?
- 01-01:16:22
Rakosi: No, I have much more attachment to Rakosi, because it was really my family name, and it's my literary self.
- 01-01:16:38
Bird: During the time when you were a social worker and you weren't writing, so you weren't in your literary hat, did people call you Callman at that point?
- 01-01:16:49
Rakosi: Oh, then they would, but they would shorten it to Carl, yeah. Yes, there is that whole life as a social worker.
- 01-01:17:01
Bird: We will definitely get there later. I'm wondering about your brother Lester.
- 01-01:17:09
Rakosi: Yeah, that's a very sad story. Lester was five years older than I. He was a hunchback, very thin, slender. He was smaller than I. His life took a totally different course. He had a rebellious spirit. He didn't get along with my father and mother. He didn't want to study, he was a poor student, but he was just as bright as I was, but he just never tried. My dad really gave up on him. He finally taught him watchmaking, and then he moved to Milwaukee and set up a store himself. He got by, because he could always make a living repairing watches, but the business didn't do anything in particular. His personal life was—he was a loser and all his friends were losers, guys who didn't marry—they were losers.
- 01-01:20:30
Bird: Because they weren't able to be successful or because—
- 01-01:20:45
Rakosi: They didn't strive for anything. They just wanted to get by in their own way, have a good time, go out with girls, if they could get them. Lester used to take out chorus girls,

but he was very intelligent, very bright, and in those days, people would stare at him because he was hunchbacked, and that was very painful for me to see. It was awful. Poor Lester. He took to drink. He used to drink, but he was never a drunkard, but he would drink much too much for his own good, and he developed cancer and died fairly early.

01-01:22:18

Bird: Did he leave home before you did?

01-01:22:26

Rakosi: Oh, I left when I was sixteen to go to the university.

01-01:22:28

Bird: Was he still at home at that point or did he—?

01-01:22:33

Rakosi: Sixteen—he'd be twenty-one. No, he was probably in Milwaukee then, oh yeah.

01-01:22:39

Bird: Did you stay in contact with him?

01-01:22:40

Rakosi: Oh sure, oh yes. No, I was very fond of him.

01-01:22:51

Bird: Well, I'm interested in discussing Kenosha a little bit more, and what life was like in the Rakosi home. I read that you didn't have books in the house.

01-01:23:08

Rakosi: There wasn't a single book in the house. They read the Hungarian—there was a Hungarian newspaper, published in this country, that they used to read, but they didn't read books. They kept abreast of what was going on in the world, but they were not—well, my father respected learning, but in his life, he had a different life experience. Books just didn't enter into it. My stepmother similarly. I don't think that she respected book knowledge as much as my dad, but she would not stand in the way of it. I don't know whether this may be in that little autobiography. Is there a piece in there about the Carnegie Library?

01-01:24:48

Bird: Uh-huh, there is.

01-01:24:48

Rakosi: Then you know what that--

01-01:24:50

Bird: I know about that, but I think that we can talk about that a little bit. You mentioned that the library became your vice as a child, and I think that's very interesting.

01-01:25:00

Rakosi: Yeah, it was just a miracle. It opened up a whole world to me. In order to walk to the library, I had to pass a whole row of saloons. Was that in there?

01-01:25:22

Bird: Yeah, hiding your books.

01-01:25:24

Rakosi: Yeah, I had to slink past, afraid that the guys inside would be thinking, “What’s that little Jewish kid doing with all of those books.” Yeah, that was funny.

01-01:25:37

Bird: I’m wondering how you decided to go to the library. If you didn’t have role models with books around you, just curious?

01-01:25:45

Rakosi: Well, I would normally gravitate towards a library, towards a place where there are books. I mean, you don’t have to have a model for that.

01-01:26:03

Bird: It’s just in your nature to be...

01-01:26:13

Rakosi: This doesn’t have to do with books, but—you know, in the summertime, I started to work in a factory at the age of fourteen. I was only fourteen. You were allowed to do that then. That was my first real social experience. I worked in the Simmons bed factory, and that was rough. I worked in the spring department. First of all, the guys that were there, all you heard from them was swearing, nothing else. I mean the dirtiest, lowest swearing. Okay, I can take that, but you know there was—the springs were spread out on some kind of a mat. Then you had to pull the springs tight and connect them to a hook, and you did that constantly, all day long, and your hands would be bloody after a while. There was a tray in front of you with lye, some solution of lye, because lye was probably too strong, but you’d dip your hands in this lye, oh, it would burn like fire. So, you had that experience for three months. It made a deep impression on me.

01-01:28:53

Bird: The lye was because your hands were bleeding?

01-01:29:00

Rakosi: Yeah, in order to keep them from being infected. It’s an antiseptic.

01-01:29:04

Bird: Instead of giving you gloves?

01-01:29:03

Rakosi: No, you used your own hands. Then another summer, I worked in the chair department. That wasn’t so brutal. There you had to stick those things into the chairs—I don’t know what you call them. You know at the back?

01-01:29:41

Bird: Uh-huh.

01-01:29:44

Rakosi: You stick them into holes.

01-01:29:45

Bird: Dowels?

01-01:29:47

Rakosi: I don't know. I don't know what you call them. You dipped those sticks into the glue first and then into the holes. The glue had the most horrible smell; it drove you crazy. I'm at my first working experience in that factory, but I was very eager to work. Boys want to work, early in life.

01-01:30:36

Bird: Did you ever think that you might be a watchmaker?

01-01:30:39

Rakosi: No, no.

01-01:30:39

Bird: Why?

01-01:30:41

Rakosi: That's a good question. It never appealed to me, never occurred to me. I was a book person. When I was in high school, I just loved books. I also loved history, by the way.

01-01:31:23

Bird: Do you think as a young boy that you had a sense of what you wanted to be when you grew up?

01-01:31:34

Rakosi: Not as a young boy, no, but I knew in my senior year what was going to happen, because—I don't know; this may be in the autobiography too. I had an English teacher who—is that in it?

01-01:32:08

Bird: Uh-uh.

01-01:32:09

Rakosi: No?

01-01:32:09

Bird: I don't remember reading it. I was wondering about that, what your teachers were like.

01-01:32:17

Rakosi: Well, she was a young woman, really quite attractive and kind of sexy, I remember. I guess I was fifteen then. I was already deep into literature, and I had written an essay on George Meredith. George Meredith in his day was really a very important writer, novelist, but quite complex. I had an assignment of writing a book review of Meredith's—I've forgotten which one of his novels—and she wrote back a long commentary on what I had written, in which I could see that she had a very high regard for what I had written. Well, that's what did it. I thought to myself, "Gee, if she thinks that my literary ideas are that good, maybe I could become a writer too."

Bird: Do you think that your education in Kenosha was good?

01-01:34:48

Rakosi: Oh yeah, yes, I do. There were only four hundred students in that high school, so you didn't have enormous classes, and I think they were good teachers. I had a wonderful principal. He was English, I think. I remember his name, Mr. Tremper. He called me into his office once or twice, I remember. We just had conversations. He wanted to talk to me. I remember the high school play *Seven Keys to Baldpate*, something like that, in which I acted and was the seventh key. He was very supportive of me, but in a very unobtrusive way. He was wonderful, yeah.

01-01:36:13

Bird: Was it as progressive as the school in Gary?

01-01:36:17

Rakosi: No. My history teacher was good too. No, it was a good experience.

Bird: Were the classes at that time—were you able to speak freely or was the teacher ruling with an iron fist in those classes?

01-01:36:47

Rakosi: Sure, it was pretty free. I don't remember any old, dogmatic, stick-in-the-mud teachers.

01-01:37:00

Bird: But it sounds like it helped a great deal for you to be treated more as an equal with your teacher, with your principal.

01-01:37:12

Rakosi: Oh, yeah. I have fond memories of Kenosha.

01-01:37:26

Bird: If you didn't have books in the house, was music a part of your upbringing?

01-01:37:35

Rakosi: There was music, but not because of my folks. Lester and I both loved music. We used to get a penny a day for spending money, so we saved our pennies, I think for a year or two, and we bought mandolins. Then we bought instruction books, because my folks couldn't afford a teacher. I don't even know if Kenosha had a mandolin teacher. We used to play duets together. My interest in music was very early and very deep. If we had lived in a big city, and if my folks could have afforded it, I would have become a musician and a composer rather than a poet. To this day music means at least as much to me as poetry.

01-01:39:29

Bird: Do you play any musical instruments now?

01-01:39:31

Rakosi: Not any more, no. I had some wonderful mandolins, but I don't have one any more.

01-01:39:44

Bird: Was the mandolin something that you heard a lot when you bought one?

01-01:39:51

Rakosi: No, we got mandolins because it was the easiest instrument to learn, because it has the same fingering as the violin, but it has frets, that is, metal bars to distinguish the notes, so you don't have to guess where to press down, the way you do on a violin. On the violin you sort of slide into it. So it's a much easier instrument to play, and you use a pick, and you make the strings tremble. Whereas on the violin you have the bow on the gut strings and that can really screech. The violin is much harder to learn to play, much harder.

01-01:41:04

Bird: So, you didn't have books or music in your house. I want to know what was on the walls in Kenosha, if there were any decorations on the wall or if there was any art, whether you really found culture all by yourself.

01-01:41:27

Rakosi: Yeah, this was something that Lester and I did entirely on our own. My life with books was really entirely my own. They didn't—my stepmother just stayed out of the way, that's all. It wasn't a part of her life, and she never gave me any encouragement in it. I knew that my dad approved, but he was not a typical Jewish father, trying to push his son in that direction, no.

01-01:42:20

Bird: Was he around the house very much? Did he actually work—?

01-01:42:23

Rakosi: Oh, he was always there. Most of the time we lived upstairs of the store, so we were always together.

01-01:42:46

Bird: What kinds of sports and hobbies did you do other than the mandolin and sneaking into the library?

01-01:42:55

Rakosi: I did everything. I was an all-American boy: I swam, I rollerskated, I iceskated, I rode a bike, I did everything, I played baseball.

01-01:43:15

Bird: Did those kinds of things stay with you later in life? Did you still rollerskate now and then? [laughs]

01-01:43:27

Rakosi: Well, yeah, they stay with you. You never forget how to ride a bike, for example. Oh, I loved to iceskate, yeah, and play ice hockey.

01-01:43:55

Bird: You say you were an all-American boy. Did your identity as a Hungarian Jewish person come into your everyday experience in Kenosha, do you think?

01-01:44:09

Rakosi: Let me get your question. I want to be sure I know what you mean by that.

01-01:44:16

Bird: You had positioned yourself as an all-American boy. I know there was an immigrant community that was near you and around you at that time, and I'm wondering if you felt that you stood out at all as an immigrant in the United States.

01-01:44:36

Rakosi: No, one of the amazing things is that I so quickly became the same as everybody else, and became an American. That is possible only when you are very young. I was only six years old, so yeah, that's only possible then. It's a miracle. I don't know how it happens. Now you have a problem in the school system of dual teaching, how should immigrant, Latino children, be taught English?

01-01:45:40

Bird: Whether there should be bilingual education?

01-01:45:39

Rakosi: Yeah. Well, I know from my own experience that bilingual teaching delays the process, and that if a child has to learn quickly, he learns quickly. No, my experience was a miracle. Now, that doesn't mean that I lost some of my European elements; I haven't, because I think, I don't know why that is, I think a lot of my work is also European in tone. So, you never really lose anything in your life; it comes in there in some way.

01-01:47:09

Bird: Do you think that you still have a European tone in your poetry? Do you think that's from the ways you educated yourself, what you were reading, and what you felt was important to read?

01-01:47:29

Rakosi: Part of it is that. It's your earliest upbringing that comes in there. After all, my dad and stepmother were Europeans.

01-01:48:04

Bird: I think that that's a good thing to keep coming back to, what that means to maintain your Europeanness and how that spells itself out in your life, and also the music—I'd like to keep coming back to that as well, but I think that this might be a good time to take a break.

[end of session]

[Interview #2: August 19, 2002]

[Begin Audio File Rakosi 8-19-02]

02-00:00:00

Bird: Last time, we pretty much stopped our session when you were finishing high school. At that point you went to college. Where did you first go to college and when?

02-00:00:27

Rakosi: Well, I went there in 1920. The first school that I went to was the University of Chicago. I was then sixteen. I stayed at a dormitory at the university. The university is on the South Side of the city and it was a place where the classes were over at the—the students all lived in Chicago or in the surrounding areas. They were just dispersed after class. The campus then was deserted, so it was a pretty lonely kind of place, but so far as the university itself was concerned, it was a great place for me to be. It's a school with a great faculty in history—I was coming into it from Kenosha, a small town, and what deeply impressed me, in fact—I was in awe of it—was the architecture of the buildings which were very British in style, gothic, early gothic maybe—or late gothic, I don't know enough about that—between early and late, and I don't care. I remember even the name of one famous English professor there, Lovett [?]. It was maybe in Lovett's class that I met two students who immediately influenced me. I had not written any poetry until then. One of the students was an Afro-American from Pittsburgh who wrote poems in a style like Rudyard Kipling's, very robust. He had, I think not immediately, something of an influence on me. The other was a much older man, Japanese, who wrote quite short poems in the style of a haiku. I was struck by how much you could express in a tiny poem, but also by how lovely his poems seemed to me. At that point, I began to write and I knew that without any reasoning it out in any way that I was going to poet—that my calling would be that of a poet. I stayed there in Chicago for about a year and then moved to the University of Wisconsin for my second year in Madison. I think my folks wanted me to start in Chicago, because they had friends there who might be looking out for me. In Madison, it was a totally different atmosphere. Students were not urban students, by and large. They were from more well-to-do farmers, so it was a very much more physical kind of campus with students interested in athletics and just having all-around fun while they were at school.

02-00:06:27

Bird: I'm wondering—you said that you kind of found your calling of poetry in Chicago. It seems that Chicago might also have been a place—I'm thinking of Jane Addams' work in Chicago and maybe the culture of corruption that was starting at the time you were there—whether your other calling in social work might have started there as well.

02-00:06:46

Rakosi: No, later on yes, but not then. Later on, yes, that had a lot to do with my eventually going into social work.

02-00:07:05

Bird: Was Jane Addams an influence on you? Did you read her writing?

02-00:07:14

Rakosi: Later on, oh sure. That was part of your studies to study that whole movement of settlement houses in the country, yeah.

02-00:07:29

Bird: And also at the time you were in Chicago, it seemed that there was a big population. I think that the great migration was happening at that time. The black population in Chicago was doubling while you were there. Did you notice that or did you feel isolated on the campus?

02-00:07:49

Rakosi: Oh, no, the campus at Chicago was like an island. You didn't sense that. That was before the blacks moved to the South Side where the campus was. Later on, of course, they just flooded the South Side and these huge apartment buildings were set up—public housing—which became deadly places, simply deadly.

02-00:08:27

Bird: This is the area surrounding this very elite, perfect architecture, surrounding the university?

02-00:08:30

Rakosi: Yes. Well, I remember as a social worker many years later going to a conference at the university, at the law building there, and you were told not to go out at night. It was serious. You could be killed. That's kind of a still iffy neighborhood. I just saw a friend of mine who teaches at the University of Chicago, in their comparative literature department, and he lives there and he has to be careful. Yes.

02-00:09:36

Bird: And so you went from the somewhat small town of Kenosha to the second biggest city in the country at that time, Chicago, and then over to Madison. How did Madison compare to Chicago?

02-00:09:50

Rakosi: Although Madison is the state capital, it has a couple of lakes there. It is a fun place to be. It's beautiful in the summertime. You'd be pretty hard put to not have a good time as a student in Madison, but at the same time, Madison from the very beginning has had a most impressive faculty, tremendously impressive. Some of the great sociologists and economists have come from there. It's a university with the highest ethical standards. One of the basic principles they had was that whatever the university produced in the way of science and agriculture methods—even art—had to be given to the whole state, so that people who were artists in residence, writers in residence, scientists and so on were expected to go out to every small town and give them the benefit of the central university.

02-00:12:12

Bird: Did you transfer to Wisconsin because of that program or did you transfer for other reasons?

02-00:12:25

Rakosi: I was too lonesome in Chicago. I had no friends and the students never hung around on the campus after class. I couldn't make friends; there was nobody there. So I transferred to Madison, because I don't think that I had to pay any fee in Madison at that time. That was part of their progressive policy. If there was a fee, it was something like thirty dollars, just ridiculous.

02-00:13:09

Bird: Who are some of the faculty members that stand out?

02-00:13:17

Rakosi: There are a few. Although my primary interest was poetry, my second biggest interest was philosophy, and there were some—what struck me was wonderful professors. The man who gave the course on Nietzsche was simply superb. You suddenly discover at the age of seventeen a mind that is brilliant that is just working brilliantly to expand on Nietzsche who was himself a wonderful philosopher. Then in the field of economics there was Kiekhofer. I generally remember his great lectures in the field of sociology, a professor by the name of Ross.

02-00:14:54

Bird: Did those two professors teach progressive ideas about economics and about sociology?

02-00:15:02

Rakosi: Very progressive. The most progressive of any at that time. I think that Berkeley is now regarded as very progressive. At that time, I think that Wisconsin was the most progressive university in the country, and the most progressive in their ideas about education.

02-00:15:45

Bird: About education serving the community?

02-00:15:49

Rakosi: Yes.

02-00:15:51

Bird: And was their pedagogy progressive?

02-00:15:52

Rakosi: Yes, I really meant pedagogy.

02-00:15:59

Bird: How was it progressive? How did they teach that was different?

02-00:16:07

Rakosi: Well, I don't know. I wasn't in the education department. I studied later on, although I studied educational psychology. That was in the psychology department. By the way, in those days there was no department of philosophy. Philosophy was a part of the psychology department. Isn't that interesting?

02-00:16:36

Bird: Yes, hmm.

02-00:16:41

Rakosi: You would think now that it might have been the other way around, but no.

02-00:16:45

Bird: That's interesting.

02-00:16:47

Rakosi: Wait a minute—or have I got this wrong? Maybe psychology was in the--?

- 02-00:17:00
Bird: Psychology was in the philosophy department?
- 02-00:17:05
Rakosi: Yes, I had it wrong—just turned around. After all, philosophy is a very ancient subject.
- 02-00:17:10
Bird: So, were certain psychologists treated as philosophers?
- 02-00:17:19
Rakosi: Yes.
- 02-00:17:21
Bird: That's interesting. You have kind of an extensive educational career.
- 02-00:17:29
Rakosi: Yes, I do.
- 02-00:17:29
Bird: In your education, did that change, or was psychology always part of philosophy while you were in school, even when you were getting your advanced degree?
- 02-00:17:42
Rakosi: I don't know when it split off. It split off fairly late, I think. But, it finally split off. Of course, it went wild after that.
- 02-00:17:54
Bird: [laughs] Psychology did?
- 02-00:17:57
Rakosi: Yes, psychology did, not philosophy.
- 02-00:18:00
Bird: How did psychology go wild, do you think?
- 02-00:18:05
Rakosi: Well, they went off in all directions. Nothing seemed impossible to psychology. It went far beyond their actual competence, it seems to me.
- 02-00:18:31
Bird: Okay, so you said that at Chicago it was hard to make friends and form your community.
- 02-00:18:38
Rakosi: Well, it wasn't possible. They just weren't around. I can make friends anywhere.
- 02-00:18:46
Bird: How did you form your community in Wisconsin, in Madison?
- 02-00:18:53
Rakosi: Well, it just formed itself. I don't remember exactly how I happened to move in with Kenneth Fearing, but we did, and of course we became very close after that. What came to happen was that four of us wound up as editors of the student magazine called the

Wisconsin Literary Magazine. One of them was Margery Latimer, a novelist and short story writer from Portage, Wisconsin. Portage was also from where Zona Gale the novelist, came from. Zona Gale was one of those novelists who was very prominent nationally for a number of years, and then people forgot about her. She was something of a lady. She was married to the local banker, and Margery Latimer was a protégé of hers. Actually Margery developed a literary kind of self-awareness from just being under Zona Gale. At the same time, nobody was more critical of Zona Gale, than Margery. She never stopped criticizing her. Anyhow, Margery then wound up on the Madison campus and—wait a minute. What is it? Triumvirate? A quadrumvirate? Is there such a thing?

02-00:21:33

Bird: I'm not sure.

02-00:21:36

Rakosi: A foursome—there was a foursome developed with an Armenian, Leon Serabian Herald, whose family had been extinguished by the Turks, and who was brought up in Cairo by an uncle. Leon came to Madison, not as a student, but as an auditor. He didn't have the education requirements for being admitted. He was much older than the rest of us. He wrote very lyrical Eastern style, lovely poetry. Kenneth [inaudible], at the time I wasn't sure if it was really poetry. In other words, it certainly was not lyrical poetry. It was poetry with a journalistic content, in somewhat journalistic language. Since I was very much a lyric poet, it didn't sound to me like poetry, but I've revised my opinion of that in later years. I know think that it is very strong and quite a significant kind of American poetry. It's quite interesting, he was a Hasidic, in an age when other Americans—that was almost inconceivable. They were out to have a good time. He had had a troubled family life with a mother who was Jewish. His father was Scottish, a lawyer. They had gotten divorced. The mother had moved to California, remarried a couple of times. She'd send him money, and Kenneth would visit her once a year, but she was not someone who gave him affection or real interest, so he came back from these visits with really nothing gained and quite cynical about her. He had good things to say about his dad, and I met him too. He was really quite a nice guy.

But, something interesting happened on one of my visits to his home in Oak Park, Illinois—that's where Kenneth came from, and also Hemingway. We were talking at the dinner table, and all of a sudden we were getting along great. I could see that his dad liked me, and Kenneth, towards the end there—by the way, his father had remarried and there were two children. He married a Swedish woman, two very fair-haired children. Kenneth had the blackest hair you could imagine. We were talking and all of a sudden Kenneth said to his dad, "You know Carl is Jewish," and the conversation came to a dead stop. The kids ran to their rooms, the wife disappeared, and his dad was very polite. He didn't show me any—he just tried to keep it desperately at the same tone, the same level as before, but the thing just blew apart. I got up to Kenneth's room, and I said, "You son of a bitch, why did you say that?" Kenneth said, "Oh, I had to."

02-00:28:36

Bird: Why did he have to?

02-00:28:41

Rakosi: That was his answer, and he did have to psychologically.

02-00:28:51

Bird: How do you read that?

02-00:28:54

Rakosi: Oh, that there was something unspoken there between father and son. The father must have had angry feelings about his Jewish mother.

02-00:29:17

Bird: About his Jewish ex-wife, Kenneth's mother, or about—was the father's mother Jewish, or his ex-wife was Jewish?

02-00:29:27

Rakosi: His ex-wife, yes. He was a decent man. He didn't want to make trouble for Kenneth, and certainly not for me, but that has remained in my memory. Let's see—where were we, when I was talking about this?

02-00:30:06

Bird: We were talking about your circle of friends at Wisconsin. I guess with Kenneth, was that visit—do you remember when that visit was, what year it was, in Oak Park? Was it much later than college or was it during college?

02-00:30:24

Rakosi: It was during—wait a minute—it must have been during one of the summers. It was not while I was working, so I don't know. It was during one of the summers.

02-00:30:43

Bird: I guess that I'm wondering if it's important whether it was close to World War II or whether—it sounds like the new wife and kids had some serious anti-Semitism in their reaction, and whether that was common all along, or was that a product of a certain time period in your experience?

02-00:31:12

Rakosi: Okay, let's get at it. It's a big subject. Anti-Semitism was so prevalent in the country at that time.

02-00:31:30

Bird: We're talking the twenties, still, or--?

02-00:31:35

Rakosi: Yeah, the twenties, the thirties, the forties, the fifties. For one thing, no Jew could get any position in any university in this country with the exception occasionally of the sciences. English? Absolutely impossible. All the writers of that period—well, actually until a fairly recent times with one exception that I'll tell you, were anti-Semitic—Pound, Eliot, Cummings. It was only one writer that I knew that was not anti-Semitic, and that was Sherwood Anderson. Prevalent, oh, you have no idea. You can't imagine it living now.

02-00:33:03

Bird: You felt that they were anti-Semitic in their work?

- 02-00:33:05
Rakosi: In their work, I'm talking about their work. Eliot was one of the absolute worst. He was worse than Pound in my opinion. Eliot at one time suggested that Jews should not live in the same city as non-Jews. They should be somewhere else. I grew up with—knowing all of that, and I knew how to live with it. You cope with it. My life was not in danger. I just had to do other things.
- 02-00:34:06
Bird: But something like the experience with Kenneth's family, it seems that you were angry with Kenneth for bringing it up?
- 02-00:34:12
Rakosi: Oh no, I wasn't angry. That is my saying that I was annoyed with him. That was my language. I wasn't mad. I was never mad at Kenneth.
- 02-00:34:25
Bird: But I'm interested that you didn't describe being angry at the family, and I'm wondering whether it was so prevalent that you just had to expect--?
- 02-00:34:31
Rakosi: Oh, no, I just accepted it. It was no surprise to me. Well, it is interesting that Jews learned to just adapt to that as a way of life.
- 02-00:35:00
Bird: I'm also aware that in the early twenties the scholarly discourse on Judaism started to go in the direction of talking about Judaism as a culture and not just a religion, and I'm wondering whether that had an impact on your view of your own Judaism, or I don't know whether that was significant in your life at all?
- 02-00:35:26
Rakosi: Well, this will take us in another direction, if you want to go there now?
- 02-00:35:35
Bird: Sure.
- 02-00:35:38
Rakosi: Well, my family were Hungarian Jews. This was when Hungary and Austria were one country. Austria-Hungary was really a very big kind of an empire almost. It was more extensive than Germany then. Germany was split up actually, and Jews were very assimilated then. My father had served in the Hungarian army. He had been a Hussar. A Hussar was a cavalry man.
- 02-00:36:44
Bird: So he rode a horse?
- 02-00:36:48
Rakosi: He was a cavalry man, so sure. The Hussars were dashing. They had sabers, and they had beautiful cloaks that hung over one shoulder and handsome caps. I remember in Baja, Hungary, they had cobbled roads, so you would hear the clack clack clack of the horses coming, the Hussars coming. Oh jeez, what a site. My dad was a crack shot, too. He claims—it's hard to believe—he claims that he could take a playing card, set it on end—this is when he was young, of course, in his twenties—and from a distance split

the card right down the middle. He was a crack shot. And he never lied. I have to believe him. He was actually a Hungarian first. He loved Hungary. He was a patriot really.

02-00:38:21

Bird: Could he be a patriot and have his socialist feelings easily, or were those at odds?

02-00:38:32

Rakosi: I think that that was before he became a socialist, yes. Let's see, what did I—he really regarded himself as a Hungarian first and a Jew next. I'll show you how in my own family assimilation took place. He had an older brother—I never saw his father, my grandfather, because he lived in a different part of Hungary and never came to Baja. He was a grain merchant, and he used to—did I go over this?

02-00:39:53

Bird: We talked a little bit about this in the first session. So, your father's brother assimilated, or he converted. Is that correct?

02-00:40:06

Rakosi: Yes, oh yeah. That came about before. Then I don't need to go. Well, all right, so you've got one Catholic right there, then my grandfather's two sons moved to Munich and they married Catholic women, and then they converted, so you had that mix there right in my own family, which means that Hungarians themselves were not particularly anti-Semitic. You could do that in that atmosphere. You can't do it in strong anti-Semitism, yes.

02-00:41:07

Bird: So, when you were growing up, did you go to a synagogue?

02-00:41:15

Rakosi: At what age?

02-00:41:18

Bird: When you were young growing up in your father's house.

02-00:41:20

Rakosi: Oh, in Chicago?

02-00:41:21

Bird: Yes.

02-00:41:23

Rakosi: Oh sure, yes. In Kenosha, there was only one synagogue. There were not more than about a hundred Jews in the city, and it was an Orthodox synagogue. Sure, we went there, and I had a bar mitzvah there, but a very rudimentary one. I don't know why—we had a rabbi, but he wasn't the one who taught me the bar mitzvah. Instead it was the man who is called the shochet. The shochet is the guy who makes the ritual slaughter of animals, you know, beef and so on.

02-00:42:54

Bird: Oh, okay for consumption, not as just religious ritual.

02-00:42:56

Rakosi: Oh, no. Heavens no.

02-00:43:00

Bird: Okay, I was thinking I didn't know that that happened. [laughs] But just so that it would be kosher beef.

02-00:43:05

Rakosi: Yes, yes, sure. He was a guy with a long beard, I remember. He was not an educated man, and all he taught me was how to read Hebrew, but I didn't know what I was reading.

02-00:43:29

Bird: So the pronunciation, but not the meaning?

02-00:43:32

Rakosi: Yes. Actually, he had two sons—and this shows you the evolution of families. One of them became an attorney. He went to the University of Wisconsin too. He was in law school the same time as I was a student there. We saw a lot of each other. As a matter of fact, he later went back to Kenosha and practiced law and became my parents' attorney. The other son was much older and he studied at the University of Wisconsin and became an agricultural chemist. He was very much an idealist, and was one of the earliest Zionists. When Israel became a country, he moved there and worked there as an agricultural chemist, and I met a couple of other men who had similar training at the university who also moved to Israel to give their services. So, that early phase of Zionism was very idealistic, and I thought that it was wonderful, just wonderful.

02-00:45:59

Bird: So, we kind of started this tangent—it's not really a tangent but a line of thought with the question of religious versus cultural ideas of Judaism. I guess that I'm just trying to pinpoint whether you felt—you felt obviously that your religion was Judaism. Did you feel that your culture was more Hungarian before it was Jewish?

02-00:46:28

Rakosi: No, I never felt that—no, I left Hungary when I was only six years old, so I never felt that I was Hungarian.

02-00:46:42

Bird: I guess I was thinking—because your father felt he was Hungarian first and then Jewish—that maybe he passed that on to you.

02-00:46:51

Rakosi: No, although I've been to Hungary twice, and I could see why you would love Hungary.

02-00:47:07

Bird: You said that Kenneth's mother was Jewish, so he was—

02-00:47:19

Rakosi: Well, by Jewish law he would be regarded as Jewish. I never asked him how he really thought of himself, whether he thought that he was a Jew or not. I tended to think of him as not a Jew. I don't know why, but maybe he was the one that just gave that impression. Others didn't think of him as a Jew, no.

- 02-00:48:09
Bird: Did you go to synagogue in the university?
- 02-00:48:14
Rakosi: No, I was never much for going to synagogue.
- 02-00:48:21
Bird: But, it seems that there was quite an active Jewish community at Madison—maybe not in numbers but--
- 02-00:48:30
Rakosi: I don't know. I never was there.
- 02-00:48:33
Bird: Well, in Madison. Just in the university, it sounds like there was quite an active community of Jewish students.
- 02-00:48:46
Rakosi: Oh yes, there was a large contingent of New York Jewish students who came to Madison, because it was the most progressive university in the country at that time—really the most progressive.
- 02-00:49:10
Bird: Okay, and so you worked with Kenneth, Leon, and Margery at the *Wisconsin Literary Magazine*. How can you characterize that magazine? What was the experience of reading that magazine?
- 02-00:49:32
Rakosi: Well, with the three of us as editors, we were contributing our own stuff also, but we made sure that the material that got into it was as good as we could get; we didn't accept everything.
- 02-00:50:04
Bird: And that was your first publishing venue?
- 02-00:50:09
Rakosi: Let's see, I think so.
- 02-00:50:15
Bird: Did you publish other places while you were in college, in other journals?
- 02-00:50:22
Rakosi: Well, that was too early for me. My first publication, I think, was in 1924, that would be four years later.
- 02-00:50:34
Bird: What kind of poetry were you writing then?
- 02-00:50:38
Rakosi: When?
- 02-00:50:38
Bird: In the 1920s, 1923, '24.

- 02-00:50:44
Rakosi: Socially conscious. Actually, that first poem that I wrote was very socially conscious poem. It had to do with marriage. What did I know about marriage? Nothing, absolutely nothing, but for some reason it came to me. It came out in the *Nation*.
- 02-00:51:15
Bird: What was the name of it—of the poem?
- 02-00:51:20
Rakosi: I don't remember.
- 02-00:51:27
Bird: And what was your relationship with Margery like?
- 02-00:51:34
Rakosi: Although I was not—she was a radiantly beautiful woman—not pretty—she was large, big, beautiful golden hair. I loved her, but not physically. We had kind of an almost mystical—or at least, I had an almost mystical feeling towards her. I don't know how she felt exactly towards me. She was very helpful to me, actually. Later on—I don't remember if I was in New York then—one of the great magazines of that early period was called the *Little Review*. It was in New York, in the Village—the offices were. Margery says to me one day, “Why don't you go to the *Little Review*. Give them your magazine.” I said, “Oh, I can't just walk into their office. They don't know me.” “Well,” she says, “do it, go, go. Do it.” Well, I did. I walked up—they had a little office, I've forgotten exactly where. I walk up the stairs and I'm scared, really scared. They don't know me. I'm just a youngster. Here is this great magazine, great editors, Jane Heap and Margaret Anderson. This magazine had been publishing—of course, Pound, some of the great Irish writers. I ring the bell, and a middle-aged woman with a mannish haircut opens the door, and I identify myself and say, “Can I come in?” “Sure.” It was Jane Heap. We talked pleasantly for a while, and she said, “I guess you've brought me something.” I said, “Yeah.” I showed her the poems. She read them. She said, “We'll take these.” [laughs] Well, that was one of the great moments of my life. To get into the *Little Review* was the achievement.
- 02-00:56:33
Bird: Did you think it was more your conversation or your poetry?
- 02-00:56:36
Rakosi: Oh, no, not the conversation, no, no, no. The conversation didn't amount to anything.
- 02-00:56:43
Bird: Had you expected it to be a more formal meeting?
- 02-00:56:49
Rakosi: I didn't expect anything. I had no idea what was going to happen.
- 02-00:56:55
Bird: Now, it's hard to imagine that the publisher would actually open the door and say, “Come on in.” [laughs]
- 02-00:57:02
Rakosi: Yes, it's so different than—oh my...

02-00:57:10

Bird: That was why you were living in New York, right?

02-00:57:17

Rakosi: I think so. I think so. I was in New York twice. The first time I worked for the Jewish Board of Guardians, which is an enormous organization that was trying to treat disturbed boys, older boys, and I had a caseload of boys, some of the boys who had been members of a famous gang called the Kid-Dropper Gang. In other words, poom boom [slaps hand] [laughs] it dropped you. That was kind of exciting. I discovered that I liked those kids and I had good relations with them. That was some help, I think.

02-00:58:46

Bird: And getting back to—I think that we should try to finish up with--

02-00:58:56

Rakosi: We're tramping around here.

02-00:58:57

Bird: But I think that it's okay. It's probably more interesting.

02-00:59:01

Rakosi: Yes, I think so.

02-00:59:04

Bird: How did you feel about having your work read by the students? If you are suddenly publishing your poetry in the *Wisconsin Literary Magazine*. Were you nervous at all about how people would feel about it?

02-00:59:18

Rakosi: No, not a bit. No, I was tremendously self-confident. I've always been that, yes. It's interesting. I never felt, and neither did Kenneth for that matter, that you couldn't learn everything that you needed to learn by yourself, by reading. So, we never needed, never exchanged poems with each other to get feedback.

01-01:00:17

Bird: Did you only read each other's work as it was being published in the magazine?

01-01:00:19

Rakosi: Yes.

01-01:00:21

Bird: Huh, that's interesting.

01-01:00:23

Rakosi: Even then.

01-01:00:33

Bird: Did you feel that they influenced your poetry, conversations that you had with Fearing and Latimer?

01-01:00:35

Rakosi: Not a bit.

- 01-01:00:35
Bird: Completely independent, were you? [laughter] And did the things you were reading in school, in your literature classes influence how you were--?
- 01-01:00:52
Rakosi: Oh sure, undoubtedly. Everything that you read really influenced you. Sure.
- 01-01:01:01
Bird: What were you reading? What were your favorite poets at that time in college?
- 01-01:01:08
Rakosi: I imagine Keats, not Shelley for some reason, but Keats. Shakespeare and the Elizabethan dramatists made a deep impression on me.
- 01-01:01:51
Bird: I'm interested because your cautionary note in the beginning of the poems 1923 to 1940 that Andrew Crozier edited, you say that your early poems, in those you were posturing, and that you don't recognize your voice in those early ones.
- 01-01:02:11
Rakosi: Well, that first poem of mine in the *Nation* certainly was posturing, because I had no experience of my own. It was a certain posture that was believable at the time. It made sense, but it didn't come out of my experience.
- 01-01:02:44
Bird: There was a lot of religious references and imagery in those poems. Do you think that that was something that--
- 01-01:02:53
Rakosi: In which poems?
- 01-01:02:54
Bird: In some of those early poems from that volume. You mention it—actually I have it right here--
- 01-01:03:01
Rakosi: Really?
- 01-01:03:02
Bird: And you mention it in the cautionary note that you weren't Christian, but you realized that some of the images in these poems—they are Christological references and symbols.
- 01-01:03:21
Rakosi: Oh, yeah. How in the hell I got to that point? I guess—well, the overall culture is Christian, and that seeps into you. It has meaning, sure.
- 01-01:03:35
Bird: Do you think that you were reading poetry with a lot of that kind of symbolism and it was coming out in your own?
- 01-01:03:48
Rakosi: Oh, sure, oh yeah.

01-01:03:51

Bird: This might not be fair, but I am wondering if you would mind helping me kind of unpack one of your early poems and if you could read it and then talk about it a little bit?

01-01:04:06

Rakosi: It depends which poem.

01-01:04:08

Bird: Okay, the poem I'm thinking of is "Plein-Air," and if you want to look at it to refresh your memory.

01-01:04:16

Rakosi: Are you sure you want me—[pause] Oh, I see, all right. Well, this is a—well, "Plein-Air" has to do with painting—

01-01:04:46

Bird: Can you read the poem, so that we have it in the interview here.

01-01:04:51

Rakosi: Okay. "Plein-Air" meaning just being out in the nature, a reference from art.

The bridge-hands at the edge of the water,

Hoisting logs, planks, down the creek of slate,

Calling to the pawpaw sun,

Played a Sicilian monody

For two baby squirrels

Under a vertical willow shoot

To a neurasthenic jay

in feather-blue spleen,

The bird in bluing

clapped on a ground twig,

Twitching his pate

Like a purr of arrows he shot to the red oak

My company in the woods included

A bee,

a zigzag fence

And Arno Holz.

I haven't the slightest idea who Arno Holz is any more.

01-01:05:57

Bird: Well, I looked him up, and he's a German naturalist.

01-01:06:03

Rakosi: I see, oh, oh, oh. That's good, that's okay. Well, now as I reread this, I am beginning to get into Objectivism, to the Objectivists, yes.

01-01:06:23

Bird: How would you describe that in the context of this poem? What's Objectivist about that poem?

01-01:06:32

Rakosi: First of all, it is all outside in nature—outside of the person himself, and it's outside his subjectivity, except for a couple of—it's impossible to keep it completely out. There's a line here, which I mean it where I say, "under a vertical willow shoot, to a neurasthenic jay." Well, I read it there obviously. Well, it's not a bad poem.

01-01:07:27

Bird: [laughs] One thing that interested me about it was—I guess reading about your life and the number of place changes you had—how many times you moved around—and thinking about some of the imagery in there, it's quite globalized: you have Sicilian monody; the pawpaw, I think, is a tree that grows in the Midwest.

01-01:07:52

Rakosi: Yes, that's right. Right. Yes, okay.

01-01:08:01

Bird: Do you recognize any posturing in that poem?

01-01:08:15

Rakosi: No, no, no. You have to go back very early for that—for posturing.

01-01:08:26

Bird: What do you think is an example in there of a posturing mode?

01-01:08:33

Rakosi: I think Jacob Gold, the very first poem, is posturing.

01-01:08:47

Bird: Would you mind reading that one?

01-01:08:52

Rakosi: No, I don't like it enough.

01-01:08:54

Bird: You don't like it? [laughs] Why is that one posturing? I'll tell you why I'm so interested in a minute, but I'm wondering why you think that's posturing?

01-01:09:03

Rakosi: At that time, I wouldn't have—I don't know why I got to this subject. Maybe it was something that I read. See, this sounds a little like Edward Arlington Robinson, the American poet who is constantly writing about—anyhow his last name is Robinson—was writing about American characters. Robinson influenced Fearing quite a bit. He was a pretty good poet, but it's just not me, just not me.

01-01:10:08

Bird: The reason I'm asking, I guess, is because I know that—we've talked a little bit about Fearing being a cynic whereas [scratch on tape] viewed as an idealist and a political poet. I think that you have an attitude that poetry isn't really meant to be political. I'm wondering whether you think that poetry tends to be posturing or whether there is more authentic versions of political poetry?

01-01:10:48

Rakosi: No, I wouldn't generalize about political poetry. There's been very good political poetry written, but it's difficult to do. It's very difficult to do because you have a political message, and the one thing a poem must never do is give a message. That kills the poem. So, you have to get around that basic problem by not changing the subject so much as approaching it from a new angle, providing a new and different perspective on it. Otherwise, if you just try to write it as it comes to you, the reader isn't going to be interested. He's already thinking the same way you are, so you have nothing to add to what he already feels. So, oh yeah, good political poetry has been written, and in fact, I write some political poetry, but I don't do it—well, there are a couple of examples. Actually, in this latest interview, I was surprised to find that I had actually confronted the issue head on. I was able to do it, but by and large, I can't do it, and I don't even try to do it.

01-01:13:33

Bird: What issue?

01-01:13:39

Rakosi: But what I do is satirize the subject. I do it by satire. That I can do pretty well, because it comes pretty easily to me.

01-01:13:52

Bird: Does that make you a cynic too?

01-01:13:55

Rakosi: Not at all. [laughter]

01-01:14:02

Bird: Have you read the work of Muriel Rukeyser, for example?

01-01:14:08

Rakosi: Sure.

01-01:14:10

Bird: Do you think she—I guess that I'm thinking of her documentary kind of poetry about the Scotsboro Trial.

- 01-01:14:15
Rakosi: I read her while she was alive, of course, although I had never met her personally. She came across then as a pretty strong poet, and I have—I recently bought her collected poetry, which came out. I think that it's very good.
- 01-01:14:44
Bird: Do you think that she has messages in her poetry?
- 01-01:14:49
Rakosi: Oh sure.
- 01-01:14:52
Bird: She's able to do it sometimes.
- 01-01:14:54
Rakosi: If your imagination is good enough, you can do it. Fearing has a message. It's interesting. He very early on had a sense that there was something evil in Wall Street, in the whole business world, and his poetry, I think, reflects that—the deep cynicism and it reflects his feelings about Wall Street.
- 01-01:15:54
Bird: I'm sure that he would have something to say now if he was still alive with all of the scandals that are coming out.
- 01-01:16:01
Rakosi: Oh yeah. He was a real pioneer there, in that sense.
- 01-01:16:15
Bird: So, where some critics have written about him as being a Communist poet or a proletariat poet, maybe you would be more comfortable with a description of him as a social critic, instead of a Communist?
- 01-01:16:31
Rakosi: Well, yeah, it's hard to categorize him. He was not only not a Communist, he used to laugh at some of the tactics of the Communists, how they behaved. I may have said this before, he used to laugh at me, because I had socialist ideas. He thought that I was just naïve.
- 01-01:17:10
Bird: What was naïve about your ideas to him?
- 01-01:17:15
Rakosi: Socialist ideas.
- 01-01:17:18
Bird: Just that the world could change or that it was impossible?
- 01-01:17:27
Rakosi: Yes, that you could—that you could actually—that may be a good way to put it, that you can actually reform the world, make things come about. No, but he was different. Those days were—those times were very optimistic. Everybody was optimistic--

- 01-01:18:44
Bird: But Kenneth wasn't. Were you, during college—did you feel in touch with the world of poetry, with the new advances in poetry and new poets that were coming on the scene?
- 01-01:19:00
Rakosi: Oh, we paid close attention to other poets, what other poets were doing; that is, their published work. In the 1930s, of course, there were wonderful international magazines published in Holland, in England and France. You had a translation, for example. Any number of them—I was in a few of them, yes.
- 01-01:19:45
Bird: Were there little magazines with poetry in them in the twenties?
- 01-01:19:51
Rakosi: As early as that? You mean just poetry?
- 01-01:20:02
Bird: Just poetry or magazines that [published] poetry along with maybe other forms.
- 01-01:20:10
Rakosi: Oh yeah. Yeah, I think that probably *Harpers*—well, as you know, *The Nation*. *The Nation* always had a cultural interest, so they never neglected poetry. Now, most magazines are just not interested in poetry.
- 01-01:20:36
Bird: Do you read *The Nation* now?
- 01-01:20:38
Rakosi: Yeah, I used to subscribe.
- 01-01:20:41
Bird: Did they publish more poetry in the twenties and thirties than they do now?
- 01-01:20:46
Rakosi: No, always a few poems, very good book reviews.
- 01-01:21:03
Bird: So you were able to keep in touch with the international scene, as well as the poets in the United States?
- 01-01:21:08
Rakosi: Oh, I always did that, yeah.
- 01-01:21:11
Bird: See the magazines?
- 01-01:21:13
Rakosi: Oh, yes, yeah.
- 01-01:21:16
Bird: Now, I know that it's pretty difficult for people to publish books of poetry. A lot of times the anth—or to keep those books in print, it seems that poets seem to live on in anthologies, but not necessarily in their own books.

01-01:21:33

Rakosi: Not true.

01-01:21:34

Bird: Not true? Okay.

01-01:21:37

Rakosi: It's so cheap and easy to publish now that there are many more books of poetry being published—thousands and thousands, but you have to also distribute them. That's a different problem. Stores won't handle them, because they don't sell enough of them, so you can get published pretty easily, but it is hard to get distributed, so that the people read you.

01-01:22:22

Bird: Right, so in the twenties it was more difficult to get books of poetry published?

01-01:22:31

Rakosi: I don't think so, no. The fact that—probably easier, because poetry was more respected. It was regarded a little more highly. More attention was paid to it.

01-01:22:58

Bird: So, we'll get back to this in our next session, but I think that—

01-01:23:01

Rakosi: I hope so. That thing better behave. [refers to recording device?]

[end of session]

[Interview #3: August 26, 2002]

[Begin Audio File Rakosi 8-26-02]

Bird: Okay, we are having a short digression on the subject of California studies.

03-00:00:23

Rakosi: Well, yes, I'm intrigued by the notion of California studies. Now I came from the Midwest. Most of my life was spent there and in different parts of the country working as a social worker. It took me a long time to really like San Francisco. I came here primarily because I had two poet friends living here then: Robert Duncan and George Oppen. And once here, I can't say that I disliked the city, but it didn't seem quite right to me. It didn't seem altogether American. In the Middle West, you feel that, well, you are right in the heart of the country since so much of American industry really started in the Middle West. I always had the feeling that this was the real America. Well, once I got out East—I worked in Boston and New York first—of course, there I found two different Americas. Then I was down in Texas for about five years, living in different places, part of the time at the University of Texas at Austin. It's astonishing that Texas, which is just below us, is so totally different from California. Texas is repulsively macho. Their whole attitude. It's very much a man's culture—the atmosphere there, the way they talk, the way they brag, how polite they are, but it felt like a fixed ritual to me, that it was all manners. In California there was none of that, absolutely none of that. I don't feel California as a macho state.

03-00:03:54

Bird: I don't think Texas would either.

03-00:03:58

Rakosi: What?

03-00:03:59

Bird: I don't people in Texas think that California is a macho state either.

03-00:04:03

Rakosi: No, no. Right now, Texans have no use for California. Anyhow, it took me a long time to find San Francisco interesting. Interesting in its—first of all—its political life. There's a lot of back and forth disputes and controversies and differing ideas. The architecture suddenly struck me, "Hey, this is really interesting." Then recently I've really come to love San Francisco, but it took me about fourteen years to do it, to get the Middle West out of my system. Now when I return to Minneapolis to visit my daughter and granddaughter, it seems odd. Everything is flat there, although Minneapolis has its own interest, partly because of the university there, but it's not as interesting as San Francisco or the whole Bay Area. Where else can you drive for about fifteen minutes and get out into beautiful Marin and other beautiful country? It's special, it's different.

03-00:06:25

Bird: Do you have a part of the city that is your favorite, a neighborhood of the city where you really like the architecture or you really find alive?

03-00:06:40

Rakosi: Well, I'm constantly amazed. Marilyn would drive me to different parts of the city and it can be so totally different from one little area to the next—the architecture and so on. Just the other day, we were in an area, just above where the gays live—

03-00:07:17

Bird: The Castro?

03-00:07: 19

Rakosi: Castro, yes. Jeez, there are some fantastic buildings there—really interesting architectural designs. This is a city that a person may never see all of, the different little areas that are here. And way up on top, sloping hills, and so on. I think that it's great. It's very unusual. There's no other city like it. I'm very familiar with New Orleans, which has its own charm and interest, but that's a city that by comparison seems to me flat—I mean psychologically—flat, except at Mardi Gras. [laughter]

03-00:08:33

I was there for two years and I was out on the street at both Mardi Gras. What happens there is—the whole city is out on the streets. I mean the whole city, and they're all drinking, so everybody is more or less released from inhibitions on that one day. Then these wonderful floats come down the street. People have been working on these floats all year, and they're really great outdoor works of—I don't know whether to call them art, but they're close to art. There's music, constant music, different bands—twenty or thirty different bands come marching down the street. Well, when that is happening and you are out there as part of it, because you've drunk some too, you get swept up in a mass frenzy—not frenzy in a bad way. And this goes on for hours and hours. Finally you hardly know where you are. I don't know what it's like now, because the neighborhoods that I knew then have deteriorated. I had a wonderful apartment on Bourbon Street. New Orleans has very old fancy ironwork. It's like in the Middle East, you open the ornate gate to a house and there is a garden in front of you, a patio, and I had an apartment in one way up on top of a circular staircase, and I was young, I wasn't married. It was wonderful. And the restaurants at that time were by far the best in the country. The greatest bartenders in the world maybe were there. You've never seen such bartenders. So New Orleans had its own wonders for me. I taught there at Tulane University in the School of Social Work.

03-00:12:33

Bird: When was that? In the thirties?

03-00:12:41

Rakosi: Wait a minute, I can tell you. I think 1935. 1935 to 1937, I think. Anyhow, I remember going down there from Chicago. I had been working in Chicago. I got this job in New Orleans. My first job there was in the Federal Transit Bureau. This was in the depths of the Depression, so that'll date it. What was happening was that there was no work for anybody and the men couldn't stand just sitting around at home without working, so they used to ride the freight cars to different cities. Some of them, at first, they did it to see whether they could find work, but there was no work, so after a while they just kept going from place to place. There were maybe as many as a million men traveling on freight cars from city to city and it was demoralizing. They were demoralized. By the time they got to New Orleans when I was there, none of them really thought they could get work. They were demoralized, unshaven, they had lice, and the government had set

up a kind of a camp for them. Well, it wasn't really a camp. It was a facility, let's say, on the other side of a river there. They were all sent there first to be deloused, to get a bath, probably to shave, and then they were sent into the city where our offices were, to talk and to get help from social workers. At that time, I was director of casework for the bureau. Actually, the job was too big for the staff. There weren't nearly enough trained social workers to treat them all. So, I was fully trained by that time, but the people that came to work for us as social workers simply had a BA, it could be in any subject. The government was desperate to have a staff in place. You wound up with—I remember some of the staff members needed help themselves. But that was a great experience actually. I spent a year there, and then Tulane asked me to teach social work.

So, let's see, where were we? [laughter]

03-00:18:19

Bird: Let's dwell here for one second. So, you taught social work to undergraduates, or was there actually a graduate program, at that point, for social workers?

03-00:18:34

Rakosi: This was a graduate program. The country was just beginning to develop graduate programs in social work. As a matter of fact, in 1924, when I started training, I think there were only two universities that were beginning to provide graduate courses in social work, so that at the end of it you would have a profession. I remember my first training place was in Cleveland. Western Reserve University had set up a program in conjunction with the family service agency there. The director of the family service agency was not a social worker himself, he was a minister, which was traditional up to that time. [pauses] I'm lost now.

03-00:20:05

Bird: That's okay, I think that that is a great place to go back to, because last time I think we got you mostly through college. So, you graduated from college and you were fully trained to be a poet? I'm just asking: when you graduated from college, I think that you said last time that you were not trained at all, actually not ready for the working world.

03-00:20:40

Rakosi: It wasn't in my mind. But in my fourth year I was beginning to panic. The thought of having to go back to Kenosha to just wait around for a job, oh jeez, I would be a burden on my parents. Oh, hell no.

03-00:21:07

Bird: And, so how did you decide on social work?

03-00:21:11

Rakosi: Oh, it was purely an accident. I happened to see an announcement in one of the magazines that the American Association of Social Workers was looking for candidates to enter the field of social work. Now, at that time I had no idea what social work was, none. It never entered my mind. I didn't know anything about it, but I thought, well, I'll take a chance. They were recruiting people in Chicago, so I went down to Chicago for the interview and they were surprisingly cordial and warm in receiving me. That kind of warmth has to be a part of social workers, and that was something new for me. I really felt at home. They grabbed me. They were tickled to death to have a man, because up to that point, it had been mostly practiced by women who had a kindly heart, and who

either did it on a volunteer basis or otherwise. So that's how I entered social work. Boy was I lucky, because you couldn't get a job—other kinds of jobs then, but I was lucky. Now, I had no idea how I was going to feel about social work. Well, I started to go to classes.

03-00:24:01

Bird: In Cleveland?

03-00:24:03

Rakosi: Yes, at Western Reserve, and I remember as clearly as if it happened yesterday, my first client. It was in a poor neighborhood, I rang the doorbell of his house, and somebody yelled from upstairs, "Come on up." So, I walk upstairs and I find a black man lying in bed. He had things rigged up so he could open the door, by pushing a button—that sort of thing—and I started to deal with his problems and his situation and I got hooked. I knew then that that was going to be my profession, that there was a deep impulse in me to be helpful to people in need. There was something fulfilling in doing that.

03-00:25:20

Bird: So, were you taking classes while you were seeing clients?

03-00:25:31

Rakosi: Oh sure, that's how social work is taught. It's always taught at both places simultaneously. It's not like an academic course at the university. It's an intensely practice-oriented profession.

03-00:25:58

Bird: So, when you walk in to the house of your first client, do you know what to do at that point?

03-00:26:05

Rakosi: Oh yes. Well, sure. You find out what his problem is, and then you know about resources in the community that he doesn't know about. If there is some kind of psychological problem, that's of course much more difficult to deal with, but you do it.

03-00:26:32

Bird: Was your first client a success story? Did you actually see if you helped him?

03-00:26:37

Rakosi: Oh, I don't know.

Because writing was still all-important to me, I was very eager to get to New York. All of the writing life of the country at that time was in New York, and to some extent it still is. I was very eager to see New York, too, to live there. It's a marvelous city to live in, to have experience in it. So I moved to New York after only about six months, nine months, something like that in Cleveland.

03-00:27:32

Bird: So, was there a specific time period that you were supposed to be doing a training, and then you graduate to becoming a full-fledged social worker?

03-00:27:45

Rakosi: Oh yes, it's a two-year graduate program.

03-00:27:47

Bird: So, you cut it short in Cleveland? Did you have another program in New York that you were finishing with?

03-00:27:53

Rakosi: No, you know, as a matter of fact I didn't continue my graduate work until later, yeah. My job after that was at the Jewish Board of Guardians—

03-00:28:19

Bird: In New York, right?

03-00:28:21

Rakosi: In New York, yes. Now that's a organization that was dealing with problem boys and you might ask, "Why did they hire me, an untrained worker?" They hired me because there weren't enough trained social workers then, but I had had some training. Also, I was a man. We dealt with boys who were real problems, serious problems. As a matter of fact, a couple of the boys that I counseled and worked with were members of a gang called the Kid-Dropper Gang.

03-00:29:19

Bird: You actually mentioned that gang last time.

03-00:29:25

Rakosi: Did I?

03-00:29:28

Bird: It sounded very violent.

03-00:29:29

Rakosi: But I did very well with them. Part of what a social worker has to be—he has to be able to relate well to other people, and also to really know how to listen intensely and to identify with the other person's problem. That's something that can't be learned actually. Many graduate social work students are kicked out of the program because they are not able to do it. They are not that type of person. But, apparently—well, I know that I do have that—so that worked well. I was able to be helpful to these kids, and I liked them, and they liked me.

03-00:31:11

Bird: Could you talk a little bit about the Kid Droppers in terms of what your day-to-day dealings were with them? What exactly was the work of social work that you did, if you can?

03-00:31:25

Rakosi: Well, these boys are in the custody of this organization, so they know that and they have agreed to—wait a minute, no, they didn't have to agree. The juvenile court put them there, and they had to meet with a social worker. They had no choice about that.

03-00:32:03

Bird: Did they meet once a week or something like that, or every day?

03-00:32:10

Rakosi: Not every day; about once a week. Okay, you're in an office. They come into the office. Let me see how to put this to you. "Hi, Jack, how are you doing?" "Oh, okay." "What's been happening?" "Not much." "Who are your friends now?" (I'm just picking this out of the air.) "Well, so-and-so and so-and-so." "What are they like? What are these other kids like?" Then he begins to describe them. Now, in the process that's just the first five or ten minutes. In the process, he's already begun to relate to you, and you relate to him, and you just keep on, and eventually you get to why he's in the pickle that he is, and by that time you have a relationship, and he can talk about it then, why he got into trouble. Then you can begin the psychological help. That's it.

03-00:34:43

Bird: And were the kids—you said that they were in the custody of this organization. Did they—?

03-00:34:50

Rakosi: Well, they were under the jurisdiction of the court, the juvenile court.

03-00:34:55

Bird: But, they are not with their parents, they're now—are they in the care of foster parents?

03-00:35:00

Rakosi: No, they're with their parents. Part of the problem is the family relationship; in fact—nearly always. So, the rest of the family comes into this, and you will be interviewing them too. Sometimes it's a father and mother and the boy—all three together. So, it can get very complex, but fascinating for that reason.

0:35:41

Bird: It sounds like you have to be psychologist and a social worker at the same time.

03-00:35:45

Rakosi: Oh, absolutely, yeah, yeah. Psychology is the heart of the program.

03-00:35:54

Bird: But, that's interesting that you didn't need a degree in psychology or—

03-00:36:00

Rakosi: No. Well, departments of psychology until fairly recently didn't go into that kind of counseling. It was an academic program purely—with some philosophical theory and so on. The curriculum in social work, on the other hand, may be 75 percent psychological counseling. In the early years, Freudian psychology was used, and when I worked in New York the second time, I worked for the Jewish Family Service. It was very large and really the outstanding social work agency in the country—better than the nonsectarian agencies. They were 100 percent Freudian, and I was flabbergasted at how knowledgeable the other people there were, when I came on the staff, about Freud's theories. It was an exciting place to be.

03-00:37:37

Bird: So, did you study Freud in New York, or had you already started to study—?

03-00:37:44

Rakosi: No, because I later got my degree at the University of Pennsylvania, as you know, and at Pennsylvania they did not follow Freud. The faculty there followed Otto Rank. Rank differed fundamentally from Freud. Rank himself had been a poet to start with, and had then studied philosophy and joined the circle that Freud had in Vienna—Freud had a circle of people who looked up to him, and showered praises on him. Rank went along as a devotee for a while with Freud’s ideas. Rank was then the secretary of the Viennese Psychoanalytic Institute. Eventually, it struck him that Freud was wrong—that that was just a theory that Freud had—that if you are going to really help people, change them, you have to adopt a totally different way to do it. Freud’s method essentially was to figure out what the problem was, and then tell the patient what the problem was, and that that would cure him. Rank thought, “That’s all wrong.” Rank’s method essentially was not to become theoretical at all, but to start with the patient’s problem as he saw it to begin with, and then let him try to work out the solution himself—to see that what he had been doing was counterproductive, it was getting him into trouble. It was making him anxious and so on. That was my method too when I was doing psychotherapy, and it works.

03-00:41:09

Bird: When you were in New York and you were steeped in Freud’s theories, was it more the Freudian approach that you used then?

03-00:41:18

Rakosi: Entirely, oh yeah. But, in social work, in the day-to-day problems that human beings have, there’s nothing theoretical about it. They are practical problems—psychological often—but even the psychological doesn’t depend on some theory as to how to work it out. So, although I knew quite well what the Freudian theory was, in the day-to-day work with them, I didn’t ever use that. As a matter of fact, a very old friend of mine who was a psychiatrist, and with whom I trained at the—I think it was—Lebanon Hospital in New York, I asked him, “Solly, in your practice do you—how do you use the idea of the Oedipus complex?” And he laughed and said, “Oh, I never use it.” But Freudian theory is very interesting, and writers have picked it up. My friend Robert Duncan was a great Freudian. He knew all about Freud; Freud appealed to him.

03-00:43:17

Bird: And even reading Freud is something like reading ...

03-00:43:24

Rakosi: He is a splendid writer. Even in translation it comes through. Rank on the contrary was a dreadful writer—absolutely dreadful. His mind was so complex, so packed with ideas that in the German, it just comes out as a solid mass. Trying to translate it into English is hard.

03-00:44:19

Bird: Did you ever read any of his poetry in translation?

03-00:44:22

Rakosi: Yes, I did, and he’s pretty good. He could have been a poet.

03-00:44:28

Bird: But he had a relationship with Anaïs Nin, didn’t he?

- 03-00:44:31
Rakosi: With whom?
- 03-00:44:34
Bird: With Anaïs Nin? Didn't he have a relationship with her?
- 03-00:44:36
Rakosi: Yes, oh yes. [Bird laughs] Well, I turn up my nose because Anaïs Nin really exploited him, and was cruel to him. He was much older. She was a little skinny woman—Spanish. I think that her father had been a famous pianist, and they met in New York, I think. Rank was divorced from his first wife by that time, and he was attracted to her, and she kind of seduced him and then made vicious comments about him.
- 03-00:45:55
Bird: In her diaries.
- 03-00:45:56
Rakosi: Yes. So, you know. I never met Rank, because by the time I had got to the University of Pennsylvania, he was already gone, but the faculty there—he had analyzed the faculty there, so that I got the Rankian approach through them.
- 03-00:46:30
Bird: Interesting. Where did you live in New York?
- 03-00:46:39
Rakosi: Oh, yeah, let's see. When I lived in the Village actually, most of the New York writers, the avant-garde, lived there. e e cummings lived there. The second time I was in New York, I was there for five years. I lived on West 69th Street, just off of Broadway in an apartment, and below on the ground floor, there was a restaurant called Fleur de Lys. I used to eat there occasionally, and that's where I met a great American composer, I don't remember his name.
- 03-00:48:17
Bird: I would be miserable at helping you.
- 03-00:48:19
Rakosi: Damn, not Bernstein. Name some...He composed Rodeo—can you stop that for a minute?
- [tape interruption]
- Copland, Aaron Copland.
- 03-00:48:55
Bird: So, you met Aaron Copland.
- 03-00:49:13
Rakosi: Yes, Aaron Copland used to eat there too.
- 03-00:49:21
Bird: At the Fleur de Lys?

03-00:49:21

Rakosi: Yes, at the Fleur de Lys. I used to sit with him and chat. I don't remember any more what we talked about—probably politics and probably art, the arts. But anyhow, many years later when I visited New York, Fleur de Lys was still there.

03-00:50:06

Bird: I wonder if it is still there now?

03-00:50:10

Rakosi: Probably. Who knows?

03-00:50:11

Bird: I lived there for a little while, but I don't remember that restaurant.

03-00:50:16

Rakosi: Oh really?

03-00:50:19

Bird: So, when you were in New York—okay, so you were having lunch with this composer—were you involved in the music scene there very much?

03-00:50:28

Rakosi: You mean listening to music?

03-00:50:33

Bird: Listening to music, live music, playing your mandolin.

03-00:50:37

Rakosi: I still played my mandolin. I'll tell you a story about that, though. I never went to the opera. I don't care for opera, but I went to concerts, of course, yes, and to theatre. Always theatre, yes. About the mandolin, I used to go from one mandolin to another that was more expensive, and better, until I had a Lyon and Healy mandolin, which was awfully good. Well, one day I saw an announcement in the paper of an auction of books and musical instruments and I went to the auction. And there was a mandolin there, and I started to play it. It had the greatest sound that I've ever heard, just a beautiful, beautiful sound. Sound is hard to describe, but this was mellow, and soft, and rich. They were just showing it then. So, I got my paycheck a few days later, and as I was going down to buy it—I was walking along maybe Broadway, one of the streets—and there was a circle of men around some guy sitting on the sidewalk and he's fooling around with cards—three cards face down—and the men are all watching intently and they're betting. You have to guess which one is the queen of hearts, let's say.

03-00:54:05

Bird: It was a sleight of the hand kind of thing?

03-00:54:08

Rakosi: The player turns up the cards quickly for all to see and puts them face down again. One of them is the queen of hearts, say. He moves them around with both hands. You have to guess which card is the queen of hearts. Well, I watch, and one of the guys wins. I wonder, had the player made a mistake? It was obvious where the queen of hearts was. The player moves that cards around again and another guy wins. By this time I've been sucked into the game and I bet. But I lose. A man standing next to me says, "You

didn't pick the right card." And I'm so befuddled that I'm thinking that maybe in my excitement I hadn't picked the right card and I bet again, and I lose. I'm in a kind of a trance and when I come out of it and look around, the street is empty. Everybody had disappeared. Jeez, I had lost a bundle there and couldn't buy the mandolin.

03-00:55:28

Bird: So, all of them were working together, and they were showing you how easy it was, so you would play.

03-00:55:33

Rakosi: Sure, that was a real con game. It wasn't the money for me so much, but the fact that I had lost that wonderful instrument. Anyhow, that was my experience. It was a learning experience.

03-00:55:58

Bird: You were living in Greenwich Village and e e cummings was living there, and all of the other writers. Did you see all of the other writers?

03-00:56:07

Rakosi: cummings was there before me—long before me. And the others too—a whole slew of very famous American writers lived there. My friend Kenneth Fearing lived there then, and I saw a lot of him.

03-00:56:27

Bird: I'm wondering what kind of writing community there was there. If you are living there when there are other writers around, did you have—I know that you didn't have poetry readings, right?

03-00:56:44

Rakosi: No, there were no readings, but that's a small community and writers hang out at certain bookstores. There were wonderful bookstores there. They hang out in certain restaurants, so you meet everybody, really. You meet everybody.

03-00:57:16

Bird: And was that a particularly productive time for you?

03-00:57:23

Rakosi: Pretty productive, yes.

03-00:57:28

Bird: We started this conversation talking about San Francisco and New Orleans, and I'm wondering what role place has in your work. Do you think that your work from when you lived in New York was...registered New York at all, and the work San Francisco registers in San Francisco?

03-00:57:47

Rakosi: No, no, because I don't write that kind of poetry where you are writing about a place. Maybe once in a while I've done it, but ordinarily not, no.

03-00:58:14

Bird: Okay.

03-00:58:15

Rakosi: It's more apt to be some reflection of what I've been reading than of the place I've been living.

03-00:58:26

Bird: Okay, so after your first period of time living in New York, you describe this great job, but then you leave New York to go back to Madison, right? If I have that right, I think that you were working in New York and then you decided to go back to get your master's in educational psychology?

03-00:58:52

Rakosi: Yes. Well, I'll give you the exact date on that. That was 1925. Now, I forget the reason why I entered the educational psychology department, but it was kind of interesting. My first job after getting my MA in educational psychology was for the Milwaukee Electric Railway and Light Company. They had a personnel program there with a highly trained industrial psychologist—well, two highly trained industrial psychologists—to work with motormen in developing skills for their work, and—are you running out?

03-01:00:37

Bird: No, it's just making noise. [referring to recording device]

03-01:00:41

Rakosi: It was kind of interesting, because this was a totally different kind of activity. The older man had set up the program. He was quite a gentleman. He had created a machine which flashed scenes on a screen in which a streetcar is crossing at a certain speed, and an obstruction occurs suddenly in front, how fast does the motorman respond? The two were constantly trying to improve the program, and develop different equipment. I did that for about a year, but I wasn't really going to go into the field of industrial psychology. I wasn't that interested, but for that one year, it showed me a different kind of activity in society. Of course, that is a big, big thing now in American life—industrial psychology—oh yeah.

03-01:02:40

Bird: In terms of getting people to work faster and more and—

03-01:02:45

Rakosi: Well, efficiency, efficiency. But it really was starting there in Milwaukee. I doubt if there were more than one or two other places in the country then that was doing that.

03-01:03:09

Bird: You didn't go get your master's so that you could work in industrial psychology, did you? I'm wondering why you made the decision to move from New York to go get your master's at that point.

03-01:03:27

Rakosi: I guess it must have been that I was looking for ways to make a living—different ways of making a living. Social work is very absorbing. You don't have much psychic energy left after a full day of that. I guess that I was looking for easier and easier ways of making a living so that I would have more time—well, not necessarily more time, but more psychic energy for writing. That's really why I went down to the University of Texas.

03-01:04:41

Bird: That was already after you had your master's?

03-01:04:45

Rakosi: Yes.

03-01:04:46

Bird: So, you wanted to be a teacher? You went to get your master's so that you could teach, right?

03-01:04:51

Rakosi: Yes. I went down to the University of Texas, and I got a job there in Austin—in the English department. I taught freshman English. I was thinking, well, maybe the easiest thing—the best thing—for me was to become a professor at the university. That was part of a program to get a PhD in English literature. [pauses; laughs] My class in English...they were all engineering students. They couldn't learn anything. Their minds were built for engineering, for mechanical things, not language. It was a dreadful experience. I had good professors, though, but what I couldn't stand was their affectation. They were acting as if the university was like Oxford or Cambridge. I left the program after a year, so the next thing, I think, "Well, I'm going to try law, let's see what happens there." So, I entered the law school and they were very glad to have me. I was a little older than the other students by that time, and I really liked law. I was fascinated by jurisprudence. It's a great subject. But, what happened was—I may have mentioned before; Southerners are endless talkers. Gee, they talk, talk, so. In one of the classes you were expected to analyze a case. So they called on me to analyze a case. I'd heard these other guys doing it, just talking away—a blue streak. But I couldn't do it. When I tried, I got flustered, and other students started to laugh. Well, that finished me. I realized, if law requires that kind of oily tongue and arguing, I would never make it. So that went down the drain.

03-01:09:52

Bird: Where were you studying law, still in Texas?

03-01:09:55

Rakosi: Yes, in Austin, Texas, at the university. The next thing that I tried was medicine. [laughs] I entered the school of medicine. The school then was not in Austin, but in—what's that port—Galveston, Galveston. So, here I am in a first-year class, anatomy. There's a cadaver for me to dissect each part, but I couldn't get myself to touch the body, to actually cut it. There were four or five of us around the cadaver, and they were doing all of the cutting. I was able to get a ninety-eight in anatomy, however, because medicine is just a matter of memory, just sheer memory. I was doing fine that first year, but I couldn't continue, because I'd run out of money and there were no grants available at that time for students. You couldn't take out a loan, so I had to quit.

03-01:11:58

Bird: Would you have wanted to continue if you had had the money?

03-01:12:03

Rakosi: I would have. Oh, yes, sure. I would have gone into psychiatry then. That was my plan.

- 03-01:19:59
Bird: Now, it is interesting to me that you left New York thinking that you wanted easier occupations so that you could write and remain a poet, but you're picking rather difficult and time-consuming courses.
- 03-01:12:27
Rakosi: Yes, but if I had been able to go into psychiatry, you could limit your time there, because you are very well paid.
- 03-01:12:43
Bird: So, it was the end result you were looking towards?
- 03-01:12:45
Rakosi: Yes.
- 03-01:12:46
Bird: Because medical school doesn't seem to be the place where you'll have hours on end to write poetry.
- 03-01:12:53
Rakosi: Not while you're in medical school, oh no, no. Gosh, you have to stay up late into the night. I mean, after all, [William Carlos] Williams was a doctor.
- 03-01:13:10
Bird: So the progression, I think, is that you were in New York and then you went to get your master's, and that was a two-year program?
- 03-01:13:17
Rakosi: In what?
- 03-01:13:18
Bird: The educational psychology program. It was a two-year program, was that right?
- 03-01:13:25
Rakosi: No, that's a one-year program.
- 03-01:13:30
Bird: And so, did you read people like John Dewey and—?
- 03-01:13:32
Rakosi: Oh yes, oh yes.
- 03-01:13:38
Bird: Was John Dewey a major influence on you?
- 03-01:13:39
Rakosi: Dewey's ideas did influence me yes, but somebody like Emerson influenced me more.
- 03-01:13:57
Bird: It was interesting. I've been looking back on some of Dewey's writings, like *Democracy and Education* and *Experience and Nature* and *Experience and Education* and I was thinking that maybe Dewey had a lot to do with the kind of poetry you were writing when the Objectivist group was coming together.

- 03-01:14:23
Rakosi: Well, there were ideas in the air in this country, so you pick up ideas that are already in the air, sure.
- 03-01:14:35
Bird: It seemed like the emphasis on experience and Dewey talks about the image being the main instrument for education of the way people form images when they are trying to learn. That seemed to be—
- 03-01:14:51
Rakosi: I don't remember that idea of his, no.
- 03-01:14:56
Bird: What other courses did you take when you were doing your master's? What was the curriculum for your educational psychology master's?
- 03-01:15:07
Rakosi: I don't remember, no.
- 03-01:15:10
Bird: I couldn't figure out exactly what the end result that you were envisioning with that would be—whether that was just to further your ability to be a social worker or—?
- 03-01:15:25
Rakosi: No, no, at that time I must have been headed towards working in industrial psychology.
- 03-01:15:40
Bird: So, then after that you went to Milwaukee and you did the industrial psychology, and then you went to Texas right after that? Is that correct: from Milwaukee to Texas, to the university there?
- 03-01:15:57
Rakosi: I have trouble with remembering. I don't remember.
- 03-01:16:01
Bird: I seem to remember reading that you had a stint working for Bloomingdale's as well.
- 03-01:16:06
Rakosi: Oh yes, when I was in New York. That was a kind of amusing experience. You know Bloomingdale's is one hell of a store. Yes, I got a job in Bloomingdale's in the personnel department as a psychologist. Now, the superintendent of the store—is he called superintendent?
- 03-01:16:49
Bird: Supervisor—?
- 03-01:16:52
Rakosi: The head. I don't know. Let's say the manager of the store, that huge store, hired me. But, he didn't know what a psychologist was expected to do in the store, and I didn't know what I was expected to do in the store. I knew one thing that I would have to do, however, and that was to analyze each position in the store: exactly what a sales person in one of the departments did, how long it took, and the kind of personality required for a good salesman—that sort of thing. So, I started with what was logical, with men's ties.

Nothing could be simpler than that. I was working away at that. I would sit with the sales person there all day to see exactly what he did. I would say that I made some progress. This was in the late fall. Christmas was approaching, and that was the big season for stores. So, Christmas came but sales had not been very good at Bloomingdale's, and the manager was fired, and I was fired. [laughs]

03-01:19:44

Bird: You hadn't finished your project yet?

03-01:19:46

Rakosi: No, no. It was an amusing experience. I had another other interesting experience there. I encountered a gay man for the first time in my life. He was a floorwalker in one of the other departments.

03-01:20:16

Bird: What's a floorwalker?

03-01:20:20

Rakosi: He's a guy who has several departments under his supervision. He walks around to make sure that everything is going as it should. We used to meet at lunchtime, and go outside to chat. He was very handsome, young. Truck drivers would drive by and they'd give each other this very intense kind of look—a different kind of look. I didn't know quite what it meant. Then one day, he happens to say that he had an appointment with his dentist, and that he never had to pay for his dental work. Well, then I caught on. That was my first encounter with a gay man.

03-01:22:03

Bird: So when the truck drivers were staring intently, you were thinking that something was going on?

03-01:22:09

Rakosi: Oh sure. They were giving each other eye signals.

03-01:22:14

Bird: I see. But, I imagine that at that time—would he talk about it openly after you figured it out, or no?

03-01:22:25

Rakosi: No, he would never talk about it no.

03-01:22:31

Bird: New York is always an education in itself, I think.

03-01:22:34

Rakosi: Well, it can happen anywhere, of course.

03-01:22:45

Bird: What year did you go to Penn for your—what was it there? That was your master of social work degree.

03-01:23:00

Rakosi: Let's see. Pretty late. It must have been sometime between 1935 and 1940.

03-01:23:07

Bird: Okay, so we'll get to that a little bit later. One thing that I wanted to ask you about is that you had mentioned that Leon Herald got you active in politics, that you had had your socialist views from your father, but Leon Herald was the one who pulled you in to...

03-01:23:33

Rakosi: Yes, this was when I was in New York.

03-01:23:37

Bird: The second time?

03-01:23:39

Rakosi: Yeah, the second time. I used to see a lot of Leon. He had no formal education that I was aware of but he loved to cook, so the kind of jobs he used to get were in restaurants. He eventually wound up as a salad chef in one of New York's big restaurants, one of the famous ones.

I used to see a lot of him. To Leon the basic political issues in the country was the exploitation of the poor by the rich, and if you were poor, you naturally were a Communist. He had joined the Communist Party by the time I knew him. On those days some of the Communists were organized according to where they worked and some according to where they lived.

He belonged to a street area group. He kept talking to me about, "Why don't you join the Party?" Well, he finally persuaded me, but I was also persuaded by my curiosity as to what it was like to be an actual member of the Party. I was very curious. So, I decided to join. Well, the Party wouldn't take just anybody. You had to be recommended by a Party member, so Leon recommended me enthusiastically. [laughter] to become a member. However, I didn't join the street Communists, I joined the workplace Communists. They were called cells. I was astonished to find that the members of my cell, which was the social agency I was working in, were really the brightest, the most sensitive, the most perceptive people in the agency.

03-01:27:52

Bird: Where were you working at that time?

03-01:27:53

Rakosi: Jewish Family Service.

03-01:27:56

Bird: Okay, okay. So, you didn't know that they were Communists until you joined?

03-01:28:04

Rakosi: Of course not, no. That's always a big secret—total secret. So, what happens at meetings, well, they had to do entirely with how to influence the minds of the other workers, to make them knowledgeable about communism and want to join. I think I was in it for two years. After a while, I realized, "I'm not really interested in changing other people's minds." Finally I decided, "No, I'm just not going to do it." I remember that speakers would come in from the central committee of the Party and speak to us. They were like creatures from Mars. They weren't like us at all. I was repelled also by the strict dogmatic party line that they were there to teach us. So, I left the party.

- 03-01:30:32
Bird: So, a cell was only from your agency?
- 03-01:30:35
Rakosi: Yes.
- 03-01:30:37
Bird: Were they small meetings, or were there a lot of people in your agency?
- 03-01:30:46
Rakosi: They were relatively small, sure.
- 03-01:30:48
Bird: I read that you participated in some strike actions.
- 03-01:30:53
Rakosi: The only thing that I participated in was in street marches. They had wonderful marches. They could organize thousands of people to march in the streets, and that was exciting.
- 03-01:31:10
Bird: Did you consider yourself a Marxist at that point?
- 03-01:31:15
Rakosi: I've always been a Marxist. The idea of communism is noble. There's nothing wrong with the idea. It's just that the kind of Marxists who became leaders just took advantage of it and corrupted it.
- 03-01:31:45
Bird: Were you aware when the Russian Revolution was happening? Do you have memories of 1917?
- 03-01:31:58
Rakosi: About what?
- 03-01:31:58
Bird: About the Russian Revolution?
- 03-01:32:00
Rakosi: Of course. You mean the one in 1917?
- 03-01:32:08
Bird: Yes.
- 03-01:32:10
Rakosi: I had read about it. I was only fourteen years old then. I hadn't read about it then, but later on I did. Sure, oh yeah, I read a lot about it.
- 03-01:32:25
Bird: Did it strike you as something hopeful and inspiring?

03-01:32:28

Rakosi: Oh yes, it was like a beacon to the rest of the world almost. It looked so promising, the whole idea that you could transform a society into a really benevolent society. That's a great dream.

03-01:33:04

Bird: When the people from the central committee came to give speeches to your cell, was there any apparent Russian influence?

03-01:33:16

Rakosi: It was all Russian influence. That was the big mistake that the Communist party—in this country—made. That it took the Russian experience as their model, and they tried to practice the Russian way in this country, but this country is a democratic country. You can't practice Russian communism in this country, so of course it flopped—it flopped.

03-01:34:00

Bird: Did you read Russian poets when you were in the Communist party?

03-01:34:08

Rakosi: Oh, of course, but not because I was in the Party.

03-01:34:11

Bird: Whom were you interested in?

03-01:34:12

Rakosi: Oh, all the great Russian writers of the nineteenth century. They are still the greatest. You can't get any greater than Chekhov and Tolstoy. And, recently, Marilyn picked up a new book that has come out—picked it up in the library—Isaac Babel¹. I had heard of him and read a few of his stories about the Cossacks, but I didn't realize fully what kind of a writer he was. He is really superb. He was chiefly influenced by [Guy de] Maupassant, so his writing is very concise, epigrammatic almost. Now, the reason I'm bringing this up is that this book describes his experiences in Russia right after the 1917 revolution when Lenin had instituted his Seven Year Plan to industrialize the country, and Babel recounts personal experiences that he had had. Now, this is just the beginning of the revolution and they are beginning to organize a new society and turn Russia into an industrial country. The experiences that he had—if you want to know what was really going on then in the personal lives of Russians, two or three years after the revolution, this is the book to read.

03-01:37:10

Bird: Okay, that sounds good. Have you gotten through the whole thing yet?

03-01:37:17

Rakosi: About half.

03-01:37:18

Bird: It looks like a monster.

1. Babel, Isaac. *The Collected Stories*. Ed. Nathalie Babel, Trans. Peter Constantine. New York: Norton, 2002.

- 03-01:37:20
Rakosi: He's quite a writer.
- 03-01:37:24
Bird: Did you read the Russian Futurists? Were you interested in [Vladimir] Mayakovsky's work at all?
- 03-01:37:30
Rakosi: Oh, sure, I read all I could get in translation.
- 03-01:37:35
Bird: How about Anna Akhmatova?
- 03-01:37:38
Rakosi: Well, she came much later for me, but I got to her eventually.
- 03-01:37:43
Bird: Right, because I don't think that she was able to be published outside of Russia until much later.
- 03-01:37:49
Rakosi: No, she hadn't been translated. I'm quite familiar with the Russian writers. I'm very interested in what they do.
- 03-01:38:11
Bird: I think that I'm going to change gears here a little bit, but when you were in New York, were you aware of the Harlem Renaissance, and did you have contact with people that were involved in that?
- 03-01:38:32
Rakosi: No, I didn't, but my wife Leah and I used to go to Harlem to the Cotton Club there to dance. In those early days, it was safe to go anywhere in New York. I mean anywhere. You were never bothered. You weren't attacked. There was none of this violence then. So, we just went for the experience. We had a great time dancing in Harlem—great orchestras, wonderful jazz. I remember the black dancers really having a great time, really letting themselves go. They are not as inhibited as we are. I remember in some of those places the dancers would just swirl around, and around, and around—it was wonderful.
- 03-01:39:45
Bird: Did you join them and dance in the same way?
- 03-01:39:50
Rakosi: Yeah, in the same way, but we were too inhibited to do much of it.
- 03-01:39:50
Bird: Okay. But, when you were in New York, was the work from the Harlem Renaissance, was it being published in things that you were reading, and were you aware that it was going on?
- 03-01:40:00
Rakosi: Yes, oh yes. I read them. I'm very much interested in black writers too. They have something to say. They have something important to contribute to American culture. Of

course, their jazz is a prized article in American culture. As a matter of fact, it's too early to say how much they've actually contributed to American culture.

03-01:40:57

Bird: I'm noticing that you have this huge music collection. Do you have jazz artists in that?

03-01:41:07

Rakosi: Oh sure.

03-01:41:09

Bird: Whom do you listen to?

03-01:41:09

Rakosi: I've got everybody.

03-01:41:12

Bird: It looks like it. Who are some of your favorite jazz artists?

03-01:41:19

Rakosi: Well, my preference really is for early jazz. Of course, Louis Armstrong and Duke Ellington and Sidney Bechet and John Lee Hooker and Coleman Hawkinds—I could go on. It's a pantheon.

03-01:41:46

Bird: Okay, how are you doing? Do you want to stop now?

03-01:41:51

Rakosi: Yeah, well, it's four o'clock.

03-01:41:53

Bird: Yeah, it's about four o'clock. So, next time we'll go into—I think we are almost up to the thirties, and we'll talk about poetry a little bit more.

[end of session]

[Interview #4: September 4, 2002]

[Begin Audio File Rakosi 9-4-02]

04-00:00:07

Bird: Okay, how are you today, Carl?

04-00:00:13

Rakosi: Oh, fine, it's a beautiful day out there.

04-00:00:15

Bird: It is. I think that every time I've come to San Francisco now, it's been sunny.

04-00:00:18

Rakosi: You're lucky.

04-00:00:21

Bird: I know, I'm going to start thinking it's a sunny place. [laughter] It's dangerous.

04-00:00:28

Rakosi: Yes, yes.

04-00:00:31

Bird: Okay, we're all set. So, I'm interested to start off this section. I'm so impressed by how many places that you went to in the twenties and thirties and early forties and how much you moved around and how much you must have seen of the country and what an interesting time that was. I was wondering if you could talk a little bit about your perceptions of the Depression.

04-00:00:58

Rakosi: Yeah, well, oddly enough, people during that period were quite optimistic in the sense that they were sure that they could cure the system. Now, the only cure out there on the horizon was communism or socialism—some form of socialist idea, let's call it Marxism. I remember that confidence that everybody felt. Nobody thought that it couldn't be corrected. They weren't depressed about the situation, the way people get depressed now about the slightest little thing. That was in the air; that was the way Americans felt then.

04-00:02:23

Bird: Can you explain why that is?

04-00:02:27

Rakosi: Well, I'll have to speculate about that. Capitalism had not reached this high development in which you had more and more middle-class people and the very rich. It was still a little more down to earth, and there was not this tremendous distance between the very rich and the poor. It may have felt that it was more manageable. Also, people did less griping; they felt freer to act, I think. As I said before, they would storm the welfare offices. They would really get out there and protest. They were not really rebelling so much as that they simply wanted to correct the system, and that was it. About the blacks, the blacks had a different agenda, although a few blacks did join the Communist party, and the Party went way out to try to attract them, because they thought that with the blacks, they could really transform the whole system. But the

blacks had a different agenda and they didn't join in large numbers. I suppose it was because they didn't feel that comfortable with whites and didn't want to be in that camp. It's interesting that--I remember that in the John Reed Club in Chicago, which was a socialist club of writers, I did meet this black novelist, well known—damn, I forget his name.

04-00:06:05

Bird: Richard Wright?

04-00:06:01

Rakosi: Richard Wright, yes, he was there., but by and large, the John Reed Club was a club of white writers. The blacks just went their own way, a different way.

04-00:06:22

Bird: Were you actually a member of that?

04-00:06:23

Rakosi: Oh sure.

04-00:06:25

Bird: What did that entail? What were the meetings like for the John Reed Club?

04-00:06:32

Rakosi: Oh gee, I don't know. They didn't have any formal programs, as I recall. I just recall talking with other writers of a socialist bent, so I imagine that we talked politics and not writing.

04-00:07:03

Bird: Were there publishing outlets available to you as a John Reed Club member or anything like that—any kind of publishing formations there?

04-00:07:10

Rakosi: No, I don't think so.

I do remember this: in New York, I was single and young then, and, of course, I was interested in girls, young women, and that the Communist party had a summer camp called Camp Unity, which that was set up to really, I suppose, convert people to socialism. I used to go there and meet the most beautiful young women. It was just flabbergasting. In the city I used to go out with three of them. They lived in different parts of New York and Queens. I used to have to travel long distances on the subway to take them home. They were lovely. They were lovely looking, very bright young women and social-minded—really the best kind of people. Camp Unity, of course, had a program. You had fun, but also there were lectures, and there was a sense of belonging together.

04-00:09:14

Bird: Do you remember who gave the lectures?

04-00:09:18

Rakosi: No. My experience there was very attractive. There was nothing offensive about the camp.

04-00:09:28

Bird: Were they teaching you Marxism and--?

04-00:09:34

Rakosi: No, I think everybody there already was a Marxist. It would have been like preaching to those who were already converted. The program and the ambience was an attempt to instill a sense of unity among these socialists and Marxist sympathizers, to give them a good time, at the same time. It was very successful, very successful. That may have been the only really bright experience I had in the Party that was really enjoyable in every way.

04-00:10:29

Bird: Do you have the sense that at that time, when people called themselves Marxist, did they actually read Marx?

04-00:10:35

Rakosi: Of course, oh yeah.

04-00:10:37

Bird: I didn't know whether the ideas were so much in the air that one could claim to be a Marxist without actually reading Marx.

04-00:10:50

Rakosi: Oh, I don't see how that's possible, to be a Marxist without having read Marx. Oh, you read Marx and Engels—a whole host of early socialist writers. There were some in France and so on—I forget their names now. Oh yeah, I read them all, and so did the others. These were very intelligent, educated people.

04-00:11:22

Bird: Was there a time that you thought about your own work, your work as poetry, in relation to Marxism, and how could your poetry further that cause as well?

04-00:11:34

Rakosi: No. No, that never entered my mind, that I would use poetry for a political purpose. That would be fatal to the poetry.

04-00:11:50

Bird: I'm interested because I thought that the John Reed Club would be a place where those were the kinds of things people would think about, and how can we make art into weapons.

04-00:12:02

Rakosi: No, that's what the Communist leaders wanted. [laughter] They never got that from a really good writer, no.

04-00:12:22

Bird: Well, I guess we started this talking a little bit about the Depression. You went into the optimism of the Depression. You were a social worker so you were working with—you mentioned in New Orleans, you were working with men who were riding the rails, because they couldn't get work. What were your experiences as a social worker during that time. Are there places that were hit harder than others?

04-00:13:11

Rakosi: No, it was universal. There were no differences. One part of the country was as bad as the other. [pauses] Give me that question again.

04-00:13:33

Bird: I guess I'm wondering if you have any stories about what you saw, how the Depression actually hit people. I know you were in Chicago, you were in New York, in big cities, where it is hard to get by anyway, let alone in the Depression.

04-00:13:51

Rakosi: I guess there's so much that I saw, I don't know where to begin. Everybody was out of work, everybody, including architects, engineers. Now, whoever heard of an engineer being out of work? So, there was a general loss of self-confidence in people. That was the big thing. I'll just take that one profession, architecture, as an example that comes to my mind. If nothing comes your way...if you can't get any work as an architect, and there is nothing on the horizon to make you think that it is going to get better in time if you just hold out, you're going to lose your morale and your self-confidence. And if you go further down the line, you'll be riding the rails out of desperation. Or, sometimes a husband just couldn't stand sitting around and seeing his family go further and further down into a hazardous poverty. He just couldn't take it, so he'd light out. So, the country was full of that kind of transient men. I never found women doing that, however. That was happening what you found wherever you went. In New Orleans I found—this was in the worst part of the Depression—I found that the people that were coming in were people from every profession, and also working men. Actually some working men had a better chance of getting a job than the professional people.

04-00:17:28

Bird: Because they could do other jobs than what they—?

04-00:17:29

Rakosi: Yes, occasionally some physical job would come along that had to be done, so some of them could get jobs.

04-00:17:39

Bird: Did professional people cross over and do those kinds of jobs too?

04-00:17:44

Rakosi: Oh yeah, oh absolutely. That's a good point. They would do anything, any kind of job. It was a level of desperation where you will do any kind of work in order to make a little money.

04-00:18:11

Bird: Did you actually work with men more than you worked with women?

04-00:18:15

Rakosi: Not when I was working for the private family agencies, but in the public agencies there were more men.

04-00:18:27

Bird: I wondered if you were somewhat rare being a man working in social work, whether they would actually assign you to men more than women.

- 04-00:18:39
Rakosi: Well, there were only two public agencies that I worked in: one early one in Chicago where it could be either; and the one in New Orleans which was a federal job, but otherwise it was all family agencies—family and children’s agencies. So, there could be a child that I would be working with, a husband, a wife or a family all together; it was different combinations.
- 04-00:19:35
Bird: Did the Depression affect your family pretty hard? I know you weren’t married yet. You weren’t married until 1938, I think.
- 04-00:19:45
Rakosi: Yeah, ’38.
- 04-00:19:49
Bird: What about your father and your stepmother? Did the Depression hit them pretty hard?
- 04-00:19:55
Rakosi: No, my parents were never hit by the Depression, because my father was this expert watchmaker who could always make a living, and we had a store always.
- 04-00:20:12
Bird: He could always make a living because he was repairing watches, not necessarily selling new ones.
- 04-00:20:15
Rakosi: Yes, sure.
- 04-00:20:21
Bird: Do you think that the nature of social work changed at that time because of the Depression? Did you find that what people needed help with was very different than before the Depression?
- 04-00:20:35
Rakosi: Well, psychologically not, but the help that was needed was immeasurably bigger. Public agencies were not set up for help on such a vast scale. They were caught by surprise, and they really didn’t have the funds yet to provide financial relief. They had started out historically as poorhouses. If you go back still further, people were sent to prison if they couldn’t pay their bill—that sort of thing. What was the question again? [laughs]
- 04-00:21:33
Bird: Whether the nature of social work changed—whether the things that people needed help with changed at that time.
- 04-00:21:37
Rakosi: Well, sure it changed in the sense that they needed financial help, and more and more they needed psychological help because of the demoralization. As a matter of fact, the whole program of the Federal Transit Bureau, of which I was director of casework, had that as their objective—to help with their demoralization. It didn’t work, however. You couldn’t do it. We didn’t have the necessary staff, and we didn’t have the people with the skill to do it, because—as I think I said before, it had been set up quickly and there

weren't that many people around who could do it yet. So, in a sense it failed, but it did—I don't know how to put it—it was not altogether useless. People were still helped a little—they were deloused and cleansed, and they had a period in which they could talk about their problems, and that was it. I suppose that was of some help.

04-00:23:36

Bird: It must have been hard to be focusing your energy on helping other people's morale, and seeing case after case. What did that do to your own morale?

04-00:23:43

Rakosi: No, no, no. A professional social worker doesn't take it that personally. If he did, he couldn't be helpful. No, an interesting thing happens when you are with people who are troubled. You immediately become almost a different person yourself in trying to help them. It's very exhilarating and very fulfilling to be able to do that.

04-00:24:58

Bird: It's interesting that you say that some of these programs were put together very quickly and they were taken off guard by the Depression, because it seems that the crash happened in 1929, but that the Depression wasn't really felt until a few years later. Is that right, do you think?

04-00:25:12

Rakosi: Oh no, it was felt quickly, but it was felt on and on and on. That's what demoralized people.

04-00:25:22

Bird: So, they were caught off guard that it wasn't just going to go away like the previous short--

04-00:25:29

Rakosi: Well, Hoover was the president, I think, at that time. He did the best he could. He kept preaching a kind of optimism that nobody believed, but the government had no solution. We were sure that capitalism was dead. Oh boy, did we little know! [laughter]

04-00:26:02

Bird: Do you think that Roosevelt's New Deal had something to do with people's optimism as well?

04-00:26:09

Rakosi: Yes, I'm glad you brought that up. Yes, Roosevelt, there was something curative about him. He came from a very wealthy New York, patrician kind of family. He had a crippling condition from infantile paralysis, I think it was. You wonder—how did this social aristocrat become such a great advocate for reform? It was a marvel, but he had this wonderful voice and a delivery that was unforgettable. It has a magnetic quality and resonance that lifted up and reassured your spirits. When he died, the whole country went into the deepest grief. Yes, Roosevelt had a great deal to do with the optimism. He was so sure that everything was going to turn out right. He was doing what was necessary and the Republicans hated him for that. He was hated.

04-00:28:18

Bird: Republican politicians hated him for that, but most of the population supported him?

04-00:28:21

Rakosi: Oh yeah, sure.

04-00:28:29

Bird: It's always fascinating to me how politicians then were treated differently than they are now, or how Roosevelt wasn't usually—the photograph wasn't usually taken of him in his wheelchair, but of him standing behind something.

04-00:28:38

Rakosi: That's right.

04-00:28:39

Bird: And now all of the things that we know about our politicians and our presidents.
[laughs]

04-00:28:43

Rakosi: Oh, yeah.

04-00:28:54

Bird: I was also interested—you talked about the men riding the rails, and you yourself had that experience as well, didn't you?

04-00:29:04

Rakosi: Oh sure.

04-00:29:04

Bird: What was that like?

04-00:29:05

Rakosi: When I was at the University of Texas in Austin, I met someone from New York who was studying there, and he had ridden the rails, so I joined him, because I was curious about the experience and it sounded romantic. It was his idea actually. We started—let's see—in some little town in south Texas. He knew where to wait for the freight trains that would come along next. From him I learned how to hop on. It was great. One of the interesting things about riding the rails is that you don't mix with other guys that are doing it. There's no mixing of any kind. They're all loners. We'd ride on top. There is a broad platform on top of the boxcar, and you climb up on top and lie flat on your stomach and put your arms and legs around the two sides of the board, and that's how we'd ride. It's dangerous, but I wasn't aware of it. If a switchman comes along—they walk those boards to see, I suppose, if everything is all right, if the connections are in place. He could throw you off the moving train, and in fact, in Arkansas there was one of these fellows who would throw everybody off the train while it was traveling real fast.

04-00:34:09

Bird: Literally throw them off the train?

04-00:34:10

Rakosi: Oh, he'd kick em off, absolutely. He was a big guy with a stick. The other danger was that if you were traveling at night, and you'd go to sleep and let go of that board, you would roll off. So, there were dangers to it. But there was never any communication among the guys that were doing it, and there were quite a few. I discovered then when I

was inside a boxcar—we traveled that way too sometimes, and sometimes we'd get locked in. The switchmen wouldn't know that there was anybody inside and would lock us in. One experience I had, we were traveling at night, and we were locked in. I didn't see anybody, I thought we were just the two of us. Now, those boxcars are made of iron. Everything is iron, so you can't sit anywhere because the jolting and swaying would break your back. It could almost kill you, because your whole body is shaking violently for hours and hours. Well, anyhow, one time when we were approaching St. Louis, and they opened the boxcar, I suddenly saw that there were about thirty fellows in there. But there had been no communication, not a word was spoken.

04-00:36:49

Bird: And when you get locked in there, is it completely dark?

04-00:36:52

Rakosi: Oh, black, pitch black. It was blacker than anything you've ever seen. I've never seen such blackness.

04-00:37:06

Bird: Is part of the reason that they don't communicate because they don't want to get caught?

04-00:37:11

Rakosi: Oh, no, these guys were loners. They didn't want to talk.

04-00:37:18

Bird: Were there some switch operators who let people ride the trains, that understood these are what the times called for, and--

04-00:37:26

Rakosi: Oh, no. They were in the hire of the railroads. The railroads were merciless to them. They would throw you into jail if they caught you.

04-00:37:45

Bird: But you never got caught?

04-00:37:45

Rakosi: No.

04-00:37:50

Bird: It's interesting, because I thought—I was reading your Americana poems, and thinking, "I wonder if these are snatches of conversations that he heard on the rails in his experiences."

04-00:38:04

Rakosi: No, no, they weren't. [laughs] If that had been the case, there wouldn't have been any poems that I could have written. I got nothing from the other guys. It was different in an earlier period when so-called hobos used to ride the rails—a totally different kind of people, of men. They did have a relationship with each other, and talk a great deal. In fact, they had almost a culture of their own, and a reason to be moving around like that—totally different. It had nothing to do with the Depression.

04-00:39:10

Bird: That was before the Depression, you are saying.

04-00:39:13

Rakosi: Slightly before, yeah.

04-00:39:17

Bird: So, I'm wondering if you could talk a little bit about where the Americana poems came from. I'm interested in them, because it seems—one I'm thinking of in particular is called "New Orleans Transient Bureau, 1934." It seemed to me that there was a real connection between your work as a social worker and your—

04-00:39:41

Rakosi: Oh, that one. That's not really an Americana poem, though. That came directly out of my experience there. Oh sure.

04-00:39:58

Bird: For those poems, I guess I'm asking, did you find yourself overhearing conversations and putting those in, or what is the material of those poems?

04-00:40:10

Rakosi: Oh, it could be from a conversation or from things in the newspapers, or from what you hear on the street, what's in the common language of the people.

04-00:40:28

Bird: They have a real folklore quality to them.

04-00:40:36

Rakosi: I can see why you'd say that; there's a faint similarity, but it's not the same. The Americanas are more like street talk, street thinking. But it's hard to know where you get your ideas.

04-00:41:02

Bird: Right. With those poems were you trying to capture an America?

04-00:41:06

Rakosi: I was, yes. Remember, I'm a foreigner. I'm observing and hearing everything, and I'm very curious. [pauses] Robert Duncan, by the way, remarked that you almost had to be a foreigner to write those poems, that only a foreigner would be that much interested in catching the essence of the American, yeah.

04-00:41:46

Bird: Well, last time I asked you whether the places that you lived had an impact on your writing, and you made the point that, "No, that's not really the kind of poetry I write, but sometimes that happens." I was thinking about it later, because someone who moves around that much during that time period—it's almost like the change in places—I mean, you went to just so many places that that seems to have some kind of impact on, at least, that section of your poetry, but that it wouldn't be particularly, you are writing a New York kind of poetry or a poetry about New York or about Chicago.

04-00:42:33

Rakosi: Well, remember I—I never stayed in one city very long, except for Minneapolis, so that place never made a deep an impression on me. Although I lived and worked in New York, and loved the place—I was never a New Yorker. [pause] So, you have to live in a

place a very long time for place to be in your poetry. Now, the other Objectivist poet, a woman, who lived in Wisconsin...

04-00:44:03

Bird: Lorine Niedecker?

04-00:44:05

Rakosi: Yeah, Niedecker. She wrote poetry in which place was all-important in her work, but she lived in one place all her life, never moved out of there.

04-00:44:25

Bird: And New York seems very much in Reznikoff's poetry.

04-00:44:26

Rakosi: Entirely, absolutely. Reznikoff used to do a lot of walking on the streets—just walk, walk, walk, and he'd make up his poems as he walked. Oh yeah, he is a New York writer.

04-00:44:58

Bird: So, as a foreigner looking at America, are you more critical of the American, or less?

04-00:45:08

Rakosi: I'm less critical, oh yeah. [pause.]

04-00:45:20

Bird: I think this is probably—you just mentioned the Objectivists—this is probably a good time to go through that period. I understand that [Louis] Zukofsky invited you to contribute to the *Poetry* issue when you were—I think you were in Houston.

04-00:45:38

Rakosi: Yeah. But I've given the background for that, haven't I?

04-00:45:50

Bird: I don't think so.

04-00:45:54

Rakosi: Oh, then I have to go into the history of *Poetry* magazine. It was founded by Harriet Monroe—early 1920s I think, and published in Chicago. She had some very good early contributors. Pound was one of them, and Vachel Lindsay, Carl Sandburg—there must have been a few others. So, it started off very well, with a bang. It was the only good poetry magazine in the country then. There was only one other poetry magazine in the country—to my knowledge. Now there must be hundreds.

04-00:47:09

Bird: What was the other one?

04-00:47:16

Rakosi: I don't remember the name of it now, but it was in the East, somewhere, but I wouldn't have wanted to contribute to it.

04-00:47:35

Bird: You're not thinking of *Dynamo*, are you?

04-00:47:38

Rakosi: No, oh no. *Dynamo* was a pretty interesting magazine. No, this just wasn't good poetry, so you have to cancel that out and say that there was only one decent poetry magazine in the country. But, over the years, Harriet Monroe had more and more contributors who, by the way, were all women. It became more and more sentimental, and had less and less artistic merit. Then it got down to a very low point. Ezra Pound was living in London at the time, so he had no personal connection with poets here. He kept writing one insulting letter after another to Harriet Monroe, saying, "Get off your butt, and get some good poets in there." And finally persuaded her to let him pick a young poet whose judgment he trusted, to edit an issue with contributions from fresh talents. But she was not really convinced because in the very next issue, she apologized for publishing the Objectivist poems. Pound and Zukofsky had been corresponding and from that, Pound had developed confidence in Zukofsky's critical judgment, so Harriet Monroe very reluctantly allowed Zukofsky to put together the now famous Objectivist number. Zukofsky simply wrote to those poets he thought were the best at that time and invited them to submit their work.

04-00:51:19

I happened to be then in San Antonio then--

04-00:51:21

Bird: Or in Houston, I thought.

04-00:51:24

Rakosi: Oh, Houston, excuse me, yeah. I was teaching in a high school then. I had never met Zukofsky, but he knew my work, because he had seen it around. I had appeared in *The Nation* and in a number of international magazines, and also in Ezra Pound's own magazine. I think it was called *Exile*—I've forgotten the name of it.

04-00:52:04

Bird: *Exile*, yeah.

04-00:52:10

Rakosi: He and I had appeared in that together, so he had some confidence in my work. Harriet Monroe didn't like the poems but she printed them with a preface, by—I'll call him Louis, because we became good friends. But, she insisted that Louis give the group a name, some kind of a name so that it would look like a new literary movement, which would be to the credit of the magazine. Louis wrote me, "She's a fool. It's not a movement." He hated the whole idea of giving it a name, but he had to do it. So he thought up the name Objectivist, thinking that that best described the nature of Reznikoff's poetry, which is more or less true. He saw me as a lyric poet, and in that issue of the magazine, I appear first, as a lyric poet. Well, as I said, in the very next issue she apologizes for [laughs] her misjudgment. But Louis went on. He became, in a way, the entrepreneur of our group. Niendecker, by the way, was not a part of it at this time. I think I was the one really who first called her an Objectivist, because I thought that she was the most Objectivist of us all, and she is.

04-00:55:49

Bird: Does she become more associated with the group in the late sixties? I didn't know whether it happened when the *Contemporary Literature* article came out in [Spring] 1969 or if--?

- 04-00:56:08
Rakosi: Well, she came in a little after the Objectivist anthology came out—a little after. She didn't quite make it. She would have made it, I think, but I don't think she thought her work was quite good enough just then. But she is, no question, an Objectivist really. Yeah, Zukofsky went on to then put together the Objectivist anthology. I don't know if you want to get into the literary end of this. It's not social, but it's historical.
- 04-00:57:03
Bird: Of course it is.
- 04-00:57:05
Rakosi: It's interesting, actually there are many different talents in the Objectivism anthology.
[pause]
- 04-00:57:57
Bird: Many different talents in the...
- 04-00:58:07
Rakosi: I'm trying to think of the name of the San Francisco poet/critic who had a long poem in there.
- 04-00:58:22
Bird: [Kenneth] Rexroth?
- 04-00:58:22
Rakosi: Who?
- 04-00:58:23
Bird: Was it Rexroth?
- 04-00:58:24
Rakosi: Rexroth, yeah, thanks. You're my savior.
- 04-00:58:30
Bird: Except when it's composers. Then I'm not.
- 04-00:58:36
Rakosi: Yeah, Rexroth. He had a long poem in there. It had a pretentiously overweight title ["A Prolegomenon To a Theodicy"]. I wrote to Louis, and said, "Jeez, what's Objectivist about this poem?" He said, "Oh, I know, but you underestimate the merits of this long poem." Louis was into long poems himself, very long poems.

Oh, I know what I was going to say. Louis' first idea for the anthology was to include not just young poets, but the other really good poets—Pound himself, of that period, but Pound objected. "No, no, we don't need that kind of exposure," so the program for the anthology changed and it's what we now have. The critical response to it was almost nil. Only one poet reviewed it favorably. That was Horace Gregory. Gregory was at the University of Wisconsin at Madison the same time I was, and he was a pretty good poet himself—a great admirer of Kenneth Fearing. He wrote poetry very much like Fearing's. Others simply ignored the book completely, which looking back, is kind of interesting.

- 04-01:01:06
Bird: Why do you think that is?
- 04-01:01:11
Rakosi: Well, we were the avant-garde then. It shows that the old guard simply had contempt for us, that they had no regard whatever for us. They wouldn't even review it disparagingly. [laughter]
- 04-01:01:54
Bird: Some of the old guard did get into the anthology anyway. You said it changed away from that kind of program, but I think, if I remember correctly at least, William Carlos Williams was in there.
- 04-01:02:09
Rakosi: Oh, he's not an old guard. Oh, heavens no—he's new guard, so much new guard that he couldn't get published for years. No, he had as much trouble getting published as we did. In other words, the literary world was simply not willing to accept the idea of an American style poetry.
- 04-01:02:51
Bird: There seems to be some confusion about what role Williams had in Zukofsky's conception of what Objectivism is.
- 04-01:03:02
Rakosi: No, he had nothing to do with that.
- 04-01:03:08
Bird: Because there are some quotations that people use of Williams explaining what an Objectivist is. I don't know if he tried to take credit for it later.
- 04-01:03:14
Rakosi: No, he had nothing to do with it. Williams and Zukofsky corresponded quite a bit, and Zukofsky loved Williams' earlier work.
- 04-01:03:42
Bird: What did you think of it?
- 04-01:03:46
Rakosi: I thought it was wonderful—beautiful actually. I like it better than his later work.
- 04-01:03:58
Bird: Do you have any idea of what Williams thought of your work?
- 04-01:04:01
Rakosi: Oh sure. Didn't I have this in our previous interview? No? Okay. I had sent him my first book, *Amulet*, and asked him if he would write a recommendation for a Guggenheim. You had to get at least three recommendations at that time. He wrote back an ecstatic letter. He thought it was the most wonderful book, but he said, "I would not advise you to use any recommendation from me, because if you do you'll never get a Guggenheim." The second person that I had asked for one was—I don't know what's the matter with me, I can't remember names. [pause] Hmm, [Wallace] Stevens. Well, Stevens thought my book was good for a different reason—a totally different one than

Williams'. Williams just praised it to the skies, but Stevens gave a specific reason. He thought that I had exactly the kind of realism that poetry needed, but he said he would not write a recommendation, because, he said, "Those people at the Guggenheim are just as capable of reading your work and judging it as I am. It's just a waste of time for me to write for you." He was absolutely right, so I didn't feel bad about that. This whole idea of having to get recommendations for a stipend. They can read a man's work themselves and judge it, for Christ's sake. The third one I approached was Marianne Moore. I had proposed to write on the psychology of the poet, and she wrote back a very curt letter saying that she couldn't approve of my project, period. So, I never got a Guggenheim.

04-01:08:00

Bird: Did you apply without recommendations or you didn't apply?

04-01:08:03

Rakosi: No, I didn't apply.

04-01:08:05

Bird: Why do you think Williams thought he shouldn't help you get a Guggenheim?

04-01:08:10

Rakosi: Because he had such low prestige. His reputation was terrible.

04-01:08:18

Bird: And when you proposed to do the psychology of the poet, was that a serious project that you wanted--?

04-01:08:25

Rakosi: Absolutely serious. I could have done it, too.

04-01:08:30

Bird: What would you have done if you had gotten the Guggenheim?

04-01:08:35

Rakosi: What do you mean?

04-01:08:36

Bird: Well, how would you have made that study, I guess? What would have been your methods?

04-01:08:40

Rakosi: Well, I would have just looked internally. [laughs]

04-01:08:44

Bird: Do you think that it's possible to talk about the psychology of the poet as a type of person, or would it be definitely a personal?...

04-01:08:56

Rakosi: Yeah, that is an interesting point. I think there is a fairly common element that runs through all poets, and I would pick that out.

04-01:09:29

Bird: What do you think that is?

04-01:09:37

Rakosi: Are you sure you want to go into that?

04-01:09:42

Bird: I can hear historians listening to this later, and saying, “Why didn’t she ask him about the...”

04-01:09:48

Rakosi: I thought you would ask historical questions. What do I think what?

04-01:09:58

Bird: What do you think the common element is in poets?

04-01:09:59

Rakosi: Oh, let me see. It has to do with perception—visual perception, a way of looking at what you are seeing, which is perhaps clear or clearer than what you would be seeing, let’s say, in just walking along and seeing something. Well, it certainly is that, yeah. That would be one element. The other element is what you hear. You hear something that is musical. I’m talking now about lyric poetry. There are other types of poems, of course. There’s the narrative poem where that’s not the case. The lyric poet is very concise, almost epigrammatic—all that sort of thing.

04-01:12:14

Bird: When you talk about lyric poetry, I know obviously there’s the musical quality to it. What other characteristics make something a lyric poem, or is that the main one?

04-01:12:37

Rakosi: Well, those are the three biggest ones. There may be others that I can’t think of now, but those certainly are enough, and of course, just from the name, lyric poetry, you’d know the cadence in it is all-important.

04-01:13:11

Bird: What about the voice in it?

04-01:13:14

Rakosi: Well, the voice is the sound, yeah, although the voice also is the person. Now, another element has to be there, and that’s sincerity. In other words, it has to be really the voice of the poet and not the voice that he remembers from some poem that he has read—that sort of thing.

04-01:14:17

Bird: Apart from the poems, like the Americana poems that we were talking about where you deliberately take on other voices, do you think that your voice has been pretty constant in your poetry?

04-01:14:29

Rakosi: Oh, I think so. I hope so. I don’t know. Remarkably the same, as a matter of fact, astonishingly the same after something like twenty-three years that I did not write anything or did not read any poetry. That the new poems would have the same voice as the old—exactly the same, as if there had been no interregnum.

- 04-01:15:10
Bird: What did it mean to you that you were now part of a movement after Zukofsky had put together the *Poetry* issue in the anthology?
- 04-01:15:21
Rakosi: What do you mean?
- 04-01:15:25
Bird: Well, I'm wondering if it, I guess, psychologically if it made you feel any kind of validation in your career, or if it economically if it helped you—or if you thought, “Okay, here is the turning point. I'm going to have no problem being published now.”
- 04-01:15:41
Rakosi: Oh, no, no, nothing like that, but it did have this effect, if you were viewed as part of a movement in the history of poetry, of course you've achieved a certain visibility that you might not have otherwise. If you have to—as most poets do, try to get there as a loner, it's obviously harder. So, it gave me a little more edge.
- 04-01:16:40
Bird: There seems to be some degree of arbitrariness in this movement, in that Harriet Monroe asked or forced Zukofsky to call it a movement. But then there also seems to be a lot of—you actually did feel like you were a part of a movement in that.
- 04-01:16:58
Rakosi: Oh, we were part of a group, not a movement.
- 04-01:17:01
Bird: Okay.
- 04-01:17:00
Rakosi: Yeah, we were a group. You can say that we were all four Jewish, so that already forms a kind of grouping. Now, we were Jewish in different ways, and the Jewishness came into our poetry in very different ways, because we came from different Jewish backgrounds. Let's take George Oppen, for example. Oppen's family were German Jews originally, and they were Reform Jews; that is they belonged to the Reform wing of Judaism. His father was a theater owner. His mother had died early on, and his father had remarried quite a wealthy woman, so there was money in the family. His mother had left him a small inheritance which contributed to a break in the relationship between Oppen and Zukofsky. Zukofsky assumed it was larger than it actually was and that Oppen could afford to support a struggling genius like him, and when Oppen, of course, wouldn't do it, Zukofsky withdrew from the relationship angrily and the two were not even on speaking terms in the end. I was not on speaking terms with Zukofsky either at the end because he had become quite nasty in his later years.
- 04-01:19:39
Bird: Zukofsky would have been happy in earlier periods when poets had someone supporting them.
- 04-01:19:45
Rakosi: Oh yeah. He expected it. I remember one day he and I were talking, and somehow this question came up of being a genius. He talked as if he thought I was a genius too. Oh

come on, I thought. It sounded like an atrocious idea then. I mean, we were just youngsters, but he already sensed that he was a genius.

Hey, where am I now?

04-01:20:39

Bird: You were talking about Oppen getting an inheritance and his background.

04-01:20:41

Rakosi: Oh yeah, Reznikoff was also a Reform Jew, but Jewishness was very, very important to him. He contributed to Jewish magazines, to the *Menorah Journal*, which was the big Jewish magazine at the time, and wrote a history of the Jews in, I think, North Carolina—somewhere like that. So, he was very Jewish-conscious. Oppen had never been inside a synagogue in his whole life. He had never even been bar mitzvahed, which means almost that you are not a Jew.

04-01:21:48

Bird: I read that actually someone did perform that for him in the park or something, in New York.

04-01:21:53

Rakosi: Yeah, I was going to get to that.

04-01:21:55

Bird: I'm sorry. [laughs]

04-01:21:57

Rakosi: So, you had these two extreme contrasts there. I had some sense of Jewishness—not nearly as strong as Reznikoff's. I wasn't really that much interested in Jewish history, and so on. So, there were different kinds of Jewishness in this amalgamation. And the interesting thing was that Zukofsky came from a very Orthodox Jewish family. In his "A" poem, he describes his father as kind of a rabbi. In reality he was a pants presser. [laughter] That's right, but he describes him as a rabbi, walking around. Zukofsky and I never talked about Jewishness when we were very close friends in New York. But one day I was curious and I asked him, "How do you feel about being Jewish, your Jewishness?" He looked annoyed. "Oh," he said, "It means nothing to me, nothing." "Oh, come on," I said, "it must mean something to you." "Nothing," he said emphatically, "nothing." Well, that's the kind of diversity there is among Jews. But, there was one common element among us—probably more, and that common element was seriousness. All four of us were very serious always about subject matter. I suppose that that is a Jewish trait. So, in that sense—one of the literary critics—oh jeez, really a celebrated critic, writing about the Objectivists.

04-01:25:59

Bird: Heller, Michael Heller, or Rachel Blau de Plessis?

04-01:26:04

Rakosi: No, a really outstanding American critic.

04-01:26:10

Bird: Eliot Weinberger?

- 04-01:26:11
Rakosi: Much more outstanding than Eliot. [laughter] Hugh Kenner.
- 04-01:26:15
Bird: Oh, Hugh Kenner, yes.
- 04-01:26:17
Rakosi: Hugh Kenner wrote that the Objectivists were born mature, which says somewhat the same thing that I was saying before.
- 04-01:26:38
Bird: Actually, I'm interested in the kind of critical debates about the term "Objectivist," and Eliot Weinberger, for one, says that at this point we should leave the term behind, that it's not—and other people say that it is very relevant, and that it is really a historical moment in poetry.
- 04-01:27:02
Rakosi: Well, I would go for the latter. I mean, it's there, and it's not too bad...if you don't try to explain it...to describe it.
- 04-01:27:21
Bird: So, you are saying that as long as you don't try and read your poetry or Reznikoff's poetry through the lens of Zukofsky's essay or his work on the poetics of Objectivism?
- 04-01:27:37
Rakosi: Yes, Zukofsky's attempt to define and describe the Objectivists simply doesn't work. It doesn't work. His definition has to do with optics, looking through a lens. I don't remember now exactly how he plays that out, but he had to come up with a definition—it was forced on him. He didn't want a definition at all. So, if you don't try to define the term, it's fine.
- 04-01:28:53
Bird: Do you think that there are other ways of describing what the Objectivist poets have in common, besides that definition, and besides Jewishness?
- 04-01:29:01
Rakosi: Oh, let's not go further into that. When you get to Niedecker, she's different. She's thoroughly out in nature, I mean really out there. How she brings in her understanding of American history—she brings in Thomas Jefferson, American figures. That's a little different. So, we get that kind of difference, among the Objectivists.
- 04-01:30:13
Bird: Do you think that—I guess I've been reading about the Objectivists and the term "movement" is used. I think of part of a movement as going against what's come before in terms of literary history. Do you think that that's the case?
- 04-01:30:30
Rakosi: Oh absolutely. It's a new poetry—a new kind of poetry.
- 04-01:30:38
Bird: Where specifically was the break? What do you think the Objectivists did differently than what came before?

- 04-01:30:50
Rakosi: It's all in what I told you so far. Well, also maybe the fact that we were all immigrants—of European immigrant origin—
- 04-01:31:18
Bird: I think out of what you said, sincerity might be one thing that really marks the separation, especially in *Poetry* magazine.
- 04-01:31:27
Rakosi: Well, I must say that the Objectivist poets were all very sincere—absolutely sincere, 100 percent sincere. That's a part of integrity in poetry.
- 04-01:31:45
Bird: I've seen that you use that word a lot to describe poetry and being a poet. I was wondering if you could explain that a little bit, what you mean by integrity.
- 04-01:32:04
Rakosi: Well, I suppose being honest about your feelings—about what you are actually feeling, or if you are experiencing something that you're not playing it up to an audience, dramatizing it for show, so that it'll have more effect, that sort of thing.
- 04-01:32:47
Bird: So, definitely different from, say, the symbolists?
- 04-01:32:58
Rakosi: Well, with symbolism, integrity doesn't enter into it really, because in symbolism you are working to create an artistic effect, maybe even to create a mood, to suggest something. The subject matter is different.
- 04-01:33:40
Bird: And, I know that other people have asked you about this, but it certainly seems that we should at least remark on the irony of having Pound be the instigator of this group of predominantly Jewish poets coming together. I was wondering if you had any comments on that.
- 04-01:34:03
Rakosi: Well, Pound in a way is a typical American anti-Semite of a certain kind. Eliot was an anti-Semite of a different kind, and Cummings also of a different kind, more like Eliot. The way I speculate about Pound is that he was brought up in a small town in Idaho—I don't know much about his father, but he certainly picked up anti-Semitism either from his family or from the small town in Idaho where he lived, because it was in the air. It was in the air everywhere in the country at that time. So, he started with that, and becomes a great poet, lives in London, and a little of it comes out in the *Cantos*, although I haven't read all the *Cantos* thoroughly enough to be sure. The other side of this is that if you look at the *Cantos*, what he admires are all either Chinese rulers—absolute rulers, but great rulers—or great Italian rulers of cities. Rulers with big names. He deeply admires them. The *Cantos* are full of that. So, when he moves to Italy to live—he's already quite old by that time—he hopes to establish a literary relationship to Mussolini or get some kind of literary recognition from him, and he goes on the Italian radio to broadcast for Mussolini, and that's where he really goes crazy with anti-Semitism—just crazy with it. So, who knows what was in his mind at that point. Of course he winds up in jail, and just by the skin of his hair, he escapes being branded a

traitor during wartime, and being executed. But he has enough friends and prestige to be able to wind up in a psychiatric hospital instead. But even then he gets visited by American Jew-haters, fascists. On the other hand, in personal encounters, that anti-Semitism fell away from him. I don't think, for example, that he knew that I was a Jew, but he certainly knew that Zukofsky was, and he corresponded with him freely, and Allen Ginsberg visited him in Raoallo. In personal encounters apparently, he was not anti-Semitic, but that's typical of American anti-Semites. He can be even your friend. As a matter of fact, this happened to me once. For the summer session, I think at the University of Texas, yeah, I met a school principal there. We got along great. I was quite attracted to him, and I think he knew—no, he didn't know. All of a sudden he starts spouting the vilest anti-Semitic diatribes against the damn Jews, the damn Jews. So that was America.

04-01:41:09

Bird: In that situation, did you identify yourself as Jewish?

04-01:41:14

Rakosi: No, I didn't. I didn't have the guts to do it. I was already so friendly with him that maybe it wasn't a question of—I mean, what would it have accomplished—I don't know. I didn't want to fight with him, although if he had started out that way with me, I would have punched him in the nose. [laughs]

04-01:42:04

Bird: Did you have any feelings about—when you heard that Allen Ginsberg was going to visit Pound? Did you think that--?

04-01:42:09

Rakosi: I thought it was odd, but Allen was ready to do anything and everything. I must admire him for his great courage about many things. For example, I think he was only a boy when he had to take his mother around. She was already psychotic, and his father I think taught English in high school. I don't know where that was, but this thirteen-year-old boy had to take his psychotic mother around on the bus. She'd shout and scream, and so on—a terrible experience.

04-01:43:38

Bird: And you knew Allen pretty well, didn't you?

04-01:43:42

Rakosi: Yeah, we became friends, good friends, yeah. It began at Naropa, where he had invited me to give lectures during the summer sessions.

04-01:44:05

Bird: I think that that's probably a good place to stop.

04-01:44:07

Rakosi: Sure.

[end of session]

[Interview #5: September 12, 2002]

[Begin Audio File Rakosi 9-12-02]

Bird: Okay Carl, how are you?

05-00:00:04

Rakosi: Pretty good, pretty good. Working away, working away.

05-00:00:08

Bird: Good, what did you do yesterday?

05-00:00:13

Rakosi: Hey jeez, ask me what I did ten years ago and I'll tell you, but yesterday— [laughs]

05-00:00:17

Bird: Did you watch any television on our historical event, 11 September?

05-00:00:28

Rakosi: Oh yeah. Oh sure, I had to watch that. It was different in different places. I watched the ceremonies in New York, and New York is such a big mixed city that it had to be done in different spots, and it was a little different in each place, but it was quite personal and down-to-earth. Then I saw the one in Washington, and somebody had written a much better script for Bush, because it sounded pretty good, but it was clearly a war message that we've got to invade Iraq. It had a totally different flavor to it. I sense from my experience with propaganda during World War I and World War II, that's what we can expect now. Really behind the guise of wonderful patriotism, bravery, courage, all that crap. I say crap, because when a soldier is under fire, he's just doing what is normal to protect himself. It was rhetoric, and I didn't like that. It was too familiar from my past. The one I liked best of all was in this little town in Pennsylvania—

05-00:02:52

Bird: Shanksville?

05-00:02:53

Rakosi: Yeah, one that was simple, personal, and simply had feeling. It was really a kind of eulogy for those who had died. And there, there was real bravery, because the men on the plane—and the women too—really fought back, so that felt pretty good.

05-00:03:38

Bird: Did the events, the catastrophe at the World Trade Center—I haven't decided on the best word for what that was yet—did that seem completely different from other historical events that you've experienced?

05-00:03:48

Rakosi: Well, of course. We were attacked at Pearl Harbor, but that is so far away in Hawaii. I don't even think of it as—it's of course a part of the United States, but it's so far away that I don't really feel it. I've never been to Hawaii. So, the attack on Pearl Harbor didn't, in any sense, give us the sense of vulnerability. It just meant a kind of treachery on the part of the Japanese—deception. But, this time—and it is true—we became personally vulnerable in this country for the first time. That's bound to create some change in people's ideas and the feeling of cockiness that we have in this country.

05-00:05:30

Bird: What did you think of all the flags that went up all over San Francisco and all over the country in response to the World Trade Center?

05-00:05:38

Rakosi: Well, I shouldn't be talking about that, because I come from an immigrant family, but flags have always repelled me. I've never been able to accept a flag as an expression of really being American. It's one kind of Americanism, but there are all kinds of Americanisms.

05-00:06:40

Bird: Did it look the same as it did during World War II with the flags flying everywhere?

05-00:06:46

Rakosi: World War II was entered into with a great deal of enthusiasm, including me, because there we were after the arch-devil of all time; Hitler. That was worth while, so there was tremendous enthusiasm. This time, it's how things are blown up for political, strategic reasons—blown up out of all proportion. This is a war? It's ridiculous. There are maybe two-three thousand potentially very dangerous men out there who are really out to hurt us. That's a war? I don't see it.

05-00:08:29

Bird: So, you think that the patriotism that we see now somehow is less authentic or less real than it was during World War II—that it's more strategic?

05-00:08:38

Rakosi: Well, much less, yeah, but I'm trying to find words for what I see now. There's no question that Americans are deeply disturbed about 9/11, and they should be. It arouses a sense of nationhood. You're a part of it, and it's an attack on you personally, so that's perfectly authentic. How long that will last I don't know. I would think that unless there are continuing assaults on us, that it will gradually just go under and disappear, become just very small in the background of our minds, because there are so many other things that concern people. Of course, this is really small potatoes anyhow, when you think of what we know now is going on all over Africa and in the Mid-East. After all, each individual is concerned with his own personal life. That's the main issue. So, I'm very uncomfortable about the over-blowing of 9/11. What is interesting—and this happened in World War I and World War II—how the media immediately becomes the expression of the political will of the government. They immediately become one. It says something about a government and the helplessness of individual people, persons. I, for example, could not personally do anything to change that. In fact, I tend to be sucked into it.

05-00:13:17

Bird: Into believing, at least, what the media is telling you.

05-00:13:23

Rakosi: Yeah, because after all, a person's behavior is dependent upon what he knows about a situation—what he's been informed. Every time governments leave out information that you need to know because they have a different agenda, they've misled you. It's a no-win situation for the individual in that kind of a situation.

05-00:14:26

Bird: Do you think there was—I'm trying to think of a comparison between now and the thirties, which was between the two world wars—whether there was more information then or less, or whether it was more acceptable to dissent at that time and still be American?

05-00:14:51

Rakosi: I'm trying to think of who dissented from World War II. There were, of course, the pacifists. There are genuine pacifists who will object to every war, any war, no matter how just. In World War II, of course, there was a huge German population—people of German descent in this country—and in New York there was a large group that, of course, dissented and raised vigorous opposition. Then there was the more or less silent majority who were not sure, and because they were not sure, they're swept along. I don't recall dissent on the basis of real principle, though. World War I, I'm trying to think. There, that was really a struggle among nations. Germany had become just too strong, too powerful, and at that time this country was not so strong, but England and France were the big powers, and Austria-Hungary. Austria-Hungary was a very big power then. That struggle really had no ethical basis, that war. It was simply a fight between rival powers to keep the others from becoming too strong, too dominant—a totally different kind of war. It was a bloody war, a terribly bloody war.

05-00:18:50

Bird: And, you were too young to go to that war, and then you were beyond the age of the draft when World War II came, right?

05-00:18:58

Rakosi: Yeah. [laughs]

05-00:19:00

Bird: Lucky you.

05-00:19:01

Rakosi: Although George Oppen got into it. He was drafted. He was younger than I was.

05-00:19:19

Bird: Then in the mid-thirties there were a lot of writers going to Spain for that struggle. Did you ever consider doing that?

05-00:19:34

Rakosi: I almost went, oh yeah. That really was a fight between right and wrong. I mean, that was so clear-cut. A number of my friends went. Now, we know that they went too late in the game, that the war had already been lost. Why didn't I go? I was young. I wasn't married. I could have gone. I guess the plain truth was that I wasn't willing to risk my life for it. I suppose that is a form of fear. I wasn't willing to go quite that far.

05-00:21:10

Bird: Did you know people who went?

05-00:21:21

Rakosi: Oh yeah. It was a noble cause.

- 05-00:21:29
Bird: At that time, you were a member of the League of American Writers?
- 05-00:21:38
Rakosi: Yeah, I was there at the very beginning.
- 05-00:21:45
Bird: I read that you contributed to a pamphlet against Franco?
- 05-00:21:48
Rakosi: I must have. I don't remember that, but oh yeah. I was signing pamphlets all over the place, yeah.
- 05-00:22:02
Bird: And was the League of American Writers something that—was it actually a membership or was it just attending conferences and helping to put out the pamphlets?
- 05-00:22:17
Rakosi: I don't remember.
- 05-00:22:20
Bird: It's hard when I dig through your archives and you are not there with me.
- 05-00:22:30
Rakosi: The league was an organization that was, of course, very liberal—it wasn't Communist, but it was certainly liberal, progressive. Like in Europe—all I can say is that everything that they promoted and the writers who belonged to it, they all had a progressive purpose—socially progressive purpose, in addition to being an organization for writers to meet each other—that sort of thing.
- 05-00:23:53
Bird: Were any of the other Objectivists, members of the league?
- 05-00:23:59
Rakosi: Oh, I imagine that we were all members, I think so. That reminds me, Zukofsky—in his poem “A”, Lenin was a great hero. He quotes him at length. But the left wing really didn't want Zukofsky. He made a big show of Lenin's language and ideas, but it didn't come to anything. It just was an item in that poem, period.
- 05-00:25:07
Bird: It's hard to imagine Party officials reading that poem from the beginning to the end.
- 05-00:25:17
Rakosi: I don't think the Party paid any attention to him, no. He was too complex for them, and too literary.
- 05-00:25:22
Bird: When we finished last time, we started to talk about the Objectivists, and then we moved away from there and back to there, but we talked about one thing that the main Objectivists had in common which was a seriousness that came from their varying degrees of Jewish heritage. Can we say that—social activism wouldn't be a common trait, but at least social consciousness would be another thing that the Objectivists had in common?

05-00:26:22

Rakosi: Unquestionably, but you know, that is an American Jewish trait. The first and major supporters of the civil rights movement in this country were Jews, not Christians. Jews were the ones who put funds into the civil rights movement, who were the leaders actually, who encouraged it, and so on. So, it's a kind of a Jewish trait.

05-00:27:10

Bird: What other kind of life experiences did the Objectivists have in common? Is there a— [pause] jobs or--?

05-00:27:32

Rakosi: Okay, let's take them one by one. The one I know least about is Reznikoff. I'll start with him. Charles for a while was a student in journalism at the University of Missouri. He dropped out, left that and studied law, became a lawyer, and then made a living working for a law book publisher, I guess editing texts—that sort of thing. In that way, he became very very familiar with the language of law, and you hear the language of law in much of his work—not so much the poetry, as in—there's a long piece about America. I've forgotten the name. And also, the sparseness of the language is in his long piece about the Holocaust. That's law language. It's very exact, very dry, very objective, because lawyers have to be that way. Now, in his personal life—well, that's how he made his living, but he also—I think his parents had a business making—what was it?—hats, women's hats, something like that. He went on the road for them, selling that for a while. I visited him once in New York. He was a bird-like little man—about my size; I'm little too. He talks a mile a minute, but he's not a listener. We had a long talk, or he had a long talk, and at the end of it, I knew a lot about him, but he didn't know anything about me. He wasn't impolite, that's the way he was.

05-00:31:51

Bird: That's interesting. You would think, as a poet, you would need to be a really good listener.

05-00:31:57

Rakosi: Yeah, you do. Well, he's a good listener, I suppose, in other situations. I just glimpsed his wife coming in, and they had a little chat. I could really see who was the power in that house. [laughs]

05-00:32:28

Bird: His wife?

05-00:32:30

Rakosi: Oh sure. Actually she was a very big shot in the Zionist movement, in this country—really a prominent leader of the Zionists, so she had a lot of prestige among Jews. Also, she was a professor of English at Brandeis, and he was just a little unknown poet. And probably, I assume, she brought in more income than he did into the house. So there was that. Then, I read with him a number of years ago, in Michigan. This was in the 1970s, I think. This was a program to honor the Objectivists. Zukofsky wouldn't come. He sent a very curt reply that he wouldn't come. He wouldn't come for a couple of reasons. He didn't want to be on the same platform with Oppen. Oppen was anathema to him by that time, partly because—maybe I went into this with you before—partly because he thought Oppen should support him, because he was a genius, but also because...I guess this was the last straw. Oppen had started as a kind of disciple of his. He recognized

Zukofsky's great talent, and went to New York, not to study under him, but really to just be with him. Somewhere along the way they had disagreed on something, and Zukofsky said to him, "Oh, you think that you know more about it than I do?" And, Oppen thought a moment, (he was not a pugnacious sort of a guy), and said, "Well, yeah, I think I do." Oh, that was the end of their relationship. Zukofsky never wanted to be in same room with him after that. Here's an example—Zukofsky had gathered some young promising poets around himself, who had great admiration for him. One of them was saying something, and Oppen's name came up, and Zukofsky glared and said, "I see you've been with Oppen, huh?" So, that was going on, and I think I told you that my own relationship with him came to a very quick end, because after not writing anything for over twenty years, I had a lot of questions and anxieties about my own writing that I had just begun on, so I sent him a group of poems for his reaction, because he had previously wanted to see my poems, so this was not out of line. And he sent back my packet of poems unopened with a curt reply, "I don't do that kind of thing anymore." Well, that finished it.

To get back to Reznikoff. I read with him at this meeting, and saw that he had a magnetic appeal for the young poets there. They gathered around him and listened to him intently, so he had something going there that was very nice. His poems are very hard to read because they are so short. I did read them myself fairly recently at a gathering, and I could do it, but it's awfully hard. But he was never able to do it well. He would start to read, and then towards the end, when it's very important to make an ending end, his voice would drop, which emotionally meant that he didn't think too much of the poem himself. So, that was a bit of a disappointment, but my memory of him is very pleasant.

05-00:41:23

Bird: Were any of the other Objectivists better at reading? Were any of them particularly drawn to that kind of thing, performing their poems or reading their poems I mean?

05-00:41:35

Rakosi: I never heard Zukofsky read, but I hear that he was an excellent reader, and that when he read his very difficult poetry, they came out making sense. What I have in mind is in his long poem "A", he has a section in which different voices are going on. It's musical, and I think his wife made up an actual score for it. I didn't see how that could be read, but he was able to do it, apparently.

05-00:42:36

Bird: But he never sang his poems like Anne Waldman or something?

05-00:42:42

Rakosi: No, no. His wife taught music in high school, and then his son, of course, became a really celebrated violinist. Louis himself is a tall and very thin guy, and when I was in New York—when I was working there—I went by Carnegie Hall, and saw a poster announcing a concert by a quartet with his son as first violinist. "I've got to see this," I thought. I want to see if I can pick out which is Zukofsky. I had seen him as a little kid, just maybe two years old, three years old. So I'm in the audience, and they come out and I recognized the son immediately. He looked exactly like his father, physically. He was a very good violinist, but I understand a pain in the ass as a person. In his mind Zukofsky was the leader of the Objectivists, that he was the one who deserved the most

attention, so that he wouldn't allow researchers to go to the Zukofsky archives and use anything without his permission, and that whenever they published, they would have to show that Zukofsky was the leader, the top dog.

05-00:45:14

Bird: Do you think that he got that from his father? Do you think that was how Zukofsky—?

05-00:45:20

Rakosi: No, I don't think so.

05-00:45:21

Bird: He just had a very grandiose idea of his father?

05-00:45:29

Rakosi: Yeah, he's not well liked among musicians either. Let's see where are we. I think I've said all I know about Reznikoff.

05-00:45:50

Bird: You said that Zukofsky tried to get through all of his life without working?

05-00:45:57

Rakosi: Absolutely. A lot of us would have liked to do that but didn't even try. I'm trying to think of the name of the fellow who was a friend of his, a very good friend of his in New York when they were young, and he had a firm—God, I forgot the business—but as a favor to Louis, he hired him. Louis just didn't do any work for him. Then, he met his wife and the same thing happened. His wife was the one who brought in the income. So, it was always that kind of an arrangement. I didn't like his wife. She was a very possessive, in-grown kind of a person.

05-00:47:38

Bird: Her name is Celia?

05-00:47:42

Rakosi: Celia, yeah. I thought it was a bad choice for a good marriage, but it turned out to be a good choice for his literary career.

05-00:47:58

Bird: I'm starting to think that there can be a long history written about wives supporting poets—thinking of Fearing and Zukofsky.

05-00:48:07

Rakosi: But with Fearing, it wasn't that he didn't want to work. It wasn't any of that. Fearing actually did bring money in at one time. He brought in a lot of money.

05-00:48:29

Bird: With his writing?

05-00:48:33

Rakosi: Yeah. He sold a couple of his novels to one of the big publishing houses, and one of them became a movie, so he was bringing in quite a bit of income for a while.

05-00:48:46

Bird: But, Zukofsky was not?

- 05-00:48:49
Rakosi: No, he was different. For a while, he was a teaching assistant at the University of Wisconsin, my alma mater, and almost as soon as he arrived, I'd get letters from him complaining that the faculty was stupid. He couldn't stand it. After a year he left.
- 05-00:49:30
Bird: Was he actually going to school there as well? Was he getting a degree there, or was he a professor?
- 05-00:49:34
Rakosi: No, a teaching assistant. I don't know exactly what he did.
- 05-00:49:45
Bird: So, is he the only Objectivist who was in academia, at least for a little while, in terms of being a professional writer slash professor?
- 05-00:50:00
Rakosi: Let's see. Yeah.
- 05-00:50:07
Bird: Because you were getting your PhD in Texas for a little while, but you were soured by that experience.
- 05-00:50:14
Rakosi: Yes, I was in academia for a little while. Then I was a writer in residence at two places.
- 05-00:50:26
Bird: What was Oppen's occupation?
- 05-00:50:31
Rakosi: Oppen was an honorable guy. Let's see, his mother died and left him a small legacy. Let me see, what did George do? I don't know what George worked at in this country. I know that when he fled to Mexico, he really did work there. He went into partnership with a Mexican, and the two of them manufactured furniture. He also did some very interesting sculpture. He never talked about that so I didn't know about it until much later. It was really very good.
- 05-00:52:24
Bird: What kind of material did he use?
- 05-00:52:30
Rakosi: Wood. I should know what he made his living at, but I don't. You know, by the time I met him, we were already in our sixties, so I don't know about that part of his life.
- 05-00:53:06
Bird: Now, both of you took large sojourns from your poetry careers—breaks in your poetry careers—did you talk about it at all when you were deciding--?
- 05-00:53:17
Rakosi: Between us? No.

05-00:53:24

Bird: And he's been clear in saying that part of why he stopped writing was because he didn't feel like it was right for the times, and that he didn't want to be writing Communist verse at all.

05-00:53:41

Rakosi: That's a little of my reason too, but not entirely. The reason I heard him give for it didn't make sense to me. It had something to do with his daughter, but I didn't pursue it. Our not writing was something we wouldn't have wanted to talk about. My relationship to him was quite close. We met first when I had this invitation to give a reading at San Francisco State. I was going to stay on campus in some dormitory but he thought that would be too depressing. So, I stayed with him and his wife, Mary. He was a real gentleman.

05-00:55:30

Bird: That was the first time you ever met him?

Rakosi: Yeah, and when I moved to San Francisco, my wife Leah and I, and he and Mary, were together a great deal at each others' houses and picnics and so on. We saw eye to eye on so many things that.

05-00:56:10

Bird: Do you feel like—it seems that there were groups within the Objectivist group. There might have been—it seems that maybe your poetry and Reznikoff's poetry might be closer than yours and Zukofsky's, and you and Oppen seem to be more politically-minded than the others.

05-00:56:32

Rakosi: That's true, yeah, the two of us were more politically-minded. I don't remember hearing Reznikoff talking politics. But he sympathized with our views—what was the question again?

05-00:57:09

Bird: I guess, how do you see the alignments within the Objectivists?

05-00:57:24

Rakosi: It's interesting. It depends upon what you are looking at. In some ways, in terms of craft, I would say my work is closer to Zukofsky's. If you're looking at the subject matter, some of it is a little like Reznikoff, really not so much like Oppen. Again, if you are looking at the lyrical element, I'm much more like Zukofsky than Oppen.

05-00:58:46

Bird: I suppose I was thinking about you and Reznikoff, I was thinking about the clarity of the language, and then when I think about it a little bit further, you still use language much differently than Reznikoff.

05-00:58:55

Rakosi: Oh yeah.

05-00:59:00

Bird: But very different from how Zukofsky...

05-00:59:14

Rakosi: Well, it's very clear that I differ from the other three in the sense that there is much more diversity in my work. Zukofsky is just single-minded. After all, I'm a satirist; I'm an ironist; I'm a humorist in some poems; I'm lyrical. So, if I have any real distinction, I think it is in that diversity.

05-01:00:16

Bird: Where did Niedecker fit in to all of this?

05-01:00:21

Rakosi: Oh, she's very straight-minded. She's admirable in that respect. She doesn't go anywhere near the complexity of Zukofsky and she's much more in the American tradition of nature poetry. She also has a little of the psychology of Marianne Moore, although she doesn't have Marianne Moore's imagination.

05-01:01:50

Bird: Do you have a sense of how each of these poets felt about the others' work, whether there was...the most popular, maybe? [laughs]

Rakosi: We all loved Reznikoff's work. It's interesting that I liked George's latest work better than what he wrote during his middle period, which is a little more discursive and not quite pointed enough for me. The latest work that he thought was a failure—he was beginning then to suffer from Alzheimer's—what was it called? *Primitive* something or other, or maybe just *Primitive*, I thought was his best. His very earliest work, his little book, *Discrete Series*, was first-class. Very distinctive. As for Zukofsky, when he tried to make his poetry sound like music at the expense of meaning, we thought he was nuts. We didn't say anything to him about it, though.

05-01:04:29

Bird: Is it fair to say that if everybody liked Reznikoff's work, that most of you weren't drawn to Zukofsky's work? Is he at the other end of the spectrum, possibly?

05-01:04:46

Rakosi: I can't say that, no. No, we all saw it as the highest quality. Even at the worst, it's always of the highest quality, very scrupulously written.

05-01:05:16

Bird: What did they think of your work?

05-01:05:20

Rakosi: Oh, George would see some poems of mine in a magazine and he'd sent me a letter in which the words were arranged like a poem, in which he honored the poems. It was a distinctive way to do it.

05-01:05:48

Bird: So, he would collage lines from your poetry?

05-01:05:51

Rakosi: No, the words were all his.

05-01:05:52

Bird: I did read some of those letters that I found in your archive.

- 05-01:05:56
Rakosi: Did you? I don't know what Reznikoff thought of my poetry. Now, Zukofsky initially—I think I mentioned this—had the highest regard for my early work. He said I was the lyric poet among the group, and he put me first in that issue of *Poetry* magazine. What he thought about it later, I don't know, but he did for quite a while try and get me into and did get me into some of the literary magazines, so he was pushing my work.
- 05-01:07:15
Bird: So, it seems that he was according you some level of status, because you are a lyric poet, or because your poetry was such high quality?
- 05-01:07:27
Rakosi: Both, he wouldn't have passed the time of day with any of us if he hadn't thought our work wasn't of the highest quality you could find.
- 05-01:07:46
Bird: What is it about lyric poetry that makes it necessary to put you first, to respect that?
- 05-01:07:52
Rakosi: Zukofsky had the highest regard for lyric poetry. Most of his poetry is not lyrical. At one point, I remember seeing a comment by him, in which he said that he wished he could have been a lyric poet.
- 05-01:08:30
Bird: Do you think it has to do with the long history that is attached to lyric poetry, or just that his tastes were with lyric poetry?
- 05-01:08:47
Rakosi: I don't quite get your point.
- 05-01:08:57
Bird: That's okay, I might be beating a dead horse here. [laughs] It's interesting though. It sounded like he was reverent because you were writing lyric poetry, and I'm wondering if he thought of it like one might think of someone who had really mastered an old art, rather than someone who is just starting a new kind of art or a new form.
- 05-01:09:25
Rakosi: Oh no, lyric poetry is not new at all. There's always been some of it.
- 05-01:09:27
Bird: Right, that's what I'm saying, lyric poetry is an old form and maybe that's why he was--
- 05-01:09:32
Rakosi: Well, there will always be lyric poetry of some kind. He just didn't think it was in his nature to be able to write lyric poetry, so he followed Pound's model for the long poem, although he also wrote very short poems.
- 05-01:10:18
Bird: You told me last time that you thought that you were most responsible for bringing Niendecker into the group. Do you have a sense about how the others felt about her work?

- 05-01:10:34
Rakosi: I really don't know. I myself have a high regard for it and I think she deserves the reputation that she has. Reputations, of course, kind of flow in and out. She stands out partly because so much contemporary poetry is just so journalistic, so undistinctive. I think that women critics have begun to pay special attention to her work. What they see in the poetry that would be feminine, I don't know. Maybe just the fact that she is a woman poet.
- 05-01:12:33
Bird: Because feminists have been engaged in recovering women poets and making sure that they are being written about, and that their reputation—
- 05-01:12:39
Rakosi: Well, she compares very well with the best of women poets, sure.
- 05-01:12:53
Bird: And she was quite enamored with Zukofsky's poetry, right?
- 05-01:13:00
Rakosi: Oh, yes, she really regarded herself—and was through correspondence—as a student of his. You know, she lived in this out-of-the-way little place in Wisconsin where she didn't have other poets to be with or to get stimulation. I've forgotten how she met Zukofsky, but she sent her poems to him, and that relationship was like a master to student. I discovered when I talked to her that he would send them back with his criticism, and she learned from that. She learned from that how to be careful, to strip away everything that was not usable, that was not effective. So she has a lot to be grateful to him for. I recently learned from Jenny Penberthy, who edited *Lorine Niedecker: Woman and Poet*. I met her at some meeting—that she had evidence that the two had had sexual relations, and that there had been a child, something like that. I couldn't believe it for a while, but she claimed that it was so.
- 05-01:15:53
Bird: Was there some evidence? Maybe a letter or something like that?
- 05-01:15:57
Rakosi: I don't know, I don't remember. But I couldn't believe it.
- 05-01:15:59
Bird: So, you didn't meet her until much later, right?
- 05-01:16:09
Rakosi: That's right.
- 05-01:16:12
Bird: But you met Zukofsky in the thirties?
- 05-01:16:14
Rakosi: Right.
- 05-01:16:16
Bird: How was that? What was the first meeting with Zukofsky?

05-01:16:20

Rakosi: Oh, it was a very joyous meeting. We got along great, just wonderful. There were reasons. When I met him, I had knocked around a lot by that time, so I had had a lot of experience with women. When I met him, I discovered to my astonishment that he'd never had any sexual experience. He pretended that he knew all about sex, but he didn't know a damn thing about it. So, we would be talking a lot about women. He was afraid—they were kind of unknown elements to him—figures. He was afraid of becoming involved in any way with them, for fear it would affect his writing—all kinds of hazy fears, but he saw that I was not only comfortable with women, I was chasing women. [laughs] So, it began to feel safe to him too, and then he got hooked up with Celia, and I had my first child then, and by then he had enough confidence to have his son, first child. So, I had this kind of personal influence on him. It's amusing to look back on it now.

05-01:19:14

Bird: It seems that he was enjoying being the teacher to both Oppen and Niedecker, but maybe those roles were reversed for you?

05-01:19:26

Rakosi: Well, I wasn't a teacher so much as a kind of an example to him of what is safe.

05-01:19:37

Bird: Did you feel that he tried to be the kind of authority that he was to Niedecker and Oppen in terms of poetry to you?

05-01:19:41

Rakosi: Oh, no, never. I wouldn't have stood that for a minute. No, he never tried. I was at the stage where I was an important poet to him. Later on, that's something else.

05-01:20:09

Bird: So, when you met Louis, did he come to your house, was it a scheduled meeting or did you meet him by chance?

05-01:20:20

Rakosi: You mean--

05-01:20:27

Bird: The first time you met him.

05-01:20:31

Rakosi: I don't remember that first time, no. We were both living in rented rooms, I imagine, yeah.

05-01:20:53

Bird: I was wondering if you could talk a little bit about Leah and meeting her. I think you met her in 1938.

05-01:21:04

Rakosi: Yeah, well, I think last time I was telling you about Camp Unity and all of those great young women that I was squiring around.

05-01:21:20

Bird: I actually wanted to ask you about that, whether they each knew that you were dating all three of them or whether...

05-01:21:26

Rakosi: Oh no, you didn't do that. Oh, no.

Well, my friend Leon Herald Serabian was living on Fourteenth Street in New York with his lady friend Betty. Well, actually, I think they were married. Leah and Betty had been roommates at one time.

05-01:22:08

Bird: I think her name was Betty, Betty Foster.

05-01:22:13

Rakosi: Right, I forgot. So, it was natural for Leon to introduce me to Leah. Leah had already had two boyfriends. One of them, to my surprise, was a bartender. That was a little crass for me. The other was a painter, a very good painter, Art Gunn, but dreadfully neurotic. I met Leah at some gathering that Leon had arranged. I instantly liked her whole personality—everything about her. She wasn't as good-looking as the young women that I had been going out with, but she had a wonderful nature. I instantly took to her, and we got along wonderfully in conversation. She said, I'm going out with Art—I've forgotten to say, as a matter of fact I have a couple of his paintings—but he's so neurotic, so wrapped up in his problems that I don't know, so I said to her, "If you break up with him, let me know." Well, a few weeks later, she called me, and that was it. So, we moved in together on Fourteenth Street and had an apartment right next to Leon's and that's where we lived for a while.

05-01:26:37

Bird: Now, first she was living with Betty in the Village, and she was dating a bartender and then an artist. Was she a rebellious woman at that time?

05-01:26:53

Rakosi: Oh, you never thought of her as rebellious. I don't know how to describe her. There was a great calmness about her, a maturity. I described her this way once to a friend, that she was the most psychologically wholesome person I have ever met. She had lost her father when she was a teenager. She had just adored him. He must have been a great father. Her mother was kind of a non-figure in the family, so she was more or less on her own, with an older brother George who was a great guy, actually. That whole family was an interesting family. She had one brother called Irving who was an absolutely typical New Yorker: he talked like a New Yorker; he thought like a New Yorker; he was never out of New York City in his life; he was a car salesman; he talked like a car salesman; he didn't read books. When he learned that I had written books, he went to the library, and my God, there was a book of mine there. He couldn't get over it. He couldn't get over the fact that his brother-in-law had written a book.

05-01:30:11

Bird: Did Leah's mother die when-?

05-01:30:16

Rakosi: Yeah.

- 05-01:30:17
Bird: So, how did—
- 05-01:30:20
Rakosi: No, well, I don't know exactly in what order that happened, but she was pretty much on her own, under the guidance of this older brother—very much older brother George, whom I was very fond of. He also was a very typical New Yorker, but a real gentleman, in every way.
- 05-01:30:54
Bird: So, did George support the kids?
- 05-01:31:01
Rakosi: George did help some, yes.
- 05-01:31:05
Bird: What was Leah doing in New York?
- 05-01:31:10
Rakosi: Leah was an artist's model. She had lovely legs apparently—
- 05-01:31:24
Bird: Apparently? You knew that. [laughs]
- 05-01:31:27
Rakosi: Well, she had lovely legs. I was hooked on her legs. She was getting jobs as an artist's model. That's how she originally became interested in art. That's how she supported herself and came to know many of the avant-garde painters of that time.
- 05-01:32:20
Bird: Because she was modeling for them?
- 05-01:32:31
Rakosi: Yes, after we were married, she was working most of the time.
- 05-01:32:40
Bird: What was she doing then?
- 05-01:32:45
Rakosi: She worked at a kind of quasi-clerical work.
- 05-01:33:02
Bird: Did she have creative outlets, did she do some art as well?
- 05-01:33:09
Rakosi: That's her work. [pointing to sculptures] That's her work all around here.
- 05-01:33:19
Bird: Did she do that the whole time you knew her, or is that something she did later?
- 05-01:33:23
Rakosi: Later, yeah. She had no art education, so she had no confidence in what she was doing. That came very, very slowly, in very small trickles, until at the very end, a well-known

artist from Boston noted that her work was quite distinctive. A great compliment. “I can recognize your work right away,” he said. She was much better than she thought she was, and I used to drive her down to the studio, down by the bay—there was an art class down by the bay that I used to drive her down to every day and pick her up. She worked at it. She loved it. She loved woods of all kind. You can fall passionately in love with wood, different kinds of wood—the grain, the—yeah, I could see why that would be...

05-01:35:38

Bird: Were you ever involved in her creative process, maybe critiquing or—?

05-01:35:43

Rakosi: No, no. But she had a wonderful faculty for leaving me alone when I was at work. She was a great wife. We were married for fifty years.

05-01:36:09

Bird: Did you have her read your poetry before you sent it off to be published?

05-01:36:16

Rakosi: No, I would never—and still don’t—show my poetry to anybody until it’s published.

05-01:36:29

Bird: Do you know what she thought of your poetry?

05-01:36:38

Rakosi: She was tremendously proud of me as a poet, but I never got into her opinion of my poetry.

05-01:37:01

Bird: I’m thinking about the fact that she lived with Leon Herald’s girlfriend. I know Leon was politically engaged. Was Betty and Leah active in politics as well?

05-01:37:18

Rakosi: Not Betty, not at all, but Leah and I were always together in social actions, oh yeah. She was equally leftist.

05-01:37:33

Bird: So, how long did you date, before you got married? It seemed rather quick, that’s why I’m asking.

05-01:37:48

Rakosi: Oh, let me tell you. That’s an interesting story. At that stage in our life, we both thought that marriage was totally unnecessary, that it was something that the state imposed on human beings, so we didn’t get married, and that went on for about a year. Then she became pregnant and we were going to visit my parents in Kenosha and she said to me, without having any other intent behind it, “I wonder, what will your mother think if she knows I’m pregnant and we’re not married.”

I thought about that for a moment and I had to say, “She’d be baffled by it. Not comfortable.” So that’s what made us get married at that point, which is kind of an interesting commentary on the times. In other words, that we didn’t feel it was necessary to get married for security reasons. We were absolutely sure of our relationship, and it made no sense to us then.

05-01:40:32

Bird: It seemed that your stepmother had a great fondness for Leah, did they get along?

05-01:40:38

Rakosi: Oh, yeah, everybody loved Leah. You couldn't not love her or like her. There was a wonderful optimism about her, too. Well, I get ecstatic about her.

05-01:41:18

Bird: Do you think that that is a good place to stop for today?

05-01:41:22

Rakosi: Yeah, very good.

[end of session]

[Interview #6: September 18, 2002]

[Begin Audio File Rakosi 9-18-02]

Rakosi: I remembered why I had such a strong antipathy to Zukofsky's son. What was his name again, his first name?

06-00:00:16

Bird: I don't know. [Paul]

06-00:00:20

Rakosi: It's because the National Poetry Foundation was very eager to publish another Objectivist anthology, and the three of us were still alive then and it would have been a wonderful number. Zukofsky's son wouldn't give permission to include Zukofsky unless the foundation presented Zukofsky as the leader of the group and as the mentor of the group. Well, that threw me into a rage. The presumption of this guy. That's why I called him an S.O.B.

06-00:01:34

Bird: Did you ever talk to him?

06-00:01:37

Rakosi: I never met him, no, I never met him.

06-00:01:41

Bird: So, did the National Poetry Foundation decide not to do that anthology then?

06-00:01:46

Rakosi: Well, you can't do one without Zukofsky.

06-00:01:46

Bird: Right, and they weren't willing to put him as the mentor?

06-00:01:53

Rakosi: Oh, no. Historically, it wasn't so at all. As a matter of fact, the other poets were the favored one in that first anthology. He picked them out, because he thought they were very good. The other thing—by this time, I was not communicating with him any more, but in his later years, he had a number of young poets visit him—to use the metaphor, sit at his feet—. One of them was Robert Creeley, and it was Creeley who was talking in that incident I mentioned before—Creeley had a great admiration for Oppen. Zukofsky could tell that he had been to see Oppen, and he said, "You went to see Oppen, didn't you?"

06-00:03:42

By the way, regarding Oppen—the *Old Poet's Tale*, that long poem of mine is really an elegy for Oppen, and when I reprint that poem, I will indicate that it is an elegy. I was forced to conceal that fact by George's wife. She got very angry at the whole idea of my reporting on his death. She thought it would hurt his reputation. Before I wrote that poem, I wrote a prose piece on his death, which I postponed publishing, because she was so angry at it. It seemed to me later on that that it didn't do justice to George, and I wrote the poem.

06-00:05:43

Bird: Now, the prose piece, that's the first thing that disturbed Mary?

06-00:05:50

Rakosi: Yeah.

06-00:05:53

Bird: It's extremely sad, and I think—I can't quite figure out how it would hurt his reputation?

06-00:06:04

Rakosi: On the contrary, not only would it not hurt it, it showed that somebody cared enough about his work to do this. Actually, she became quite offensive on the telephone and that ended my friendship with her. Then she died I think, a year after George.

06-00:06:42

Bird: That piece struck me as a really important commentary on the system of health care, and what happens when people have Alzheimer's and go into different care facilities. I thought that that was really an important piece. Has that prose piece gotten published?

06-00:07:04

Rakosi: Not since. I haven't republished it, no. It was a stark piece and I wanted it to be stark reality, what happens to an important poet, when he's forced into that kind of health facility.

About Reznikoff—I'm thinking of the two long pieces, "Testimony" and "Holocaust." Originally he didn't call them poems; he gave them a different name that I forget now, and he was right to give them a different name. They show the influence on his style there of the work he did for the legal publishing house there, constantly reading and editing law books, a very dry, succinct style, very powerful. It doesn't really matter whether you call it prose or poetry.

06-00:08:58

Bird: With "Holocaust," did he take—is there some element of collage in that, that he was actually taking pieces from cases that he was reading?

06-00:09:09

Rakosi: Absolutely—from cases, yeah, actual cases that appeared in the law journals, and he just extracted the essence of it. Legal language is very dry and factual. If you read legal documents, you find they don't have the human quality that Reznikoff put in. He must have extracted the part of, say, what witnesses were saying or what others were saying, so that it comes out that way and yet is a very human kind of document. So that's interesting. Did we talk about the international conference on the Objectivists in—?

06-00:10:35

Bird: In Paris?

06-00:10:37

Rakosi: Yeah.

06-00:10:43

Bird: We haven't yet, would you like to talk about that?

- 06-00:10:48
Rakosi: Well—
- 06-00:10:51
Bird: This was in 1973 or something?
- 06-00:10:59
Rakosi: I'll have to look that up; I don't remember exactly when, but it was not too long ago. [September 1989]
- 06-00:11:10
Bird: I wasn't up to that part yet on my preparation sheet, but that's okay. Okay, go ahead.
- 06-00:11:24
Rakosi: Yeah, this was held at an abbey outside of Paris which had been converted into a cultural center. The surroundings were lovely.
- 06-00:11:42
Bird: Royaumont, is that right?
- 06-00:11:48
Rakosi: Royaumont, yes. The French really know how to do these things. It was a great event. There were people from Spain, Italy. There were two hosts. One was a well-known French poet, the other was a Portuguese fellow. I don't think he was a poet. Anyhow, I was there with my daughter and son-in-law. When I say the French know how to do these things, I have in mind not only the great food, and the great wines, but the minister of culture made an appearance, and since I was the only surviving Objectivist, he congratulated me. So, you know, it was as if the country of France was paying respect. It was really wonderful. I had my own translator, so that everything that I said was immediately translated, and I think that one of the other American participants translated. Davidson was there; he was one of the participants.
- 06-00:14:07
Bird: Right, Michael Davidson.
- 06-00:14:10
Rakosi: Yeah, and Charles Bernstein—let's see.
- 06-00:14:20
Bird: Lynn Hejiniian was there, right?
- 06-00:14:23
Rakosi: I think so.
- 06-00:14:26
Bird: Was Barret Watten?
- 06-00:14:29
Rakosi: Oh, heavens no. Well, the others will come to me later, I think. So, each of them gave a presentation about one or the other of the Objectivists. I got into a bit of a nasty debate with Bernstein about the work of Reznikoff. Bernstein was taking the position that if you really looked at Reznikoff's work thoroughly, you saw that each little poem was part of a bigger entity, and that he was really a writer of long poems. Well, I thought that

was all wrong, but it was interesting. It was all unity until that point, I was sitting in the audience when he was making the presentation, and immediately when I contested it, the audience perked up. Differences are always more interesting than eulogies, even if they are analytical. But it was interesting. And this has social interest: none of the English poets and critics had been invited. It was strange to me, because I have something of an audience in England. People really understand my work there, sometimes better there than here. So when I got back to the States, I learned that one of the participants was reporting on the conference in the—

06-00:17:51

Bird: *Poetry Flash*—

06-00:17:55

Rakosi: *Poetry Flash*, thanks. I wrote a response to it in which I kind of took issue with a couple of things. In one, I just happened to mention, casually, it puzzled me why the English were not invited. That did it! I got a most angry response from this French poet who was one of the hosts of the meeting—plus my translator, she also wrote back indignantly. So, there's that old rivalry between France and England. The French are very, very touchy about this sort of thing. I don't know why that should be, but they are. The English don't seem to be that touchy.

06-00:19:19

Bird: Who from England would you have expected to come?

06-00:19:20

Rakosi: Oh, by all means—you know what, my memory is simply awful at the moment—names, names.

06-00:19:36

Bird: Andrew Crozier would be one.

06-00:19:37

Rakosi: Andrew, of course, and then Gael Turnbull¹, Edward Morgan, the Scottish poet—any number of the English poets, whom I read with or who heard me—John Hall. His son works with Robin who did this great video tape, of me talking about the Objectivists. It's hard to say. There were quite a few. I think that it would have been a totally different kind of a conference had they been there, although the Americans did a pretty good job of talking about the Objectivists.

06-00:21:06

Bird: Did you sense that the people who were invited, that there was a good reason for them to be invited? It seems like there were definitely Language Poets present.

06-00:21:22

Rakosi: I think so, I think so.

06-00:21:29

Bird: Why do you think that the people who were invited were invited? Why would they invite Language Poets to a conference on Objectivists?

1. Gael Turnbull passed away on July 2, 2004, one week after Rakosi's death.

06-00:21:43

Rakosi: Well, the Language Poets believed they had a connection to the Objectivists, but they saw their connection not in any connection to Reznikoff or Oppen or me, but to Zukofsky. They picked up his very, very difficult poems as the link between him and their inaccessible poems. As you probably know, they were working on theory from—a couple of the French, I guess you would call them—lingual philosophers, about language which moves away from, I guess you would call it, common sense. You can develop all kinds of theories that will affect what you write, and the French have been very clever at that. So, the Language Poets were taking their ideas from them, but I notice—and I thought this would happen—that their work is no longer inaccessible. I guess they played that game out and now they are back to where everybody else is. They are writing something that other people can read.

06-00:24:23

Bird: Do you like the stuff they are doing now?

06-00:24:29

Rakosi: I haven't really followed it. I always liked one of them who has really a good lyric sense—oh my gosh, what is his name? He teaches at the University of Pennsylvania.

06-00:24:50

Bird: Bob Perelman?

06-00:24:52

Rakosi: Bob Perelman. You got it. How do you happen to know all of these things?

06-00:24:56

Bird: He was my professor when I was at Penn.

06-00:24:58

Rakosi: Oh really? How was he? Was he good?

06-00:25:02

Bird: He was excellent. I took Romantic Poetry and then I took a whole class on *Ulysses*. It was excellent.

06-00:25:15

Rakosi: I never really classified him with the others, because he has a lyrical ear. He had the—one of the other fellows who lives here published an anthology of Language Poetry—a big talker. Who was he?

06-00:25:56

Bird: Michael Palmer? [Interviewer's note: I think Rakosi is referring to Charles Bernstein here but he crossed it out when I suggested it in my edits.]

06-00:25:56

Rakosi: No. By the way, Michael Palmer was one of the chief ones at the conference at Royaumont. I was always interested in his subject matter. He had something going. I even follow his recent work. It could be very good. He has an eye for detail that is very strong.

06-00:26:53

Bird: What purpose do you think the French organizers had for that conference?

06-00:27:04

Rakosi: One of the French speakers there was a young French poet and in his talk he said that “We French poets have lost our bearings—we are just talking away using language very well, very richly, but the subject matter has become empty, and we discovered that the Objectivists had it—we needed to learn from them.” So, I think that was behind the invitation.

06-00:28:16

Bird: They wanted some of the seriousness?

06-00:28:16

Rakosi: Yes. This was a reversal. Normally we would be learning from the French, but apparently, the young French poets had reached the conclusion that they weren’t getting anywhere with all this fancy language. So, I think that is what brought it about.

06-00:28:51

Bird: What do you make of Bernstein’s reading of Reznikoff’s poetry as a long poem?

06-00:29:01

Rakosi: Oh, it’s nonsense. What’s distinctive about him is the short poem, so Bernstein was talking against what we should be admiring Reznikoff for.

06-00:29:27

Bird: Do you think it has to do with how the short poem is considered or treated by academics? Is there some preference for long poems?

06-00:29:40

Rakosi: Oh, there is a very strong preference for long poems. Historically, the short form was already in trouble by the time I began to write, and it may be that one of the reasons for the preference for the long form is that the twentieth century was really the century of the novel and not the poem. Not only the novel, but the long novel. Also, it is easier to write a longish poem than a short one. You have to think out the essence of what you want to express and keep it in that condensed, essential form in order to have a short poem really become memorable, something that you want to come back to to read again. One test of a poem is whether you ever want to read it a second time. Also, I think there are fewer and fewer—something has happened to the human ear, I think—there are fewer and fewer lyric poets. I can’t think of any young lyric poets. Some of the young—although I’ll take that back. Some of the young women poets do have a pretty good musical ear—I’m rather impressed by Ann Carson and the Howe sisters. But, by and large, when you consider that output to maybe thousands of poems that are written now, they are very journalistic.

06-00:33:04

Bird: Now, do you see any connection between the kind of slam poetry that’s happening now, that is very dependent on rhythms and sounds—can that at all be considered a new form of lyric poetry?

06-00:33:21

Rakosi: I’m not familiar with it, I can’t comment on it. Tell me about it. Maybe I could respond.

- 06-00:33:34
Bird: Well, I think it is similar, maybe came out of—or maybe before even—the rap form of music with the heavy beat and rhyming and internal rhymes and that sort of things.
- 06-00:33:52
Rakosi: Well, rap poetry is something different. That has not only a powerful beat, but a very forceful thrust. It's very dynamic and it's appealing for that reason. What is slam poetry?
- 06-00:34:16
Bird: Well, I think we may be talking about the same thing. Those kinds of poets, they have the slam competitions. A poetry slam is a—
- 06-00:34:28
Rakosi: I can't think of anything more abominable than a competition among poets. That's pure advertising and self-promotion and aggressive. Oh jeez, that is ugly. "Ugly, ugly, ugly." [laughs]
- 06-00:34:57
Bird: Do you think that that is corrupting the spirit of poetry?
- 06-00:35:03
Rakosi: That bunch are not poets; I excommunicate them. [laughter]

They think that they are poets and that is a little like that guy—not so long ago—whom a friend of mine introduced me to, a big physical guy, who said he was a poet. So, my friend gives me a sample of his poetry—it was nothing.
- 06-00:36:08
Bird: How can you tell a poet from a non-poet, if both think they are writing poetry?
- 06-00:36:20
Rakosi: Oh, there are so many give-aways: lack of a real imagination, lack of any depth, much idea—obviously this guy was going on the idea that anybody and everybody could be a poet. You simply have to learn to write fourteen lines and put it in the form of a sonnet. He was absolutely sure of what he was saying, "I believe in the sonnet, that is the thing." In other respects, he turned out to be a rather interesting guy. He had been a bombardier in World War II and had studied at the Sorbonne and learned French, so he had something going for him, but not as a poet.
- 06-00:37:50
Bird: Do you remember what the name of this person is?
- 06-00:37:54
Rakosi: Oh, it doesn't matter, he's—
- 06-00:37:57
Bird: You don't want him to hear it. Did you ever go to the—you weren't living there at the time—but did you ever go to the Nuyorican Café in New York?
- 06-00:38:09
Rakosi: No.

- 06-00:38:10
Bird: Do you know about that?
- 06-00:38:11
Rakosi: I know the fellow who was running it. He was here in San Francisco for a while. I met him. Yeah, he was a very energetic guy.
- 06-00:38:27
Bird: Was it [Miguel] Piñero?
- 06-00:38:31
Rakosi: No. He had an English name.
- 06-00:38:37
Bird: I think my memory is as bad as you are complaining yours is. Bob Holman?
- 06-00:38:44
Rakosi: Yes. That whole phenomenon puzzles me. I just can't understand it. It strikes me as a kind of lunge for public attention at all costs. Some of those poets may be simple-minded enough to think that they really have something to give to the general culture or to society. It's a new phenomenon. It is so far outside my sense of what poetry is that I may not be a good judge.
- 06-00:39:58
Bird: Thinking of what you have said about not really sharing your poetry until it has been published with people and not reading out loud, that seems very different from this. This seems to be forming these communities that the point is to share your poetry, and who knows if anyone is getting published or not.
- 06-00:40:26
Rakosi: They are constantly being with each other, letting everybody read their poems before their poems are published, for some assurance that it's all right. It's almost a new little society there.
- 06-00:40:53
Bird: Are you familiar with the work of Victor Hernandez Cruz, a Puerto Rican-New York poet?
- 06-00:41:01
Rakosi: Cruz?
- 06-00:41:04
Bird: Yeah, Victor Hernandez Cruz.
- 06-00:41:07
Rakosi: No. Why do you ask?
- 06-00:41:13
Bird: Because he's—well, I guess I was just wondering if you had any thoughts on his poetry, because he is actually one who does compete occasionally in the slam competitions, but he is also very much a poet of the page.

- 06-00:41:30
Rakosi: Oh, is he?
- 06-00:41:29
Bird: Yeah, I think so.
- 06-00:41:32
Rakosi: Oh, there's a chance that it's probably good. He's a young fellow?
- 06-00:41:41
Bird: Middle-aged. I think that he's been a visiting poet out here, maybe at San Francisco State, and he was one at the University of Colorado at Boulder.
- 06-00:41:57
Rakosi: Well, he could be pretty good.
- 06-00:42:02
Bird: I'm thinking also—and knowing that you've been to Naropa—thinking of Anne Waldman's emphasis on performing her poetry and that it's not the same as the kind of rap or slam poetry that we are talking about.
- 06-00:42:16
Rakosi: No, Allen Ginsberg had me read at Brooklyn College when he was there. Anne read with me then. Well, I had never heard Anne read before, Allen asked me, "Do you want to go first or last?" Well, I always like to go last. I said, "Last." She put out a performance that was fascinating. It was almost like a dance, she was so full of physical energy. "Oh my God," I thought, "how can I follow her." I said to Anne afterwards, "Jeez, I can't follow you." And Anne said, "Oh, I wouldn't worry about you." I'm the exact opposite when I read—she leaps out at the audience. I just intuitively I wait for the audience to come to me. I speak slowly and carefully...and it works out okay. At that session, Allen had invited senior citizens as auditors, so I had maybe fifteen, twenty people, widows in the audience and when I read the "Old Poet's Tale," they almost wept. It is a very emotional piece. So, I got more of an emotional reaction than Anne did, but she's terrific. That's the only way that she can read her poetry because that's what she is. The other poets, I feel, are putting on a show. I don't think that it's genuine, although I haven't gone to any of their readings, so I can't say for sure.
- 06-00:45:28
Bird: With Anne, I know her approach to teaching how to perform poetry, it is a lot about feeling it in the moment instead of rehearsing, and choreographing.
- 06-00:45:42
Rakosi: Yeah, that's part of it too. I mean, that's the Buddhist approach.
- 06-00:45:51
Bird: So, while we are on this subject, I'm wondering what you think of Naropa as a project, of the Jack Kerouac School of Disembodied Poetics.
- 06-00:46:04
Rakosi: Well, I think the original title that Allen gave it, I thought was awful. The one thing you don't want is to have poetry disembodied. I said this to Allen one time, and he said he had something different in mind. I think he was quoting something Buddhist or had

something Buddhist in mind in that title. The project itself is very vital, I think. It's kind of tempered down, since it's become a university and they have to qualify as an academic institution now, but part of its charm and attraction, of course, was that it was a rebel college, and all of the dissident thinkers came there, and were welcomed. They would expect a special kind of non-academic reception there when they came to teach. I think it was quite an institution. One of my very best friends who is there now is a senior professor, Anselm Hollo. A wonderful translator and poet.

06-00:48:28

Bird: I guess I think of Naropa as a utopia for poets, especially because of my experiences with the summer session, of being able to be just in a poetry bubble and be bombarded with all of that. [laughs] Do you think there should be more of that or do you think that there is value in that?

06-00:48:47

Rakosi: Oh sure. I would love to see more of that. It's interesting that it had to be a Buddhist institution. It doesn't seem to be possible under other auspices. Of course, when I say Buddhist, I really mean Tibetan Buddhism, because Indian Buddhism is very, very different. Indian Buddhism leads towards the absence of life, you might say. Yes, and I understand that the institution was founded by a Buddhist monk.

06-00:49:59

Bird: Chogyam Trungpa Rinpoche.

06-00:50:03

Rakosi: But is there another Buddhist college? It seems to me that there is another one, isn't there?

06-00:50:08

Bird: Another Buddhist college?

06-00:50:10

Rakosi: Yeah, in the East.

06-00:50:14

Bird: I don't know. Just a Buddhist college, not a writing college?

06-00:50:22

Rakosi: A Buddhist college, yeah. But I find it interesting that this Buddhist college has put primary emphasis on the arts, not on history, not on other academic subjects, but on the arts, including the dance. It has a great dance program. Later on, they had some very interesting psychologists on the faculty, so all together it's a rare cultural institution.

06-00:51:18

Bird: What do you make of that? What kind of connection is there between Buddhism and the arts? Why is it necessary for it to be Buddhist to be so centered on the arts?

06-00:51:35

Rakosi: I don't know, I'm not a Buddhist myself, but if you look at the countries where Buddhism developed first, let's say in China, poetry was very big. In Japan, painting. I don't know enough about it, but let me think now. Maybe it's because philosophically, Buddhism uses intense meditation to arrive at truths, and so on. They would naturally

have to do it in the arts. You wouldn't be doing it in the sciences or academic history and sociology and the other subjects. Those are not based on meditation, on that kind of original thoughtfulness, whereas the arts are. So the two just belong together.

06-00:54:12

Bird: I think of Allen talking about beginner's mind or first mind, and poetry or haiku or dance seem to be good ways of expressing that—you know, what comes into the mind.

06-00:54:33

Rakosi: Oh, God forbid. In academia, you don't take the first thing that comes into your mind, otherwise you are in trouble.

06-00:54:41

Bird: What do you think of poets who say that they never edit? I notice that you edit very heavily, it seems to me.

06-00:54:56

Rakosi: Yeah. Well, my dear friend Duncan never edited his poems and I was astonished that he didn't need to. He was a bit of a mystic in the sense and that may be related to it—I think that his parents were Rosicrucians, and he grew up with that in his early life. He was convinced that that first flash of insight was better than what came later, which would be more studied. Now, he was able to make it work because he had one hell of a mind. He was a great talker, but a very interesting one. We used to get along together great, but it could hit a snag. I don't know whether I mentioned this before, but we were both on the program at the University of Wisconsin in Milwaukee once. The English faculty there had invited us, because they expected to have an interesting dialogue between us. We weren't reading poetry. So, we'd get started and I would say something, then he would say something which I couldn't agree with. But the reason I couldn't agree with it was because he was using language differently than me. I'm pretty exact in what I say, but the words he was using, I discovered, were much more general. You could take them this way, that way, so when I realized that, I just gave up and there was no debate. He would say something, I would say something, and so on. [laughter]

06-00:58:17

Bird: What were you supposed to be discussing?

06-00:58:24

Rakosi: Oh, God knows, I don't know. I don't remember.

06-00:58:29

Bird: Well that seems to fit both of your forms of poetry, and maybe his not editing works better for his kind of poetry.

06-00:58:40

Rakosi: Oh yes, I think so. He had a very rich mind, one of the best minds I've ever encountered. I remember sadly when he was at St. Mary's and he was dying. He was in excruciating pain; he couldn't move. I visited him. By then he had been in the hospital now for some time and I asked the nurse, "Is Robert getting visitors now?" She looked sad, "No," she said. Now, originally, a number of young women students of his did come. They were very sympathetic and helpful. Then they just stopped, so I—I'll never forget my experience. He was sleeping when I came in and I waited by his bed for a

long time. He finally awoke and when he saw me, said, “Oh, Carl, I loved you and Leah so much.” And then we talked a little. He couldn’t move, he was in such pain. Then in walks this guy from Buffalo who had become his literary executor—I’ve forgotten his name now. He comes in breezy, apparently thinking he was going to cheer him up. It was a terrible shock for me. That miserable guy, stupid. Well, Robert died the next day. He had a great mind. When I first came to San Francisco—I’ve forgotten whether it was at my house or at Michael Palmer’s, but anyhow, Michael Palmer was there with his wife, and Robert and George Oppen and me and my wife—and we had quite a conversation going. Robert was talking away. Michael finally said, “Robert, shut up, let—I want to hear what Oppen and Rakosi have to say.” [laughter]

06-01:03:18

Bird: Did Duncan just not like silences?

06-01:03:27

Rakosi: No, his mind was just racing all the time. He used to compose poems on the bus, and he would be reading them aloud to test them while he was on the bus.

06-01:03:52

Bird: Did people look at him strangely?

06-01:03:55

Rakosi: I don’t know. They probably did, yeah.

06-01:04:00

Bird: It’s interesting. I wonder if there is a comparison to be made when poems are composed on the run. You said that Reznikoff often composed as he was walking the streets of New York.

06-01:04:19

Rakosi: I think so. He was thinking as he went along. But it’s interesting. He didn’t write nature poems or particularly urban ones. It was always about people, about encounters he had, which came to him as he walked. At least I think that was what was happening.

06-01:05:07

Bird: One thing I wanted to ask you about when you were talking about Naropa—you were talking about how the places where Buddhism comes from are places of great poetry, and I’m wondering—and you were saying that the twentieth century has been the time of the novel, and not really the poem. Do you think that’s true globally or do you think that poetry is more valued still in China and Korea and Russia or Latin America?

06-01:05:45

Rakosi: Oh, we know that it’s much more highly valued in Russia. We know that for a fact, because they draw huge audiences—or did—even during the Stalin regime, and I know when I was in Hungary that—oh, first of all, many many streets were named after poets in Hungary, and during the Communist regime, if a poet published a book, it was sold out in twenty-four hours. I would assume the same is true in the Czech Republic. Poetry is embedded in an age-old culture in the European countries. I’m not sure about Germany. It certainly is in France. England has become so much like us that I don’t know, but poetry has no status in this country. I’d put it in the same category as chess. [Bird laughs] Yeah.

06-01:07:56

Bird: I didn't realize that it was that bad.

06-01:08:00

Rakosi: Oh, I think it is. I got into an angry dispute with a young poet once at Naropa when I made that observation. I could see that my audience imagined that poetry really had some social effect, that it made a difference to society that there was poetry. So, I tried to disabuse them of that notion, and one guy got up in a rage and stalked out of the room. He couldn't stand hearing that, but you have to face reality. That's what it is. That doesn't mean that some people don't love poetry, but you also have to confront the fact that if you are talking about any kind of a larger audience, that working people in this country simply don't have the time to read poetry. If they are going to work all day, read the newspaper, have a family, they are not going to be reading poetry, so there are all sorts of impediments to possible readers of poetry, reading poetry. I think that there are many more potential readers of poetry who would like it, even love it, than we actually have, but I think the social forces are against it.

06-01:11:01

Bird: Why do you think that is?

06-01:11:04

Rakosi: Because under capitalism people have to work damn hard in this country to make a living. It's interesting, this hasn't happened to painting, the fine arts. On Charlie Rose's program, several museum directors have said that the attendance at art museums is larger nationwide than for sports events. That really astonished me. And it's true: there are long lines waiting to get into good art shows. So, of course, there, people don't have to sit down and take the time to read. There's a visual feast open to you without effort. You can even make a social event out of it. It's an interesting difference.

06-01:12:55

Bird: That is interesting. Do you think that it has anything to do with, I guess, the education system, and what people are educated in, that maybe there isn't enough of an emphasis on poetry as there is on visual arts?

06-01:13:13

Rakosi: No. In the school system, they have constantly run short of funds for art. At least poetry gets into English classes, which are compulsory. And also, one has to recognize that some people would never like poetry. One of them is my own son who is a doctor. He doesn't really like poetry. He would never read it for pleasure.

06-01:14:07

Bird: Because it takes too long or—?

06-01:14:11

Rakosi: It's not everybody's cake.

06-01:14:14

Bird: Is that hard at all, having a son that—?

06-01:14:22

Rakosi: No.

06-01:14:26

Bird: The museum seems to fit well with your theory about poetry and capitalism, because if you think about how a lot of those exhibits are set up—actually, all the time, they are set up to drop you off in the gift store.

06-01:14:42

Rakosi: Yeah, but also, you enter a very attractive building, a beautiful building, and pictures are—everybody can love a picture that's universal.

06-01:14:57

Bird: I've heard people say, they don't know how to read—"Oh, I don't know how to read poetry." I've never heard anyone say that about art—except for the very modern art forms.

06-01:15:06

Rakosi: Yeah, the abstract art. And there what they mean is not that they don't understand the picture, but they don't understand what the painter was driving at—what he thought he was doing when he was painting this. It's very strange, when you read what the painter thinks he has painted and what you actually see in front of you, it's often not the same thing.

06-01:15:52

Bird: Do you think that people need to learn how to read poetry?

06-01:15:58

Rakosi: I don't think so. Some poetry, of course, has a lot of references, allusions in them to previous poetry, to mythology. Well, yeah, that has to be explained, but otherwise, just as you don't need instruction in order to love music, I think poetry would be similar. I think there is such a thing as a poetic eye. I mean by that, that there is a way of looking at things poetically and not with a literal eye. So, for that reason, some people just don't have the genes to look at things with a poetic eye. That's what I think.

06-01:17:56

Bird: Do you mean look at the world or to be able to look at poetry with the right eye?

06-01:18:04

Rakosi: I don't mean intellectual things, but things that you are looking at, yeah. Or reading.

06-01:18:19

Bird: Can you be a little bit more specific on what one would see if they are looking with a poetic eye? I don't know if you want to look out your window or—

06-01:18:36

Rakosi: I suppose it means looking at things with a creative eye, where you see beyond the literal. Let's take that painting above my fireplace. It's a Duffy. I'm looking at it with a poetic eye and I see the possibility of a great intertwining there, so there's some force in me that puts it there, that creates that. The coloring gives me an emotional feeling—that sort of thing.

06-01:20:00

Bird: Do you think that one could acquire a poetic eye by reading more poetry?

- 06-01:20:03
Rakosi: No.
- 06-01:20:04
Bird: You just have it or you don't?
- 06-01:20:06
Rakosi: I think so, oh yeah. Not everybody is alike.
- 06-01:20:14
Bird: But poetry would then be a way of taking a snapshot of what that kind of vision is?
- 06-01:20:23
Rakosi: Yes.
- 06-01:20:26
Bird: So, it would seem to me that one might argue that if poetry is read more and that that poetic eye is transmitted in that way, there could be a social role for poetry.
- 06-01:20:47
Rakosi: Which would be what?
- 06-01:20:49
Bird: I guess opening people's eyes to looking at things in ways that they wouldn't ordinarily—to give people a specific kind of vision, and maybe to encourage people not to accept things the way they are seeing things.
- 06-01:21:07
Rakosi: Oh, I can't make that leap, no.
- 06-01:21:13
Bird: Do you think in countries—we had the example of Russia before, at least, years ago—where there are more people going to readings and when poetry is more a part of the culture, do you think that then there is the potential for poetry to have more of a social impact?
- 06-01:21:34
Rakosi: I do, oh definitely. Yes, during the Stalinist regime, people thronged to poetry readings, because they couldn't stand the propaganda, which became totally stereotyped and predictable. So, I just assumed that there they were going to hear, not anybody criticizing the government, but a truthful expression, because they weren't getting it. But even before then, poetry had great status in those countries.
- 06-01:22:49
Bird: And here, do you think that it's because the culture is young that poetry doesn't have more status?
- 06-01:22:56
Rakosi: No, it's because from the very beginning, this has been a mercantile society. If you think of the reason why we rebelled against England, the main reason was financial; we didn't want to pay the taxes. That's not a moral reason. It was a mercantile society with very big landowners and just common people. So you had a big social separation there or distance really between the poor and the wealthy property owners.

06-01:24:01

Bird: I remember you saying in an earlier interview that, at least in the twenties, you thought that poetry was respected a little bit more.

06-01:24:26

Rakosi: I don't know whether I would say that now. In the twenties I was just a youngster—what did I know?

06-01:24:45

Bird: Do you think that there are historical moments when poetry means more or is more respected or more important in this country?

06-01:24:58

Rakosi: There were many fewer poets in the twenties. There was only *Poetry* magazine in Chicago that was just a poetry magazine. You had to go overseas to international journals for really interesting, important poetry and prose. So, that said something, that it had to be in Europe and Holland for a while—Paris. Those were really great magazines. I want to say that Pound had a lot to do with that early period. But, there are always creative people in every generation. There are rebels. So, no matter what happens in this country, there will always be some young people who have the talent.

06-01:27:01

Bird: Do you think that there is any danger—I read a few weeks ago about Black Sparrow closing its doors, and I'm thinking of how much poetry depends in this country on small presses.

06-01:27:12

Rakosi: Oh absolutely.

06-01:27:14

Bird: Do you think that there is any danger of not having published poetry?

06-01:27:21

Rakosi: Well, we're already far into that, because most bookstores will not stock poetry at all. You have to almost go into a used bookstore to pick up poetry. Black Sparrow sold out because—he was getting older too. A publisher has to make a living, and he made a living, because he was lucky enough to discover that one... that prose writer.

06-01:28:33

Bird: Bukowski?

06-01:28:38

Rakosi: Bukowski, yeah. He was making money on him and losing money on the others. He was losing money on my work. A publisher can't continue to lose money, so that is far along already. It's a real menace, a danger to poetry, absolutely.

Now, what happens to poetry when it's put on the Internet? I'm going to be put on the Internet in a month or two. I've never had that experience. I learned from somebody who recently put his work on the Internet, that he got many many responses. Many more than he would have got from a book. Well, who knows? I don't know what's going to happen there. That's a possibility. Things change so rapidly. You don't plan for it.

Nobody thought that you would get so many responses to a poetry reading on the Internet. I suppose that means that poetry will survive.

06-01:30:54

Bird: Is that attractive for you to get a lot of responses from your poetry?

06-01:30:59

Rakosi: Well, every poet—oh, yeah, wants readers. Sure, it's kind of exciting.

06-01:31:18

Bird: Are you going to have your own web site? Who is putting you on the Internet?

06-01:31:24

Rakosi: Oh, the University of Pennsylvania.

06-01:31:40

Bird: There's one poem of yours, right now, on the Internet. If you type in your name, that's the first thing that comes up. I think it is "To a Non-Citizen."

06-01:31:50

Rakosi: Oh, yeah.

06-01:31:52

Bird: And it's on a modern poetry web site that Carey Nelson has, so you are already there.¹

06-01:31:57

Rakosi: Well, that's strange. They didn't ask for my permission. That's piracy. [laughs]

06-01:32:15

Bird: Now, your first book, *Selected Poems*, was published by New Directions, right?

06-01:32:16

Rakosi: Yeah.

06-01:32:21

Bird: Can you talk about that a little bit, how that came about?

06-01:32:27

Rakosi: I don't know whether the publisher asked me or whether I asked the publisher.

06-01:32:41

Bird: It was James Laughlin, right?

06-01:32:45

Rakosi: Laughlin. I had been asked why I called it *Selected Poems*, because actually that was not true. They were all of the poems that I had at that time. I don't know why I called them selected poems.

06-01:33:16

Bird: Maybe you were trying to give the impression that it was part of an opus or something?

1. The website has been updated and no longer includes that poem but it has been replaced with others. http://www.english.uiuc.edu/maps/poets/m_r/rakois/rakosi.htm

- 06-01:33:28
Rakosi: I don't like the fact that I called them *Selected Poems* now, but it was part of a series then that he was running, and I must have just sent it to him.
- 06-01:33:56
Bird: It was the Poet of the Month series.
- 06-01:33:57
Rakosi: Yeah, Poet of the Month, right. Laughlin was a quite big man, physically. I read with him once. He was scared to death. I practically had to hold his hand. That surprised me. He was an honorable editor. You probably know this story. He had sent Pound some of his poems, and Pound sent them back saying, "Stay with publishing."
- 06-01:35:24
Bird: Oh no.
- 06-01:35:25
Rakosi: Yeah, it's a horrible story. "You're no poet, stay with publishing." So, he did that. He was browbeaten into not writing poetry, until rather late in life, and then he wrote a very pleasant kind of poetry—very accessible. It was not really very distinctive, but very pleasant.
- 06-01:36:22
Bird: Some thing has been made of the way that the poems in your *Selected Poems* have changed over the years—that it was a different kind of writing in that book than you do later. Do you think that there is anything significant in that?
- 06-01:36:41
Rakosi: Sure. I start out being entirely lyrical, and kind of find my way here and there in Objectivist poems. Then, I have no middle period, because that is when I stopped writing. After that, of course, I latch on into what you would call political or social poetry, but also metaphysical poetry too. The meditative poem has always attracted me—it still does. In fact, more than ever.
- 06-01:38:08
Bird: You have several poems, I think called "meditations."
- 06-01:38:10
Rakosi: Yeah, a number of new ones. Now when I'm just free-thinking, it's always meditative. I haven't been writing—I don't think so—political poems recently. I've just written thirteen poems. I've been on a little binge. They're different—some of them are meditative, some take off from something scientific that catches my imagination, but always with a philosophical purpose, so that's my latest piece.
- 06-01:39:53
Bird: It would be great to read one, if you wanted to, and we could record you reading one of your new ones.
- 06-01:40:02
Rakosi: You mean on the Internet?

- 06-01:40:05
Bird: No, if you want to talk about one to talk about what you are doing now.
- 06-01:40:08
Rakosi: I can do that, sure.
- 06-01:40:10
Bird: Do you want to do it now?
- 06-01:40:11
Rakosi: Do we have time?
- 06-01:40:19
Bird: Maybe we could start off with that next time.
- 06-01:40:19
Rakosi: Yeah, I'll do it.
- 06-01:40:23
Bird: That *Selected Poems* volume came out after you had already taken the break, right? You had already stopped writing poetry? I think the *Selected Poems* came out in 1941.
- 06-01:40:42
Rakosi: Let's see, when did I stop? Yeah, I stopped around 1939, 1940, so about then, yeah.
- 06-01:40:58
Bird: And how did it feel, after you had made the decision to stop to then be presented with your first book?
- 06-01:41:10
Rakosi: Oh, I don't remember that, but I've said this in other interviews. I became ill, actually. I couldn't stand it for two years. I thought, "Oh God, I'm going to die." But, I had to do it, to stop. So, I stopped reading poetry and stopped writing it. I just put myself totally into the social work world, and that's a world that can keep you absolutely absorbed. In a way, it was good and bad, but it's a great occupation, and one that gives one great satisfaction. So, I was in that world totally—until I started to write again, in 1969.
- 06-01:43:02
Bird: Did you feel like the decision to stop writing was a gradual attrition, or was it a definite decision, "I'm not writing anymore?"
- 06-01:43:23
Rakosi: Well, a number of factors came into it: one of them was that I was such a committed Marxist, and I found that the *New Masses* editor and his assistants there had absolutely no use for poetry, and especially not for lyrical poetry. They thought that that was just self-indulgence. So that discouraged me, but I wouldn't have stopped entirely for that reason. What stopped me was a practical matter, that once I was married and had my first child, there just wasn't time for it. I tried briefly to do it, to write at night, but then I was up all night, and then had to go to work—a full day, all day. I couldn't do it, so that's what made me do it, made it necessary. I could never understand why George Oppen did it, though, because he had a little income. He could have survived, and Mary would have worked. I don't know why he did it.

- 06-01:45:46
Bird: Do you think that the fact that you were doing it influenced him at all?
- 06-01:45:49
Rakosi: No, not at all.
- 06-01:45:55
Bird: You had said last time that he told you that it had something to do with his daughter. Do you remember what it was?
- 06-01:46:05
Rakosi: No, I don't remember. It didn't make sense to me. He never said anything about his being miserable when he didn't write, but I became physically ill.
- 06-01:46:49
Bird: Can you account for that? Can you explain what the relationship there is to you writing poetry, and when you can't do that, have a biological response to that?
- 06-01:47:04
Rakosi: Well, look, it's a rejection of your nature, of your psyche, the thing that is you. Remember that when I was at the university, I saw myself only as a poet, nothing else. It was my whole being, so what did I do? I suppressed that, I just crushed it. There was the possibility that I had crushed it forever. Not only that, I had removed every temptation to write it. So, that's a total devastation of a part of a person, and I knew that was going on.
- 06-01:48:47
Bird: What did Leah think of it—your stop at that time?
- 06-01:48:54
Rakosi: She didn't like it. She took great pleasure in my writing. She didn't like it, no. But she was kind of helpless. She was pregnant and then had a child. At the time she thought that's the way it had to be. When you're young, you don't have a conviction that the other person's writing is all-important—that it might be so good that it has to be preserved at all costs—that sort of thing.
- 06-01:50:23
Bird: That it's historical. Then over time, did social work start to fill in?
- 06-01:50:35
Rakosi: Oh yes, social work can fill it in—it's that kind of a profession—especially psychotherapy, which I went into a little later. Partly because you're able really to help another human being—that's one of the greatest pleasures there is. And also, it's stimulating. You are always having experiences with people, people, people—all kinds of people, and on the most intimate terms. It's like living a thousand lives through other people. It's a great profession.
- 06-01:51:54
Bird: That's a great description. That's a good place to end.

[end of session]

[Interview #7: September 25, 2002]

[Begin Audio File Rakosi 9-25-02]

Bird: I wanted to clarify one thing from last time, which is that Louis Zukofsky's son's name is Paul.

07-00:00:19

Rakosi: Paul, yeah.

07-00:00:24

Bird: Since we couldn't think of it. I thought, what if it is Louis?

07-00:00:27

Rakosi: Louis Junior. [laughter]

07-00:00:31

Bird: We'd look silly.

07-00:00:37

Rakosi: I wanted to go more into my own family background. It's kind of interesting to me too. This makes me think more and probe more into the background. I think I spoke before about how profoundly assimilated Hungarian Jews were in Hungary. A Hungarian Jew, like an American Jew now, thought of himself as a Hungarian first and a Jew second, he was so completely one with the culture and the spirit of Hungary. There was so much intermarriage that they were in danger of really disappearing into the general population. For example, my father's uncle was educated by the Jesuits in a very small town in Hungary where there was no public education. He was very bright, apparently. When he grew up and became an adult, he converted to Catholicism as really an expression of gratitude to the Jesuits. For in those days Jews—I'm not sure if they couldn't get into universities at all or whether they were extremely limited in number in how many could get in. So, he became a Catholic. I don't know what Catholicism or Christianity meant to him, because he then became a professor of philosophy at the University of Budapest, which is a very high position.

07-00:04:05

He set up the first movie studio in Hungary—the very first one, and he married his chief actress, who was a beautiful woman. I remember seeing a photograph of her and exclaiming, "Wow." Then on the other side of my family—the maternal side—something similar happened. My grandfather's two sons, when they were adults, moved to Munich, Germany, and they just ruined my grandfather financially with stupid ventures apparently, and they married two Catholic women. I wound up having a couple of cousins who were Catholic. They used to visit in Baja. It seemed strange. I'm getting to some point here later on.

07-00:06:07

When my father came over by himself—it must have been 1907 or 1908—he told me that he had railroad tickets to Chicago, where he had a job waiting for him, but he only had enough money for a banana to eat on the way. That's unusual for immigrants, to have a job waiting for them. He had two friends—Hungarian friends—from Budapest who had preceded him. One of them, by the name of Laszlo, had a travel agency. He

must have sent my father the tickets to come over. It was mutual help. Immigrants help each other tremendously.

07-00:08:07

Bird: So, they shipped tickets to come all the way from Europe?

07-00:08:09

Rakosi: Yeah. The other family was named Roth, which in German means red. Probably, it's a short form of Rothschild, which means "at the sign of the red shield." You've got history here.

07-00:08:45

Bird: You mean the wealthy family in the *Fiddler on the Roof*? [laughs jokingly]

07-00:08:53

Rakosi: Yeah. German and Hungarian was spoken by the Jews. I remember Laszlo had a little wife—very, very homely, hunchbacked. The two couples used to visit us in Kenosha. I remember they had such a happy time together. It was a kind of joy and happiness without liquor that I've never seen in this country. I imagine it had to do with Hungary, maybe their memories of Hungary. They all loved Hungary. It was a country that on the whole had been good to the Jews. It allowed Jews to set up their own educational institution, and they subsidized it, so that the first school that I went to in Baja was a Jewish school. I don't know whether this was an arrangement unique to Hungary, probably not. It's that kind of joyousness and happiness at being together that seemed to characterize the Hungarian Jews that came to this country.

07-00:10:46

On Leah's side of the family it was totally different, and that is the point that I'm going to make. The extreme differences among Jewish immigrants coming from different countries. Leah's parents came from Russia. Russia, of course, had a long history of pogroms. I don't need to describe them, although the extent of Jew hatred in Russia hit me in the face recently in an autobiography by Isaac Babel. Babel lived through the Russian Revolution, and he came from a part of Russia—Odessa—which did have a very distinctive cultural identity for the Jews. That's where nearly all of the great Jewish musicians—violinists, pianists—came from, not from St. Petersburg or Moscow. So, he was also kind of assimilated. What he wrote had to be autobiographical; he wasn't making it up. You know Babel is the man who wrote the series of short stories called *Red Cavalry*, which was very popular. It has been translated a lot. This account goes beyond that.

07-00:14:45

This is a new collective edition of all of these short stories, edited and translated by his granddaughter, who is a professor of Slavic languages. Just picture, the Bolsheviks are in power, Lenin is in control, but things are not organized yet. People are not yet under full control; it's chaotic. Babel is on the train, and—this is just horrible—and people are going past, soldiers, muzhiks, and there is a Jewish couple sitting next to him, and a soldier and a muzhik come by and stop by the Jewish couple, and the soldier just up and shoots the man in the face. The muzhik takes out his knife cuts off the man's penis and sticks it into the woman's mouth, and says, "Here Jew, take your kosher meat." Of course, the Communists didn't want this to happen. The country just wasn't organized, yet but it shows the extent of Jew hatred among the peasants and others.

07-00:17:31

So, Leah's family came from there. But she is first-generation American. She was born here. Now, she had an older sister who was a very simple woman, not well read. I described her brother earlier. He was a car salesman, and her sister had married a pants presser. It was a very menial job, which he had all his life. So, very simple people, but when you went to their house, there was a warmth there, absolutely unparalleled in my experience. It just embraced you the minute you walked into the house. It had something to do with food...I didn't feel that among Hungarian Jews—it was not that kind of warmth—theirs was more distant.

07-00:19:29

There's something interesting too about her older brother. Her father was a furrier and did quite well. Her older brother was the oldest son in the family and he too became a furrier and did very well. His first wife came from a German Jewish family. He was really quite a gentleman. He always thought of her as being slightly higher in social standing. And it's true, the German Jews were always considered the top of the social strata among Jews. They were the first, apparently, to become assimilated as Germans. They were the first, apparently, to develop successful businesses. Money had something to do with it, but not entirely. It had to do with the kind of manners you developed, your taste, your culture, and so on. So, he used to say he learned a lot from her. He probably did learn a lot about manners from her. So there are differences in social level among Jews from different countries. The lowest in scale were the ones from Galicia, which—there is no such place anymore. It was, I think, a part of Poland. The Polish Jews were also looked somewhat down upon, because they were poorer, they were less well-educated, they had worse manners, they were probably more coarse. That's what I'm picturing here, great differences. Leah had this wonderful capacity to express warmth, full warmth, a wonderful warmth. You were just enveloped by it.

07-00:23:29

Bird: It's interesting, it seems that the hierarchy among Jews has to do with how well a group is assimilated. When I think of assimilated, I think of the downside of also losing one's own culture.

07-00:23:43

Rakosi: Absolutely. Now, there has been a counter force to that. Jews have been trying frantically to preserve a Jewish identity. The Orthodox Jews, who used to be the poorest and the least educated, have among them a lot of young intellectuals who are Orthodox because they believe Jews have to hold on to basic Judaism in order to keep Jews from intermarrying and disappearing in the general population. To some extent this is true of even Reform Jews, of which I am a member. Take what happened to my daughter. She married a non-Jew. She had gone through some Jewish education in our synagogue and was very fond of the rabbi, but the Reform rabbis then had a policy of not marrying people who were not Jews. A rabbi could make individual decisions. He was not bound by the policy, as in Catholicism. So Barbara could have gone over to St. Paul and been married by a rabbi there, but she was so angry at our local rabbi for not making an exception for her that she just wouldn't do it. So, they were never married by a rabbi. They had to get a Unitarian minister to do the marriage ceremony.

07-00:27:04

Bird: Was she angry at the rabbi, because she didn't get the permission?

07-00:27:08

Rakosi: Yeah. He wouldn't stray from the policy. But he was a very sweet guy. He was just following what the Central Conference of American Rabbis had set up. Something like that.

07-00:27:35

Bird: Do you think that over time that your own relationship with your Jewish identity has changed? Are there times when you feel more attached to it or more distant from it?

07-00:27:47

Rakosi: Well, of course, distance—that's a good point. Distance has something to do with it. When I was in Minneapolis and was director of a Jewish agency and was seeing a lot of rabbis, and members of the Jewish community were on my board of directors, I had a very strong sense of Jewishness. It was expected that I would go to the synagogue, and I became involved enough to change the prayers on Yom Kippur, the Day of Repentance, which ask for forgiveness of God, for sins that we Jews committed during the year. Well, that seemed outrageous to me, because it was based on the principle that all the Jews bore responsibility for any individual's sin. It's a vicious principle. The rabbi had no objection to changing it, so I wrote up a prayer that went something like this: forgive me for any sins I have committed. The change had to be made through the whole service, because it's constantly "forgive us, forgive us." The rabbi used it. He had it printed up, and we used that—it's probably still being used, and I noticed that other Reform synagogues have done something similar.

07-00:31:09

Bird: When the rabbi first used it, was there any kind of reaction?

07-00:31:12

Rakosi: Oh, there was a great sense of relief, yeah. Oh, it makes no sense, that practice. I'm sure it goes back thousands of years, when the Jews were a small tribe, and had such a sense of bond and closeness that you could say, "Well, forgive us." It probably also has to do with the view that God looked upon the ancient Israelites as a single people—not any individual. Of course, now I'm again a long way from Jewish practice, and Marilyn is not Jewish. So, I'm a long ways from it.

07-00:32:39

Bird: Did you do anything to celebrate the holidays that just went by?

07-00:32:46

Rakosi: No, I felt bad about it though, because it felt as if I was abandoning my people.

07-00:33:02

Bird: I saw that there were quite a few Jewish agencies that you worked for. Was that something that you sought out, or did it just kind of happen that way?

07-00:33:21

Rakosi: It had to do with the fact that the Jewish agencies were way ahead of the nonsectarian agencies in practice. For example, Freud's ideas were first used in this country by Jewish social agencies, not by the others. American psychiatrists did not recognize Freud as being anybody they wanted to be associated with at the time. It was the social workers who picked him up, and only gradually the nonsectarian agencies did also. But, the Jewish agencies were the first. They were the sharpest. Well, the first one I worked

for was the Jewish Board of Guardians. It was a huge treatment agency for disturbed boys. I had a case load there of delinquents who had come under the jurisdiction of the juvenile court. By the way, this was when juvenile courts were just beginning. This was in the 1920s. There was one in New York, there was a famous one in Boston, and one in Chicago, and that was it. Oh, by the way, that reminds me. This was when I was just partially trained. I thought I did pretty well with these boys, though. They were tough, really tough. They were members of gangs, and their fathers were members of a gang called the Kid Dropper gang. Kid Dropper, because boom, boom, you dropped them, you killed them, the other guys.

07-00:36:44

Bird: So, it was actually the fathers that were members of that gang?

07-00:36:49

Rakosi: Yes, but the sons were delinquent already; they were rough.

07-00:36:52

Bird: And they were all Jewish?

07-00:36:53

Rakosi: Oh, they were all Jewish. They were all Jews. It was a surprise to me that Jews were gangsters but they were. There were some pretty bad ones. Which reminds me, my youngest granddaughter, Mimi, just finished her training at St. Mary's as a school counselor. She got placed in a school that has two public housing projects nearby. So, she inherited a group of kids—these are all African American kids from housing projects—who hate school, who can't sit in their seats for five minutes, who are exploding all over the place, and she's expected to do something with them. The school is terribly organized; they don't know what the hell they are doing apparently about this sort of thing. So, I've been helping her with that problem because in her training as a school counselor, she's not trained to be a psychiatric social worker. It's interesting how it gets around.

07-00:39:17

Bird: Where does Mimi live?

07-00:39:18

Rakosi: She lives here.

07-00:39:20

Bird: In San Francisco?

07-00:39:21

Rakosi: Yeah. Let's see, where were we? I got sidetracked here.

07-00:39:34

Bird: Well, one thing I wanted to clarify was that you talk about the Jewish agencies and the nonsectarian agencies, and I'm wondering—sometimes it seems in this country that nonsectarian often has some Christian leanings. It's like a nonsectarian school suddenly celebrates Christmas, right? You had said that some of the traditional social workers were priests or religious.

07-00:40:06

Rakosi: Yes, well, the early ones were ministers. I'm trying to think if Catholic agencies had priests as directors. I don't remember that.

07-00:40:35

Bird: Also, when they first created the juvenile courts, did that seem to be a good idea?

07-00:40:46

Rakosi: It was absolutely necessary. If you put a child into an adult court, he's going to get an adult punishment. Oh, that was a very forward move. Now, somewhere in the 1920s, I worked in Boston for the Massachusetts Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Children, which had a very close connection to the juvenile court there. It may have been the first juvenile court in the country—I remember the judge there—oh, he was really an elegant gentleman from an old New England family, one of the great families. I forget his name now. I loved the way he looked and how he presided over the court with the children. He was really a benevolent, fatherly figure, but not a pushover, not soft. He relied on the judgment of the social workers on what to do in these cases.

07-00:42:50

Now, my case load was in Cambridge. Part of Cambridge was very, very poor Irish and Portuguese. They'd been brought to the attention of the court, because either the children had been severely neglected or abused in some way—not sexually. That didn't come up then. Because of the agencies' close relationship to the court, I had a certain authority as a worker in the agency to do some things which I would not have had the authority to do otherwise. I could order a person to open the front door for me and let me in, which you can't do normally. Most of the situations that I had, had to do with the mother just being drunk and neglecting the children, leaving them filthy without food, that sort of thing—terrible drunkenness. One situation I'll never forget. It didn't have to do with the Irish, but with a Portuguese family. I knocked on the door—I don't know what the offense there was—and I ordered them to open up. The wife opened the door. I said I wanted to talk to the man, the father, because it had something to do with the father's behavior. "No, he's not here," she said. It was an angry situation. I decided to look around and I open a door and there is the father hiding in the closet. That sort of thing. The Boston experience was interesting.

07-00:46:16

Bird: Did you ever have any threatening situations to you, if you are demanding the door be opened—someone armed on the other side?

07-00:46:28

Rakosi: No. That's the only time really I had to force myself in. I guess that I did that because they were so totally uncooperative, and something had to be done about the children. Going back to the Jewish Family and Children's Services, where I did my major work in New York, I was with them for five years. The agency was very Freudian. They had a psychiatrist on staff, and the quality of the thinking was just brilliant, just brilliant. We used to transcribe interviews in minute detail and then study them in preparation for the following interview. It was engrossing because we were perfecting our practice. Three of us did most of that. Two of my colleagues became directors of the agency eventually. They were very good. I left after five years for a supervisor's job in St. Louis.

07-00:49:27

Bird: And that was another Jewish agency, I think?

07-00:49:29

Rakosi: Yeah.

07-00:49:37

Bird: It was the Jewish Family Service?

07-00:49:39

Rakosi: Yeah.

07-00:49:41

Bird: Was that very different from the job in New York?

07-00:49:47

Rakosi: Well, it was a very small agency. So, it wasn't nearly as stimulating. By that time, I was married and I was going to have my first child, so that was a totally different kind of experience. I was trying to teach there. That was my job. I did teach a course at Washington University there, in supervision, but then my life was mostly beginning a family, and social life, and not so deeply engrossed in developing therapeutic practice.

07-00:51:12

Bird: So, when you were the supervisor, were you teaching your staff?

07-00:51:18

Rakosi: Yes. What a supervisor does in social work is examine the case records of the practitioner, and teach from there. It is different from academic psychology where you are just teaching from theory. Theory doesn't mean much when it comes right down to practice. One reason for that—the obvious reason really is that human beings differ so much from each other—circumstances, their genetic inheritance, all sorts of things, that there is no theory for everybody. Then you have to try to understand each person, and to understand each person really takes a long time of constant questioning and listening and listening. Yeah, that's what supervision means in social work.

07-00:53:00

Bird: Were there people who were social workers and did feel that theory was the way to go?

07-00:53:20

Rakosi: Yes and no. What's odd is that the social workers who picked up Freudian theory did try to hold on to it and apply it in practice. On the other hand, at the University of Pennsylvania where I was—Otto Rank—I don't know if I may have mentioned this before—had been a poet himself originally. I don't know how he got into the Vienna Psychoanalytic Institute, but anyhow, he had some theory to go on. It was probably Freudian then. Yeah, it would have to be. He became secretary of the Vienna Institute. But in later years he came up with the exact opposite theory about how to help human beings when they have psychological problems. His theory, as I may have mentioned, was that you do not foist the theory on the patient, but you let him work out his problem himself, with some psychological assistance.

07-00:55:30

Well, in social work, the University of Pennsylvania had the Rankian view, and the Columbia University Graduate School of Social Work had the Freudian view, so you did have the two. I wrote a paper on that subject once, which was published in the magazine called *The Family*, and it was translated into Italian, which surprised me, in which I was comparing what happened in actual practice. What happened, I found, was that neither party really paid much attention to theory when they were confronted with a specific situation. So, yes and no.

07-00:56:42

Bird: It seemed that when I was reading some of your book reviews and articles that you wrote in the forties and fifties that there seemed to be—I don't know if you were kind of the lone representer of the Rank camp, because it seemed that the points that you took issue on had to do with going too much off into theory and forgetting about the—

07-00:57:10

Rakosi: Well, there were very few Rankians. It was just a handful, four or five at the most.

07-00:57:28

Bird: So, you were a supervisor at Jewish Family Service, it looks like from 1940 to 1943. Then, I think you went to—it was the wartime's children's services. Do you remember that?

07-00:57:46

Rakosi: No, '43 to '45, I wound up in Cleveland, yes.

07-00:57:56

Bird: I'm going to distract us for a minute, because I really wanted to know... If you had just stayed in one state and one job, it would have been easier. [laughter]

07-00:58:16

Rakosi: But less interesting.

07-00:58:17

Bird: Right, that's very true. In 1942, I found that you were a case consultant for the Metropolitan Bureau for Wartime Childcare. Do you remember that?

07-00:58:51

Rakosi: Oh, yeah.

07-00:58:51

Bird: Maybe this was a minor thing.

07-00:58:53

Rakosi: I do, yeah. I did that. I don't remember what exactly. What was the name of that again?

07-00:59:05

Bird: It was the Metropolitan Bureau for Wartime Childcare, and you were a case consultant.

07-00:59:14

Rakosi: That was in addition, while I was still doing my job at the Jewish Family Service. It was an additional thing that I took on. Don't ask me what I did, though. I was a consultant, that's all I remember, so that's easy.

07-00:59:36

Bird: What does a consultant do?

07-00:59:39

Rakosi: Well, a consultant helps them with any problems they have with understanding what the problem is, what to do about it.

07-00:59:56

Bird: Why is it “Wartime Childcare?” Were they children affected by the war? I was thinking, maybe it was children of soldiers.

07-01:00:14

Rakosi: I think they were anticipating problems of returning families. Yeah, I totally forgot about that thing.

07-01:00:35

Bird: Did World War II change things about social work? Did you have different things to deal with during World War II?

07-01:00:53

Rakosi: Let me get my brains back to 1943. This was World War II now that we are in, and communism, so my mind was very much taken up with political issues and with what was happening in the world at large. Oh yeah, that was a very active period for me, but I’m trying to think whether social work itself was much affected.

07-01:02:25

Bird: I was wondering, when we did enter the war, whether it was the fact that men were enlisting or being drafted to go to the war, leaving families behind. I know, also, there were times when we didn’t accept refugees, but then there were times later that we did, and whether you saw any of them?

07-01:02:54

Rakosi: Well, yeah, the new refugees that were coming in, were coming in from Germany and Austria, and they were—let’s put it this way, a higher social class, better educated class who demanded more when they arrived. The poor Russian Jews who came here, Polish Jews, didn’t demand anything, but there was really a strong demanding quality among the immigrants that we saw in the Jewish agency then that was hard to cope with. That part of the program was paid for by the Jewish Federation, not the Community Chest. Of course, the agency was very open to immigrants then. It certainly wanted to save as many German and Austrian Jews as it could, but those Russian and Polish immigrants very quickly adjusted and did pretty well. Some German Jews were so angered by the Nazi persecution that they became Quakers. They gave up Jewish identity; they didn’t want anything to do with it. I remember one family that came over that we helped—a very intelligent, likable man. He had married a non-Jewish German woman. They were an admirable couple. She was loyal to him—it was a great marriage. The latest Russian Jewish immigrants who came were also very demanding, however. They were arrogant almost. But, these Jewish immigrants had lived through a period when all religion in Russia, the Soviet Union, was almost banned. Communists had no use for it. So, they were brought up where they had to scrounge like hell for everything. So, when they came here, they also were very demanding, very aggressive, but they were perfectly suited for American society, and they are doing fine.

07-01:08:09

Bird: What do you think that their expectations were for coming here? If they are coming over being very demanding—were they—?

07-01:08:21

Rakosi: Oh, just to do as well financially as possible. I see them now in Golden Gate Park here. They congregate in certain places in the park, and they also go to the same restaurant that I like, a French restaurant, La Bergerie, the sheep cote. I see them there; they come in large groups, ten, twenty people. So, they huddle together the way immigrants have always done.

07-01:09:15

Bird: You don't speak Russian or—?

07-01:09:16

Rakosi: No.

07-01:09:17

Bird: Do you speak German?

07-01:09:17

Rakosi: I know German, yeah.

07-01:09:21

Bird: Did you deal with some of the cases in their own language?

07-01:09:27

Rakosi: No, I didn't have to. I wonder now about my father. He didn't know any English, just as I didn't know one word of English when I came, but okay, I had a chance to learn it. He goes to a foreign language, he doesn't speak one word of the language? You would only get along with the help of other compatriots who do speak the language, although he may have gotten along by using German. I must say that my stepmother who brought me up in this country, did pick up English, but it was always like listening to Hungarian. She never learned how to spell in English, and we would—the store would buy things from a distributor in Chicago, and she would have to write letters ordering items. When she'd write me, I would have to laugh because it turned out so funny. I could just imagine the people in the distributing place, when they would receive an order, telling each other, "Here's another order from Mrs. Rakosi," and laughing too.

07-01:11:52

Bird: Did you try and help her with her spelling?

07-01:11:58

Rakosi: Oh, no, she would have been offended, because she thought that there was nothing wrong with her spelling. But I admired her. She was a very courageous woman.

07-01:12:12

Bird: Your father passed away in the late thirties?

07-01:12:18

Rakosi: I think so.

07-01:12:34

Bird: How did your mother do, after your father passed away?

07-01:12:38

Rakosi: Well, that's when her real courage came up. Here's this woman who is not a watchmaker who learned a little about jewelry from just simply working in the store, but not an expert on it, but you'd think that when my dad died, that she would throw up her hands and give up. How could she manage to run a business, both in watchmaking, and watch repairing? That had to be a part of it, because there wasn't enough selling to make a living. But, she didn't falter one bit. She did do it. It was a miracle. That's why I say that I admire her great courage.

07-01:13:52

Bird: Did you or your brother Lester help at that time?

07-01:13:55

Rakosi: By that time, Lester had moved to Milwaukee. For a while, she just sent her watch repairing jobs out to be done, and Lester did it part of the time, and somebody else did it at other times. She kept up the store, lived there by herself, upstairs above the store. She had a few friends. I can't imagine myself doing that, but immigrants have great courage.

07-01:15:01

Bird: Did she have community support from other Hungarians that were there?

07-01:15:10

Rakosi: There were no Hungarians there. The others were all Russian or Polish Jews. They became her friends. She belonged to the sisterhood of the synagogue, so she had some friends there that she used to see. It must have been pretty lonely for her, however.

07-01:15:35

Bird: Your father must have been fairly young. Was it a surprise when he died?

07-01:15:41

Rakosi: He was pretty young, yeah, but it was not surprising, because he never exercised—there was no occasion for him to exercise or to walk much. He was always at his bench repairing watches, with his magnifying loupe. That reminds me, there was an ice cream parlor down the street from our store, and when I was—I must have been twelve, thirteen years old, I asked the ice cream owner if I could work there. I was eager to work. I don't know what got into me, but I was very eager to work and find out how it was to work and earn a little money. The store owner was a very jovial guy, of Italian origin. He said, "Sure." So, I worked at the soda fountain, and that was fun, making up sodas and sundaes. My father liked him. I liked the guy too. My father used to ask him, "How is Carl doing?" "Oh, he's a good boy, a very good boy." A few years later I worked during the summer vacations in the Simmons bed factory.

07-01:17:53

Bird: You weren't eating all of the product or anything.

07-01:17:55

Rakosi: Oh, no.

07-01:17:57

Bird: It seemed that you were very close to your father. That must have been a terrible moment for you?

07-01:18:07

Rakosi: Yeah, that was, yeah. I was thinking, also, what pleasures did my father have? The only thing that I can think of, other than being visited by other Hungarian Jews, was driving on the weekend to Chicago. The roads at that time were terrible, big holes in them, so you couldn't drive fast, so we'd get as far as Big Bend, Indiana, and never get to Chicago. But that is all the pleasure that they had. I never remember a time when they were not worried about being able to pay their bills from the distributor. This was unceasing. There was never a day when they didn't worry about that. "Well, are we going to be able to pay this time?"

07-01:19:55

Bird: You've said a few times that immigrants and especially Hungarians tend to help each other. Was there an expectation that you would send money home when you were working?

07-01:20:10

Rakosi: Actually, I didn't. I wasn't earning much myself. Social workers were very badly paid, but I felt guilty that I didn't offer to do more, but they never asked. If they had asked, I would have, I think, done something.

07-01:21:04

Bird: Getting back to—we were on World War II for a little bit. Do you remember when you became aware that the Holocaust was happening, that Jews were being put into concentration camps and exterminated?

07-01:21:27

Rakosi: Well, they were never put into concentration camps, they were shipped off to Auschwitz.

07-01:21:33

Bird: Right from Hungary?

07-01:21:35

Rakosi: Yeah, they were—or maybe a few were for a while in concentration camps, which meant that they were worked to death on war jobs for the Germans, but the others were extermination camps. I can't put a date on when that was revealed in the papers, but it didn't come out soon enough.

07-01:22:46

Bird: Did you notice anything change about American anti-Semitism at that time? Was there still—

07-01:22:53

Rakosi: Yes, there's been a constant diminution of anti-Semitism over the years. There's no comparison between what it was, let's say, in the 1920s and what little of it there is now—no comparison. Certain occupations were simply closed to Jews before. They couldn't get training in it. You never knew when you were going to run up against some guy who hates Jews. Well, what do they hate? They don't hate any specific Jew, they

hate the thought of a Jew, a stereotyped idea of a Jew maybe with a long beard, although many older men now have beards. You thought of Russians growing beards, other people, but Americans are supposed to be clean-shaven. So it was a big surprise to me that that was happening.

07-01:24:57

Bird: Did Americans start growing beards in the sixties?

07-01:25:02

Rakosi: No.

07-01:25:04

Bird: Later?

07-01:25:03

Rakosi: I don't know when it started, but later. It's almost popular now. I guess it is popular. The other day at the symphony there were white beards all around the audience and among the musicians. One of them looked like Santa Claus. So, what was I talking about?

07-01:25:47

Bird: We were talking about—I was asking you about World War II, and if you have any memories of realizing what was going on.

07-01:26:04

Rakosi: Oh sure, the papers were full of it. Of course. This is when Israel was founded, and ships carrying Jewish immigrants were barred from this country during the early part of Roosevelt's administration. That was a hectic time—a terribly hectic time, and I was terribly excited about the founding of Israel. I think that I talked about that before.

07-01:27:09

Bird: Well, you just started to. I actually wanted to hear more about that. You had said that you gave some money to Zionism and the Zionist cause.

07-01:27:21

Rakosi: Yeah, I felt that suddenly became the chief cause of every American Jew, the founding of a country for Jews. Ever since—I think it was the eighth century—the Romans destroyed ancient Israel, just destroyed it. The Jews had been spread all over the world, and they constantly had to use their wits on how to get into a country in the first place, and then how to live in the country when you got there, at the mercy of the other people in the country. So, you had this long history that every Jew knows about of suffering and anxiety, exterminations. In Spain, of course, they either had to become Christians or they were simply expelled. They spilled over into what is now Turkey or the Ottoman Empire. The Muslims were much more hospitable to the Jews than the Christians were, which is kind of ironic, when you think of the situation now. So, here suddenly England, who has the Protectorate of that Palestinian area, establishes a state for Israel with the Balfour Declaration. Well, you can imagine what that means to Jews all over the world that finally after more than a thousand years, they can have a country and an identity. This goes to the deepest feelings of a person. So, I was deeply moved by the state of Israel when it was founded. Also, I was terribly attracted by the kind of people who settled there. They built communes, lived under an ideal socialist system—kibbutzes. I visited a kibbutz when I was there. It gave me a wonderful feeling. Finally Jews had a

chance to return to agriculture. They weren't allowed to own land in other countries, so they had to become business people of some kind, but here finally, they had the opportunity to return to the land to become farmers, return to nature, as it were, too, and everything was shared equally. It was a great feeling.

07-01:32:12

Bird: How do you feel about the way Israel has developed over the years?

07-01:32:19

Rakosi: Terrible. Well, what happened was that gradually it became more and more mercantile, and capitalism came in, of course. Foreign investments came in too. A tremendous amount of American investment in Israeli firms, so it is a highly capitalistic country, which in itself is not necessarily evil, but the situation became worse and worse under dreadful leadership on both sides, the Palestinian and the Israeli. [Ariel] Sharon, who has a history of moving into Lebanon—oh, his God-damned stupidity starting a civil war there, between Muslims and Christians. He didn't actually start it, but his presence there just blew it up. And then this same man, because of suicide bombings, incessantly, in Israel, which starts out as a very liberal country with the exception of the rabbinate there, which really belongs in medieval history, the Israeli public becomes so pessimistic about the possibilities of peace with the Palestinians that he gets into political power. Sharon again. This time, he is just—it's impossible to describe how destructive he has been to both Israel and the Palestinians. So he's a curse on both people. And the Palestinians haven't had the leadership to stop the suicide bombings, so as you know, it's going on full blast, worse than ever right at the moment. I hate Sharon, I hate the guy. The best thing that could happen would be if he were assassinated, but that's not going to happen.

07-01:36:35

Bird: But you think that changes in leadership would be the way out of that struggle right now, or do you see any way out?

07-01:36:41

Rakosi: Oh yeah, change in both leaderships, because Arafat has been trying to—a little like Saddam Hussein, in the sense that he says one thing, but he doesn't do anything to back it up. Of course, so far as the world situation is concerned, it's like an infection that has spread to what is going on right now, the big political question; should we invade Iraq? So, here in this little corner is this infection that's affecting the whole world situation, the relationship of countries to each other. It's like a nightmare.

07-01:38:24

Bird: With Israel and the Palestinians, even with a change of leadership, there still would be the land struggle. Do you have any thoughts on what would make that region peaceful for some time?

07-01:38:41

Rakosi: Oh, sure. The problem in Israel started with a kind of no-win situation, because there's no question that Palestinians had been living in that land now for several centuries and the Jews' claim to the land is based on the fact that they lived in it more than a thousand years before the Palestinians were there; and as a matter of fact, they weren't even called Palestinians at that time. So, you have conflicting claims for the same piece of land. There are conflicting accounts now, about why the Palestinians left the land, and

the Jews could occupy it. The Palestinians claim that the Jews just pushed them out. The Jews claim that during the war, the Palestinians left because the leadership told them, “You leave, we’ll drive the Jews out, and then you can return.” Well, there may be some truth in both claims. There was some pushing out apparently, but also the other, too. Well, you have to come to some kind of agreement as to how you could carve it up so that both people have a country. That can be done if the leaders are willing to do it. Sharon is absolutely unwilling to do it. Or at least he is willing to do it in such a way that the Palestinians are going to wind up with two pieces of land that aren’t even connected satisfactorily. It can be done, but you have to have leadership that’s willing to embrace the idea of two viable countries. There is no reason why that can’t be done. But, it’s not in the process of being done. I notice in the paper that the Israeli foreign minister, [Shimon] Peres, was saying, and he’s an old-time labor leader, and a peaceful man, not Sharon, saying, “We don’t want to be there. We want them to have their own country, but we have nobody that we can really negotiate with. The leadership there can’t do it; they can’t control the suicide bombings, the attacks, so we can’t move.” Now, that’s the best progressive position there is right now in Israel, but it is not a good enough position.

07-01:45:02

Bird: Have you followed the response specifically in San Francisco and Berkeley to this situation?

07-01:45:07

Rakosi: What do you mean?

07-01:45:14

Bird: I’m wondering if you’ve followed at all—I think that there is a certain sense across the country that the US tends to support Israel—

07-01:45:27

Rakosi: Oh, when you talk about the United States supporting Sharon, we’re talking about the Bush administration. That’s not the United States. That’s very different. Sure, Bush supports Sharon, because that’s the way Bush would act in a similar situation. You get tough, you know. He may even admire Sharon, I don’t know, but that doesn’t mean that the rest of the country believes this.

07-01:46:23

Bird: There’s been quite a bit of activism, of pro-Palestinian activism in Berkeley over the summer and spring as well.

07-01:46:41

Rakosi: Yeah, you begin to hate people under these circumstances. Young people are particularly caught up in this. There was a time when I sympathized entirely with the Palestinians, during the early part of this, but then as time went on, and I saw that Arafat was just trying to play both sides, to say one thing, to promise yes, he’s against the suicide bombings, and then releasing from jail the very people who were instigating it, what are you to think, except that he has his own agenda, which may be really to bring down Israel. There have always been a certain proportion, I don’t know how large a proportion of the Palestinians, who really have the idea that eventually they are going to get the Jews out of there. It’s very complex.

07-01:48:35

Bird: Do you have anything else to say on that, on solving the problems of the Middle East?

07-01:48:40

Rakosi: No. [laughs] They haven't asked me to solve it.

07-01:48:43

Bird: Well, we'll be sending this recording to President Bush.

[end of session]

[Interview #8: October 2, 2002]

[Begin Audio File Rakosi 8 10-02-02]

08-00:00:00

Bird: Okay, how are you today, Carl?

08-00:00:02

Rakosi: Pretty good, pretty good. I've got some things here that I could start with.

08-00:00:10

Bird: Okay, that sounds good.

08-00:00:20

Rakosi: Before I forget, there's one marginal person in my life whom I haven't mentioned so far. He was my father's nephew, the son of his favorite sister, in Budapest. He came over, I think, in the 1960s, 1970s, quite late. He knew a little English. He was trained as an engineer, and he was tall and nice looking and quite a ladies' man apparently, my dad said. He was never a ladies' man in this country. Or maybe he was when he was young before he was married. He could have been. I mention him because he was just full of the kind of life that Budapest meant to people. He was a gay character. My dad sponsored him; you had to sponsor an immigrant in those days to maybe show that he didn't simply fall back on public welfare. Since he was an engineer, it was very easy for him to learn how to become a watchmaker, because, after all, watches were really little machines, that's all they were. If you were an engineer, it didn't take much to figure that out, except that a watch is very small. So, he became a watchmaker and settled in Detroit, and I used to see him from time to time. Now, in this country he married the plainest—I wouldn't say she was ugly—but she was so plain, I couldn't understand how he happened to marry her. What I'm getting at is, he brought with him the atmosphere of Budapest in the early twentieth century, when it was part of Austria-Hungary. He finally had a stroke, and I assumed died, because I didn't keep up correspondence with him. We weren't on the same cultural wave. He wasn't a book person, but he was quite intelligent; he was okay. I just wanted to bring that in, which leads me into Hungarian Jewish humor. It's very interesting.

08-00:05:07

The humor of the Hungarian Jews was totally different from Russian humor. There was never a big solid community of Hungarian Jews. They were spread around, although proportionately there are more Jews in Hungary than Jews here. Jews here comprised about 4 percent of the population. In Hungary it was about 10 percent. There were about a million Jews. I think that a hundred thousand survived. Now, let me tell you. It's interesting. His name was Biro, which means judge in Hungarian. I doubt whether Jews were allowed to be judges in Austria-Hungary, I rather doubt it. A recent collection of Hungarian Jewish humor came out, by someone called Biro, the same name as my cousin, so we could be related.

08-00:07:01

But anyhow, let me give you a couple of styles, a couple of directions, in which Hungarian Jewish humor went. It has to do with what I assume is Jewish skepticism about God. In this story the Danube, or the Tisza, that's a tributary, overflowed, and it kept bringing in more and more water until it reached a person's knees. So, there was

this Orthodox Jew who was praying, and he kept praying to God, praying away, praying away. A boat came along to rescue people and called to him, "Isaac, come on out, we've got to get out of here," and Isaac said, "No, no, I have faith, I have faith, don't bother me." He kept on praying, and the water kept rising. It got to the second floor, and a second rescue boat came along. It urged him, "Isaac, come on, are you crazy? Get out of there." "No, no," Isaac said, "leave me alone, I'm praying. God will save me, God will save me." Finally it reached the roof, and he was on top of the roof, and a third boat came along. "Come on you crazy guy, get off there. We've got to get out of here, this is the last boat that's going to save anybody." "No," he says, "I have faith. God will save me, God will save me." Well, he drowns and he winds up in heaven and he meets God and he says to God, "God, I don't understand you, I kept praying and praying to the very end and you paid no attention to me. I thought you would save me. I don't understand you." But God said, "Well, Isaac, I don't understand you. I sent three boats to save you but you paid no attention." [laughter]

08-00:10:45

Well, that's one direction. Now, a different one expresses something about the relationship between Jews and non-Jews in Austria-Hungary in the early days. Jews were pretty well treated then. Two Jews are traveling on a train, and there is a non-Jewish—it would be a Catholic, because Hungary is a Catholic country—there is an army sergeant sitting next to them. These are very poor Jews, and they brought lunch with them. The train is moving along, and the two Jews open their package of food, and they start eating fish heads, and the sergeant stares at them and things, "That's disgusting." The fish heads smelled terrible. The Jews kept on eating—that's all they could afford. Finally the army sergeant says to them, "Listen, you Jews are so clever, you are so smart." The two Jews look at each other; they don't know what he's talking about. He keeps on saying, "There must be some secret to how come you Jews are so bright, so smart." One of Jews says, "Are you sure?" Oh, yeah, he's convinced. "I'd like to know the secret. I'd give anything to know what that secret is." The two Jews are kind of laughing to themselves, but he keeps pursuing the subject, until one of them finally says, "Well, all right, I'll tell you the secret, but it's going to cost you." "Well, how much is it going to cost me," said the sergeant, "I'm willing to pay any amount." So, the Jew says a very high figure, thinking that the sergeant is not going to go that high. It's about a month's salary for the sergeant. So he goes, "Okay, okay. What's the secret?" "The secret is fish heads. You eat fish heads and it will really make you smart," the Jew says. The sergeant starts to eat the fish heads, but it smells bad, and he's not used to it, and he throws up, vomits out of the window, and he says, "You Jews, you cheated me," and the Jew says, "We didn't cheat you. You see, you're smarter already."

08-00:15:45

Anyhow, Jews have a great humor.

Getting back to the Communists, there's a recent autobiography by the English historian, [Eric] Hobsbawm. I don't know whether you are familiar with that name. Apparently, he is one of England's foremost historians. He's now in his eighties. He's a Marxist.

08-00:16:31

Bird: Eric, right.

08-00:16:32

Rakosi: Eric Hobsbawm. He's remained a Marxist to the very end, which is quite unusual, but it's so much like what I went through. I guess he's part Austrian, part German Jew. He spent his childhood in Berlin, during the beginnings of the Nazi takeover, and he became a Marxist at that time because he thought that only the Soviet Union could really overcome them. I thought pretty much the same thing, that for that time, for his time and for my time, in the 1930s, Marxism and communism was the right solution, and that what went wrong was a perversion of communism under Stalin. The the original Marxists, who followed Trotsky, had a different view of communism, not as a national system, but as a global movement, but Stalin changed that to nationalism.

08-00:19:10

In other words, whatever was good for Russia at that time—or the Soviet Union—was the thing that he wanted. He went paranoid, and eventually homicidal so that the leadership was awful. We made a terrible mistake in this country of following that leadership. It got screwed up, because in this country there was such a thing as a native, natural rebellions of working people and farmers, and so on, against all forms of injustice. Even Texas, the worst state, I found had activists. They weren't Marxists, they were rebels. They were rebelling against injustice, and that leads me to the phenomenon of terrorism.

08-00:20:43

There's an awful lot of hypocrisy about the very use of the term terrorism. Take for example when England had the Mandate over Palestine, before there was any Israel, there were two militant groups who, today, would be called terrorists. They were Jews. One was called the Stern Gang. I've forgotten the name of the other. [possibly the Irgun] So, now Sharon is using the term terrorism to depict the Palestinians. The two groups were terrorists against the British troops there when there was a reason for them to be terrorists. My general idea is that the word terrorism is too narrow a term, for what always happens in the world when there is injustice, when people fight against it. Today, anybody who is militant against injustice is labeled a terrorist. Well, that's hypocrisy, and it's a way to really confuse people, and to achieve political ends that are hidden behind the term terrorism.

Getting back to politics. It's simply astonishing to me that the Democratic party has been so corrupted by having to raise funds among corporate lobbies to be able to run their campaigns. They don't dare to say anything about it. We are right in the worst phase of misrepresentation. It boggles the mind. Everybody has been so corrupted by money and politics that this goes on. As far as I'm concerned, I've pretty much made up my mind to just vote for the Green party, instead of making these stupid choices. In Germany, the Green party is a recognized, legitimate political party, and they are represented in Congress. Here your Green vote is simply wasted politically. It's a nasty decision you have to make.

08-00:25:25

Bird: Of course, there's that whole debate about whether people who were voting Green in this country, and I would imagine that if they voted for any Green party, that that was a vote for the Republicans.

08-00:25:40

Rakosi: Yeah, I imagine that if the race is close, which I don't think that it will be, but if it is, I won't vote the Green party. Okay, let's see what else I have. All right, you were interested in talking about process in writing. You probably remember that Zukofsky used the term sincerity to describe the work of Reznikoff, and off-hand, nobody who reads Reznikoff would have any question about the sincerity of his work. There's a basic sort of conflict here. A poem is, after all, an artifice: it's an aesthetic artifice. It has to be aesthetic in the first place, and it has to be an artifice at some point, which makes it resemble more a sculpture than music, which flows, although music also has structures. Well, how you do something that is an artifice, and that is in the world of aesthetics, how does the word sincerity apply? But it does. It was a little difficult for me to try to figure this out.

08-00:28:23

Now, it doesn't apply to every type of poetry. For example, if you are writing satirical poetry, all you can say is that satire either works or it doesn't work. The question of sincerity can't enter into it. If you are writing narrative poetry, then again, but not quite to that extent, sincerity doesn't enter into it. You are making it as dramatic as possible. But, if you are writing lyric poetry or meditative poetry—more even in the case of meditative poetry—the question of sincerity does enter.

08-00:29:36

In this sense—let me see if I can phrase it. You're using metaphors a lot in that kind of poetry, and it's very easy to fall into affectations of different kinds. You want to make it as dramatic as possible, so you push that. You want to make it as profound as possible, so you use words to express profundity. But, also what is important here, and that has to do more with sincerity—it has to be what you really feel, and not what you inherited from some book—without any affectation. It has to be honest. Probably the word honest would be a little better than sincerity—honesty. I think, in that sense, all of the Objectivists had that. I think they had it probably in part because they were immigrants or of immigrant background. They were serious. They weren't playing games; they weren't trying to be coy, like [e. e.] cummings, for example. They weren't trying to be clever, which again is a kind of trickery of real intellect. They were just expressing what they were feeling, what they were thinking.

08-00:32:36

Bird: Why do you think that that is a quality of immigrants? Or easier?

08-00:32:43

Rakosi: The immigrant has to try harder; he doesn't take things for granted, and he sees things more clearly, as a result, than the person who is living in the country and who is so used to what he sees, that he doesn't see it clearly anymore, or he doesn't see certain aspects of it. That's really the origin of my Americana poems, after all. Now, the case of—what's her name?

08-00:33:33

Bird: Niedecker.

08-00:33:37

Rakosi: Yeah, Niedecker is different. Her skill in writing, the stark quality of it, is due partly to instruction from Zukofsky, who she told me was merciless in his criticism of the stuff

she was sending him. And partly due to her isolation on this tiny plot of land, this tiny little house on the shore of a small lake. She never left that place, which is a very American kind of situation to be in; not an immigrant situation. As a result, she winds up writing poetry that is not like the others, in subject matter, not at all like them. She left briefly, very briefly to visit New York and that was it, and came right back. She never lived in Madison, which would have changed her writing a great deal. Also, although she brings in some history, Thomas Jefferson, it's the poetry of isolation really—isolation with nature, with this particular kind of nature too. But, you take Reznikoff. Reznikoff had two modes. He's much more sincere in one mode than in the other. The mode in which I find him least interesting is his takes on the Old Testament stories.

08-00:37:22

Bird: This is his least convincing?

08-00:37:28

Rakosi: He feels sincere there, I'm sure, as a writer, because he's very much into that tradition, which I never was myself. But, after all, it's not anything he's experienced. He's getting it second or fifth hand maybe. So, it moves along with some what biblical cadence, but that's not the Reznikoff that's admired. [phone rings]

08-00:39:22

But the Reznikoff that everybody loves is when he's just walking along the streets of Manhattan and ideas come to him. But what are the ideas? He's not observing the scenery, the streets or the trees, no. He's reflecting on people that he's met, that he knows very well. He puts them into a relationship with himself. He's talking to them; they're talking to him as he's walking along. That's absolutely authentic, because he knows these people. That's what everybody loves in him. As a matter of fact, Oppen says—Oppen was in World War II—and he says he took a volume of Reznikoff's poems with him to the army.

08-00:40:55

Bird: I think that Zukofsky used sincerity as a way of describing Objectivist poetics, but it seems to me that you also use it as a way of kind of sorting through maybe good poets and not so good poets.

08-00:41:16

Rakosi: Absolutely, but that's a test that has not been applied academically. Too often the test has to do with the subject matter of a poem. If it has important subject matter at the time, it will be rated very high in academia.

08-00:41:58

Bird: At that time meaning at that historical moment?

08-00:41:59

Rakosi: At that time. But, how to get around the time element in poetry, there really is only one way to do it, and that is to take the subject matter which seems so important at the time, and reduce it to the elements that are universal, that don't change with time; and that can be done. But so much of Alexander Pope, for example, had to do with his time, they were satires, but they've lost their relevance—you can't find them interesting now. He hasn't universalized them.

Oppen was always very generous in his praise of my poetry. He used to send me—well, you saw some of his comments at the university. It's interesting, some of Oppen's poems which are unquestionably sincere, I had a little trouble with myself. It was a little too much talking about a subject, and not enough epitomizing of it. I never said anything about it to him. The exception was his very first book, *Discrete Series*. He's just beginning to write, but he has a sharp eye, so he gets these things in their essence. Then the last book that he wrote, *Primitive*, which he thought was a failure, I thought was one of his best books because he left things unanswered. His imagination was a little freer.

08-00:45:48

Zukofsky's work is very strong, and he had a brilliant, critical mind. I may have said this before, but I thought he was really a follower of Pound. I thought that he did a more difficult task than Pound had done in laying out, in his critical essays, just what was good poetry, and what wasn't. You were left with no doubt. I followed Pound's critical ideas very closely, and I'm forever indebted to him for them (not his poetry, although some of the *Cantos*, I do love). Some of the earlier satirical poems, I didn't know how to make them out; I didn't realize that they referred to actual people. So I didn't get the point of the satire. Some of the recent studies—I have one study here of how he evolved from the early satirical poems to the *Cantos*. Zukofsky did something more difficult. After all, it's not such a hard task to distinguish a great poem from a bad poem. You don't even have to be a poet to do that. But, how do you distinguish a good poem from a very good poem. That's much harder to do, and Zukofsky did it.

08-00:48:59

Bird: In his *A Test of Poetry*?

08-00:48:58

Rakosi: Yeah. That's a great feat. He did that as a young guy too. It's a great feat. Although I broke off relations with him in later years, I have to respect the work he did. After all, he followed Pound in so many ways. And he was the an impresario for the work of the Objectivists. He really pushed it. He got me into a couple of the good magazines. Pound was the big impresario for the poets that he liked.

08-00:50:12

Bird: One thing I was wondering about is—in recent scholarship, there has been a lot of questioning of canonization, and that whole idea of great literature, and the politics of who is deciding what is great literature. I was wondering what you think about that, and what role does taste have?

08-00:50:39

Rakosi: Well, you know, once a person is canonized, you can't decanonize him. He's dead already. So, it becomes institutionalized and it doesn't budge, and of course teaching at universities, that's what they use now. But, it isn't what any poet would really want to see, because it leaves out—in a way, it may leave out the most interesting poets. Well, I suppose something like that happens with all of the big prizes, but canonization is a little different. The term itself is associated in some ways with something saintly. It's been sanctified, like one of the saints. Well, that has nothing to do with reality; it's created in the university, and they are the victims of it. So, young poets have to look around and see for themselves. Young poets tend to be rebels, and they are not going to

fall for canonization. That may be what they are taught, but they go out and find their own idols.

08-00:53:14

Bird: If one of the elements that make a poem really great would be this kind of taking the universal elements of an experience, would that mean that great poetry should be cross-cultural, that anyone from any culture should be able to understand these things?

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Rakosi: Oh, I think so, oh sure. Culture's just like human nature, it doesn't differ in its basics from people to people, country to country, so beauty and poetry is recognizable by all people, all nationalities.

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Bird: You don't think that there are any cultural elements to beauty, or what one would recognize as beauty?

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Rakosi: I suppose I would say yes and no. Some elements of a culture are, perhaps, because they are more familiar to a person in that culture, may seem more attractive to him when he encounters it. I'm not sure. Since basically human beings are alike, it seems to me that their perception of beauty would also be alike in different people. On an individual basis, of course, people vary tremendously in their sensitivity to beauty and the arts. That may be partly physiological. Basically, the human race is global. I don't know how far you can carry that. One of the interesting things is—I'm thinking now of African tribal poetry. Some of the most beautiful poetry I've ever read—this was in translation—is by some of the Pygmies in Africa—wonderful poetry, because it's poetry that puts you immediately where they are in a jungle, let's say, and night is coming on, and there's a mystery there. That's poetry, the mystery. That's straight on from their experience, just like Reznikoff's is straight from his experience, walking the streets of New York. In other ways, of course, the Pygmies, you can't say that they had much of a culture. But, beauty and the perception of beauty, which is what the arts are all about, is universal.

08-00:59:13

Bird: Now, I think I might have just got a definition of poetry from you, that poetry starts with or is the mystery of experience, or a mystery from experience?

08-00:59:32

Rakosi: Well, that certainly is one kind of poetry.

08-00:59:37

Bird: Lyric or meditative.

08-00:59:40

Rakosi: It touches the most profound part of our self, the mystery of living, yeah.

08-00:59:55

Bird: Is that also beauty?

08-00:59:59

Rakosi: Yeah, beauty if you express it that way. The wonderful thing about the arts is that—although it has what I consider marginal connections to the practical world, it is free of all constraints—I mean really good, great art—it’s just human experience straight out. In the workaday world you don’t have that freedom, and in the world of entertainment, you don’t have it. You have it only in the arts. I never used to think of it that way. In fact, I always thought that poets just talk big about poetry, that they were just promoting themselves, so I shied away from them and disliked it, but in fact, there’s something to be said about all of the arts being the most precious part of society. It’s the least corrupted, it’s the least diversionary, and it’s the most profound. I include all of the arts in that—even architecture, which some people think is not an art. It’s like making an enormous piece of sculpture. By the way, Charlie Rose on his program has had a number of great architects on, until then I never thought of architecture as one of the great arts, but when you listen to these guys—there’s one Italian architect, [Renzo] Piano, who’s planning another huge skyscraper for New York, but, this time, not as high and with different materials—

08-01:04:03

Bird: This is the one that is going to replace the World Trade Center?

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Rakosi: Well, I’m not sure exactly where it’s going. I don’t think that they’ve decided what’s to go there. But he was talking like an artist. One of the amusing things he said—I don’t know whether I’ve mentioned this before—an architect always has to fight gravity, because when you are moving up, gravity tends to pull you down, so you got to have the structure and the materials, and so on, to defeat gravity. Of course, it’s going to be very high. You also have give the illusion of something that’s light, and not heavy. Well, a lot of things, apparently, get into the art of architecture. And of course, [Frank Lloyd] Wright had this aesthetic idea that you have to respect nature, the landscape. You’ve got to make something that goes with the land. So, we’ll take architecture into the arts.

08-01:05:55

Bird: It would be interesting to think about doing that in New York City, following Frank Lloyd Wright’s advice. Where is the land?

08-01:06:03

Rakosi: Oh, you couldn’t do it. Although, now wait a minute. He did something in Tokyo. He had a big building there, a tall building, which was different. So, he didn’t just have the one idea. Then the last architect that I heard was a Polish architect [Daniel Libeskind] who just had a totally different idea. He’s done some stunning buildings in England. He showed photographs of them. Now, this is kind of interesting. He also did the new Jewish Museum in Berlin. Imagine doing a Jewish museum in Berlin. When he showed photographs of it, they thought he was crazy. The walls—it’s not a box. He hates boxes. He says he sees nothing interesting or artistic about a box for a building. So, he has walls not quite coming together, ceilings moving this way and that. And there’s one room that you don’t want to enter into at all. It will give you such a fright to have the thing so out of what you can ordinarily see. It’s a room that has nothing in it. He’s celebrating the—not celebrating, it’s a memorial about the Holocaust.

08-01:09:17

So, architects are thinking deeply. He showed one building he built in Manchester. Manchester is a very commercial city. It's an extension to one of their museums. The museum that it's an addition to—not an extension, but an addition to, is a square building. It's okay. Every building around it is square, maybe four or five stories high. This building, this was the one where they thought he was crazy. It's totally different. It sticks out this way that way, but he says, "I want to do something original, something that they are not used to seeing, give them a new experience, a different experience." So, here is the architect thinking the same way a poet or a composer thinks. It's got to be something new, something different. But, at the same time, when you see it, you say, "Well, jeez, that's way out of—there's no connection between that building and any of the buildings around."

08-01:10:51

Bird: Now, do you think that the concept of sincerity would also work in architecture? I think what you said about Frank Lloyd Wright wanting to stay true to the land—would be one way of seeing it—but do you think that that would be a test for architecture?

08-01:11:10

Rakosi: Well, not if the architect is determined to be original. But maybe, yes, then that would be sincere. Let's be original, not follow others. I think it would, yeah.

08-01:11:35

Bird: I'm thinking about how especially with memorials how much an architect must think about the audience, the person walking into the building. There's some degree of—at least with, I think, the Holocaust Museum in Berlin, some degree of affectation in the sense of provoking the entering person to feel a specific way.

08-01:12:02

Rakosi: Sure

08-01:12:04

Bird: I wonder if it is a similar thing in poetry, that that is not a sincere way of designing buildings.

08-01:12:23

Rakosi: I don't know that sincerity—I'm trying to see whether it is applicable to architecture. I don't think that it is applicable. A building just has to work in architecture. This fellow was saying that some buildings are just great. You're lucky when that happens. For example, there is one building in New York that when you see it at night, it just makes your hair stand on end, it's so beautiful. It's all black. Others just don't work so well. It's a matter of luck. The architect has to pick out the materials, of course, and sometimes he's lucky; and it just works great. I wish I could remember the name of this building.

08-01:13:50

Bird: The one that came to mind was the Seagrams building, but I don't think that that is black.

08-01:13:59

Rakosi: This one is black. At night it just knocks you over. It doesn't matter.

08-01:14:22

Bird: I'm trying to think of architecture and poetry together. I'm wondering to what extent you think of the person your poem—the reader entering your poem, and if—?

08-01:14:38

Rakosi: Yeah, that's interesting. This Polish architect started out as a musician. He was a professional musician; he performed—he didn't say which instrument. At the same time, he was studying architecture. What appealed to him about architecture was its public nature, the fact that there were always people coming in and out, in and out, in and out. If he could create a building that would entice people to come in and out, in and out of there, he thought that would be a great experience to be in that kind of a building. He loved that public aspect. Poetry is the opposite. Poetry is written always in isolation. I never heard of a poet who had a particular audience in mind. That would be crass, vulgar. No, he's exploring his own nature and doing the best he can to get it out as it really is, unaffected by all that he's read, and all of the people that he's met. It's his own self that he's tried to express. In that process, there is no room for trying to change it to what others may expect of him. He's got to get that out first. Now, he may wonder afterwards, after he's done it, "Well, what are readers going to be thinking about this?" And, he may make some changes then, but not necessarily, not everybody. It depends on the poet. Duncan never changed anything that he wrote, and I could never get over that.

08-01:18:08

Bird: Do you know who your readers are?

08-01:18:13

Rakosi: No, I don't. I don't know whether any poet knows. How can you know?

08-01:18:39

Bird: I didn't know if maybe the National Poetry Foundation tells you when they have lots of orders from universities or from certain types of institutions or whether you get letters from readers.

08-01:18:56

Rakosi: I have gotten some letters yeah, but you know, just a few, not many. Then I discover years afterwards that people have read me, certain individuals, but you never know. It's fortunate that you don't know.

08-01:19:20

Bird: Why is it fortunate?

08-01:19:28

Rakosi: You can be yourself better if you don't know. If a poet is read widely and he knows it, it doesn't do him any good. It makes him a little slack. I have no idea what happens in academia, in universities. The National Poetry Foundation took me up originally, because the director of it at that time admired my work. It only takes one person sometimes to do this. Since they never paid me for any of my books—I published a couple of others also with them. I felt at the time, it's a very bad publisher, because they get no counseling on how to get the books in the hands of readers, or the funds for it. I once asked Burton Hatlen, who has been in charge now at the University of Maine for a few years—he's a pretty good poet himself—"Why don't you get somebody from your business department to help you? The books are just lying around." "It's a good idea,"

he said. Of course, but it's never been done. It's very easy to get published nowadays, by the way, for young people, but very hard to get into book stores, because most of them will not handle poetry.

08-01:23:10

Bird: What do you think of the Poet Laureate position?

08-01:23:21

Rakosi: Well, that started out, you know, not as the Poet Laureate title, but as poetry consultant to the Library of Congress. That was the original title. That was a modest title, and that was okay. Then they raised the ante to Poet Laureate. Well, why this guy is Poet Laureate and not somebody else, becomes the question then. It's a very different kind of a question. Poet Laureate has, of course, a long tradition in England where it has meant that they've chosen eminent poets—poets who've already established themselves with very important books. There it had real meaning, but now every state practically has a poet laureate. Well, that's nonsense. So, like so much in modern society, it just goes wild. And it damps the significance of the national title.

08-01:25:24

Bird: Do you think that there is anything to having a national one? Isn't it Robert Pinsky right now? [Billy Collins was Poet Laureate for 2001-2003. Robert Pinsky served from 1997-2000.]

08-01:25:31

Rakosi: There might be, yeah. I'm very uncomfortable with the title, however. It's a bloated title. I don't know that anybody deserves such a high title. The actual function of a Poet Laureate in Washington is—it's not just an honorary title. His function for years now has been simply to organize readings in Washington. When Robert Haas was Poet Laureate a few years ago, [from 1995-1997] he simply invited me to give a reading in Washington. He introduced me—a very good introduction, by the way, and people came. It was an honor for me. I had never read in Washington, at the Library of Congress before. But that's all he did. He had a performing function. It wasn't just honorary. I don't think that in England he has a function. I think it is really honorary.

08-01:27:48

Bird: He just gets a crown of laurels?

08-01:27:49

Rakosi: Yeah [laughs].

08-01:27:50

Bird: Do you think in this country the politics of the poet matter very much?

08-01:27:59

Rakosi: I don't know any Republican poets; I've never met one. [laughter]

08-01:28:10

Bird: There's got to be one.

08-01:28:13

Rakosi: I suppose there is one down South. He'd have to be down South.

08-01:28:19

Bird: I read that Amiri Baraka, who I guess is Poet Laureate, I'm not sure, of New Jersey or of his specific—of Newark maybe, just of Newark—

08-01:28:32

Rakosi: Yeah, Baraka, I read that too. That was in yesterday's paper, I think. It's for New Jersey. I understand, however, that the Democratic governor wants him to give up his crown. He's apparently gone too fiercely into black nationalism that gave the impression that white people were enemies. And then by an interesting twist, he became a Marxist and as fierce a Marxist as he had been a black nationalist. Whatever he writes, though, he's a powerful playwright. His poetry is good but I don't feel he speaks from personal experience.

08-01:31:46

Bird: It seems that Baraka has gone through his phases. He had his black nationalist phase, and I think now that he's kind of a self-declared Mao-Marxist.

08-01:31:55

Rakosi: A Mao-Marxist? Really?

08-01:31:56

Bird: He's moved past the angry, angry black nationalist stage. I was thinking about our conversation last week, because the point of conflict right now is that one of his poems is critical of Israel and Sharon.

08-01:32:19

Rakosi: Well, he's absolutely right. Sharon has been a historical disaster to the Jews in Israel. He's been a disaster. I want to tell you, I knew some of the early Zionists that went to Israel, and these were people who were of such high idealism—the highest. They were willing to change their whole lives in order to build up a country, and they started out with socialist ideals, very high ideals. They would be raging in their graves at Sharon. Baraka was right.

08-01:33:51

Bird: Now, Baraka's poetry certainly falls in the political poetry category. Do you think that he's effective?

08-01:34:02

Rakosi: I think he is. I haven't read him recently, but I think he is. He's a good workman. He has a good imagination.

08-01:34:12

Bird: Sincere.

08-01:34:13

Rakosi: Good ear, oh yeah.

08-01:34:14

Bird: Sincere?

- 08-01:34:16
Rakosi: Oh, absolutely good ear. He's always so dramatic. And he's a passionate writer, so you have to assume that he's sincere. There's a poet in town who was married to him, a white woman. I picked up some things about Baraka from her.
- 08-01:35:11
Bird: Nothing you want to share?
- 08-01:35:13
Rakosi: Oh no, it wasn't scandalous. It had to do with her problems of living with him. You really can't imagine him as an easy husband to live with. Despite his power, his passion doesn't convince me altogether that it's coming from personal experience about being poor and unjustly treated. He was also involved in local politics in Newark. Did he run for mayor?
- 08-01:36:41
Bird: Yes. [Interviewer's note: I got this wrong. Baraka did not run for mayor. He assisted Kenneth Gibson in his campaign for mayor of Newark in 1970.]
- 08-01:36:41
Rakosi: Yeah, so there's the politician in him too. Human beings are a mixed bag.
- 08-01:37:02
Bird: I tend to think of him—on the subject of whether it's coming from experience or not—as part of maybe even an Eastern European tradition of a town wailer. Or at least a Russian tradition of the person maybe in charge of grieving for other people, or spouting out the ills of other people.
- 08-01:37:29
Rakosi: But who would want to do that, if that's so? Then it derives from an enormous arrogance and presumption that he's going to be the voice of the people. It's not anything that I like. My model in this sort of thing is Montaigne, a philosopher of moderation. I love Montaigne.
- 08-01:38:23
Bird: I was wondering actually when we were talking about beauty and knowing that you have a big interest in philosophy over the years, if you've done a lot of reading in aesthetic theory or if you find that important?
- 08-01:38:37
Rakosi: Not at all. No reading in aesthetic theory. No, that gets into academic theorizing, which I abhor.
- 08-01:38:58
Bird: So, you wouldn't even consider that philosophy.
- 08-01:39:00
Rakosi: No, I don't. Aesthetic theory is a theory about beauty. Philosophizing is about human beings. They are not the same thing. So, I don't know whether I would give it that dignity of a form of philosophy. But I really don't know much about it. I don't read it.

08-01:40:02

Bird: But what about someone like Kant? Have you done much reading of...

08-01:40:08

Rakosi: Some, oh yeah. You can lose yourself in the philosophers. They start with certain assumptions and then they build from those assumptions, and that building is always very logical, so logical that you come to feel that it must be right. How can it not be right? But the assumptions may be wrong. No matter, philosophy is wonderful reading for me, I love it, but I can get lost in it.

08-01:41:30

Bird: So you distinguish philosophy from theory? The distinction there is that philosophy deals with humans or human nature, and theory deals more with abstract.

08-01:41:40

Rakosi: You mean aesthetic?

08-01:41:43

Bird: I'm just thinking of the difference between philosophy and what you are calling academic theory.

08-01:41:52

Rakosi: No, theory is simply a concept, an idea about something, but there's no clash between theory and philosophy. Philosophy is simply an extended theory about something. It's really the same thing.

08-01:42:19

Bird: We were talking about the Language Poets and the French theorists who influenced them, someone maybe like Derrida, talking about language. It seems to me that there has been a lot of extended thinking on that subject.

08-01:42:40

Rakosi: I would probably find them interesting, but who has time for all that? I have some time for the end product, but aesthetic theory, I think, by its very nature tends to be arid, because it takes you too far from the original text to start with. The aesthetic theoretician is simply being creative on his own, making something up. I'm not interested in following him.

08-01:44:26

Bird: Do you find beauty in your own poems? Do you think that that is one of the ideals in your own poetry?

08-01:44:31

Rakosi: I hope so. I think what's drawn some people to my poetry...is the human element in it. It can be always very human, and at the same time aesthetic. I think that's what has appealed to them. Marilyn and I run into it once in a while. She ran into it in a book store on Ninth Avenue, which is now out of business. One of the young clerks was reading one of my books. She was curious and said, "Oh, you are reading a book by Carl Rakosi?" "Oh, yeah, I love his work," he said. "Well, I know Carl Rakosi," she said. "You do?" "Yeah, he lives close by on Seventeenth Avenue." He was thrilled. That sort of thing happens once in a while. But who knows what poetry is going to become? I'll put my bets on Anne Carson. She has a piece in the latest issue of the *London*

Review of Books [vol.24, no.17. 9/15/02] that shows that she has the kind of original inventive mind that poetry needs. This is not a poem; this is in prose, and it's called "Euripides to His Audience," and she has Euripides just meditating and talking to what she imagines his audience would be. Now, she's a Greek scholar so she knows the material, but I'm struck by her wonderful inventiveness. She has a good mind.

08-01:49:18

Bird: Okay, we'll stop there.

[end of session]

[Interview #9: October 7, 2002]

[Begin Audio File Rakosi: 10-07-02]

09-00:00:00

Bird: Okay, how are you doing today, Carl?

09-00:00:04

Rakosi: Pretty good, pretty good. Did you watch *The Forsyte Saga* last night?

09-00:00:10

Bird: The what?

09-00:00:10

Rakosi: Galsworthy's *The Forsyte Saga*?

09-00:00:19

Bird: No, I didn't.

09-00:00:22

Rakosi: I remember when it came out. Galsworthy was quite popular, but it didn't quite measure up to, let's say to Trollope. This is a redoing of *The Forsyte Saga*. It's kind of interesting, because they've shortened the talking, which made it brisker, so that it sounded like an old-fashioned piece now, and it's in color. It has the most beautiful young woman in there, reading poetry, and she is the beautiful woman. That's part of the plot. You watch it, but it is close to soap opera. That's what makes it different from a portrayal by Dickens or Jane Austin, or Trollope.

09-00:01:48

Bird: Do you enjoy plays a lot?

09-00:01:51

Rakosi: Oh yes.

09-00:01:52

Bird: Do you ever get out to see some around San Francisco?

09-00:01:57

Rakosi: Oh sure. The Berkeley Rep has been for years the most reliable place to see interesting plays well done, really well done. I saw a Wilde play there that was done really as well as the Wilde play that I saw in Dublin, at the Abbey Theatre. It was beautiful, really perfect.

09-00:02:38

Bird: Do you see any of the really cutting-edge new plays that get put out, or mostly classical ones?

09-00:02:53

Rakosi: Well, if the Berkeley Rep puts it on, I'll see it. I have confidence in their judgment, but otherwise I won't take the chance.

09-00:03:11

Bird: The chance that you'll have to sit through something awful?

- 09-00:03:17
Rakosi: Not necessarily awful, but trying too hard to be original, pushing it, exaggerating. That sort of thing.
- 09-00:03:37
Bird: Do you have a favorite playwright?
- 09-00:03:42
Rakosi: Oh, I suppose [Arthur] Miller would be my all-time favorite, because when you see a play of his, his whole heart and soul are in it, and you are with him. He talks about real people, real situations.
- 09-00:04:09
Bird: Do you ever go to the Shakespeare festivals?
- 09-00:04:10
Rakosi: Occasionally, yeah. Occasionally. ACT has been a great disappointment to me. They put on a performance of *Macbeth*, in which a black actor was so bad, I couldn't wait until intermission to walk out. It was terrible. Total misunderstanding of what Shakespeare was all about, in his times.
- 09-00:05:03
Bird: So, it was more the interpretation of it than it was the acting?
- 09-00:05:08
Rakosi: Both, the acting was pretty bad. They haven't done well. They now have plays running with an English playwright—what's his name? It was interesting work.
- 09-00:05:38
Bird: Stoppard?
- 09-00:05:40
Rakosi: Yeah, Tom Stoppard. I do want to see that. It's pretty hard to spoil Stoppard, because so much of it is sparkling talk. Stoppard has an interesting background. He was born in Alexandria, Egypt. There was a large colony of Egyptian Jews living in Alexandria, and they had quite a strong cultural presence in the town. Most of them emigrated to France, but I gather he himself comes from a German Jewish family. Then, I suspect, changed the family name. It was probably Goldsmith, something like that originally. He's very bright. You have to have something to say, really in a play; really something that opens your eyes to something that you may have been dimly aware of, but the full point of it, the significance you haven't gotten. Stoppard can do that. I've seen some great plays at the Berkeley Rep.
- 09-00:07:54
Bird: Have you ever thought of writing a play yourself?
- 09-00:07:58
Rakosi: I would have loved to do it, but I was out of writing for so long that I didn't have time to. When I picked it up again, I had too much poetry in me to try. But, I would have liked to do it. I could have done it, too, I think.

09-00:08:50

Bird: To what extent do you think writing a play would be similar to writing a poem in the way that you do it?

09-00:08:58

Rakosi: Well, in both cases, you have to have an accurate ear for human talk, street talk, domestic talk, talk in different situations. At least the type of poetry that I write, that would enter into it too. Other than that, I don't know. I could think of all kinds of differences, of course. When you are writing poetry, you discover a voice that is talking in the poem. In a play, there are many different voices, representing characters, interacting and having problems with each other and so on. Well, that gets into all kinds of complications in human relationships that a poem would not get into. It couldn't get into really, because a poem is much more of an abstraction of reality. The play is a particularization of reality, and you see it very clearly in a play. However, the abstraction of reality in a poem has a cutting edge that a play can't have.

09-00:12:05

Bird: The cutting edge comes from the degree to which it is condensed?

09-00:12:11

Rakosi: Condenses and abstracts, yeah. But, you have to have the intelligence to know what is really an abstraction and a condensation. When you say it's an abstraction, it makes it a universalizing of your abstract that you... But, people love both—particulars and abstraction. When painters try to be abstract, they run into serious problems. I think that I may have mentioned this before, that I am always amused at what some of the very celebrated abstract painters have said about their paintings, what they think the painting represent [laughs]. Well, you look at it, where is it? [laughter] Abstraction can get further and further away from what common sense tells you is reality. Mondrian, for example, in his squares—what in his mind he intended them to represent, in my mind can't possibly represent that. Impossible. But, people go to a showing of that phase of Mondrian, read what it says they are supposed to represent and come to believe it, see it.

09-00:15:29

Bird: Do you—the fact that you don't see the intention or that you don't see what the artist sees in the painting, do you think that that is a failed painting, or do you think that it is necessary to take the intention along with the painting?

09-00:15:46

Rakosi: I would say that same thing about a poet who says that this particular poem is meant to express so and so, and you read it and you see it does not. My opinion is that the poem has failed; he just hasn't done it. But I think that would hold for painters, that they would be vulnerable to the same kind of error or self-deception.

09-00:16:32

Bird: Do you think that there is a painter that abstracts well, that you see the intention and you look at the painting that you can see that?

09-00:16:43

Rakosi: Oh, sure. For example, the abstract painters who will paint certain colors—just colors. A color has more than a visual effect on a person; it sets a mood. For example, blues, pinks, reds. There's an actual—I don't know whether to call it factual basis for the—

there's a physiological basis, let's put it that way, for a painter then claiming this represents such and such a thing, but the colors and the thickness of the paint itself—brush stroke and so on—undoubtedly influences, and that can work, sure. Painting can also express movement, frantic movement. You'll get an emotional expression there, and you'll say, "This guy, he's in a state of frantic agitation, fear." Fear can be well expressed in painting without figures, although I prefer figures.

09-00:19:22

Bird: I know we've talked a little bit about people you've been associated with or that you've had friendships with. Robert Duncan and Oppen, the poets, and then there was Aaron Copland, the composer. I'm wondering if there are other artists, whether painters or playwrights that have been really important to you—or musicians?

09-00:19:57

Rakosi: Paul Auster, I had dinner with him the other night. He was here for a reading. Paul's family—his grandfather—I don't know whether I've mentioned this—his grandfather and his grandmother lived in Kenosha, the same town where I grew up. Years later, I learned a strange fact that his grandfather had been killed by his grandmother in Kenosha, but the newspapers—I looked it up in the newspapers, and this happened actually before I got to Kenosha. He'd been a contractor in the city, and it was a mystery to me how come the grandmother was never arraigned or charged with murder, but the newspapers were silent about that. Well, years later, I met Paul for the first time, and he had written a very laudatory piece about one of my early books. He was a poet first, a pretty good one. We developed a friendship. He did something very interesting. He has a mind of some depth, but his talents seem to be in the direction of the detective story. You're familiar with Auster's work?

09-00:23:05

Bird: Not as familiar as I should be.

09-00:23:08

Rakosi: He did it so cleverly, so ingenious, and with so much depth to it at the same time, that the French took it up, and he became a great literary celebrity in France. You know that [Edgar Allen] Poe wrote the first detective story, and France just embraced Poe. He was a great genius to them. So, here's Paul, he's continuing Poe's tradition, which they love. We became very good friends, and I had dinner with him the other night, after his reading. People were hanging from the chandeliers, there were so many. It's curious, you wouldn't think he'd be a popular writer, although I notice this last book of his is on the best-seller list. He is both a first-class prose writer and an ingenious novelist of that kind, and he has depth, which is an unusual combination. Anyhow, we're friends. When I left, he said, "I'm coming back for your hundredth birthday." [laughs]

09-00:25:25

Bird: Is that this November or next November?

09-00:25:30

Rakosi: It's next November.

09-00:25:35

Bird: That'll be a fun party.

- Rakosi: Let's see if there's anybody else. My friends tend to be not writers. George Evans and August Kleinzahler were very good friends. We used to do a lot of walking together, and talking, and George, who still lives here, is still a very good friend. August has really gone his own way. He does a number of things for the *London Review of Books*. He's learned to write the kind of poem that magazines and commercial publishers will publish. I don't know whether this is intentional on his part. It may be, because he's tried to make a living on his writing, which is, I think, impossible to do if you are just a poet. He gets occasional teaching jobs. That may be all.
- 09-00:27:52
Bird: How would you describe that kind of—?
- 09-00:27:53
Rakosi: Wait a minute, there were others—what's his name? I'll have to look him up. He is a very social-minded poet. He was a Communist too, from the Middle West. He was a little younger than I. He died a few years ago—a very good writer. Yeah, we were friends. [Tom McGrath]
- 09-00:28:53
Bird: And you met [Jorge Luis] Borges, didn't you?
- 09-00:28:55
Rakosi: Borges, oh yes. Borges was probably the most remarkable writer that I've ever met, in the sense that he contained so much in his head. He remembered everything, and it came out chiselled in marble, as if he had worked on it painstakingly—a remarkable, remarkable man, very handsome too.
- 09-00:30:07
Bird: How did that meeting come about?
- 09-00:30:16
Rakosi: Oh, the Spanish department at the University of Wisconsin had invited him to talk to the faculty people there and the students, and I was writer in residence at the time. That must have been about 1969, '70. That was an interesting experience for me, in that the university is such a big place. You had sixty thousand students and nobody paid the slightest attention to me. I was supposed to be honored in some way, but nothing happened. They gave me work to do; I had a couple of classes.
- 09-00:31:24
Anyhow, he was there that year. They had a big banquet for him, and he came with his then-young wife, and she wanted me to meet him, because I was a poet, and not just a faculty member, so she sat me next to him. That was the strangest sensation, to sit next to a person who is totally blind, and you have to help him with the knives and forks, and tell him what's on the plate, that sort of thing, so we got very intimate, without my realizing it. We talked and got very intimate. You can do that quickly, in the right setting. Then, I described in my prose piece that he had to go to the bathroom and she couldn't take him, so she asked me to take him. All of a sudden, while we are there, he says to me, "My name is Borges," and I had been talking to him for an hour, and I said, "I know, I know. Everybody knows who Borges is," I said. [laughter] But he was very modest. Maybe as a blind man you are less aware of that sort of thing, but he was a world-class celebrity by that time. Everybody knew of him. There wasn't a place in any

country that didn't know about Borges. He had been translated already, everywhere. It was a great example of modesty.

09-00:34:26

Bird: Were you a fan of his work when you met him?

09-00:34:26

Rakosi: Oh sure. I had a great respect for his work. He reaches depths that you can't get to just straight on by analysis. There is a marvelous symbolism in his work, which is kind of a mystery in language—what, in poetry and prose exactly what symbolism is. Symbolism is not the same as allegory, not preaching a lesson, you are suggesting both mental and emotional things in symbolism. Some of the late nineteenth century Symbolist French painters I love. Symbolism is another element in poetry, of course. The Objectivists—this is kind of interesting: Zukofsky had a strong dislike for symbolism. I didn't feel that; I felt attracted to symbolism, but none of us practiced symbolism. We were too close to realism, and that was the most important to us. But symbolism is the kind of thing that never dies. There's always going to be some symbolism, because not everything can be explained and expressed in rational terms.

09-00:38:07

Bird: Do you think that symbols transcend time or do you think that there are new symbols for each era?

09-00:38:23

Rakosi: I think the way it works is that someone that feels this need to express this present in that way, and will do it well, and others will follow. So, for a while there is a group that practices it, sometimes it's called a fad, and then it goes away. But, poetry tends to be more analytical, to be the opposite of symbolism.

09-00:39:09

Bird: You mean contemporary poetry?

09-00:39:13

Rakosi: Yeah—than symbolism. Also, I think, as you run out of subject matter more and more, new subject matter—there's only, after all, a limit to how innovative each generation can become—your recourse is to become more and more analytical, which means more and more psychological. Of course, that's supported by the times which are scientific.

09-00:40:48

Bird: Do you think as subject matters have been used up that it is harder and harder to be original?

09-00:40:52

Rakosi: To be original, yeah. Circumstances in life change. There's always going to be original work, but there are limits. There are limits.

09-00:41:22

Bird: I was thinking of Jack Spicer saying that it is no longer possible to be original.

09-00:41:33

Rakosi: Did he say that?

09-00:41:29

Bird: Uh-huh.

09-00:41:32

Rakosi: That was stupid. [laughter] No, that's the kind of foolish statement that I've heard over the years. Would you believe it that in almost every generation, there's talk of, "Well that's the end of the novel. We've exhausted the real possibilities." Poetry has died a dozen times, "No more poetry." But, each generation comes up with new ideas. They have the creative impulse.

[phone rings; Marilyn answers the phone]

09-00:42:56

Rakosi: To get back to symbolism, that still has great possibilities in my opinion—almost limitless possibilities, perhaps because there is this mix of emotion and meaning that can take all kinds of forms. But, I don't see poetry moving in that direction now.

09-00:43:49

Bird: Because it's becoming more analytical?

09-00:43:57

Rakosi: Yeah. And if it's becoming more analytical, it means that you are becoming less emotional. So you would have to depend for your emotion on subject matter that is very sad, tragic subject matter. I'm encouraged about my own work, though, by the fact that young people, when they do have a chance to read it, get excited about it. I think because it is very accessible.

09-00:45:26

Bird: Do you think that it also has to do with—it seems like the shorter poem is becoming more and more rare in academia. Do you think? [laughs] That that might be one reason?

09-00:45:33

Rakosi: Yeah, I think so.

09-00:45:42

Bird: Also, it may be a way of explaining the fact that poems are dealing less and less with emotions. With longer poems there are—

09-00:45:55

Rakosi: Yeah, full of explanations, observations, observations of nature. You can be in nature, let's say one of the state parks or national parks, and you get a powerful, emotional experience just being there. But to convey that experience is awfully hard, because there has been so much description of nature already. Maybe a million books have been written, extolling it, describing it.

09-00:47:56

Bird: I'm wondering if when you start a poem, whether you think in terms of the image that you are trying to capture or does it come to you in a line? What is the kind of unit that you start with?

09-00:48:38

Rakosi: It comes initially as an idea, an idea of a possibility as a poem, some idea that could be a poem. It's never an image, no.

09-00:49:08

Bird: Would it be an experience? Are there times when you experience something and you think, "Oh, that's a poem."

09-00:49:15

Rakosi: It could be an actual experience, which would be the best source for a poem, of course. In fact, if you depart from using an actual experience for a poem to just thinking about what's happening in the world or something you would write in a book, you've already dropped to a much lower level of possibility for a poem. Then you have to make up something. It's done all the time, but it's not as authentic.

09-00:51:00

Bird: And when you took your break from poetry, was it hard to have the experiences you were having, and were there times when an experience would strike you as something that you needed to write a poem about, but you had to stop yourself?

09-00:51:19

Rakosi: Oh sure. There were endless times, when I was seeing clients and patients when I could have stopped and worked from experience, but once I had made up my mind that I couldn't swing it and do both, I suppressed that. If you suppress something long enough, it doesn't hit you again.

09-00:52:17

Bird: When that break was over—I noticed that in some of your poems you were writing about things that must have happened during the break, like about your children. I was wondering how you would get back to that experience, to write.

09-00:52:36

Rakosi: Well, that surprised me, that I could do it. It just happens. So, a human being apparently is able to do that. Things don't die in you that way—things that are important in your life—especially not in the early years. The mind tends to hold on longer to things.

09-00:53:14

Bird: In the early years of your life?

09-00:53:18

Rakosi: Yeah.

09-00:53:26

Bird: We haven't actually talked about coming back after your break to the poetry world.

09-00:53:36

Rakosi: Well, I wasn't going to come back to it. I was simply going to retire when I was sixty-five. I had no idea what I would be doing, but I wasn't worried about it. So, when this letter from Andrew Crozier came, all of a sudden, the possibility that I could write again came to me. Well, once I thought that it was possible, I couldn't wait to start doing it.

09-00:54:52

Bird: So, it was really Andrew's letter that got you to start doing it again.

09-00:55:10

Rakosi: I guess this means that a writer has to think that he can write before he'll do it. It takes a certain amount of boldness, aggressiveness, to write anything publicly. I've never been bold or aggressive in publishing my writing. I've been bold in other things, in other experiences, but not in writing. I always felt that the writing itself had to speak for itself. If it wasn't good enough, it wasn't good enough. I wasn't going to promote it. I still have that point of view.

09-00:57:12

Bird: When you say that you were never bold in writing, do you mean that kind of self-promotion, or that you don't think your poetry is bold?

09-00:57:20

Rakosi: In promotion, yeah. [laughter]

09-00:57:38

Bird: So, did you try to write again before you answered Andrew's letter?

09-00:58:42

Rakosi: I think I did. It immediately stirred things up in my mind. I was going to throw the envelope away unopened at first. I was not expecting a letter from an unknown Andrew Crozier. When I did, it took about an hour for the letter to sink in. I couldn't believe it. "Is this real? Is this guy real?"

09-00:58:55

Bird: How did Andrew find you? He was a scholar in England and a poet?

09-00:59:02

Rakosi: Yeah, he was a graduate student at the University of Buffalo, and he was studying with this American poet—a big fellow.

09-00:59:28

Bird: Jeremy Prynne?

09-00:59:36

Rakosi: No, no. He had been a student of Jeremy's at Cambridge. No, this professor in Buffalo, Charles Olsen, referred him to my work. It had affected him so much that he had copied every Rakosi poem in the university library that was in the magazines, and he told me in his letter that that's what he had done. That impressed me. It wasn't just that he knew my work. He had gone through all of that trouble to do it. Well, that meant that my work was pretty good. So, that gave me hope. "Man, I still have hope."

09-01:00:41

Bird: [laughs] Part of becoming a poet again was to start writing, and it seems that the other part for you would have to be to start reading again, because you didn't read during your break, did you?

09-01:00:52

Rakosi: No, not a thing. I thought that I had made that clear. If I had read at all, I couldn't have handled it. It would have thrown me into too much conflict. No, I didn't read anything. So, I didn't know anything about the Beats, for example. That whole period was out of my attention. So, when Allen called me—actually, Allen saw me first in Minneapolis. He wanted to meet me. That whole Beat phenomenon seemed very strange to me, because to a Marxist, what the Beats did made no sense. What were they fighting for? What were they after, except to dress up strangely and go on drugs, and to abuse your body? It made absolutely no sense, so I had a strange feeling meeting Allen for the first time. He was a very practical guy, actually.

09-01:02:46

Bird: A very practical guy?

09-01:02:47

Rakosi: Oh yeah.

09-01:02:49

Bird: In what way?

09-01:02:52

Rakosi: In every way. He saw poetry in a practical way. He was not only practical, he was smart in the way he organized his personal life, and we became good friends, very good friends. I think I told you what happened at Naropa one summer. It's funny. I had to take a car back to the college for a class, but the car was full, so Allen says, "I want Carl to sit on my lap." [laughter] No way was I going to sit on Allen's lap. That was out. I had to hitch a ride with somebody else.

09-01:04:26

Bird: Was he insulted?

09-01:04:28

Rakosi: No, no.

09-01:04:34

Bird: Other than the Beats, there was also the Black Mountain School and [Charles] Olson's work.

09-01:04:45

Rakosi: Well, you know, I met many poets in New York afterwards at readings at the St. Marks [Poetry Project]. But we didn't become friends, particularly. Other contemporary poets have really not had the slightest influence on me as I see it, not the slightest. Now, this may be true of other poets, too. Poets tend to be independent. The one poet who did have this big influence on me is [Wallace] Stevens. I had to really get him out of my system.

09-01:05:57

Bird: So that you wouldn't be imitating. I know you were saying that poets didn't influence you, but when you became a poet again, did you have a strategy for figuring out what the poetry world was all about in the late sixties?

09-01:06:24

Rakosi: Well, I suppose that I was figuring it out, but what difference does it make? I had my own agenda. It's dangerous to let yourself be influenced in your thinking and in your poetry by other contemporary poets. I suppose to some extent you can't help it, because you and the other poets are all subject to the forces that are playing at the time. But that doesn't mean that one influences the other. Of course that's a part of academic effort, I suppose, to find out how one influences the other, but I don't know whether—it doesn't mean much to a practicing poet, it doesn't matter. If you are like [Robert] Duncan, Duncan says, "Everybody influenced me." He meant it.

09-01:08:34

Bird: Which is almost the same as, "No one influenced me." Do you remember the first book of poetry you picked up was after the break, the first one that you read?

09-01:09:00

Rakosi: I think it may have been this poet whose name I couldn't remember—can you stop for a minute? This might be it—[tape pauses] It's Charles Olson.

09-01:09:21

Bird: Okay, that was the first book you read after you took your break, or one of the first?

09-01:09:27

Rakosi: No, I don't know which the first one was, but I read like crazy after that. I wanted to catch up. I read *BlackBird*, I read [Cid] Corman, I read everything I could lay my hands on.

09-01:09:45

Bird: Now, Olson's "Projective Verse" is something that everyone knows, and it gets taught all of the time. What do you think about that?

09-01:09:55

Rakosi: Well, I don't think well of any theory. It's all right. If they want to play around with that, but I think that as soon as you do that, you become academic, and I've never been academic, and I have no interest in being academic, and I don't think that it serves anything but as intellectual exercise for students. It does nothing for the creative poet, theory. You have to have good critical ideas like Pound, because you have to know what is good and what isn't—but short of that, it's every man going his own way. What, by the way, is the projective theory?

09-01:11:34

Bird: I found it helpful in understanding *Howl* by Allen Ginsberg. Olson talks a lot about the energy that's communicated by the poem, the kinetics of the poem. Even the essay itself is poetic in its energy.

09-01:11:56

Rakosi: Yeah, that's true. I read it. I think that he writes good poetry, interesting poetry. On one of my reading tours in England an English professor asked me, "What do you think of Olson?" I didn't know what to answer, because there was obviously a big fad for Olson in England, so, anything that I would have said would have disappointed him. But Olson's worth reading.

09-01:13:13

Bird: Did you ever meet Olson?

09-01:13:15

Rakosi: No, I never did. The little college that he ran for a little while in North Carolina [Black Mountain College] was very useful and necessary perhaps to bring out certain poets and painters. He released people's energies, students' energies. He was a good influence.

09-01:14:07

Bird: I know that [Robert] Creeley and [Ed] Dorn went there. Did Duncan go there as well?

09-01:14:19

Rakosi: Yeah, Duncan was there.

09-01:14:28

Bird: Do you think that that project was comparable to Naropa?

09-01:14:30

Rakosi: It was probably more radical than Naropa and more energetic than Naropa. I was looking over the poetry in my library in order to find Olson, and it was astonishing; so many of the poets there, I had immediately gravitated towards after I started to write again, eager to read them, to know what had been going on in the meantime.

09-01:15:34

Bird: What about something like in 1960, that New American, Donald Allen's anthology?

09-01:15:44

Rakosi: Well, that came a little too early for me. Duncan was in there. I thought it was good; it was interesting.

09-01:16:08

Bird: I was wondering about that, because it did seem like the time period that you were taking your break seemed to be such a dynamic time in the history of poetry, looking back on it. But it was also the time of McCarthyism and a kind of conservative atmosphere—in the fifties at least—that it seemed like it would be a stifling time.

09-01:16:33

Rakosi: Oh, McCarthy never stifled writers. Writers bloom under that kind of an attack from the right, by fanatics. I never had any personal experience with McCarthy, but I remember vividly the developments in that famous case when Eisenhower was president. McCarthy had built up an invincible political support around his un-Americanism. Now the Bush people are beginning to pull out that card again. It is unpatriotic if you criticize. The press went along and created an atmosphere where you could lose your livelihood if you were critical of the government. You would be accused of being a Communist. The mood of the country at that time was so—I'm trying to find the word for it—is it American? Is it a kind of jingoism? Eisenhower didn't speak up against this trend. Eisenhower was a very, very popular president. He was a former general. You would expect him to speak up.

09-01:19:16

Bird: Against McCarthy, you mean?

09-01:19:23

Rakosi: Yeah, not a word. We leftists realized that he was cowed by McCarthy. McCarthy got away with situation after situation, destroying people's reputations and their means of livelihood, until one day he attacked a young man from Boston who—let me try to think of the exact circumstances now—he was really an apolitical kind of a guy, but apparently he had a friend or maybe two friends who were not Communists exactly, but liberal. If you were liberal, you were a Communist in McCarthy's mind.

His attorney was Joseph N. Welch, a special counsel for the army and a member of the top legal firm in Boston. He looked and acted like a real Boston aristocrat, very prim and courteous, and spoke in very measured tones. I don't know whether there are any such men anymore. His elegance was in stark contrast to McCarthy's bullish appearance. Nobody could accuse this man of being un-American. The whole country was watching his hearing the way people are drawn to an execution. McCarthy kept badgering the witness with the same questions over and over, in an accusatory tone, "Are you, or were you, ever a member of the Communist party? And what was the nature of your association with this friend?" Et cetera, on and on. Finally it became too much even for this gentlemanly attorney, and he said, "Sir, have you no sense of shame?" There was dead silence for a minute. Would he be cited for contempt? But, as you know he wasn't. I can tell you the whole country went crazy with relief. Finally somebody had dared to face up to this guy. It was a historic moment because that was the end of his political power. He was through after that, finished.

09-01:23:16

Bird: I understand what you mean when you say that writers tend to flourish at times of oppression, or times when that kind of thing is happening, but I'm thinking of the ruined careers that resulted from McCarthy and even in Oppen's case—from my understanding, he and Mary went to Mexico after being harassed quite a bit by the FBI, and they got their passports revoked at that time. Fearing was also called up in front of the house committee.

09-01:23:58

Rakosi: Yeah, but it had no effect on their work. George didn't stop writing because of going to Mexico, no. Mexico would have been a good place for him to write, actually. I had practical reasons for stopping, as well as my psychological involvement with the Communists, in my head, I couldn't believe that they were all bad guys. I assumed that there must be something wrong with me too, not to be able to write Marxist poetry. I notice that Hobsbawm, the British historian, changed as soon as Stalin made a pact with Hitler. I still didn't change at that time. I thought, "Well, there must be a good reason for this pact." So, it took me a long time to disabuse myself.

09-01:25:49

Bird: When all of the information came out about what Stalin had been doing, I think it was in 1956 or so, was that shocking to you?

09-01:26:01

Rakosi: Yeah, he invaded Hungary and put down a revolt against the Communists there. It did shock me, but I still continued to hold on to communism as an ideal. Like Hobsbawm, I felt it was being perverted by the people who were leading it. But anyhow, communism is still not dead. I notice in Brazil, the leading candidate now is a Communist. As soon

as capitalism looks as if it is not going to work, that it's going to hurt too many people, you get Communists.

09-01:27:34

Bird: Did you have any association with the people around the *Partisan Review*?

09-01:27:49

Rakosi: No, they were a snooty bunch. Fearing did have a connection there. I never did, no. I wasn't in New York at the time, anyhow.

09-01:28:06

Bird: They were more Trotskyites?

09-01:28:10

Rakosi: Yeah, I think so.

09-01:28:10

Bird: But you were more firmly Communist?

09-01:28:17

Rakosi: Yeah, although Trotsky was a very attractive figure to me. He had written a history of the Russian Revolution, which was really a beauty of a work. His idea was that the state should not try to force the writers of the country—do the job of explaining communism to people and promoting it, and beautifying it, and so on, but that writers should be allowed to go their own way. Stalinists never went for that. So, Trotsky was an admirable guy to me. The Trotskyites in this country were intellectuals, very smart, very bright. They were actually brighter than the other Communists.

09-01:29:56

Bird: Why do you think that is?

09-01:30:00

Rakosi: I don't know.

09-01:30:06

Bird: They were very anti-Stalin, because the project was different.

09-01:30:14

Rakosi: Yes, their aims differed. Trotsky envisioned an international communism, Stalin, a national one. You know that Stalin had Trotsky killed in Mexico. Horrible kind of an assassination. Well, the political left has always had this problem. It splits up, between the moderates, the Mensheviks and socialists, and the Bolsheviks, who are the most extreme. Well, you had that in Russia. The two were more hostile to each other than they were to the Czarist regime. They were out to destroy each other. Of course, if you have that kind of acrimonious division, the conservatives can stay in power.

09-01:31:42

Bird: Do you think that is still the case now? The infighting on the left?

09-01:31:50

Rakosi: There is no left any more. [Bird laughs] There's not only no left any more, there's almost no union movement anymore.

09-01:32:02

Bird: Well, the docks are all—well, they are all locked out of the docks. At least the longshoremen.

09-01:32:11

Rakosi: The longshoremen union is still a strong union, sure. There are a few strong ones. The big ones now, since we don't do much manufacturing anymore, are the service unions.

09-01:32:24

Bird: One thing I wanted to ask you about also: it is interesting that you completed the decade of the thirties as a poet, and then became a poet again in the late sixties. At that time, there was a lot of renewed interest in the Objectivists. Do you think that it was a similar time period to the thirties that the Objectivist poets seemed particularly appropriate, or why do you think that they were picked up again in the sixties?

09-01:33:11

Rakosi: I think because they had quite a bit of influence on the poets of the sixties. Poets like Eliot, Pound, and Cummings were already established, but the Objectivists were talking about a reality that was more relevant to the sixties. There was a need for poetry to be more realistic. The Beat poets were influenced by that. I think that's it. The Language Poets started out being impenetrable and wound up being perfectly realistic. Their early work is just a blip on the horizon. Other than that, the Objectivist poets wrote well enough to exert an influence on successive generations.

09-01:36:35

Bird: You don't think that the specific time period of the sixties would find the Objectivists interesting because of the political commitments of you and Oppen?

09-01:36:52

Rakosi: No, no no no, it's the quality of the writing, I think, and the realism of the subject matter. None of the Beats were Communists. Allen Ginsberg's mother was a Communist, not his father. So, it's not a political influence, no. The Beats didn't have a political purpose, as I understand it. They thought they did. They were going to change the lifestyle, which is a totally different thing.

09-01:37:59

Bird: Or not conforming, I guess.

09-01:38:02

Rakosi: Yeah, but if you are not conforming, what are you doing? You have a different lifestyle. That's the weakness, it seems to me, of Beatnik writing.

09-01:38:28

Bird: It's that they didn't have a valid plan?

09-01:38:33

Rakosi: They didn't have a social purpose in their writing. They were using their imagination to invent different lifestyles, which is existential, but it's not deeply existential, not deeply enough; it's not philosophical in any way. Allen, some of his poetry does have a social protest, and then it is strong, but poetry can go in many different ways.

09-01:39:59

Bird: Do you think that during the sixties that your personal political commitments were in line with the movements of the sixties?

09-01:40:10

Rakosi: Let's see, the sixties.

09-01:40:11

Bird: The civil rights movement and the antiwar movement.

09-01:40:25

Rakosi: Oh yeah. Let me go back to 1945—no, even earlier. I left New York in 1940 to work in St. Louis. There I met wonderfully liberal people. We had fun together. We organized square dances. We had a great time. Some of them were writers, some of them were artists. As a matter of fact, I have several paintings in my study by them. They weren't working-class people; they were middle-class people, but they had the plight of the poor and working class on their mind. So, there was wonderful activity going on in Saint Louis, when I was there.

09-01:41:56

Bird: So through discussions and getting together, was there any kind of activism with that group?

09-01:42:09

Rakosi: I think there was—lots of petitions, marches. I have a very pleasant memory of the people there. I like St. Louis very much. By the time I got to Cleveland in 1943, I wasn't involved at all in any political stuff. In Minneapolis, which was my last position for twenty years, I couldn't be. I was the director of a social agency. You just didn't do it for fear of hurting it. It was interesting though, this is the Jewish Family and Children's Service—half of the board members were very liberal, I mean very liberal. I got into trouble, however, because I signed a petition, along with half of my board members, in support of Henry Wallace, who was a candidate of the left at that time. I lost a job that I really wanted in Baltimore because of that. They were all set to hire me, but then they sent a couple of their board members down to interview people in Minneapolis to get more information about me, and the director of the Jewish federation that raised money for our agency happened to mention that I had signed the petition for Wallace. That did it. I never got the job. My life would have been altogether different if I had moved to Baltimore.

09-01:45:07

Bird: Do you think that if any of those people knew that you had been a Communist at some point—?

09-01:45:11

Rakosi: No.

09-01:45:11

Bird: They didn't know?

09-01:45:11

Rakosi: Oh, no.

09-01:45:13

Bird: What if they had known?

09-01:45:17

Rakosi: I wouldn't have gotten the job in Minneapolis, either.

09-01:45:39

Bird: I was thinking about your comment about the Beats not having a social purpose, because they were more focused on lifestyle, and a lot of what was going on in the sixties had to do with not conforming and with creating this alternative lifestyle.

09-01:45:45

Rakosi: Yeah.

09-01:45:46

Bird: Was that any different, do you think, than the Beats? How did that strike you at the time?

09-01:45:56

Rakosi: I don't know enough about the Beats to say. I can't say. I don't know. People now are rebelling against the worst aspects of capitalism. The environmental movement in this country, for example, is really surprisingly strong. That's kind of taken the heat out of political action. And the number-one issue before the country now is health care. Everybody sees that as a basic issue no matter who you are. So, issues shift around, and people put their opposition into different issues at different times in the history of a country, but there is always some cause to fight for. It really is inexcusable that we don't have proportional representation in this country. It makes it impossible for a third party to get anywhere, so they in effect are shut out since both parties have now moved to the center, in effect we have only one political party. It's ironic that Germany is better at this than we, because the Green party there does have representation in the government.

09-01:49:09

Bird: When we were talking about Israel a few weeks ago, you had talked about it as a great idea that went wrong under bad leadership. I was thinking later, I would wonder what you would say about democracy in this country, and how you have seen it go through many different stages, and whether you think that it has evolved or devolved.

09-01:49:46

Rakosi: Well, democracy in this country—we're talking about political democracy now, not social democracy, because socially we do have it. But in politics there are so many ways to influence people's minds that depend on money to finance campaigns. I don't think that we really have political democracy in this country, because the monied interests are able to influence people's minds too much. We have the pretense of it. We make a big deal about it, that this is a great political democracy, but as long as money determines who is going to be our political leaders, there can be no political democracy. There's another reason why it is not a political democracy, which is kind of interesting. I just learned this rather recently, and it's in the Constitution. The state of New Hampshire or Delaware, let's say, a few hundred thousand people have two senators. The state of California with 34,000,000 people also have only two senators. That's not democratic. It is really rooted in the Constitution.

09-01:52:40

Bird: Do you think that there is a time that you have experienced where there was more of a democracy than there is now? Has it changed?

09-01:52:50

Rakosi: No, it's just become much more deceptive in recent years, but it is surprising—the American people are not stupid—how many people realize this, but put up with it.

09-01:53:25

Bird: Okay, we can probably stop there.

[end of session]

[Interview #10: October 14, 2002]

[Begin Audio File Rakosi 10 10-14-02]

10-00:00:00

Bird: How are you doing today, Carl?

10-00:00:07

Rakosi: Pretty good.

10-00:00:10

Bird: It's real live San Francisco weather today.

10-00:00:14

Rakosi: Yeah, we could use a little bit more sun.

10-00:00:20

Bird: So, you have some things that you want to start.

10-00:00:26

Rakosi: Yeah, well, you know my birthday is coming up. It's rather funny. Some things have happened around my age that illustrate people's attitude about old age. Some of them are delightful, actually. I remember a couple of years ago, I was in the dentist's office. All of the employees were Chinese girls, young women. I get seated in the dentist chair and one of the young women examines my chart and all of the sudden she lets out a shriek and all of the other girls come rushing, and she says, pointing to my sheet, to my birthdate, and pointing at me. That was really funny. In China, apparently, old age is greatly revered, because another time, another experience I had getting x-rayed. The technician was Chinese too, and he looks at my age and he says, "Oh, in China you would be a great person." But the most delightful incident occurred in Ireland. It was so unexpected. I was passing through immigration. I had flown over from England, and a middle-aged man was inspecting my passport, and all of the other people were passing through quickly from England, and he keeps holding on to my passport just looking at it, looking at me. So, for a moment I thought, "Am I going to have trouble here? What in the world is happening?" Finally he looks up at me and he points to my passport, the date of birth. So, immediately I knew what was in his mind, so, "Oh yes," I said, "that is correct." So, he says to me, "Congratulations, Mr. Rawley," and passed me through. I've never forgotten that. It was the most gracious, delightful entry into another country.

10-00:04:10

Bird: If in China older people are revered, do you think you get that at all here?

10-00:04:21

Rakosi: Oh, no. On the contrary, the older you get, the more you are ignored. It's the opposite. To illustrate that: I had a strange experience. I was on the board of directors of the Senior Wing of the Jewish Community Center. Issues came up occasionally that had to do with social work. Well, I was an expert on social work. I had forty-five years of experience in it, so you think they'd want my advice. I made certain suggestions. They were polite but they were totally ignored. I could see that they thought, "Okay, we'll let him talk, but he can't know what is good for the organization. He's too old. He comes from another old, old generation." No, it is the very opposite here. Now, it is interesting,

on the street it's different. Also, there is a big difference between the way young women look at me and greet me and the way men do. Men tend to more or less ignore me. Young women don't. They smile, they take me inside them; the men don't. It's American culture. It's the aggressive macho Anglo-Saxon of the male, I suppose.

10-00:07:23

Bird: And the fact that women are better, of course?

10-00:07:31

Rakosi: [laughter] They still are, yeah. Now, if I'm in the social company with just men, that's different. There, everybody is out for a good time, and they don't make that kind of distinction, but when it comes to decision making, policy making—this is for people in their forties and fifties.

10-00:08:13

Bird: What about in poetry circles? What about young poets?

10-00:08:19

Rakosi: No, it doesn't happen in the arts, nowhere in the arts. I suspect this is so in England, but I'm not sure. It's not so in the rest of Europe.

10-00:08:50

Bird: That they would treat you differently as an older person?

10-00:08:56

Rakosi: Yeah.

10-00:08:55

Bird: In Europe that wouldn't happen, you are saying?

10-00:08:58

Rakosi: In most of Europe, yeah. I'm not sure about England. Ours is such an aggressive country. Thank God it doesn't happen in any of the arts. The older I get, the more I respect the arts. I've always had great respect for the other artists, but not poets. I've been reluctant to give poets the high regard I know other poets have given them. I've always felt that it's a form of self-congratulation.

10-00:10:24

Bird: It also seems that since way back, there has been that tradition of seeing poets as the visionary, or Shelley's "unacknowledged legislator of the world."

10-00:10:44

Rakosi: Who holds that view? Other poets. Not the actual legislators of the country. Poets and artists have always been poor; society has never rewarded them in what matters, in their livelihoods. They've had to scramble like the devil. Sometimes they couldn't make it, and they had to choose between a livelihood and their poetry. They had to choose a livelihood. So, there's a lot of double talk and hypocrisy there. In fact, right now, unless a poet goes into teaching, I don't see how in the world he could make a living. Some of them, who haven't had to, have come from rich families. Sometimes I was reading in the *London Review of Books* about an English poet who is my contemporary, George Barker, whose first book appealed to me. I thought it was unusual, and actually T.S. Eliot thought so too, and published him in the *Criterion*, but I noticed he managed to

live by marrying women who had money. He married four or five different women, had fifteen children by all with different women. Now you can say he had a fairly easy life. He was a very good-looking man, apparently. So, it's still the case. If you go back far enough in English literature, poets had to have a sponsor, some lord who also had some literary interest or who wanted the flattery which comes with the dedication of a book, that sort of thing. It's tough for people in the arts, really. It doesn't altogether mean that it's bad for the arts. It is not good for an artist to be comfortable in his circumstances, to have nothing to think about but his work. He has to be out in the world with people struggling.

10-00:15:03

Bird: So, it wouldn't actually be a very good utopian vision of having artists fully funded as an important part of society?

10-00:15:16

Rakosi: Well, if they all were funded and didn't have anything to do but write and get paid? I know it wouldn't be good for poets who have to have different kinds of life experience. For the painter and sculptor, it could be good. I don't know. In music, does a composer need all kinds of experience? Of course, problems come along in life, just in the normal course of events. I don't know. But, I do know that it is helpful to have artists subsidized to some extent. But, in any case, artists, writers and composers will do what they feel they must do regardless.

10-00:17:24

Bird: You mentioned in an earlier session that you've come to think of the arts as a really important part of your life. I wonder if you could explain that a little bit more, and talk about exactly what role you think that art plays at least in U.S. society, or could play?

10-00:17:51

Rakosi: Well, what they do play, and what they could or should play are three different things. The artist has a certain sensibility, which is the thing that draws a young person into the arts in the first place. He has the sensibility and the sensitivity, and a poet and a writer first becomes aware of this in his reading. He sees exemplars, great exemplars from the past, and then along the way, he begins to, for some reason, from experience with a teacher, or simply it could come from just reading, that he too has this talent, and then he goes into it. The composer has a different process. Or maybe it's not so different. He immediately goes into music instruction. He has to play an instrument of some kind. He can't be a composer without learning to play an instrument. He learns the craft immediately, and he begins to experiment himself with things. In painting and sculpture, I think something different takes place in that you can be a great painter without having gone to a school of any kind. I think so. So, the arts may be different in the way a person becomes an artist or writer. What was your original question?

10-00:21:09

Bird: What role do you see the arts playing in the life in a community or a nation?

10-00:21:25

Rakosi: I would say that poetry plays no role in society, none. The other arts play something of a role—painting and sculpture, because they go public. They go into museums, and since very little, almost nothing, is required of a person to look at a painting and like it or not, museums have become very popular. I think I told you that the [director of the] Museum

of Modern Art in New York made this comment, that more people go to art museums in this country than to athletic events, which astonished me, but I assume he has the figures. Now, composers similarly, because concerts are public events. People go to an opera, who may not be crazy about the music, but it is a big show, a great spectacle. People dress up in their best outfits, especially women. Again, you don't need any education to love music, but to love poetry, you do, because it uses language, and there are all kinds of references in it. There's a lot of basic stuff you have to know, and you have to want to learn it in the first place, and that limits it from the start.

10-00:24:03

Bird: Do you think that in the case of symphonies, operas, and art museums that, at least in this country, the role they play is as entertainment, or as some way to spend a Sunday afternoon?

10-00:24:21

Rakosi: Well, yes, but it's more than that, because art museums are educating places too. You get educated along the way. It's an easy way to get educated. Children love art museums.

10-00:24:44

Bird: I know I've asked you about aesthetic theory and you weren't very interested in that, but I'm wondering if you think about the aesthetic. I think that Rank has written about the aesthetic as a faculty, a different mode of thinking than an analytic mode or other modes of thinking, and I'm wondering if you think about the aesthetic as a different operation in the mind?

10-00:25:15

Rakosi: I do indeed, absolutely. I'm sure of it. It's a specific faculty. It's not to be confused with intellectual faculties. I was convinced of that before I read Rank. It's interesting that he started out as a poet, so I suppose we arrived at it for the same reason.

10-00:26:13

Bird: Do you think then that the arts—this sounds grandiose—what can you find out about a society by looking at its art, if it carries the consciousness of a society?

10-00:26:36

Rakosi: Well, you can tell a great deal about the culture and the mores of a society, yes. Now, the great advantage of the arts, and it has a great advantage, which the rest of society does not have, and that is, it's not doing it for money. It's not doing it for any reason other than the art itself. That's a tremendous advantage. It allows you to be totally free and honest and bold, which other human beings are not able to be, simply because when you are working some place you can't have that kind of freedom. So, things come out as a result in the arts, which never come out anywhere else. That's why in a mercantile society, they pretend to have the arts in mind, pretend they care for the arts, and do a few little things to convince themselves that they are doing it, none of their priorities are in the arts, none whatever. In a mercantile society they come last, in fact, very last. Now, what would happen if the arts came first? Well, it's impossible.

10-00:29:38

Bird: Now, you got at least two grants from the National Endowments for the Arts. I know there was 1969 and 1973.

10-00:29:48

Rakosi: Yeah, I think I got—

10-00:29:53

Bird: Three. 1979 also.

10-00:29:58

Rakosi: Well that didn't mean anything to me except the honor. The amount of money was nothing. I got a significant amount of money once, however, from some source, but I never knew or could find out from whom. I almost threw the check away. There was no name or address on the envelope. My wife said, "Well, open the envelope." I opened the envelope and there was a check for \$5,000. That was a significant amount for me then. There was a name on the check. I've forgotten the name. It was a name that sounded like an organization, but I never heard of it. I asked Allen Ginsberg one day. I told him about it, because I thought that it might have come from him. Allen was very generous. No, he thought it came from another writer whom I had never met, who is still alive. I've forgotten his name. The name he gave was a guy who occasionally writes poetry, but who's written scripts for musical comedies, that sort of thing, so he's done well financially. It's still a mystery. The person simply didn't want to be identified.

10-00:32:34

Bird: That's as much as one of the National Endowment of the Arts grants.

10-00:32:38

Rakosi: It was more, I think.

10-00:32:41

Bird: That's nice.

10-00:32:47

Rakosi: The national grants I got were not that much—\$5,000—the early ones.

10-00:32:54

Bird: The '79 one, I think was \$10,000, was that right?

10-00:33:01

Rakosi: No, I never got \$10,000.

10-00:33:03

Bird: Really, I thought that I read that in your archive, as an arts creative writing fellowship grant.

10-00:33:12

Rakosi: No, I never got that much. The poet in this country marvels at the situation in Russia, where you would get an audience of five thousand, ten thousand people who would be as interested in the poetry and the person reading, the poet himself, as in a symphony concert. They would get as much applause as at the concert. That's what seems to have happened in Russia. Well, in this country you just marvel at such a thing.

10-00:34:18

Bird: What do you think was the biggest audience you've ever had at a reading?

- 10-00:34:33
Rakosi: Probably a couple of hundred. A hundred would be about usual size.
- 10-00:34:58
Bird: I was thinking, last time we ended talking a little bit about the sixties and the movements of the sixties, and I know that you read at a peace rally that Robert Bly organized.
- 10-00:35:16
Rakosi: Oh yes.
- 10-00:35:17
Bird: Now, that was for a much bigger audience, but that was for a whole group of poets, right?
- 10-00:35:25
Rakosi: Yes, but that had a social purpose. We were protesting the Vietnam War, so people turned out for that reason.
- 10-00:35:40
Bird: It was like 2,000 people.
- 10-00:35:40
Rakosi: Oh yeah, a big audience.
- 10-00:35:45
Bird: Was that your first reading, your first public reading of poetry?
- 10-00:35:59
Rakosi: No, but the whole—that scene is changing with the Internet, though. It's becoming, of course, depersonalized. It takes that kind of an extension to get big audiences, so that's the price you would pay for extending it that much, it seems to me. But, I don't know. I'll find out a little bit about that next month, when I go on the Internet myself. I have visions of somebody calling from Finland. Impossible. [laughter]
- 10-00:37:27
Bird: Do you think the web site will have an address for people to write to you, or maybe an email address?
- 10-00:37:36
Rakosi: I think so. Tom [Devaney] hasn't given me the specific instructions. But talking about young poets, I do want to talk about this a little. The other day, I think three days ago, this letter, he dates it October 5, from somebody called Joseph [Massey] in Eureka. It says, "Dear Mr. Rakosi, I'm twenty-four and have been reading your work since the age of sixteen. I love it. You'll find a copy of my chapbook, enclosed with this note. It's my first book of any sort. Looking forward to your University of Pennsylvania interview. I'll be tuning in by way of computer."

{The Kelly Writers' House at the University of Pennsylvania webcast a conversation with Carl Rakosi on October 30, 2002. He participated by telephone from his home in San Francisco. A recording is available at:

<http://www.english.upenn.edu/~wh/Rakosi.html>}

I was making the comment at one time that American poetry has become more journalistic, much more journalistic. Well, this little chapbook, he's twenty-four years old, is full of delightful, really tiny poems. He has an ear for the epigrammatic. It's a question of what makes the very short poem work, when it works. Looking at his work and my own, it's being able to identify the particular that is also universal, and then stopping there, stopping with the particular. You don't go on into a universal. The particular itself has to be the universal for the short form to work. Very few people can do that; he does it. He's going to make it. It's amazing how short you can get and still say a lot. Believe it or not, I don't know where I picked it up, I have a strange little anthology, a little booklet. Every single poem in there is one line only. You wouldn't think that was possible that just a single line would be both a particular and a universal. It is possible.

10-00:42:02

Bird: Is it an anthology of many poets?

10-00:42:05

Rakosi: Yeah, different poets have been able to do it. But, that is not the direction in which poetry is moving. He has good skill there. I don't know what he is doing up in Eureka. He's probably trying to make a living.

10-00:42:30

Bird: Do you answer when people write to you and give you their books?

10-00:42:31

Rakosi: Oh, sure, you have to answer. He expects me to answer. But, I've gotten some things from young poets whose work I didn't like, but you still have to answer.

10-00:43:04

Bird: Are you honest? Do you tell them when you don't like it?

10-00:43:11

Rakosi: No, why would I? I don't want to destroy them.

10-00:43:17

Bird: I wanted to ask you also about—you were talking about the epigrammatic style of writing, and that also seems to be the style of a lot of prose that you've written.

10-00:43:36

Rakosi: Yeah, well, it works great in prose. There's a whole genre of epigrammatic prose, of course. The French are great at it. Eighteenth-century French writers were very good at it. The English, not so much. It seems to go with the French language itself, which places a high value on clarity.

10-00:44:22

Bird: It strikes me that what your prose does is very similar to what your poetry does, and it seems to blur the line a little bit, between prose and poetry.

10-00:44:35

Rakosi: It's true.

- 10-00:44:37
Bird: Do you think that they are very different? How do you describe the distinction between the two?
- 10-00:44:48
Rakosi: Well, I have written a number of aphorisms. Are you referring to the aphorism? The aphorism is a distinct genre. It's a genre in prose. What is the difference? One difference is that epigrammatic form in poetry still has to be constructed. You have to have a beginning, a middle, and an end. An aphorism in prose is just a straight line, it doesn't require a form. It is simply the spoken language.
- 10-00:46:14
Bird: In your collected prose, in the preface to that, you give a disclaimer that this isn't your normal thing to write prose, that you are usually a poet. Did you feel reluctant publishing a collected prose?
- 10-00:46:34
Rakosi: Oh, no, I was glad that I had enough to publish.
- 10-00:46:48
Bird: It's interesting, it seems in your later books that more and more you are including poetry and prose in the same—
- 10-00:46:56
Rakosi: Yeah, and I'm going to do that in the book I'm going to bring out next, which would be selected and new—new work, which would be both poetry and prose.
- 10-00:47:18
Bird: Would Etruscan, would they bring that out?
- 10-00:47:20
Rakosi: What?
- 10-00:47:21
Bird: Would the, I think that it is Etruscan, is that the publisher in England?
- 10-00:47:26
Rakosi: Oh, no, he went broke. Etruscan [Books]. He piled up a debt of 15,000 pounds with the printer, and he just had to stop, give up publishing entirely. He's back at the university studying to be a teacher. He was a poet himself, a pretty good one.
- 10-00:48:08
Bird: I noticed they published *Earth Suite* for you, but also *The Old Poet's Tale*, right? On the back of *The Old Poet's Tale*, it says collected poems volume one. Was there supposed to be a volume two?
- 10-00:48:25
Rakosi: Yeah, there was, sure.
- 10-00:48:27
Bird: But there wasn't one?

- 10-00:48:31
Rakosi: No, there is not going to be one.
- 10-00:48:36
Bird: That's interesting that you have two collected volumes. You have the National Poetry Foundation one and the Etruscan one.
- 10-00:48:48
Rakosi: Well, the National Poetry Foundation one is just far from being complete.
- 10-00:49:09
Bird: Because you have been writing so much since then?
- 10-00:49:12
Rakosi: Writing some, yeah.
- 10-00:49:25
Bird: I was wondering how you made the decision to not—it seems that most poets do their collected volumes in a chronological order, and yours is definitely not in chronological order.
- 10-00:49:47
Rakosi: Well, I've been criticized for that, by critics, because to critics, critics like to trace a development of some kind in a poet, and sometimes an undevelopment, a straying of some kind, but that has been of no interest to me, and I don't think would be to any creative artist. But, I can imagine if you are teaching a course, it is convenient to say that this is his early work, that he's changed this way and become this, and so on. It becomes a scheme. I don't think that life actually moves that way, however, or at least, the poet is not aware of that kind of movement. So much depends anyhow on circumstance in a poet's life, which is unplanned. There's too much there that is unpredictable and unknowable, really.
- 10-00:51:51
Bird: In the poet's personal life?
- 10-00:51:55
Rakosi: No, in the development of his poetry, and what he writes. For example, a person, let's say in his sixties, develops cancer. All at once, his whole life changes. All he can think of is this new reality in his life. He expresses that. There's no development there. So, that's an artificial kind of thing that critics and teachers like to have in a classroom, and I understand that, but I'm not interested.
- 10-00:53:30
Bird: But what about the relation the historical moment plays in the writing of that poem? Do you think that there is a relationship between specific poems and the historical context?
- 10-00:53:53
Rakosi: Do you mean what is happening at the time?
- 10-00:53:56
Bird: Right.

10-00:53:57

Rakosi: Oh, absolutely.

10-00:53:58

Bird: So, if we put your sixties, seventies poems together, that tells something about life at that time?

10-00:54:06

Rakosi: I think so. There's no question about that. During the Vietnam War, for example, some of my best poems came from there, because people were going through that miserable experience, and I was involved in fighting it. It woke up my imagination, I'm sure. Historic events will start up a poet's imagination. One of my poems has to do with Portugal. I was never in Portugal, but I was deeply interested in the overthrow of the oppressive regime in Portugal at that time, and the soldiers marching in with roses on their bayonets was a wonderful sight. Oh sure, but not every poet has that kind of interest.

10-00:56:21

Bird: When you say that the Vietnam War awakened your imagination—I'm thinking of Denise Levertov, and her work and her idea of the "poet in the world," and that there is a certain responsibility that goes with being a poet, and I'm wondering if there was any sense of that during that time, that maybe that was a historically specific time that the country needed its poets.

10-00:56:53

Rakosi: I got into a bitter argument with her, by the way, about that idea. I didn't like it that the poets have a responsibility to—and all that. Responsibility to whom? The idea wasn't phony to her, but it would have been to me. Phony on the moral perspective on political issues, social problems. We were both at Yaddo [artists' community] a couple of times, actually. The two of us were surrounded by some other, younger, I think they were poets, but I'm not sure. They were artists of some kind. She started to lecture me on the responsibility of the poet. "Oh my God, what the hell are you talking about?" I thought. "I was a Communist. Where the hell were you?" I didn't say that to her, of course. We started out as very good friends, and I do like her work; I'm not damning her work. I can understand where this up-front moral sense of responsibility comes from. I think it came from her mother who was a Christian evangelist. Her father had been a rabbinical student. Her father was a Russian Jew, apparently a very bright rabbinical student in Russia. He went to Germany to study philosophy. Actually, by that time, he was a rabbi I think. He went there to study philosophy and he became a converted Christian and married this English woman who was a kind of evangelist. He was a minister in England for a while, and then in Switzerland, I think. Denise had a great deal of respect for her father. I never met him. I met her mother in Oaxaca, in Mexico. My wife and I visited her a couple of times. She was a pleasant woman. We'd meet in a narrow living room. There was an enormous picture of Jesus on the cross on one wall. I kept looking at that when I was talking to her. [laughs] She was pleasant. Any person can have many different qualities. Even a religious evangelist can have a good sense of humor.

10-01:02:32

Bird: I'm wondering, thinking about your resistance to Levertov's idea of "poet in the world," what would make you then read at an anti-war rally? Do you think that it had some effect, or what the purpose of that was?

- 10-01:02:53
Rakosi: I'm not sure I know your question.
- 10-01:02:55
Bird: It would be easy to think that, as a left poet, you would want to read at an anti-war rally, like you did in 1968, the one with Robert Bly, and [Robert] Creely and Diane Wakoski was there.
- 10-01:03:12
Rakosi: Well, actually, if a gathering is large enough, and if it gets enough public attention, it will have a slight effect, yeah. I read partly because I wanted to express something about the war, along with other poets. It was stimulating being with so many other poets—and very good ones.
- 10-01:04:02
Bird: Was that your only social protest that you read at, or were there other instances of that in your life?
- 10-01:04:17
Rakosi: There may have been; I don't recall now. But, in general, I don't think much about poets reading poems against the war, because I don't think that it has any real effect. I would be marching on the streets. I would write letters.
- 10-01:04:52
Bird: As a citizen, and not necessarily as a poet?
- 10-01:04:57
Rakosi: Yeah.
- 10-01:05:04
Bird: So, if the poets didn't have very much effect on the war, do you think that opposition to the war brought about really good poetry? You said your poetry—
- 10-01:05:16
Rakosi: I'm sure it did. I'm sure some poetry is being written right now against the Iraqi threat.
- 10-01:05:49
Bird: Have you written any?
- 10-01:05:55
Rakosi: No. Probably because I don't think it is going to happen.
- 10-01:05:56
Bird: You don't?
- 10-01:05:58
Rakosi: No, I'm one of the few who doesn't think so. I don't think so, because the financial expense and the loss of life in the end will divert it in some way. I hope so.
- 10-01:06:36
Bird: Some are making the argument that we would actually go to war because of the economy, because it will increase military spending.

10-01:06:48

Rakosi: Well, that's possible, but you have to wait and see what the full public reaction is going to be to this. You have an absolutely supine media, and it's a commercial media. There are voices out there, magazines out there that are opposed immediately for very good reasons, but the big commercial publications, if you are really in control of that, you are in control of people's minds, the majority of people's minds, and you can make them feel that this is imminent danger, and that you have to attack. It could happen still.

10-01:08:23

Bird: Do you ever read the "Boondocks" comic strip in the *San Francisco Chronicle*?

10-01:08:35

Rakosi: No, what is it?

10-01:08:38

Bird: I think it's one of the last voices of dissent, at least on the comics page, more than "Doonesbury."

10-01:08:52

Rakosi: What's the name?

10-01:08:49

Bird: It's called "Boondocks."

10-01:08:50

Rakosi: "Boondocks," I'll have to look for it.

10-01:08:54

Bird: Well, I guess literally retreating from the subject, I was wondering if we could talk a little bit more about Yaddo?

10-01:09:07

Rakosi: Well, I had been to Yaddo a number of different times, never since being here in California. The idea is to be away from all of your responsibilities, every single one, including your family and in a place where you are never disturbed by anybody. It is strictly forbidden at Yaddo to even talk to anybody between breakfast time until five o'clock. You are off in a cabin all by yourself. You don't see anybody—you can't see anybody. That appealed to me. It's a wonderful thing. You can really be productive there. Some people can't stand it. Some poets simply fled from Yaddo after a few days because they couldn't stand the expectation: here's your opportunity. It created too much anxiety, and they had to flee. By and large, it works for most people. It's a beautiful setting, a huge estate, large enough for a lake and woods, in upstate New York. It's very interesting. People come there. You have to be selected, of course. You can't just—it's free. It's funded from a family fortune. Some Wall Street broker in the late 1890s founded it [Spencer Trask], or his widow I think did it. I must say it was always very stimulating for me. I did well there. The friends I made there tended to be composers, rather than other poets. They were the people I was drawn to that I felt I had more to talk about. With the other poets there was too much of a temptation to talk about not so much shop as gossip about what is going on in the field of poetry, that sort of thing, which is not really interesting, and doesn't get you anywhere. With composers, I had a real feeling that we had something going between us.

10-01:14:20

Bird: So the first time you went was 1968. Did you get selected based on *Amulet*?

10-01:14:30

Rakosi: I guess so.

10-01:14:32

Bird: Is there a sharing of work? Are there nights when you are supposed to share?

10-01:14:53

Rakosi: No, people are selected who are already so far along in their development that they don't need that, and they don't want it. Once in a while a composer would play the piano, however, and that was about it.

10-01:15:34

Bird: Denise Levertov was there. Who were some other people who were there when you were there?

10-01:15:41

Rakosi: I can't give you names, I'm sorry. My memory is simply not good enough. A number of composers who are big names now were there at the time. An Indian novelist, Raja Rao, was there one time. He was a Brahman. He used to meditate for thirty minutes in the morning before breakfast, and take a bath. One day I saw him from a distance. He was coming toward me with *Amulet*. He was excited. He said, "I just translated some of your poems into French. They work perfectly." I just don't remember others at the moment, but they were very mature practitioners already.

10-01:17:37

Bird: I think that Horace Gregory's wife was there—Marya Zaturenska.

10-01:17:56

Rakosi: Oh, yeah, Zaturenska. I understand that Kenneth Fearing late in life went there too. Now, she was a lyric poet, Marya, pretty good. Strange little woman. The name was Russian. She herself was Russian, but I suspected she was Jewish, but didn't want to say so. I could be wrong. I couldn't get her to say whether she was or wasn't. My dear friend Marjorie Latimer, who loved most people, detested her. She thought that she was a total phony. I don't know. She was friendly in a sort of way. I didn't think of her as one of the big people at Yaddo.

10-01:19:49

Bird: Have you kept in touch with Horace Gregory, because you knew him in college, right?

10-01:19:58

Rakosi: I didn't keep up with Horace, partly because I suspect that he was anti-Semitic. He had some disability, I forget what it was now, a physical disability, which was pretty bad. He was a fairly good poet himself. He tended to imitate Fearing, who was his idol. But you meet different people at Yaddo at different times. By the time five o'clock comes around, you are pooped, because you have been working hard in the cabin somewhere off in the woods. Between five and six, the conversation was wonderful, very lively. The food was good. It wasn't grown on the premises, but it was grown nearby on the farms. It was very fresh and good.

10-01:21:47

Bird: That's an important part. I'm sure you wrote better because of it.

10-01:21:56

Rakosi: I don't know. There was some hanky-panky going on, too. Nobody said anything about it, though.

10-01:22:37

Bird: I know you also went to Mexico for a period of time for part of the year, each year. Was that another kind of retreat for you, for writing?

10-01:22:50

Rakosi: Yeah, Mexico, though we went after my retirement. I was raring to go by then. Oaxaca has this really ideal climate, really superb. It's balmy. It's not hot, except in the early afternoon. Then you just stay off the streets, stay indoors. I was able to be quite productive in Oaxaca. There were about a hundred American expatriates there, permanent residents. They were interesting people. They were usually in the arts of some kind, sometimes in academia, the part of it that taught the arts. For example, a couple of people who were former deans of music departments at universities. Then other American writers, painters, but good ones. It was so much easier to live in Mexico. You have no idea of the pace. This is not true of Mexico City or Guadalajara, but a city like Oaxaca, which then was about 100,000, but you never saw it as a city of 100,000, because there were few houses higher than a single story—a two-story house is a high house there, so it gave you the impression of a small town or a very small city. It's wonderful, not just visiting a foreign country, but living there, and hearing the language, and then the pace is so much slower. It's so much easier, easier. Industrialization, of course, brings a different pace altogether, much faster, much more automatic pace. Oaxaca is not industrialized.

10-01:27:20

So, we met interesting people there. Mexico has always been full of, for example, American anthropologists who are studying early Indian cultures. An American psychologist, actually an Argentinean and his wife, an American dancer, whom we met there, became one of our closest friends. They now live here. I was able to be quite productive there. We could get up early in the morning, because we had an American neighbor, a couple from New York, and they would be quarreling first thing in the morning. I had to get up earlier, before they would start fighting with each other. I used to hate them because they used to interrupt my work.

10-01:29:20

We lived in different places in Oaxaca. In one place, which used to be the estate of a former governor of the province, and the new owner, who was the governor's wife and her adult daughter, had converted it into a place for tourists. So you lived in different little houses on this estate. That was one place, I swear, where the most beautiful woman I've ever met in my whole life was the daughter. Mother and daughter were aristocrats. There was a real social distance between classes in Mexico. In this country, you can't even imagine such a distance. It's vast. In order to be a governor of a province in Mexico, you have to be a part of the very upper social class, including money. Here was this elegant daughter. She was so beautiful. The mother was still very beautiful. Anyhow, they were running it. It was a big place. It's a whole different life experience, to be in Oaxaca. At the other end of the social scale, poor Mexican workers would be—

drinking is a big problem in Mexico. You can buy, what do you call it? Tequila, very cheap. You would see them in the morning, lying dead drunk in the street. But it's wonderful anyhow. The peasants would come in from the farms with their serapes hung over their shoulders, and they'd sit next to you on the bus, and you had to stay as far from them physically as possible, because they had fleas, and the fleas would jump on you. My hands swelled up twice their size one day just from flea bites. They'd come in selling things. [phone rings]

10-01:33:37

Another time, we stayed with friends, a potter and his wife, who were about my age actually. They were interesting. He was a self-taught potter. Actually, he had started as a puppeteer. He came from a German Jewish family and migrated here in his late teens. A distant relative of his mother, a wealthy New York Jew, sponsored him—a really wealthy guy—and got him to this country, and then just dropped him. He didn't do anything more. The potter, Ed Seheier, became one of my very best friends, a very witty, bright fellow. He's still alive. He never went to school to learn pottery, but taught himself. I don't know exactly how he met his wife, but she worked with him at first and then they began to do pots on their own. She was completely self-taught too. She worked with him, and finally became a better potter than he. She had developed very fine glazes, and he would do the—I don't know what you call it—the engraving, the figures on them, which were very much like African figures, actually, or very early Mexican, Indian figures. But, almost always on the same subject. He could never seem to get away from the subject of Adam and Eve and the serpent. There were various forms of that, but essentially, it was pretty much the same theme. I remember his saying to me once—I don't know how we got on to it—"I don't know why I couldn't get off that theme. That's a failing on my part."

10-01:38:09

Bird: He was just obsessed with that?

10-01:38:13

Rakosi: Yeah, yeah. And he had, I suspect, a little of the same problem that Picasso had with his women. He had to hate, basically, hate something about women that made him depict female figures the way he did. Something made him feel that women were, not exactly his enemies, but they were something not to be trusted, that sort of thing.

He is a great potter actually. There's no question about it. He's now recognized as one of the great pioneers of American pottery. There's a video made of a celebration at the University of New Hampshire, where he donated most of his work and where he and his wife taught for many years. The two of them live in one of these huge retirement places in Arizona.

10-01:40:44

Bird: Did you learn any Spanish when you were in Mexico?

10-01:40:59

Rakosi: Oh, I picked up some, sure.

10-01:40:58

Bird: Do you think that helps writing, when you are starting to think in a different language?

- 10-01:41:08
Rakosi: I think so. A writer of course has to have a good ear for language, and it doesn't make much difference what language, unless perhaps it's a language like Chinese with a different kind of principle to it. I picked up some Spanish. I could get along at the post office, which is sort of difficult. But, if you don't use it, you don't have it.
- 10-01:42:01
Bird: But, you did some translations in Mexico.
- 10-01:42:11
Rakosi: Of Sephardic poetry, yeah, but not in Mexico. These were in Hebrew. That's different. I didn't actually translate from the Hebrew, I translated from a very bad English translation of these poets. I just figured out from that dreadful translation what the poet really had in mind, and how he must have actually expressed it. Partly from my reading of the beautiful sections of Hebrew poetry, Jewish poetry in the Old Testament, "Song of Songs." These Sephardic poets wrote like that. They were really writing in that style, that tradition, because they were all rabbis. So that's something to go on.
- 10-01:44:01
Bird: Were you able to read the Hebrew enough not to translate, but to hear the rhythm of the poems?
- 10-01:44:07
Rakosi: No.
- 10-01:44:11
Bird: I guess the translator was Israel Zangwill. So you had to trust him far enough to hear what the rhythm was?
- 10-01:44:24
Rakosi: No, the problem was that he had no rhythm. He had no ear whatever for lyric poetry.
- 10-01:44:33
Bird: Because he was a novelist, right?
- 10-01:44:39
Rakosi: Yeah, but fortunately, there had been great translations from the Hebrew, by many writers, some of them English and some of them going back to—I'm talking about English Christian translators, great translations.
- 10-01:45:16
Bird: Of the Sephardic poets?
- 10-01:45:19
Rakosi: No, of the original poets from the Bible.
- 10-01:45:31
Bird: And you've had your work translated. It's been in French and Italian?
- 10-01:45:38
Rakosi: A few poems into Italian and German, many more into French, even a few into Spanish. I heard that there have been translations into Russian and Polish, but I haven't seen those. A magazine in Vienna, Austria, translated a few into German.

10-01:46:26

Bird: Do you have any role in the translations, say, with the French translator? Does he send you them before he publishes them?

10-01:46:38

Rakosi: No.

10-01:46:41

Bird: I wonder if you have a sense of whether you think they are accurate or whether you think they are good translations.

10-01:46:48

Rakosi: Well, the one into Spanish was very bad, he missed the point. I don't know about the French.

10-01:47:00

Bird: Do you think that the translation of poetry should be more about the rhythm and the sound of it, or more about the content? That seems to be a big decision that translators have to make, which gets sacrificed for the other.

Rakosi: Well, it depends upon the kind of poetry you are translating. If you are translating lyrical poetry, then of course, the cadence, the music of the poetry has to take priority. In lyric poetry, because the subject matter has to be simple, you don't have to worry much about the subject matter. If you are writing other kinds of poetry, then the subject matter has to be accurate. In general, the practice of translating I think is good for a poet, because it seems to limber up your mind. You have to exhaust all sorts of possible translations. Is this right, and so on. You are on high alert, tension. Your mind is really working to get at the best possible English.

Bird: In translating, do you think that it's more about writing your own poem based on this other poem, or do you think that it is reproducing or trying to really translate?

10-01:49:28

Rakosi: Oh no, it is translating the poem. Oh yeah. Although [Robert] Bly's translations from the Persian, for example, come off very well; they sound good as poems, but they are his poems. I became aware of that, because he translated some poems— They were poems I found quite attractive, and then I had occasion to read a more literal translation of the same material by a Persian and it was quite different. In general, translating is good for a poet. It loosens up avenues of resource in language, and makes them more available.

10-01:51:06

Bird: Okay, I think that's it for today.

[end of session]

[Interview #11: October 23, 2002]

[Begin Audio File Rakosi 11 10-23-02]

11-00:00:00

Bird: I was thinking of you on the way up here, because I heard on the radio that a theater in Moscow is being held hostage by rebels who want the Russian government to end the war in Chechnya, and they have a thousand people in a theater. I thought, if we really think that art is separate from politics, here's a—

11-00:00:24

Rakosi: Oh, wonderful, really. That's fantastic.

11-00:00:35

Bird: That they are holding a whole theater hostage? Why?

11-00:00:40

Rakosi: You have the whole history of Stalin there. The whole world is sort of changing back in some ways. I notice for example that the mothers and the wives and the sisters of people who had been imprisoned by—

Bird: Saddam Hussein?

11-00:01:22

Rakosi: —Saddam Hussein were out on the streets. Now, I never would have imagined that they would have dared to do that. Human nature, you can only push it that far, even in the most despotic situations. It is going to rise up. So, maybe we can be a little optimistic about what could happen now.

11-00:02:06

Bird: With the Moscow one, it is so interesting that it is a theater that they are holding hostage, not a government office.

11-00:02:21

Rakosi: Yeah, I suspect that's because they really want to make trouble for [Vladimir] Putin at this point. He is holding the country together. He is a little like Bush in that respect. He's got the drive. After all, he was in the secret service himself. He was the director for years, so he knows how to do this. The whole world situation has become so interesting, so complex. You never thought before that you could look at the whole world, and see what everybody everywhere is doing, and how they are being affected by each other. It has never happened before. So, we are into a new period in world history it seems to me, which affects each person individually, because he is aware of this. This is something new that is being brought into his consciousness. I wish young people were perceiving this in this country, because I noticed just in today's paper that the people who are voting are not young people—two to one, they're people older, in their forties. Two to one. Where are the young people? What are they thinking? Are they so cynical that they don't want to vote? Are they so absorbed in their own personal problems and lives that they are indifferent? Studies should be made of that. But anyhow, it's great to be alive.

11-00:05:07

Going back to Russia, culture in Russia was always a big thing, although during the czarist times they were too absorbed, too interested in French culture, but they always had this very high regard for the arts. During the Communist era you were expected, as I said before, to really write propaganda in the form of poetry, in the form of music. It is interesting, [Dmitri] Shostakovich, I think it's in his "Leningrad" overture [Symphony #7]. He was in and out of trouble with the Stalin regime. He did this piece as a kind of propaganda piece, because Moscow and St. Petersburg were in great danger of being attacked by the fascists, by the Nazis, rather. So, you'd think that it would have some of the characteristics of a propaganda piece of music, mechanical. He was a genius, and despite the fact that he wrote it as a propaganda piece, it's a great symphony. He had it both ways. I don't think that he realized it at the time, but his great talent showed through. That couldn't be corrupted.

11-00:08:14

Let's see, we were at the point of high regard. Why is it that in countries like Russia and countries like Iraq and Iran too, culture is viewed as absolutely a fundamental national asset? It is what characterizes a country almost. You have none of that here. It isn't in the minds of people. So, it has an effect on American artists. There was a brief period in the 1930s, I think, when you had the WPA [Works Progress Administration] in this country, and every writer I know was on WPA then. There was such a wonderful spirit that came out at that time. For the first time, writers, I assume artists and composers also, felt that the government was really interested in what they were doing, and wanted them to be doing that. In that sense, it was something national they were doing, and not just personal. That was just a flurry, a wonderful flurry. They turned out these wonderful books describing each state. To this day they are good literary works for every state. But that ended just as soon as WPA ended. Then it was every man for himself. It seems to me now it's even worse.

11-00:12:23

Bird: Do you think in the thirties—obviously it was the Depression and artists were more out of work than they normally are, so those programs started—do you think that there was more than a reason than that for art to have a national function?

11-00:13:00

Rakosi: Roosevelt set it in motion there—he himself was a great leader. He had this wonderful resonant voice. He came from a very high social class with a great financial fortune. He was free to do it—by the way, he was hated by the political right. He was despised. The press was just awful to him. So, it took real courage on his part to do what he did. He had a great wife to prod him along. It was the woman behind him. During this period, you'd think that people would be depressed. On the contrary. People were optimistic. They knew that they could change the system; they could reform it. There was no question in their minds that they could do it. I was absolutely sure it could be done. It was an optimistic period, and that was part of it, and that's what relates to your question.

11-00:15:33

Bird: And having artists doing all of these great murals and with the publications about every state, and magazines that were coming out, that that was a way of continuing that optimism.

11-00:15:42

Rakosi: Sure, and that was just a blossoming of their talents. Wonderful art work came out then. Although the creative impulse is purely an individual matter, it comes out freer and stronger when a whole nation is behind you.

11-00:16:36

Bird: I think last time, you were saying that if there was suddenly some utopian moment where poets were fully funded and could write at their leisure, that that wouldn't be good for poets, but I wonder if it would be good if the entire country is behind and valuing art and celebrating art.

11-00:17:03

Rakosi: Sure, it would be good. But then some artists might take it too much for granted and become slack. But most would find that they do better work. They would do work that had more of a social content too. The other situation tends to drive the poet into more aesthetic, personal material. I thought today we could also try to make an overview of my whole life, and see what I come up with. [laughter]

11-00:18:56

Bird: Sounds good.

11-00:19:06

Rakosi: So, I'll just kind of free-associate here. Let me start with Chicago. Starting there, I'm only sixteen years old, rather than eighteen, which is the usual age, because I was pushed ahead two years, in the Gary, Indiana, school system. I'm sixteen years old, and I go to Chicago, which is a very rough—I don't know how to describe it. It's a working-class, Middle Western city, very industrial in its character, but the campus there puts you into a different world. The campus—the architecture, the buildings are modeled after either Cambridge or Oxford, I don't know which. They are almost like cathedrals, semi-Gothic. It was my first exposure to that. I was overawed. I used to hang around the International House there, and that was a fascinating place to be. To my amazement—you know that I come from Kenosha, I am sixteen years old. I had never met graduate students from India before, from all over the world. They came to the International House. There was great talk there. It was a wonderful place to be. You had great professors in the English department. I think that one of them was called [Robert Morss] Lovett. Some were great celebrities, and here's this kid who is going to have a chance to be in a class with them. It was kind of an awe-inspiring experience.

11-00:23:02

At night, at around four or five o'clock, the people on the campus just vanished. They went in all directions, and I was left suddenly alone. I was in a dormitory, and I didn't know anybody in Chicago. I finally decided for my second year, I would transfer to Madison, the University of Wisconsin there. That was about as different as it could be. There's nothing awesome about the campus there. On the contrary. The student body were mostly kids from the farms in Wisconsin. Wisconsin at that time already had a big reputation for being a progressive kind of university. Progressive principles of education were being formed—suddenly the name I'm looking for comes to me: [Alexander] Meiklejohn. He had been there the year before I came, and had made the university so attractive that students from New York started to come there. So, there was a contingent of New Yorkers at the university, who were more like the Chicago students. They were real students. I didn't feel that the students at Madison at that time

were real students. They were there because they could afford to go to college, but they were primarily interested in girls—the men—and similarly, I suppose, the girls in men. They were interested in athletic types. It was a great year for Wisconsin athletics when I was there. Actually, I started this paper myself while I was a student, called *The Issue*. What I was really doing was satirizing the students. They were interested in anything but studies and learning.

11-00:27:25

At the same time, that's when I became part of a close friendship with Margery Latimer and Kenneth Fearing, and Leon Herald. So, there was a tiny group of Wisconsinites who were genuine students. I wanted to learn. I was hungry to learn. There was that group and then there was the New York group. Although—I think I have described before, I had started to write in Chicago. It was in Madison that I knew for sure that that was going to be my life. I did more and more writing there. I've already talked about William Ellery Leonard. A very early, maybe one-of-a kind class—I think that it was just an ordinary English class, which he used for creative writing. It wasn't called creative writing; there was no such thing then. Maybe there should be no such thing now. [laughter] Leonard, when my little book came out, *Selected Poems*, from New Directions, he did pay me a compliment. He quoted something in Latin that meant that I was putting a great deal of content into small form. He did compliment me. So, he wasn't a rascal all the way through. [laughter] But, Leonard I had to respect anyhow. He was a man of learning. He was learned in the classics and I think that I took a course in German literature with a friend of his, who was a German Jewish refugee teaching there then—Lewisohn, or something like that; I've forgotten his name—it comes to me now, Ludwig Lewisohn. But he published a number of books. He had something of an influence on me. It may be that my memory of German—I remember German pretty well, although I never use it. That may be why. German literature made a deep impression on me.

11-00:32:39

Bird: You actually read the literature in German?

11-00:32:43

Rakosi: Oh yeah. So, I spent four years there. At the end of that time, I don't have a vocation; I don't have anything to make a living with, so I stay out another year, to get a master's degree, in the Department of Educational Psychology. Really, my purpose was to become a personnel psychologist, but the course work came in that department, Educational Psychology. Oh, by the way, let me go back just a minute, because I must say that I had some of the best time, most productive time in the philosophy courses. They just intrigued me, and they were wonderful courses, wonderful professors—Professor [Max] Otto. They had a great course on Nietzsche, and another philosopher, a Scotchman, McGovern or something like that. So, it was stimulating intellectually. There was enough in them to really make you think. It was more than stimulating—exciting.

11-00:35:35

Bird: And it was in the philosophy classes that you felt that the most?

11-00:35:41

Rakosi: Yes, more than in English—much more than in English, really. They also had a great professor of sociology, [E. A.] Ross. He was already in his sixties and had huge classes,

because he was a great lecturer and that was exciting, very exciting. So, it was a great time to be there—not awesome like in Chicago, but it was more down to earth.

11-00:36:34

Bird: Did you find it had changed a lot when you went back to be writer-in-residence there?

11-00:36:36

Rakosi: Oh, yeah.

11-00:36:43

Bird: It was a long time later.

11-00:36:45

Rakosi: Well, just consider, when I was there in 1920 to '24, there were 10,000 students. When I went back there as writer-in-residence, there were either 50,000 or 60,000 students. That's a different university.

That's why, when I went back there as writer-in-residence, I was a nobody on the campus. Nobody paid the slightest attention to me. I had certain classes to teach, but other than that, you are on your own.

11-00:37:49

Bird: Were they actually creative writing classes?

11-00:37:50

Rakosi: Yeah, they were.

11-00:38:54

Bird: How did you teach them?

11-00:38:08

Rakosi: What I thought had to be taught was—what could be taught, because you can't really teach a person how to be a good writer, because he's already read good literature, and if he hasn't already picked up from these models what it takes to be a good writer, then he's not going to make it. What can be taught is how to be self-critical. What I did was to—they would write something, each person would write something. We would sit around in a circle, and a student would read his thing, and then I'd ask each person in the group to react to it. Now, one of the interesting things about this is that very, very poor writers can be very good critics. You don't have to be a great writer to be a great critic. It is very easy to see what the other person is doing wrong, but not what you are doing wrong. So, they would learn from that how to be self-critical. Then I would supply a few things of my own, but in general I left it to that type of group dynamic, and that worked very well. At Michigan State University, I was there too. The coldest winter. Oh God, that was cold! There I had two students. I'll never forget. I had a much worse group of people in my class at Michigan State. By worse, I mean much poorer talent. Two of the students, however, had very good talent, but they wouldn't show up for class, and I could understand it. It was just drivel that was coming through. I said to them, "You guys have to go to class once in a while, but I know why you are staying away." It was fun. Anyhow, let's see. Where am I?

11-00:42:49

Bird: Can I interrupt for one second? I was wondering about the Berryman class. You had taken over for John Berryman, doing the course on the American character, right?

11-00:43:13

Rakosi: Berryman was an interesting poet who was quite learned, but not an academic one actually. He was not in the English department, actually; he was in the—comparative literature? I've forgotten. But, after several marriages, and a terrible drinking problem, he one day just jumped into the Mississippi and killed himself. I was at that time director of the Jewish—no, wait a minute, what am I talking about?

11-00:44:37

Bird: It was 1973, at the University of Minnesota.

11-00:44:42

Rakosi: Oh, yeah. Only one person in the philosophy department there knew that I was Carl Rakosi. You have to remember that during the time that I was not writing, I didn't want anybody to know that I was Carl Rakosi. He happened to know that, so he wondered whether I would take over Berryman's class. So, it was a challenge. I thought, "Sure, I'll do it." It was a course on the American character, and that was absolutely not in the English department; no, that was in the Department of Sociology, in fact. Many of the students were in sociology. Well, the American character, that's a great subject. I was delighted actually to tackle it. I didn't know what I'd find among the students.

11-00:46:23

Now, students in sociology and history—I think there were some from history—are different from students of English literature. They have different interests, and they are looking for different things. We explored the subject. We looked for character in novels, sometimes in poetry, in social mores. You run the whole gamut, and you find at the end of it that you can't find an American character. It's much too complex. There are American characters. Certainly, somebody from Alabama, who has lived all his life in Alabama is not going to be like somebody who has lived all his life in Massachusetts, and somebody who has lived all his life in Massachusetts is not going to be like somebody who has lived all his life in the Middle West. The Middle West was very different in those days from other parts of the country too. I didn't know the Far West then. So, an American character? No.

11-00:48:54

Bird: So, there are regional American characters, you think?

11-00:49:00

Rakosi: There are regional American characteristics, yes, but looking back on that, I can't say that this person from Alabama has absorbed some of the characteristics of a person from Minnesota. I didn't see it, I couldn't find it. Now, that's less so today. That's all I can say. It's less so today, because living here in San Francisco, for example, I must say that people that I see here are pretty similar to people in Minneapolis.

11-00:50:40

Bird: I was actually going to ask you if you considered yourself still a Midwestern writer or Midwestern character, or now a California person, or maybe it doesn't matter?

11-00:51:00

Rakosi: If you had asked me that ten years ago, I would have said, “No, I’m pretty much a Midwesterner,” but I don’t feel that now. I’m more of an international person because of my European background. That has never left me. Linguistically, when you grow up hearing, as your first two languages, Hungarian and German, it’s going to make you a little different. So, Europe is a part of me. It’s that part of me that made me interested in writing the “Americana” poems.

11-00:52:43

So, I’m going to go back to 1925. I take these courses in educational psychology, and they don’t amount to much. In fact, no course that I’ve ever taken in educational psychology has ever amounted to much. I wind up with a job in Milwaukee with the Milwaukee Electric Railway and Light Company. That’s a totally new, different kind of experience for me. The director of that program was an older man already in his sixties, quite a gentleman. He had built up a safety testing program for the streetcar company, which he had developed himself, a system in which there was the interior of a streetcar with a motorman and a screen on which images would be flashed, and the motorman would be expected to react to a sudden turn or sudden stop, and his reaction time would be measured, and his efficiency would be noted. It was a safety kind of instrument device. I didn’t have anything to do with the creation of that, but I operated the thing with motormen. That was interesting for a while, but I didn’t see myself doing that for very long. Milwaukee was another very industrial town then—I think the Chalmers Automobile was manufactured there. It was a pleasant place to be.

11-00:56:04

So, what did I do in 1925? So I must have [pause]—wait a minute, I am leaving out my social work. From 1924 to 1925, I was in social work. In 1925 to ‘26—so, there was this first job of mine in Cleveland. It was a family service agency. That’s where I meet this lovely woman Mary Nagy; Nagy in Hungarian means big. But, she was beautiful, and I really thought highly of her. But I was just a youngster, I knew I wasn’t going to marry her. So when I left Cleveland for another job, I left with regrets, very emotional regrets. From Cleveland, I go to New York then to work for the Jewish Board of Guardians with these juvenile court cases of tough kids from New York. And then I go to Boston to work for the Massachusetts Society for Prevention of Cruelty to Children, which was one of my most interesting experiences.

11-00:58:31

Boston was so different from the Middle West. It had so much history; it was almost like going to Europe. I roomed with three other guys there. There were places in Boston that were really charming. Right close to the State House—I’m trying to think of the name; there was a name to it. It was one of these houses that had been there for 150 years. I stayed there for a while and then my roommates and I are walking along Commonwealth Avenue one day—that was an elegant boulevard with beautiful houses—and a man stops us and says, “Would you be interested in an apartment on Commonwealth Avenue?” We said, “We couldn’t afford anything on Commonwealth Avenue.” He said, “Yes, you could.” So, we moved into a place that didn’t cost us anything more, on Commonwealth Avenue, and oh it was elegant, but there was a hitch to it, because apparently a real estate company wanted occupants in the building so that they could sell it quickly. It was sold quickly. So, then we had to move.

11-01:01:23

Bird: Oh, I see.

11-01:01:25

Rakosi: Well, we learned one of the things you learn on your way. What I remember about my social work experience in Boston was the dignity of the juvenile court process, and really there was a certain decency about it that was quite wonderful, but it all emanated from the judge. I think I told you before that he came from one of the very old families—like the Lodges. There was a Senator Lodge from Massachusetts at one time. He was one of the aristocratic families. This judge was not a Lodge, but the same order of family. So, that was a very good experience, also interesting. I had great respect for the judge and the workings of the court. So, from there, I go to Austin, Texas, because I reached the conclusion that social work is too involving. But I love social work, but you put your whole energy and interest and thinking into social work when you are doing it. I found that I was really not unique in experiencing that. Other social workers are the same as me in that respect. It's almost like having a talent for poetry. You are either a poet or not. You are either a social worker by temperament and character or you are not. The others are equally involved.

11-01:04:18

So, I decided that if I'm going to be a writer, social work is too much, and I'm going back to the university in the English department and get a PhD. So, I go to the University of Texas at Austin, and I'm in the graduate department there. There are pretty good professors there. I have some teaching function. I had a freshman English class for engineers. But you can't teach literature to engineers, at least in those days. Their imagination was made out of wood. My courses there were satisfactory courses. I had one in Anglo-Saxon and [pause]—now, I had already taken a course on Chaucer with Leonard. That's right. I loved that course on Chaucer. I'm a serious student, but I found that the professors in the English department there—there was a kind of, I don't know how to put it, snobbish literary affectation among them. I suddenly realized that I can't spend the rest of my life with people like these, put up with all of that affectation. They thought they were Oxford in Austin.

11-01:07:29

So, I quit, I drop out. I thought, "I'm going to try law." So, I study law. I actually loved the courses, jurisprudence in particular, but I see that the other students are nonstop talkers. They have the real gift of talking, and I realized that if law meant that you had to be that kind of talker, that I couldn't do it. I would fail as a lawyer. It turns out that you don't—I was wrong in my assumption, but that's what I thought. So, then I transfer into medicine. I try medicine, and that was in Galveston, Texas. It's this port way down at the bottom of Texas. The houses are on high stilts, because they're washed away at times. There I do very well in the medical courses too, although when it came to anatomy, I couldn't touch the corpse. I couldn't do the dissecting. There were always four or five of us around a cadaver. They were all doing the dissecting, but I got high marks in anatomy. Then my money just ran out and since there were no grants at that time, I just had to stop.

11-01:10:20

Anyhow, I was going to go into psychiatry directly from medicine, so I had to give that up, and I wound up next in San Antonio with a teaching job in high school. It was a senior high school in a well-to-do neighborhood. There I lasted for two years, and I

learned to my sorrow how hard a teacher has to work. Oh my God, you had hundreds of papers to take home to correct, and you had students who weren't interested at all in learning or in the curriculum, and that was a miserable experience. Anyhow, I'm not really interested in teaching. I wasn't interested in teaching in the first place. Wait a minute, it was in Galveston, Texas, where I picked up this friend, this fellow from New York, and together we started to ride the freight cars, and I think I've described that to you. That was a great experience, a great experience.

11-01:12:58

I think that next I wind up in Chicago, in the Cook County Bureau of Public Welfare. I'm still an untrained social worker, more or less. I've got experience, but I haven't gone through a curriculum. I can't forget that one day when I got back to my office, the police were there. An irate client had shot and killed one of the social workers. My next job is with the Federal Transit Bureau, in New Orleans. I take the train in Chicago, in a twenty degree temperature, and I wind up in New Orleans, and it is about eighty-five, ninety degrees hot, so in that short time, it was a hundred-degree change. I'm young, I feel great. I pick up two women on the train who are from New Orleans. New Orleans then was a very fast town. By fast I mean, fast women. Sexual mores, very fast. Drinking, not in any repulsive way, it is almost like a different civilization down there. Talk about contrast, New Orleans was the place to be if you were young. So the first thing we do, the three of us, is go out to the racetrack. Apparently, they love to bet on the horses there. So, my first experience in New Orleans was at a racetrack, even before I settle in. I had never bet on horses before. I had never seen a horse race before, in fact. I go to the cashier to make my bet, and by the time I get back, the race is all over, and I hadn't even had a chance to see the horses run.

11-01:18:11

Bird: Did you win any money?

11-01:18:14

Rakosi: No, I lost. My first year at the Federal Transit Bureau was a real experience, and several of my poems are from there, that direct experience. I spent a year there, and then Tulane University asked me to give a course in case work. Tulane was originally a women's college—maybe not; I'm not sure. Anyhow, I spent a year there teaching social work. From there, I go back to New York City to Jewish Family Service, and during the time that I'm there, I commute to Philadelphia to finish my course work for the master of social work degree. Now, in New York, at that agency, again it was an exciting experience. I think that it might have been the best agency in the whole country at the time, in the sense that they had the brightest practitioners there. They always had a psychiatrist on the staff, and their whole objective was to keep improving your professional knowledge, professional skill. There was a marvelous concentration on that. Not simply doing your job. You'd be surprised how exciting that can be, to be a part of improving methodology. That's what we were doing. There were three of us in that office who were kind of rivals in seeing who could go the furthest in this. One of them—I remember his name, Gomberg, he already had a PhD in sociology as well as a social work degree. He was very good. We'd stay after hours to make the most detailed recording of everything that happened during an interview, and then examine it afterwards and talk about it. So, it was an exciting experience.

11-01:22:37

Bird: Did you see an outcome from that? Did you see the methodology of social work change, because of the work being done in New York?

11-01:22:57

Rakosi: No, that sort of influence couldn't occur from agency to agency—

11-01:23:03

Bird: Just within that—

11-01:23:04

Rakosi: Just within the agency. At the University of Pennsylvania, I had two women professors. One of them was Jessie Taft. Her background was in child psychology. She had her PhD from the University of Chicago, I think, and the other was Virginia Robertson from—actually she was from Virginia. Hers was in—she had a PhD in education. But, they were students of Rank and may have been analyzed by Rank, so what they were teaching was really Rankian psychology. It was kind of a Rankian experience that I went through, because—let me see if I can express what it was. It was kind of a holistic method in which they would never really lecture or criticize you openly, but sort of get behind this and that, and force you to think the problem out. It's a much more difficult way to teach. I got the point. They were wonderful women. They were already in their, I think, sixties, when I got there. You felt that you could trust them entirely. I trusted them enough to tell them that I was Carl Rakosi, and so they knew I was a poet. I wrote a paper, I think on Rank, and Jessie Taft wrote back the simple comment that, "You go down deeper and stay down longer than anybody I know," which was a tremendous compliment.

11-01:27:48

Bird: It sounds like their methodology in class is similar to the one you had in your creative writing classes, having the students find it out themselves.

11-01:28:05

Rakosi: So where am I? Well, then, you get caught up in it, when you are in a career, you always want a higher position, partly because there's a little more respect attached to it. Also a little more money. So I went out, looking for a job as a supervisor. That's the next category in social work, and I get this job in St. Louis with the Jewish Family Services, as a supervisor there. That's where my first child was born, Barbara. St. Louis is a very friendly city. I've always liked it. It's neither South, nor North; it's middle Southern. It has the real friendliness of the South, without being sloppy. Also, some of the holding back of the Middle West. I was there for about three years, and I taught supervision at Washington University. I was invited to do that there. I think I was perhaps happiest in St. Louis, because it is great to have your first child. It's a happy time. Barbara is actually coming for my ninety-ninth birthday just next month.

11-01:30:56

So, then from there, St. Louis supervision, I go back to Cleveland to the Jewish Children's Bureau, an agency that had responsibility for the foster care of children, and to Bellefaire, an agency which is a residential treatment center for disturbed or problem children. Two jobs. Bellefaire had advanced to a point where they were using group therapy, which was very exciting because something happens in a group that is much

more dynamic than in a person-to-person relationship. They stimulate each other and things come out that would never come out in a person-to-person contact.

11-01:33:26

Bird: So, that was a new thing in social work to do a group thing in therapy?

11-01:33:34

Rakosi: Yes, it was more or less new at that time, yeah. I'm doing fine here now. I'm the case supervisor in the foster care department, and I have the responsibility for therapy in Bellefaire. I would have stayed there until my retirement, except that I had made friends with the community organizer in St. Louis who had moved on to Minneapolis, and had become part of the Community Chest there. He urged me to come to Minneapolis to head up the Jewish Family Service Agency there. Actually, I didn't really want to become an executive, I was so attached to practice and to the development of casework skill. I was a little less interested in supervision, but I liked supervision too. I really didn't want to change, but I became corrupted by the idea of becoming the executive of an agency. That's a higher position in the eyes of the world. I think that it was a mistake on my part to do it. But I couldn't resist the temptation.

11-01:36:49

So I take on the job of director of Jewish Family and Children Services. It's a rather small agency. I discover that being an executive is really not very interesting. In fact, it isn't interesting. I tried to make it so but never succeeded. I thought my responsibility was to help the board of directors, that is to take information that I would give them, and they would decide the policy from that information. That was the oddest thing for an executive to do. I found that I couldn't do it, that they wouldn't do it, that I would present an issue to them, give them all of the facts, and they would say, "You're the professional, you tell us what we should do." I just couldn't make them take the responsibility. You get awfully good people on the board of directors, and half of them became personal friends of mine, but that part—so, it was dull; I could have done it without the board of directors. So, I had a case supervisor under me, so she was doing the supervision, so there wasn't really much for me as an executive to do that was interesting. But I couldn't go back by then.

11-01:40:43

Bird: That was for twenty years, right?

11-01:40:42

Rakosi: More than twenty years, yeah. That's it. So, you know after that, I couldn't wait to retire actually, after I got that letter from Andrew Crosier. I was bursting to get back to writing again. Actually the first poem I wrote I think was called "Lying in Bed on a Sunday Morning." To my amazement, that poem was no different from poetry that I had written more than twenty years before. It was as if there had been no break. That astonished me. I don't know what that means. Then after retirement, my wife and I went for five months each winter to Oaxaca, Mexico, where I was very productive. We both loved Mexico, and would have stayed there actually, except for the medical problem of the water being polluted with amoebas. I got amoebas twice. The amoebas are single-cell organisms that you can't expel from your body. At that time, the remedy, the medicine you took was so powerful. It's something that women take. Flagyl? I forget the name. It makes you so nervous, it drives you up a wall. Many patients start it and just can't keep it up. It just makes you too nervous. I had to go through two of

those. Anyhow, hospital facilities in Mexico are just too bad. You wouldn't want to be there. So, we decided that we couldn't live there permanently. Now, my daughter Barbara and her husband have a second home in Mexico. They live in Minneapolis, so there is a reason for going down there.

11-01:45:44

Bird: To thaw out. [laughs]

11-01:45:46

Rakosi: She says now there's a medicine that will take care of amoebas in twenty-four hours. I'm a little skeptical, but it's possible. So, there again were wonderful experiences. Interesting people tend to go to Mexico, interesting Americans. Mostly artists and academics, retired professors, army men. Two of my friends were former American admirals. They went there because it is cheap and the climate is so balmy. I may have told you this. There were a group of American expatriates living in Oaxaca, about a hundred at the time. There are probably more now. We'd meet in the evening, have a great time together. When expatriates meet in a foreign country, they feel much closer to each other than at home. Oaxaca was wonderful. Great climate, lovely people—lovely is not the right term, but interesting people. You can be productive there, very productive. Cheap to live. It's an irresistible combination. There are more than ever Americans living in Mexico for that reason. There's a large colony in Guadalajara, the other big city in Mexico. So, finally, I'm in San Francisco. I've been here for something like twenty years. I really came here for the climate, of course.

Bird: But, it's a very different climate than what you are describing in Oaxaca?

11-01:50:06

Rakosi: Yeah.

11-01:50:08

Bird: And you like this better?

11-01:50:09

Rakosi: Oh no. [laughter] Oh no, no. Oh, there's nothing to match the climate in Oaxaca.

11-01:50:17

Bird: But you could have gone to say southern California.

11-01:50:22

Rakosi: I could have, but LA—it has no glamour. Actually, San Francisco has some kind of a—if I'm going to pick a city for climate, I want it to be an interesting city. San Francisco does have that reputation. In addition, by that time, George Oppen was here, and Robert Duncan, two people I wanted to be in the same city with. So, that's how I happened to come here, but I didn't know, when I retired, I didn't know what I could afford, and my wife Leah came out here ahead of me to scout rentals. She found this place on Irving, but it sounded like it was a lot of money. She said, "I don't know whether we can afford it." I said, "Oh, jeez." It sounded like a lot of money to me too. "Well, we'll have to try." So, that's it.

11-01:52:39

Bird: So, you moved into the place on Irving?

11-01:52:48

Rakosi: Yeah.

11-01:53:11

Bird: Well, I think that since this is our final session of the audio interview, I think this is where I'm supposed to say, "Well, I don't have any more questions, so we're finished." But I do. But that's okay.

11-01:53:21

Rakosi: You do have more questions?

11-01:53:24

Bird: I think I will always have more questions. I don't know if you can answer it, briefly—our time is running out. I am wondering one thing about how people tend to talk about the Objectivists as this past movement that happened in the thirties, yet you are still writing. You still have a lot of work, even more to publish it sounds like. I'm wondering what you think of that, whether you think that people should hold off and read what you are still writing, or whether that is okay for you, whether you think that the Objectivist poetry was in the past and now you are on to something else?

11-01:54:08

Rakosi: Well, the names of movements get in the way of clear thinking. It was called the Objectivist movement. It was not a movement in the first place; it was just a group of writers that happened to be writing at that time, and who were collected by Zukofsky for this objective that Pound had, to publish young, good American poets. Now, since Harriet Monroe insisted on a name for that first February 1931 issue of that *Poetry* magazine of hers, Zukofsky came up with the name Objectivist. You can see how much of it is pure happenstance. But it was simply four individual poets with significant differences—they might not even have liked each other's poetry—coming together. Another factor is that you start with something, but that doesn't mean that during the whole course of your writing career, you keep on writing that kind of poetry. So, that's what I meant by it gets in the way of clear thinking if you put your sights on the name of the group.

11-01:57:21

Bird: I was thinking of that, because I was thinking of the conference at Royaumont, and how you were put in this situation of being the last Objectivist, and needing to defend that from a misinterpretation.

11-01:57:38

Rakosi: Well, that's what happens. Nobody knows how to get out of that pickle. But just keep in mind that these are all individual poets, period. Examine each one as he is.

11-01:58:06

Bird: Okay, well, I think we can wrap up this interview.

11-01:58:11

Rakosi: This is the last one, huh? [laughter]

[end of session]

[Interview #12: November 13, 2002 video interview]

[Begin Audio File Rakosi 12 11-13-02.wav]

12-00:00:00

Bird: Okay, coming to the U.S. as a boy.

12-00:00:13

Rakosi: Well, I didn't know really what was happening to me; I was six years old. I was leaving my grandmother, whom I loved profoundly because she was the one who really brought me up, not my mother. It seemed like, okay, we are taking a voyage to America. I didn't know that I would never see her again, that it was a permanent departure, and later on, reflecting on this, it must have been agony to my grandmother, because she knew that she would never see me again, and that has always been on my mind, very sad. But anyhow, I met my stepmother for the first time in Baja, Hungary, she was a very, very strong, responsible woman, who apparently formed a good enough relationship with me so that I didn't reject her. When I left Hungary, I didn't know one word of English, not a single word. We were either second or third class on the ship, coming over—I think it went out of Rotterdam. So, that was kind of an adventure on shipboard for a little boy. My brother and I used to sneak up into first class, and look at what the people were like up there. The great moment came when we were approaching New York harbor, and everybody—I think it was in the morning, and everybody rushed out to get their first look at the Statue of Liberty. That was a great moment for everybody. Everybody was on deck, looking, looking. Then, when we landed, we were at—Staten Island.

12-00:03:54

Bird: Ellis Island?

12-00:03:55

Rakosi: Ellis Island, yeah. That was a different matter. You had to pass a physical examination, everybody, including all the children. If you had any trace of TB or any illness, you were not admitted, you were sent back. My stepmother, I call her my mother, was anxious, because my brother was a hunchback, and small. I think we had reason to worry that he might not pass the examination, but we did get through. My father had preceded us by a year. He had married my stepmother in this country, but she was Hungarian too. There was a small Hungarian colony in Chicago at that time, and that's where we landed first. We went directly from New York to Chicago. My father had landed a very good job there, a position actually, as chief watchmaker for a jobber of watches and jewelry in a big firm in Chicago. He had gone through a long process of training and journeyman, something like seven years, in Budapest, learning the craft of watchmaking and repairing, so he was one of the few, maybe only person who could repair—probably not the only person—but one of the few that could repair complicated sea clocks, like chronometers. He was skillful enough to really make every part of a watch on his lathe. So, he was a master craftsman. But again, as I said, I didn't know one word of English, but when I got on the playgrounds, in first grade, I think, in Chicago—I was six years old—I learned English in twenty-four hours, it seemed. People don't believe this. I was talking to school psychologists on this, because it puzzled me too, because I have no memory of gradually learning English. I had a good ear for it, of course, but I already knew two languages, Hungarian and German, because German was spoken in Hungary. I guess there was a flexibility in my language learning

skill that was there. I swear—I didn't have the accent quite right, right away, but on the playground, just listening to other kids, I picked it up right away. It's not so unusual. At early age, children can pick up a language quickly. Then it went on from there. How far do you want me to go? [Said to Bird]

12-00:08:45

Bird: I think that is good. We'll shift. So, much later, you went back to Hungary and visited Baja again?

12-00:09:04

Rakosi: Yes. I'd forgotten that I had that original address of my grandparents in Baja, but I failed to bring it with me on my trip. I was there with my daughter and son-in-law. I assumed there would be birth records, vital statistics in the City Hall there, but the Communists had moved all of that information to Budapest, in order to have better control of it, I suppose. But the minute we got into Baja and I saw the square there—the cities all had a public square, and the municipal buildings were all in that public square, I recognized it. The streetcars all came in there. That was the center. Everything moved into the center. It all looked familiar to me, and the houses looked just the same as when I left, which is probably accurate, because they don't tear down houses in Europe the way they do here. There would be a fence in front, and a yard, a house set back, and in back of that a big barn. It just looked familiar to me. I thought, "I'm back to my childhood town."

12-00:11:16

We were walking down the street, and I see a big new building there, a synagogue. First of all, it was a new building; and, then, a big synagogue? I couldn't understand. Ninety percent of the Jews had been killed at Auschwitz. How could it be? So, we walked in and I learned that it was no longer a synagogue, because there weren't any Jews left. The building had been converted into a public library, but there was a Jewish altar at one end. And the librarian told me that—I no longer had enough Hungarian to talk to her in Hungarian, but I could manage the German pretty well—that there was one Jew who worshipped every Friday night at the altar there. So, I asked the librarian, "How come there is this synagogue, a big new synagogue, here?" She said, "We thought the Jews would come back to Baja, that they simply had left, fled." The Nazis had, of course, told nobody they were sending the Jews to their extermination. They said that they were moving the Jews to labor camps where they could work for the Reich. So, it was a deep deception on the part of the Nazis that enabled them to transport Jews, all those millions of Jews, into extermination camps. Otherwise, I'm sure that if the Hungarian Jews had known that this was going to happen, they simply would have fought them, the way the Polish Jews did in the Warsaw ghetto, where they finally did rise in rebellion. They were exterminated, but at least they fought back.

Anyhow, then we were walking out and there was this long stone plaque, a handsome plaque outside the building. It was like a wall. It had many names engraved on it. I was going to go on, I wasn't going to pay any attention to it, but I paused. "Let's see what's here." Auschwitz was written on it. I looked down and I see the names of my grandmother and my mother. So that was how I learned that they had been killed in Auschwitz. So, that was it. Well, the death of my natural mother didn't mean that much to me because I really had had no personal relationship to her; it had all been with my grandmother. My grandfather must have died before Auschwitz. I didn't see his name there. That's a little of the story of the Hungarian Jews. I understand that about 10

percent of the Jews did survive, but only in Budapest, where they could hide with friends apparently, and change names—in a big city you can do that. In smaller city you can't, because everybody knows you.

12-00:17:10

Bird: Okay, and then maybe you could talk a little bit about how you found poetry as your calling.

12-00:17:21

Rakosi: Oh, yeah. Well, it was a slow process, actually. First of all, I had to develop confidence in myself that I had some literary understanding. This came when I was a senior in high school with a teacher who made some long comments about a book review I had written about George Meredith, who is a difficult writer actually for a high school student. The kind of intelligent, perceptive comments she made about my book review showed me that she thought I had talent, talent not so much yet in writing, but in my critical judgment; that I was really into literature. The next step came during my first year at the University of Chicago, it was just an ordinary freshman English class. It couldn't have been a creative writing class, because they were not yet in existence, but the professor, who might have been one of the well-known professors at the university then, Professor [Robert Morss] Lovett was one of them. He apparently had us do some writing. I was now in a very high-class university, with big expectations of students. Anyhow, there were two students there that I became friends with. One of them was a black student from Pittsburgh, a little older than I, and the other was Japanese, a lot older. At that time—let's see, I was just beginning to be seventeen years old—he looked to me like he was middle-aged, but maybe he wasn't. [laughs] Maybe he was just in his thirties. The black student wrote a very vigorous, masculine kind of poetry that was very much like Rudyard Kipling. I imagine that Kipling had influenced him, but that's not the kind of poetry—it was attractive to me, but I didn't think I could write that kind of poetry, at least not then. The other poet wrote what sounded like exquisite, very short poems, much like haikus, but as I recall, more lyrical. It was a really lyrical exquisite little form. They immediately appealed to me. That's what started me writing, under that stimulus. That was essentially the lyrical strain that Zukofsky recognized in me, when he said that I was the lyrical poet in the Objectivist grouping.

12-00:22:59

Bird: How did you become a social worker?

12-00:23:09

Rakosi: Oh gosh. Purely by accident, I didn't know what social work was when I entered into it. I had this BA in English from the University of Wisconsin at Madison, but that got me nowhere. You couldn't make a living with that. I thought, "Oh, jeez." I had to go back to Kenosha, and because school was over, I had not thought about a job. I had been so interested in developing my literary self at Madison, which is—actually, I worry a lot about the future, so this was unusual for me not to be worried about how I was going to make a living. Somehow, I had forgotten how, from Kenosha, I was really scared to death. I didn't want to be dependent on my folks. Anyhow, that would have meant that I was a failure. I happened to notice that the American Association of Social Workers were looking for social work applicants to study social work. So, they were taking applications in Chicago, and Kenosha is not far from Chicago, so I went for an interview in Chicago and I was received with open arms. Here was not only an

applicant, but a man, because social work had been largely a matter of volunteer women up to that point. So, I was accepted immediately, and got my first assignment in Cleveland at the family service. There is always a connection in social work education, between a university and a social work agency. It was never simply all academic. It was practice from day one, as well as academic. So, that's where I started, and I fell in love with social work.

12-00:26:57

Bird: And, how did you become a Communist?

12-00:27:06

Rakosi: Well, I was always a leftist. My father was a utopian socialist, and when I was in New York—I worked in New York between 1935 to 1940. My best friend, Leon Serabian [Herald], is an Armenian poet. His family had been wiped out by the Turks, and he was an older guy, a pretty good poet himself, but a self-educated man, who saw the issue as simply as, there are the poor and there are the rich. The poor have to fight to have a decent life. I wasn't particularly interested in joining the Communist party. I was what you call a fellow-traveler, a Communist sympathizer. There is nothing wrong with the ideals of communism. They're a damn sight better than the ideals of capitalism, which has no ideals. But, as a writer you don't want to become of an activist political party. You want to help them if you can and essentially you are a witness to what goes on, and that is the job of a writer, to be a witness.

12-00:29:50

For a long time, I was happy to—it was exciting to take part in street marches. It really is a very exhilarating experience to take part in a street rally, street march, which has idealism as its impetus. There are a number of young people doing this. To this day, it is still true. Leon kept saying to me, “Well, join the Party, join the Party. Why don't you join the Party?” “I'm no use to the Party. Why should I join the Party?” He kept insisting—not insisting—urging me, but then I also had a certain sense of curiosity of what really goes on inside the Communist party. Really hoping to find some brilliant minds or something that you could look up to. So, I finally did join. In those days, not everybody could join. You had to have some Communist vouch for you, to vouch that you were really sincere in joining. So, Leon vouched for me, and got me in and he thought that it was quite an accomplishment, and he praised me to the skies as a very honorable and sincere guy. [laughs] It's kind of funny when you look back to it.

12-00:32:37

In the street cells, there were cells. You really didn't do much, except march in rallies. You were strongly directed from central headquarters as to what you should be doing—what you were told to do, not “should” be doing. So, that part was not significant. Then I was told to join a cell in the organization in which I worked, which was a social welfare organization. It was actually the Jewish Family Service in New York, which was a large organization of several hundred people, which is big for a private social agency. There, to my astonishment, I found that the very brightest members of our staff were also members of the Party in that cell. Well, when you are in that kind of a cell, you are expected to do certain things, and what was happening was that your function was to talk to other members of the staff to persuade them to—as to the Communist issues, and to also become members of the Party. Well, that was a different story. I found that actually kind of repulsive, to secretly talk to people with the idea of

converting them to communism. I thought also that that was kind of boring and futile, in a way. Then we had visits from Communists from headquarters in the central office, and they were the dullest, the most dreary people who were simply aping the Russian Communist line, which is the biggest mistake that the Party in this country made. It was a fatal mistake to think that communism in this country would develop the way it developed in Russia. It was stupid. Anyhow, after a year, I just stopped going to meetings, and nobody missed me, because I never talked up much. I was a witness. I was interested in seeing what goes on.

12-00:37:23

Bird: And how did you become an Objectivist? How did the Objectivists come into being?

12-00:37:31

Rakosi: Well, the Objectivists themselves came into being, as Objectivists, they would have been in being anyhow, but as Objectivists, they came into being as a result of Ezra Pound's pushing—what's the name of the editor of *Poetry* magazine—Harriet Monroe, the editor of *Poetry* magazine, pushing her into making the magazine more vital and more literary. It had become a sloppy, sentimental magazine, imitating English Romantic poetry of the nineteenth century. Pound was interested in original American writing, and had an absolutely strong sense of that. He selected Louis Zukofsky to edit an issue of the magazine devoted to new young American poets who were good, and Zukofsky selected four of us or three of us, including himself, as the progenitors of Objectivism. The name came about simply because Harriet Monroe insisted on the name so that she could describe the issue of young poets in a movement. I could understand her wanting to do that, but in fact it was not a movement of any kind. These were simply poets whom Zukofsky greatly admired, and that's what happened.

12-00:40:56

Bird: Why did you decide to stop writing at the end of the thirties?

12-00:41:03

Rakosi: The major reason was that—there are a number of different reasons. The major reason was that I couldn't do social work and write at the same time. Professional social work, not simply welfare social work, is very absorbing, totally absorbing, both intellectually and emotionally, both go into social work. I simply couldn't do that and—I was beginning to raise a family—be married, pay attention to my family. I tried to do it for about a year, doing it at night, but then I would stay awake all night, and I simply couldn't do it. Then the other reason was that I was doing more lyrical work at the time, and I was still a Communist sympathizer. The pro-Communist sympathizer press—*New Masses*—was so down on any work that was not political that I just thought that there was no future in poetry for me anyhow. So, that entered into it.

12-00:43:38

Bird: How did that make you feel?

12-00:43:40

Rakosi: Terrible. It was agony for a couple of years, yeah. I thought I was—well, the idea entered in my mind that I might die. It was agony.

12-00:44:08

Bird: How did you start writing again and reading again?

12-00:44:17

Rakosi: I had to not only stop writing but reading poetry, so I was in a totally different world. I never read any poetry. Did I stop reading novels, I don't know? It's possible. So, for years and years, I'm in this wilderness, you might say, and I'm close to retirement. I'm director of Jewish Family and Children Services in Minneapolis, and I've been there for about twenty years. One day I get a letter from someone—Andrew Crozier, and the name didn't mean anything to me. "Who's Andrew Crozier? What does he want?" I read the letter through once, and I read it a second time to make sure I was reading it right. He identified himself as a student of, uh, at the University of Buffalo—

12-00:46:32

Bird: Charles Olson?

12-00:46:34

Rakosi: Yeah, Charles Olson. I didn't know Olson. Olson came to prominence during the time I wasn't reading anything literary. So, Olson's name was also a non-name to me. Olson had advised Andrew to read my work. He had looked up everything I had ever written in the magazine and made copies for himself, and he was simply inquiring what I was up to now, since he was interested. Now, the idea that someone in his twenties would be interested in my work after all those years was enough to make me start again.

12-00:48:08

Bird: How did he track you down?

12-00:48:12

Rakosi: I don't see how, yet the post office got to me because he wrote through Reznikoff, and Reznikoff thought that I worked for the water department. So, I don't know how got it from the water department somehow to me. That was no mean trick, because my legal name is Callman Rawley, and Carl Rakosi—it was funny. But he got to me anyhow.

12-00:49:14

Bird: How about your meeting with Borges?

12-00:49:20

Rakosi: Very few people have made a really profound impression on me. Borges was one. I was writer-in-residence at the University of Wisconsin. It must have been 1970 or '71. Something like that. By the way, that really didn't mean very much at that time, because the university was such a big place. It was something like sixty thousand students. I thought the appointment of writer-in-residence—people would know I was there. Nobody knew I was there, but I was assigned some classes to teach in creative writing. So, I was kind of a nobody or a non-body, despite the title.

12-00:50:48

He was invited to come and give some lectures in the Spanish department at the university. Now, I had read Borges. So, he came and he was—I never knew a man who could talk for an hour and a half, with the most chiseled marble-like ideas, and English prose. His father had been English, so he was just as good in English as he was in Spanish. A great mind. I mean a mind of great depth, and we became fairly close, because he was blind by that time. His wife, a young woman, had set me next to him, because she said well, I'm a poet, so he would have something to talk about with another poet and not just an academic professor. So, with a blind man, you are

physically very close because you have to show him where his fork is and knife, what he has on his plate. That leads to a remarkable closeness. When he had to go to the bathroom and his wife couldn't go with him, so she asked me to go with him. While we were in there, he says to me, "My name is Borges." "Oh, Borges, I know who you are." We had some wonderful talks together. He didn't have much respect for young Argentinean poets. He thought that they were off on the wrong track. They didn't know much. He was a great admirer of [e. e.] cummings, and I'm an admirer of cummings too, as a poet. We had similar tastes in poetry.

[Start File Rakosi 13 11-13-02]

13-00:00:16

Rakosi: Well, looking back over my poetry, I surprise myself at the extent to which I'm a political poet—

13-00:00:36

Bird: Wait, wait.

[Disk pauses]

13-00:00:41

Rakosi: I was saying that looking back over my work, I'm surprised the extent to which I'm a political poet as well as a social poet and a satirist and a lyrical poet. I hope. Let me give you some political poetry. Maybe I'm a political poet so much, because I particularly like—the political life of the country continues to be so disturbing, and from my point of view so evil. Here is a poem, this is a short one called "Museum of Historical Objects: New Acquisition," and I have a quote here from *Othello*: "And must they all be hanged that swear and lie?" and the answer is, "Every one." So, this is the new acquisition in this Museum of Historical Objects:

An honest word
(embalmed in amber)
out of Washington.

As rare
as Hippopotamus meat

or a blade of timothy
behind a bumpkin's ear.

“I was born in a log cabin”

“That’s enough!”

Here’s another:

“Sir, can you tell us
who you are?”

“Excuse me, I’m late.
I’m on the way to the presidency.”

Let’s ask an ordinary citizen.

“Sir, how do you feel about this?”

“I feel like Prometheus
chained in a limitless
and bare universe

held together by rigor
and the same old working man,
his nose to the grindstone,

while investors and billionaires
swarm in the city.”

As on a distant planet,
devoid of public events,
A beggar stands

most patiently
with a tin cup,
an engraving for the ages.

13-00:06:31

This is kind of a summation. It’s called “THE ACTORS.”

Maxwell a corporation head,
a self-made man
who loves his creator.

Strangelove a fundamentalist
who has the total clarity
of a small mind.

Luger a talk show host
a curious mixture
of geniality and venom.

Meriwether a socialist.
Had he lived
when the world was created

he would have offered
the creator
some valuable suggestions

Primrose an optimist
who instinctively
lives on ambrosia,

and leaves everything
he can't digest
on his plate

Dulcimer a celebrated
poet a sheep
in sheep's clothing

Pixel a modest
little man
of few words.

Curtain!

the play is beginning
A Comedy of Errors.

13-00:08:49

Something along a similar line, not the same, has to do with the Negro situation. In the 1940s, 1950s, there was a Negro actor called Stepin Fetchit. Do you remember him?

13-00:09:29

Bird: No, I don't.

13-00:09:32

Rakosi: Anyhow, he was a black movie star who used to shamle along, you know, just very slow. He can barely move, and act dumb, and be very dumb. I always had the idea, he's not so dumb maybe. This is kind of a parody of a white man's idea of the Negro. In fact, you have to know two things: in those days the white man's idea was that the black man doesn't want to work. He was lazy, just inherently lazy, all of these inherent qualities that the black man is supposed to have. He's lazy, he's no good. He deserves what he is, and what he's become.

Anyhow, it's called "The Black Slave, as Stepin Fetchit might have written it."

13-00:11:09

It's true, Master,
I never liked to work.
Even sitting on my ass
was too much for me.

But master's in the cold
cold ground, and I'm
sitting here laughing.

13-00:11:32

Bird: I'm going to pause it. [tape pauses] Okay, we are ready.

13-00:11:39

Rakosi: Gee, I've got to find the—[pauses] I want to read the poem that is really about my experience as a social worker in New Orleans. This was really history, because the Federal Transit Bureau in the 1930s was established because American working men, simply, there was no work for them, so they would keep moving from city to city on freight trains, hoping to find work, but not finding it anywhere and finally just moving around, because it was too painful to return home and just do nothing. So, by the time I was in New Orleans, I was director of casework services for the bureau. Transients were already thoroughly demoralized. Nobody expected to find work. Transients would come in and be deloused, and spend a few days in a camp, see a social worker, with the hope that we could do something for them. It was an emergency program so that professionally trained social workers were not available either. I had to recruit people who were simply university graduates and train them as best as I could very quickly, and that is the situation I'm talking about in this poem called "New Orleans Transit Bureau, 1934:"

13-00:14:54

Assigned
 a desk and an office,
 and his name on the door
 for all to see,
 James Watts, Social Worker,
 secure,
 and sitting before him
 a dependent, aimless human being.
 Impulses hitherto encysted
 and out of sight
 like the beautiful great seed
 of the avocado
 gushed up
 warm
 overflowing
 out to his shoulder blades.
 What is your song,
 compassion,

A low blow, Mr. Henk.

Do what you want.

I can't stop you.

Rogan's eyes now to the fore:

He won't bare his soul.

How could we know

what we are dealing with?

Ouch!

R's eyes:

or how to help him?

What can you do, Miss Rogan?

So it ended.

I was sent to Algiers

with the other saps

to be rehabilitated by work.

I remain what I am

(like Henk),

laughing and joking through it all.

Hank is awright.

Hick!

Selby is awright.

Hick!

You too, Miss Rogan.

You're awright.

13-00:19:04

Well, New Orleans was the one city that everybody wanted to visit in those days. It was the most interesting. It was like going to a foreign country. The culture was so totally different. The mix of people was so totally different. I wasn't into the jazz scene then, but that was going on too. New Orleans is just a wonderful old, old city. Everybody wanted to go there.

13-00:20:10

Bird: Can you tell the story of your own freight train rides? You were talking about how the men were coming by freight trains to New Orleans.

13-00:20:22

Rakosi: Well, this was when I was in Texas. I was always curious about things, and I had already tried different, not occupations, but preparations for occupations. I was in the graduate English department at the University of Texas at Austin, and decided that I didn't like English professors. I didn't like the academic atmosphere. It was too pompous and affected. I tried law, and studied law for a year, and decided I didn't have the oral skills to come up against these extremely articulate, talkative Texans. So, I gave up trying to become a lawyer, although I was very much taken by the study of jurisprudence, which

has a lot of philosophical basis to it. Then I went into medical school, and did my premedical studies in chemistry and physics and was in the medical school in the southern port.

13-00:22:54

Bird: Galveston?

13-00:22:56

Rakosi: Galveston, Texas, and did pretty well, very well actually, in anatomy, but I had to drop out because I ran out of money and there were no grants at that time for medical students. So, I was thrown back into going back to social work. While I was at the university at Austin, there was a New Yorker there who was going back to New York by way of freight trains. Well, that sounded possibly very interesting to me, but I didn't know how you did it. We started from Galveston, and he was always ahead of me, and showed me what had to be done. You had to be where the freight train either stopped, for water maybe, or was moving slowly around a bend. That's how it began. I started by riding the tops. You'd climb up the iron ladder that was on the side of the boxcar, and there was a wide platform, along which the railway men would walk. You'd go up there and stay there, and at night you'd lie on your stomach, wrap your legs and arms around this plank and hope that during your sleep you wouldn't let go and just roll off. Or you would hope the railway men didn't come along and throw you off, because they wouldn't simply just ask you to get off. They'd throw you off. Fortunately, that didn't happen to me. There was one fellow who used to come through Arkansas, who was supposed to be a mean bugger. He was out to really get you and throw you off, nasty.

13-00:26:51

Then sometimes you would get inside of a car. Then the switchman would close the door on you. Then it would be pitch dark, because no light could come in from the outside. That's a dark that you'd never see in nature. You'd never know who was inside with you. There was one time when I thought we were all alone, just the two of us. When the doors were finally opened, and we were approaching St. Louis that time, the doors opened all of a sudden. There were about forty guys in this freight car. If you got caught, you'd go to jail. You had to jump out of these cars. In the first place, the floor of the boxcar is about this high—very high—from the railroad track, so you had to jump way out, in order not to get caught under the wheels. One by one, these guys just leaped out. Well, I hadn't ever done a thing like that. That's a very physical thing to do. A poet isn't supposed to be able to do that. To my amazement, one fellow had a wooden leg. I didn't see how he could do it. Well, he sailed out. He did it. He just bam bang. He just stood like that. Actually, that wooden leg may have helped him. He was a young guy. Well, it came my turn. Oh jeez, I was sweating. Oh, this was it. I just flew out. I made it all right. We had some excitement. Ordinarily they didn't lock the boxcars, but one time the switchman did lock the cars. I thought, "We could die in here and they wouldn't know what was happening." But anyway, it was fun.

13-00:30:33

Bird: I was wondering if you could say something about the pictures in the *Earth Suite* book, since we have a camera.

13-00:31:07

Rakosi: [long pause] My publisher, Nicholas Johnson, asked Basil King to illustrate this particular book, and Basil is interesting. He's not a—much of a painter, but it is a

cartoon style of drawing, which really—I was a little worried that the drawing would sidetrack the reader, that it would be too much of its own thing and not be relevant in any way to the poetry. But to my surprise it worked pretty well, not as illustration, but as an accompaniment to the poetry. For example, on this New Orleans Transit Bureau poem, this is the—

13-00:33:04

Bird: Okay.

13-00:33:04

Rakosi: It's not bad, it goes with this.

13-00:33:22

Bird: And he read the poems and then he put those—

13-00:33:32

Rakosi: [long pause] This is the illustration that went with—I shouldn't call it an illustration. It is a drawing that followed a poem called "Incident in Hell," which is about the tragedy of the American Indian, and that's not bad.

13-00:34:12

Bird: Do you want to read that poem?

13-00:34:17

Rakosi: Sure. It's called "INCIDENT IN HELL."

Our ancestors were happy
when the white man came.
We made him welcome
and took care of him.

When he was hungry
we fed him. We never
did him any harm.
He seemed honest

and we trusted him,
but once he was settled
his words became as flimsy
as fluff on a cottonwood

and he acted like a coyote
around a hen house.
There was no limit to
his greed and cunning.

His soul glared the way
an owl glares at
a covey of quail-chicks.

He had no mercy,
yet he said
there is a God.

What is he?
Who sent him here?

With that the old chief,
his faced aligned with dignity,
said no more

but the agony in his eyes
was like a caged beast
in the Inferno

as it struck bedrock:
kill or be killed

signed, Playboy of
the Western Hemisphere

Alas, old chief!

13-00:35:58

What the white Anglo-Saxon did with the American Indian is actually much worse than what he did with the blacks. That's not been sufficiently recognized.

13-00:36:26

Bird: And the other book you are reading from is "The Old Poet's Tale." Can you say a little bit about that poem, "The Old Poet's Tale?"

13-00:36:41

Rakosi: Well, "The Old Poet's Tale." I had originally written a prose piece on the death of George Oppen, because I was very close to him, and Mary, his wife, had asked me to go with her to take him to the home for the aged in Oakland. When she heard that I had written this prose piece, she became very agitated and was afraid that this would harm George's reputation as a poet. He had Alzheimer's. So, I said, "Okay, I won't publish this for another two years or more, or maybe not at all." But, in the meantime, I thought, "I have to get this down somehow." So, I disguised who this was about in the poem, and wrote it about an anonymous ancient poet, who had Alzheimer's and who was dying, and that is "The Old Poet's Tale."

13-00:38:57

Bird: Do you want to read that?

13-00:39:01

Rakosi: That's a long poem. That's a considerable poem. Do you want me to read that? [pause] That will take about ten minutes to read, maybe more. What do you think?

13-00:39:37

Bird: I think we should read it.

13-00:39:40

Rakosi: You do?

13-00:39:38

Bird: Uh-huh.

13-00:39:40

Rakosi: I've got to find it then. [pause]

13-00:40:49

The poem is projected—let's put it this way, the voice in the poem is not mine but Oppen's, and he's reached a stage where he knows he knows me from somewhere, but he's not sure who I am. He is, in the course of the poem, he's being transported to the home for the aged. It's in sections. The first one, "Character:"

I myself have never written
about the anguish
of death, for I write

only from experience
but now that I
have Alzheimer's Disease

the only serious subject
as in a mortuary
is mortality.....

and I weep!

There was no mystery
about my character
or working principles.

Already into the
disease, I said to a young poet,

"Because you write
does not mean
a poetic impulse.

That remains
to be proved."

The curious
pertinacity
of character!

13-00:42:43

Another episode, two, "A Day in the Country."

One by one—interesting, this actually happened—

One by one,
 the young poets,
 cautioned by my wife,

approached me
 for a pleasant word,
 then retreated,

I standing by myself,
 my face clouded over,
 and I replied politely.

How they bustled and
 chatted, the wives
 setting the tables

laying out the cheeses
 for a picnic
 the men in a huddle

by themselves
 drinking beer,
 good Joe's.

How so light-hearted
 as if carrying
 a high note inside?

Care-free too?
 Must be the outdoors
 and the idea

of a picnic.
 a case of summer
 ungluing poets.

Bless the everyday.
 "This is the weather
 the cuckoo likes

and so do I"
 and Bruegel:
 come out, peasants,

pick your beaux [text has beau]
 swing your partners
 and doe-si-doe

never mind that
I'm tied to a post
like a dog waiting

for his mistress
to reappear
with the mustard

while the fiddles
tear up the air,
damn the Alzheimer,

hold on, Flo,
whirl to the right
and let 'er go.

13-00:44:46

Number three, "The Destination"—I should have some more light here.

In the biblical vapors
light appeared
and it was morning

and the time had come
to take me to
The Home For the Aged.

I had never seen
my poor wife so downcast
and quiet, her eyes

set where I was not,
her jaws clenched,
unnatural the whole house.

Thus we set out,
she driving,
I strapped in.

On the way
a familiar figure
joined us,

greeting me
as if I were
an old acquaintance.

I knew the face,
the eyes in particular,
unaccountably attendant,

(from somewhere)
 but not the name
 nor why he was there.

I'll call him
 Shade, trustworthy
 Shade, my *he*

As I approached
 his identity, however,
 I lost my way

while they chatted
 about nothing
 out of the ordinary

as if to show
 they were ingenuous,
 not to worry, and so on [text of poem is "etc.,"]

but I had no stomach
 for such words
 and it was lost on me.

We were both aware now
 of each other
 without looking

when in that frame
 I heard THE SCREAM
 by Edvard Munch

but could not tell
 from whose mouth
 it was vomiting,

we were so close.

The next thing I knew
 the talking had stopped.
 We had reached

our destination,
 The Home For The Aged
 and a dead silence.

Reluctantly my poor wife
 and the reliable Shade
 carried my bags

into the vestibule,
I trailing behind
without a word.

We were now, I saw,
In the milieu
of very aged women

in the final
stages of disease
and infirmity.

They were walking
slowly,
step by step,

uncertain, hesitant,
to and from
their rooms.

*“Femme je suis,
pauvre et ancienne.”*—French, my French [chuckles]

My wife of many years
just stood with Shade
and looked on

not knowing what to say,
the *physical* sight
was so overpowering.

For the first time
I was alone
with my fate

and fell inward
to the center
where it was stark

and utter, locked in,
my eyes distraught
and lost.

My body remained
through all this
tall and straight,

however, towering,
it seemed to me,
over the little

white-haired ladies
as if asserting
my eternal distinction.

At that moment
three very frail women,
better dressed

than the others,
appeared, limping
slowly towards me

from the dining room,
absorbed in talking.
I saw only the smaller

of the three. Goodness
like a philosopher's stone
irradiated the air

around her, her demeanor
kind and gentle,
what I imagine as Hebraic,

but in the exquisite
proportion of qualities,
the exquisite reserve,

she was a lady
from a far countree
(probably North)

with delicate white hair.

As she approached,
she looked up
and our eyes met

and I felt good
in her presence.
Walking over,

I greeted her
as a kindred spirit
and with a gallant

but restrained gesture
I bent over
as if to help her.

Smiling softly
 she acknowledged this
 and walked on.

By God, I thought,
 I'm going to make it.
 But it was not so.

13-00:51:08

Number four, "The Song."

A circle of chairs.
 Voices of aged ladies
 and an Adam.

Outside the circle
 a young woman, smiling,
 with a guitar.

She greets each by name
 as they approach slowly
 from the dining room

and settle in their chairs.

In the biblical vapors
 kindness, sweetest
 of the small notes

in the world's ache,
 most modest and gentle
 of the elements,

entered man before history
 and became his daily
 connection, let no man

tell you otherwise.

The playing begins
 on tremulous strings.
 Heartily she sings

and calls on them
 with her eyes,
 her urgent being,

to sing along,
 she will sustain them.
 Her young spirit,

undaunted, pleads
to stay old age,
to disregard all odds

and obliterate it,
calling on song to help,
and faintly one voice

responds and a few heads
nod to the strong beat,
but Adam's eyes are closed

and some have one eye open
and the other X-ed out
as in a cartoon.

When the song is over,
there are little smiles
here and there

and the faces are not
quite so cheerless.
Slowly then the ladies

stand up and disband,
lumbering by as before.
When he saw me, Adam

stopped a moment
with a friendly look
as if glad to find

a man to chat with,
but he's had a stroke
and is now forever

about to speak.

Another time, another singer,
of majestic girth under
Calpurnia's headpiece,

looking straight ahead
into the space
of Handel and opera

as she pleaded with Caesar
not to go to the Senate
that day (never mind that

after the event she moved
 his money and papers
 to Anthony's house...

we have Plutarch's
 word for it).
 In any case,

the style was the thing,
 full-bosomed, heroic,
 industrial age or no.

God, how she sang,
 very erect under
 her crow's nest,

leaning back slightly,
 defying all modern modes,
 and the small hairs

on my back tingled
 and I felt cold
 inside and faint.

Wife, if music be
 the conduit of death,
 play on!

13-00:55:19

Number five.

Who

Word now came,
 my room was ready.
 A nurse led us

down a long hallway
 and my wife and Shade,
 the executioners,

followed with my bags
 to a clean room
 of exact arrangement:

two identical blond dressers,
 two plain beds,
 two identical armchairs,

slightly worn,
the scene blanched
of former occupants.

My wife busied herself
and hung my favorite
landscape over the bed

and set an old snapshot
on the mantle
to remind me who I was.

I could see a younger man
there and a woman, smiling
and in vigorous health

whose excess radiated
from them in tiny pulses.
I could see

but not remember.

On the other dresser
a similar snapshot.
Of the absent room-mate.

In the picture he is
standing in the sun
in shirt-sleeves,

an ordinary man,
middle-aged,
being photographed.

Next to him,
also in shirt-sleeves,
David Ben Gurion,

the prime minister
equally plain.
No other sign

of the room-mate.
Being led down the hall
by a nurse, no doubt.

Parting was not hard
for me that day
since my wife was coming back

the next morning, which
she did and took me for
a drive in the park

and we walked
in the spring flowers.

And the head nurse,
a bluff, good-natured
black woman came by

my room and introduced
herself by her first name.
I liked her at once

and gave her mine.
And after the paper
ran a story on me

I danced with the dark-eyed
singer who came on Fridays
and had a tender visit

with my brother,
as when we were boys.
But I could not hold on.

I ate well, yet became
gaunt and agitated
and could no longer be

trusted in the dining room
and had to have
my meals brought to me.

My absent room-mate
had come back,
a small harmless old man

but incontinent. I paid
no attention to him
except to his stench

at which I raged
and shouted.
And I expostulated

with my wife: "We've been
together fifty years.
Why do I have to be here?"

Aren't we husband and wife?"
 Then my memory got worse.
 I was now no longer able

to read, or to write my name
 but only my wife knew.
 God, how restless I was!

And menaced! I had to escape.
 But I was afraid
 I would be stopped

and questioned
 at the front door.
 At siesta time,

therefore, I climbed
 over a wall and
 wandered for hours through

black neighborhoods,

lost!

[Begin Audio File Rakosi 14 11-13-02.wav]

{Continue with "The Old Poet's Tale}

14-00:00:01

How can I
 explain my confusion?
 Women had to bathe

and dress me now,
 overworked, grandmothers,
 poor, black,

whom in former years
 I would have hailed
 compassionately

but I was terrified
 and raised my fist
 when they approached.

"What's the matter?
 Don't you trust us?"
 said the head nurse,

the voice sure, steady.
I couldn't answer.
"Don't you trust *me*?"

"I trust you."
Nevertheless they
were terrifying

and I struck back
and had to be strapped
to my chair.

God knows what
my medications were!
Then my kidneys failed.

I was rushed to a hospital
and had only a few days
to live but I survived.

The question now was,
How much longer?
The Home would not

take me back and I was
transferred, therefore,
to a locked facility

where I died in a coma
on a Saturday evening,
September 9th, whether

from Alzheimer's or
another kidney failure
or because I had not

pissed in nine days
I do not know,
but thus I ended

who had upheld the
poetic impulse and
looked on with dismay

at its undoing by
innumerable theorists.

14-00:02:01

There's a coda to the poem, and I have to explain at the end of the poem there's a Middle English word, "steorfan," which means dying, or death. This is the coda to the poem.

"God, if I had
known I was
going to live

to 97, I would
have took better
care of myself."

No response.

The giber's
crucified himself.

Where's Parakletos?

In a ballad.

Ambiguous reader,
should I have been
more devious?
more intellectual?

The compassionate
Shade stood silent
in my integrity,
looking eternal.

"He is my adversary!"
"Adieu," he muttered
and dissolved.

What country is this?

of old words
an old country

country:
ding! dong!

old heart
old God

steorfan

14-00:04:18

Rakosi: This a complex poem, the last part in particular with the reference to Parakletos. The reader has to work on that.

14-00:04:31

Bird: How did you spend your ninety-ninth birthday last week?

Rakosi: I knew the University of Pennsylvania was going to interview me and ask me to read some poems on the Internet, but I didn't know that it was going to be a birthday celebration. I don't myself celebrate ninety-nine years of living as—I quote an old friend of mine in Minneapolis who says he doesn't want to get any—he's in his eighties—he says he doesn't want to get any younger, he just wants to get older. [laughter] I can tell you, people seem to want to celebrate the age. I don't know what it's like to feel ninety-nine. Well, a young person can't imagine what that could be, and it just occurred to me that this young Argentinean poet is in his thirties, so I'm three times as old as he is. How could you—

14-00:06:39

Bird: And me. [laughs]

14-00:06:39

Rakosi: And you. How can you believe that? So, the whole thing is unbelievable. We'll say I'm not really ninety-nine. Anyhow, they had this celebration in which it was set up that the questions that would come in from people would be filtered through Al Filreis. He's a professor of English at the University [of Pennsylvania]. So, I got the questions from him, and it went—I was relaxed. All I had to do was talk through the telephone, and I didn't even have to hold it; it was set for me on the table. There were good questions, and at the end, they all sang happy birthday, the whole group at the Kelly Writer's house. So, it was an unforgettable event.

14-00:08:20

Bird: Do you have anything else that you want to put on there?

14-00:08:32

Rakosi: Is there a meditative poem that you want to put on there? There is one poem that Filreis asked me to read. It's one of the meditative poems, and it might be a good poem to end with. [long pause]

Well, I can't find it. I'll substitute one for you:

WHAT'S THIS WORLD'S ACHE?

What's this world's ache

for which

the ego falls

to its knees, crying,

and claims to speak,

bound by a sigh

as in song

where one can sit

within the nature

of a voice?
Prospero himself
in these boundaries
could not do more.

O cantus firmus!

[end of interview]

KIMBERLY ELIZABETH BIRD

At the time of this interview, Kimberly Bird was a doctoral candidate in the History of Consciousness Department at the University of California, Santa Cruz. Her dissertation is on left poets of the 1930s writing in California. She earned her M.A. in Literature at the University of Colorado, Boulder.

