

GREENWICH VILLAGE SOCIETY FOR HISTORIC PRESERVATION
EAST VILLAGE
ORAL HISTORY PROJECT

Oral History Interview
JONAS MEKAS

By Liza Zapol
New York, NY
May 23, 2014

Oral History Interview with Jonas Mekas, 05/23/2014

Narrator	Jonas Mekas
Birthdate	12/24/1922
Birthplace	Lithuania
Interviewee Age	91
Interviewer	Liza Zapol
Place of Interview	Jonas Mekas' Studio in Clinton Hill, Brooklyn, NY
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Jonas Mekas, Date and photographer unknown.

Quotes from Oral History Interview with Jonas Mekas

“When I bought [the Courthouse that became the Anthology Film Archives, the neighborhood people kept asking me, “Do] you really think you can do something with this building in this drug-infested neighborhood?” Because many other buildings were in ruins on 1st Street, and all around the neighborhood there. And people thought it was hopeless. They didn’t even want to start fixing their buildings, because once a week the police used to close the ends of 2nd Street, between Avenue A and Third Avenue, and swoop. Every morning you’d come in and you’d find all the leftovers. You can recognize on the street what drugs they were using. And the police used to arrest [them]. But then the next day they were all there again. It was a drug area.

So once we moved [in], after I bought the building, the neighborhood [said], “Really? You think you can do something with it?” I said, “Yes, I’m going to do it. We are staying here.” So then they began thinking and began fixing. They created the block association to fight drug [peddlers] and worked with the police. And within like two, three years, the neighborhood changed completely. They began fixing the buildings. So that was the result of me [buying] and beginning to fix up [the] courthouse building”

(Mekas p.2)

“I was arrested first for screening *Flaming Creatures*. That was at that [Bridge] Theater, corner of Third Avenue and 4th Street. And later at the Writers’ Stage on 4th Street, for showing *Un Chant D’ Amour*, Jean Genet’s film. Why did I screen it? I knew I was going to be arrested, of course. I even had sandwiches in my pocket. I knew I would be arrested.

Because [the] independent filmmakers, we did not believe we should license our films. It was like taking a stand against licensing and censorship. Who are they, the Board of Education, or whatever? I don’t remember what they called themselves. I was arrested. Ken Jacobs was arrested, and Flo [Florence] Jacobs, the same time. But our case helped to abandon censorship two, three years later.”

(Mekas pp. 4-5)

“And so I faced those who rejected me and those who helped [support the renovations for the current Anthology Film Archives building]. And it took me ten years, but I did it. Ten years. It was the most challenging and miserable period of my life, because it was tough. It was tough. But it changed the neighborhood.”

(Mekas p.15)

“Well, one of the real bad changes happened two years ago when they destroyed—closed—the Mars Bar. Mars Bar, corner of 1st Street and Second Avenue, just around the corner from Anthology, was maybe the last bar that retained all the dirt and all the whatever people thought was bad—and they never want to go into a bar in the lower part of Manhattan. And there were a good number of such [bars] on the Bowery. But they were already destroyed, or changed.

But Mars Bar remained there, and it was not at all just a Bowery bar. Like no other bar, where you could just go in and you always find the same people there, who were drunk already. We took filmmakers [there] who came to Anthology from other countries. Many of them have been there. It was really our place.

I did a lot of filming and taping there. I have a film I made on it. And then that building was destroyed, and now there is a bank. Just opened there where Mars Bar was. So that whole corner is beginning to change, but fortunately this side of Houston—north of Houston and east of

Second Avenue—much of it has been protected by the Landmarks [Preservation] Commission. The Anthology Film Archives building is now in the protected [areas]....large chunks of neighborhoods are on the map protected by Landmarks Commission.
(Mekas p.17)

Summary of Oral History Interview with Jonas Mekas

New York City

- WWII
- Moves to NYC after war
 - Williamsburg, Brooklyn (1949)
 - 95 Orchard Street, Lower East Side (1953)
 - Neighborhood
 - Orchard Street
 - Jewish residents
 - Shift in city planning after 5 years
 - Jewish community dispersed
 - 14th St
 - Community: Ukrainian, Russian, Polish, Jewish
 - West Village
 - Cedar Tavern
 - The White Horse Tavern
 - Dylan Thomas, Robert Flaherty
 - Chelsea Hotel, 23rd St.
 - Film Society, 6th Ave. & 9th St.
 - Cinema 16, 8th Ave. & 24th St.
 - Personalities: Lenny Bruce, Miles Davis, Salvador Dali, Jack Smith
 - 515 East 13th St., between Ave. A & 1st Ave. (1960)
 - Neighborhood
 - Residents: Allen Ginsberg, Robert Frank & Alfred Leslie
 - Beat Generation
 - Gentrification
 - Theater Happenings
 - Notable Locations
 - Stanley Bar
 - Tompkins Square Park
 - Charles Theater, Ave. A between 12th & 13th St.
 - Started 'Underground Cinema'
 - Midnight theater series
 - Jack Smith - ticket seller
 - Jack starts '*Mad Magazine*'
 - Films '*Flaming Beach*', 1960
 - Writer's Stage, 4th St. between 2nd & 3rd Ave.
 - Arrest for screening '*Un Chant D'Amour*', Jean Genes film
 - Andy Warhol & Velvet Underground show (mid 1960s)
 - 414 Park Avenue South, between 28th & 29th St. (1962)
 - Film-Makers' Cooperative (February 1961)
 - Unable to get films distributed - cooperative becomes distributor for independent filmmakers

- Operated from Park Ave. loft: work & home space
 - Cooperative comes from 'The New American Cinema Group' Mekas started in 1959
 - Film distributor to universities, colleges, galleries
 - Andy Warhol - filmmaker participant
 - Film & poetry gathering space
 - Audience/participants: Robert Frank, Allen Ginsberg, Salvador Dali, Jack Smith
 - Neighborhood
 - Belmore Cafeteria / 24 hours
- 491 Broadway & Broome (SoHo) (1970s - 2004; 30 years)
- Moves to Brooklyn, 2004
 - Sutton Street & Meeker
 - Oil spill location
 - 13 Lexington Ave., Clinton Hill (current home)
- Work discussed
 - Independent filmmaker
 - Writer
 - The Village Voice
 - 1958, Mekas writes about cinema [0:55:00.0]
 - Previously no cinema coverage
 - Leaves in 1978 (20 years)
 - Editor - Film Culture Magazine
 - Film curator
 - Founder - Anthology Film Archives
 - Founder - Film-Makers' Cooperative
 - Manager - Film-Makers' Cinemateque
- 'Underground Cinema' / Independent Filmmaking
 - Mekas arrested for screenings
 - *Flaming Creatures* at Rich Theater (3rd Ave. & 4th St.)
 - *Un Chant D'Amour*, Jean Genes film at Writers Stage (4th St. between 2nd & 3rd Ave.)
 - Against licensing & censorship
 - Shift - film equipment more portable and less expensive
 - Signal Corps Army, recorded images & sounds of the war
 - After war, army sells equipment & film / affordable
 - Store at 8th Ave. & 55th St.
 - Morris Engel film '*The Little Fugitive*', early 1950s
 - Rogosin's film '*On The Bowery*'
- Anthology Film Archives Founding Story
 - Jerome Hill: financial supporter of Anthology Film Archives, also a filmmaker
 - Mekas met Hill in mid 1950s
 - Partners with Hill: 425 Lafayette St/ Shakespeare Theater
 - First Anthology Film Archives

- Two years later Jerome dies
 - Mekas needs to find another space
 - Jerome Hill leaves land for Anthology in will
 - Land sold for \$50,000
- 80 Wooster Street (SoHo)
 - Mekas buys into a co-op started by George Maciunas for \$8,000
 - Basement used for Anthology space (1974-1981)
- Courthouse, 2nd Ave. & 2nd St.
 - Operational until early 1960s
 - 1979 Anthology Film Archives buys building in city auction
 - Funding from Jerome Hill, \$50,000
 - Building needed repairs
 - Cost to convert to a film museum - \$1.9 million
 - City Auction
 - Commissioner for the Arts, Henry Geldzahler, restricts sell to non-profit corporations
 - History of Building
 - Financing building renovations
 - 80 Wooster sold
 - Art portfolios to raise money [0:10:00.0]
 - Neighborhood (1970s)
 - Drugs: Block Association created to fight drug use
- Current Day Anthology Film Archives
 - \$300, 000 deficit each year
 - Renovations
 - Notable neighborhood locations
 - Anthology Film Archives Building protected by the Landmark Commission

General Interview Notes:

This is a transcription of an oral history that was conducted by the Greenwich Village Society for Historic Preservation.

GVSHP began the Greenwich Village Oral History Project in 2013. The GVSHP Greenwich Village Oral History Project includes a collection of interviews with individuals involved in local businesses, culture, and preservation, to gather stories, observations, and insights concerning the changing Village. These interviews elucidate the personal resonances of the neighborhood within the biographies of key individuals, and illustrate the evolving neighborhood.

Oral history is a method of collecting memories and histories through recorded interviews between a narrator with firsthand knowledge of historically significant events and a well-informed interviewer, with the goal of adding to the historical record.

The recording is transcribed, lightly edited for continuity and clarity, and reviewed by the interviewee. Changes are indicated in brackets []. Oral history is not intended to present the absolute or complete narrative of events. Oral history is a spoken account by the interviewee in response to questioning. Whenever possible, we encourage readers to listen to the audio recordings to get a greater sense of this meaningful exchange.

The views expressed by the contributor(s) are solely those of the contributor(s) and do not necessarily reflect the opinions or endorsement of our organization.

Oral History Interview Transcript

Mekas: I think we should always start immediately. Walk in, you start.

Zapol: Okay, so here we are. We've started.

Mekas: That's a good piece of advice. May 23, 2014. Brooklyn, on 13 Lexington Avenue. Clinton Hill area. Talking about the Lower East Side.

Zapol: The East Village.

Mekas: Greenwich Village, Lower East Side, East Side.

Zapol: Yes. This is Liza Zapol, and it's the Greenwich Village Society for Historic Preservation Oral History Project.

Mekas: And this is Jonas Mekas: M-E-K-A-S.

Zapol: Thank you. Jonas, if you can say in a sentence or two who you are?

Mekas: I am a filmmaker and a writer and curator of film. And I also run, started, and still have a lot to do with Anthology Film Archives, which is located in the East Village, corner of Second Avenue and 2nd Street, in the former courthouse building, a small court that existed until 1960, 1961. And some very prominent New Yorkers worked in it, like [Jacob] Javits for some time worked in that courthouse. Harvey Keitel's first job was as a stenographer at the courthouse on 2nd Street and Second Avenue. He was a stenographer, Harvey Keitel.

And some of the activists and protestors of the transition from Fifties to Sixties spent some time. I think Beck [Julian Beck and Judith Malina] [00:02:26] spent some time there. And actually when I began publishing *Film Culture* and could not pay my bills for the first issue in 1954, I received a summons. And I had to appear at the courthouse, which is now Anthology Film Archives.

I should say more about the Second Avenue and 2nd Street courthouse building that became Anthology Film Archives. We purchased it in an auction from the city in 1979. It was abandoned around 1960. And for two years it was run by St. Mark's Church as an art project sponsored by the National Endowment [for the Arts], in which Schumann's [Bread and] Puppet Theater did some appearances. It was one of their places for performances.

And there was a film program run by Ken Jacobs and Stanton Kaye, which had workshops and even film developing. Jack Smith actually developed his film *No President* in the basement of the current Anthology Film Archives. But when I bought the building, it was a struggle because La MaMa [La MaMa Experimental Theatre] wanted it also. The city had given two places to La MaMa at that time, one on 1st Street between Second Avenue and First Avenue, and they had one on 4th Street. [00:05:07.16]

So they wanted a third place. There was a very big fight between [Ellen] Stewart and myself. I managed to outdo her, and eventually in an auction I managed to buy it from the city for Anthology. But it was [a] total ruin by that time. St. Mark's sponsorship by National Endowment was only for like two years, and then they could not get any money. The building was totally abandoned. By the time I bought it in 1979, it was just a shell.

Actually, the building department [New York City Department of Buildings] tried to talk me out of it: "Oh, it will cost you \$200,000 to fix it up." I said, "I want it because it looks so beautiful." [laughs] What it cost I did not know. It cost me \$1.9 million to fix it, for me to make [it into] a film museum.

But when I bought it, [the neighborhood people kept asking me, "Do you] really think you can do something with this building in this drug-infested neighborhood?" Because many other buildings were in ruins on 1st Street, and all around the neighborhood there. And people thought it was hopeless. They didn't even want to start fixing their buildings, because once a week the police used to close the ends of 2nd Street, between Avenue A and Third Avenue, and swoop. Every morning you'd come in and you'd find all the leftovers. You can recognize on the street what drugs they were using. And the police used to arrest [them]. But then the next day they were all there again. It was a drug area.

So once we moved [in], after I bought the building, the neighborhood [said], "Really? You think you can do something with it?" I said, "Yes, I'm going to do it. We are staying here." So then they began thinking and began fixing. They created the block association to fight drug [peddlers] and worked with the police. And within like two, three years, the neighborhood changed completely. They began fixing the buildings. So that was the result of me [buying] and beginning to fix up [the] courthouse building.

But my life in East Side began much earlier. See, I came as a displaced person after the war—'the war,' there have been so many wars. I am talking about what they call the Second

World War. After that war there were so many others — I ended up in Williamsburg in late [19]49. But in the spring of [19]53, I had enough of Brooklyn, because Williamsburg was, in those days, the pits. It was so miserable they used to dump the immigrants [there]. It was a very miserable area.

So I escaped to 95 Orchard Street, and that's where my life really begins [in the] East Side. And of course Orchard Street was, in the spring of [19]53, bubbling. It was busy from one end to the other, a street of shops. Every day was full of people, shoppers, and on the weekend you could not get through. It was quite an incredible shopping place. **[00:10:12.11]**

And the whole area was very much a Jewish area. From Brooklyn Bridge to Houston [Street] was very, very Jewish. And very soon after that, though, within five years, the city—I don't know who was the mayor at that time—began planning and tearing down the whole area. And of course the whole Jewish community disappeared. Now we have huge buildings, which some day will be also torn down. But they are still there, apartment buildings.

Nobody can even imagine how that area looked when I moved in. And then you go further towards 14th Street. It was already Ukrainian, Russian, Polish, with [touch of] Jewish. [Later] from Orchard Street, I moved to 515 East 13th Street, between Avenue A and First Avenue. That was around 1960. Allen Ginsberg had moved into that area [around the same time].

Okay, I will jump now to Greenwich Village. I will come back to the East [Side]. Because when I moved to Orchard Street, my first contacts were more on the West Side. That's where the Cedar bar [Cedar Tavern] was. That's where the White Horse bar [White Horse Tavern] was. And the Chelsea Hotel is there further up, 23rd Street. There was a film society on Sixth Avenue and 9th Street that every Saturday used to gather. And Cinema 16 screenings were [not too far away on] Eighth Avenue and 24th Street.

But the artists and the poets, painters, the meeting places were more [like] the Cedar bar, or the jazz places. There were many around Seventh Avenue and then 4th Street, Third Avenue. And then of course on the more extreme side of the West Side was the White Horse, where you could see Dylan Thomas and Robert Flaherty. For some time it was very active.

And there were some very good Spanish restaurants there at the time. They later disappeared. It was just off 14th Street and Hudson Street. So that was a very, very active, intense life going there at that time, before it jumped more to the East Side. **[00:15:41.22]**

Zapol: Can you tell me a story about one day maybe at the Cedar Tavern, or an event that comes to mind?

Mekas: Oh, it was a drink-the-beer place. Just one big room with stalls, with tables on the sides. But many of those places around two o'clock or so used to close, including Cedar bar. So at that time, in [19]62, I moved to 414 Park Avenue South, which was between 28th and 29th Street. That's where the Film-Makers' Cooperative was created, and that's where I lived. It was my loft on the third floor. It became a gathering place of film and poetry, and you could see Robert Frank and Allen Ginsberg. Even Salvador Dalí used to come, Jack Smith, in the evenings, during the days. And across the street was the Belmore Cafeteria, a twenty-four hour taxi drivers' night stop place, with cheap and not too bad food.

So when those places downtown used to close at two o'clock at night, they all walked there, ten or twenty blocks to Belmore Cafeteria. All those poets and those painters, [Robert] Rauschenberg, they ended up at Belmore Cafeteria across from the Film-Makers' Cooperative. What did you ask?

Zapol: I was asking you about maybe a particular story about a night that you remember.

Mekas: Yeah, it's nothing very special. None of us took it or thought about any of these places or situations as something that will be remembered in history, will become very important—any of the people, even. So it was very normal daily, nightly activity. Like you can tell some of the places today that are different situations, and no one takes them too seriously. But in twenty years, some of the places of today will become as important as Cedar bar or any other place.

And [not] very far from the White Horse, you could go and listen to Miles Davis. There was one place very close. And Lenny Bruce on Seventh Avenue near 4th Street, I walked in by chance. It was a hot summer day, and I had to stop for a cold beer. On Seventh Avenue, one of the places, there was this guy telling jokes. Not a big place. And you know, I drank my beer and listened. And I was amazed. I did not expect anything, [I expected] some jokiers and performers. [laughs] [But] he was incredible, the way he was delivering, the voice and the presence. [So] I had my beer and walked out, but I never forgot it. He was arrested later. And I was arrested around the same time. [00:20:42.03]

Zapol: And that was when you were arrested for showing—

Mekas: I was arrested first for screening *Flaming Creatures*. That was at that Bridge Theater, corner of Third Avenue and 4th Street. And later at the Writers' Stage on 4th Street, for showing *Un Chant D' Amour*, Jean Genet's film. Why did I screen it? I knew I was going to be arrested, of course. I even had sandwiches in my pocket. I knew I would be arrested.

Because [the] independent filmmakers, we did not believe we should license our films. It was like taking a stand against licensing and censorship. Who are they, the Board of Education, or whatever? I don't remember what they called themselves. I was arrested. Ken Jacobs was arrested, and Flo [Florence] Jacobs, the same time. But our case helped to abandon censorship two, three years later. And of course the Lenny Bruce case. It was all the same time.

Only that Lenny Bruce, they managed to really destroy him. But they did not destroy us, because we knew exactly what this was all about, and that we had to do it.

Zapol: You were talking about the West Village, or Greenwich Village, and then things moved to the East Village. So when do you think—

Mekas: Yes. One of the important places became the Charles Theatre on Avenue [B] between 12th and 13th Street. When I moved to 515 East 13th Street, I discovered that there was this [movie] theater there about to close. It was run by two young men, Walter Langsford and [Edwin] Stein. Walter Langsford came from an advertising background. And Stein, he was a psychiatrist, I think.

And they said, "Oh, nobody's coming. We're about to sell it." I said, "Why don't we try something like bringing in the auteur theory, and get the independents? There is a lot happening now. Let's give another chance to it." So I became like the programmer. That would be the beginning of [19]61. And I brought in a completely different set of [films], all the Hollywood classics, based more or less on [auteur] theory, which began attracting more people. And then [we] began open houses for the independents [for] underground cinema. [These screenings] became very popular and attracted other projects and events [to Charles Theater]. Bob Downey [00:25:17] [held his] midnight theater [series] there. [00:25:22.20]

And then, while I was in Chicago, I met [a young filmmaker] by the name of Ed [Edward] Bland, who was [also] a musician. Later, he made a film called *The Cry of Jazz*, the main thesis of [which] was that only Black people can make jazz, because that's [their] cry. He later came to New York. But he introduced me to Sun Ra. And I said, "You should come to New

York.” He said, “Where?” “At the Charles Theatre.” So he came to New York, and that's where he gave his first performance[s], at the Charles Theatre. Midnight series of Sun Ra. Funny, though, that I met him at the beginning of his career, so to speak, although he already did good work in Chicago. And then around 1980, somewhere in there, I'm at JFK [John Fitzgerald Kennedy International Airport], and I see this guy pushing a huge load of suitcases, musical instruments. And that was Sun Ra, coming back from his last performance in Moscow. So I helped him push it to the taxi stand. So I met him at the beginning and the very end. But I never saw him much in the middle.

My first ticket taker when I began helping [Charles] Theater was Jack Smith. But he didn't work out. He really could not concentrate on it. He lasted for like two weeks. And then I got somebody who lasted longer. I forget his name. Then I discovered that he was starting a magazine called *Mad Magazine*. So he was one of the *Mad* writers there. So [those were] my ticket sellers. [laughs] And at the same time, few blocks further on the roof of a closed theater, I think it was at the end of Grand Street somewhere, Jack Smith shot *Flaming Creatures*. That was in [19]61 or [19]62.

And then, not very far from there on [Avenue A], just off the west side of Tompkins Square Park, Ed [Edward] Sanders opened his little shop, where he published the *Fuck* magazine. And of course, a little bit later the East Village newspaper had their offices opened there. There was also a high school [—somewhere there, maybe on 12th Street—] a place for dance, performance space in that high school So there were other activities going, not only poetry or film, but other performance artists had spaces there, also. [00:30:07]

So it was quite active. And instead of Cedar bar, there was Stanley's [Bar] on the corner of Avenue B and 12th [Street]. And that was very full and active. It was the equivalent of the Cedar bar on the East Side.

Zapol: And what was happening? What was the activity at that place?

Mekas: It was a smaller place and more like an Irish bar, little bar. It was always much more crowded. And much more drinking, arguing and fighting took place after the screenings at the Charles Theatre. Everybody was going there. But it lasted maybe three or four years, and then it died. I [myself] got involved in the Film-Makers' Cooperative and Cinematheque and other activities.

Zapol: So that's when you left the Charles Theatre?

Mekas: Yes. Then it was sold. It was a Methodist Church or something for some time. And [the other day I saw] on the Internet that the theater has been torn down. It doesn't exist. Now there are just trees and junk, shrubs. They will be building something, apartment building. So that's the end of history there.

Zapol: Of that space. So the Film-Makers' Cooperative started in what year?

Mekas: That's February [19]61. At 414 Park Avenue South.

Zapol: And then how did that begin? What was the inspiration?

Mekas: The inspiration was the activity for filmmaking between [19]55 and [19]60, [19]61. Many filmmakers in New York area and San Francisco. [They were] running around with cameras. And then the open screenings at the Charles Theatre in [19]61 and [19]62 revealed how many [of them] there [were]. And the reason [for the creation of the Film-Makers' Cooperative] was that some of the filmmakers wanted their films to be distributed. There were three distributors at that time. For the poetic, avant-garde film [there] was Cinema 16. There was Brandon, for more commercial and international [short films]. And then [there was] Contemporary Films for documentary films. And we discovered that none of them wanted to distribute our films. So we said, "Okay, if you don't want to distribute"—they thought our films were amateurish and not serious, and nobody would want to see them, et cetera—"why don't we create our own cooperatively run distribution center?" [00:34:43]

First, we created what [we called] 'The New American Cinema Group.' That was in [19]59. The group included not only what you could call experimental avant-garde, but also those who wanted to make feature [story] films, like [Shirley] Clarke. And so I was exploring the film dissemination-distribution aspect. [One of the] result[s] that [came out of that] was the creation of The Film-Makers' Cooperative as part of the New American Cinema Group. The name [I borrowed] from the New American Poetry Anthology brought out by Grove Press, edited by [Donald] Allen

So the Cooperative became the distribution arm for all the independents. And it changed the [independent film distribution] situation a lot, because within two or three years, we managed to invade universities, colleges, galleries. Because they knew where to go, where they could find

the films. Also, [we were getting] a lot of publicity, especially when Andy Warhol came in. And not the kind of publicity that we expected, [it] was a publicity that newspapers liked: “This is pornography! Nudity! Sex!” [But such] publicity helped really to get many of the student groups across the country get interested. And the students helped to create film departments in colleges and universities.

Maya Deren, who lived on Morton Street in the Village, had very famous New Year's parties where everybody was there, poets, intellectuals—she was a very, very brainy person, Maya Deren. While uptown there was Shirley Clarke, less brainy, more emotional type of artist, [she] had [end-of-the-year parties]. Next day it was her party. It was very, very different uptown. Planned, not so wild as Maya Deren's party. They were very well known and [awaited] parties.

Zapol: You were saying that students were—

Mekas: Yes. So that when Maya Deren traveled trying to push films to universities to open the markets, there were only a dozen universities that were [interested in cinema], that she managed to somehow crack. That was 1960. By 1970, when the American Film Institute brought [out] their catalog of universities and colleges in the United States with film classes and film departments, there were 1,200 colleges and universities with film classes and, more or less, departments. [00:39:57]

That change happened because the independent filmmakers were constantly traveling and attacking. And the students themselves asked to show those films, because they were curious, “What is this underground cinema? And what is Andy Warhol doing?” That helped to expand it. So that Film-Makers' Cooperative, we had a mailing list, [it] was like 6,000 possible venues.

Zapol: What do you think was the concentration of filmmakers in New York, in that area there in the East Village, West Village?

Mekas: There were certain places, cities, like San Francisco and New York, and Los Angeles. I'm talking about the independently working filmmakers. Later, when Chicago Art Institute and some other places introduced film teaching and invited filmmakers to teach, like [Stan] Brakhage, little communities of filmmaking emerged in other places, slowly, until it at some point jumped all over.

[All over the country, there were] young people who wanted to make films. [But] they

realized [that the existing technology was] quite expensive. So there were some filmmakers who began experimenting and changing the equipment. The lighter equipment came into existence, and new ways of taping, recording [the sound]. You could shoot in sync without huge technologies.

So that's why in 1953 or somewhere there, Morris Engel made this new [portable] equipment, where you don't need huge trucks and lights. You can just go by yourself with a friend and make a film. So he made *The Little Fugitive*. That became a very important landmark for the independently working filmmakers. [Morris Engel] proved that you can make a film with very little money [with] portable equipment. And [Lionel] Rogosin made the film, *On The Bowery*, which, as we are talking now, was just shown at the Anthology Film Archives.

These films were shown in Europe, at Cannes Film Festival and other festivals. And the European filmmakers, the younger film writers, filmmakers, like [François] Truffaut, [Jean-Luc] Godard, they saw them and they realized also that it can be done with little money. Godard credits the New York school of filmmaking, Morris Engel, for inspiring, helping to make up his own mind that, 'I can also make a film.'

So it was a very important beginning, not only for the New York filmmakers. At the same time, as the revolution in equipment and sound recordings continued, they made documentary films. It began changing television. That was a very important period. [00:45:04]

One more important little detail is that during the war, one part of the Army was taking care of the image and sound recordings of the war—the Signal Corps. Signal Corps was the part of the Army that took care of that aspect. They had cameras and tape recorders, and cameras were designed so that if you dropped them from the plane, [they] wouldn't crash. It would survive. [After the war, for some] ten years or so, those materials and cameras and film stock, they were sitting in the storage places. And the Army decided it's time to get rid of it all. So they opened stores in New York and San Francisco. The store in New York was on Eighth Avenue and 55th Street—I remember it very well—where you could get those cameras and film stock, [and it was all very cheap, cheap. The film stock was outdated,] and you can see that [in] *Flaming Creatures*, which was shot on that film, [washed out] slightly. But [critics] said, "Oh, what a style he invented, that style!" [laughs] No, that's how the film was, outdated film.

Instead of spending, I don't know, \$5 on a roll of film, you could buy it for 75¢ a roll. And you [could] buy a camera for almost nothing. So many young people in the West Coast and

San Francisco, they went to those stores like I did, many of us did. We did not have to go and buy expensive, fresh products. That lasted like five years or so until the Signal Corps got rid of all their stock and technology. That was part of what helped the explosion of the filmmaking in New York and San Francisco. [But the] excitement was happening, changes in all of the arts at that time. Again, if you go to the East Side, Claes Oldenburg's theater was on 3rd, or some street near Avenue A.

Zapol: What theater?

Mekas: Claes Oldenburg, a happening theater. It had a name, which escapes my memory now. Maybe it will come. It was a happening theater. It was staged, these happenings. And around Third Avenue, that's where Bibbe Hansen's father [Al Hansen] did happenings.

Richard Foreman's first play [was staged] at the Writer's Stage on 4th Street between Second and Third. That's where I was arrested, also, for [*Un Chant D'Amour*]. Alan Marlow, Diane di Prima's husband, and Diane di Prima, they had a theater running between 3rd and 2nd [on] 4th Street. And that's where Andy Warhol [at] the Dom opened to the public his extravaganza with the Velvet Underground. We are talking now, what, [19]65, [19]66, [19]67.
[00:50:27.19]

Zapol: Did you attend that?

Mekas: Yes. I spent a lot of time there.

Zapol: What do you remember of that?

Mekas: Well, it was a huge space there, with a lot of equipment on the [balcony]. There was [a balcony] where you could place projectors [and] lights. And quite a sizeable stage. They could put maybe 300 people in it or so. And it was always the music, and always singing. And always people dancing. And always all the strobes and lights from the balcony that surrounded the space being thrown on the people.

I don't remember how long it lasted—a month or two. [laughs] It was a very busy period for me. I was doing many things. Writing for *The Village Voice*, editing *Film Culture* magazine, running Film-Makers' Cooperative, running Film-Makers' Cinematheque. [laughs] Forget it.

Zapol: How did you have time to sleep? You didn't.

Mekas: I slept some. 414 Park Avenue South, my loft, was full of people day and night, practically. So the only place left for me to sleep while things were going was under my editing table somewhere in the back corner. It was [a] very, very busy period.

Zapol: Tell me about writing for *The Village Voice*. What was the *Village Voice* like? How did you get that gig in the beginning?

Mekas: Somewhere around [19]55 and [19]54, and just like [eight] pages usually, very small, or [sixteen] pages publication. But immediately you could see the difference between—let's face it, it was before the *East Village Other* and before many other independent weeklies, monthlies appeared. It was the first. But the style, it was very free in what they wrote about and how they wrote Norman Mailer was there. [He] had a square column which was called, I think, 'Square.' And then Jerry Tallmer came in. He's still writing, I think, for *The Villager*. He was the like managing editor at that time, around late [19]58. I discovered they were not writing about cinema. I [had done for them] some pieces on theater, so I went and spoke to Jerry. I said, "How come cinema is not covered?" Jerry Tallmer was [writing on] theater. Later he went to *The New York Post* where he wrote on theater. So he said, "We have nobody. We have nobody here who wants or knows cinema. Do you want to do it?" [0:55:00.0] "Sure, I will do it."

And that's how it began, in the fall of [19]58. I stayed there for a good twenty years, until *The Voice* was sold to the editor/publisher of *LIFE* magazine, Mr. [Clay] Felker. And he began immediately firing the people and changing the style and the content. And every editorial meeting, he was always questioning, "Why are [we keeping] this movie journal? Who cares about independent film?" [At] some point I got tired of [his constant attacks], and I quit.

But the situation had changed already. Many other people were writing [on] independent [cinema in other] publications already. It's not the same as [19]58. When I left in [19]78 it was already a completely different situation. Around [19]61 or [19]62, when [the independent film scene] became very exciting and hectic, I could not cover [both the Hollywood and the independents]. So at that point I brought in Andrew Sarris, who was my editor, helper on *Film Culture* magazine. I said, "Why don't you cover the commercial, and I will just stay with the independents, so we can do a better job of covering?" And that's how I began concentrating around [19]62 only on the independents, and he covered [the] commercial [cinema].

But *The Voice* editorial offices, where they had the whole tiny building at the corner of

Seventh Avenue and 4th Street, I think that little area was called Sheridan Square, I don't think it's there now.

Zapol: I'm not sure, no.

Mekas: I think I passed it last week. I think I was looking for it, and there was something else there, I think.

Zapol: I'm interested in that moment in the late Sixties. I know there was a lot of tension around gentrification in the East Village, the Tompkins Square riots. I'm wondering if that affected you at all, or if you were aware of some of those tensions?

Mekas: Yes, but I did not notice as much gentrification [around] Tompkins Square. Not to the extent of what happened on Third Avenue. From 3rd Street to 14th Street was full of bookshops, on both sides of the street, bookshops and bookshops, books spilling into the street. And then they began destroying building after building. Robert Frank lived there, and Alfred Leslie. That was a really drastic change.

And then I witnessed what happened to the Orchard Street and the Jewish section. To me the Lower East Side survived very well comparatively, with the exception of some little spots. So I never took it as seriously as Clayton Patterson or somebody [did it]. [laughs] [00:59:55.11]

Zapol: I want to come back to this, your thoughts about change now. I'd like to talk a little more about when you first acquired Anthology Film Archives, the space. First of all, how did you raise the capital?

Mekas: I was very lucky that Jerome Hill— Jerome Hill's family is from St. Paul, Minnesota. He lived on Summit Street. His house was next to F. Scott Fitzgerald's. I have been there. I have seen it. His family built the link between East and West, the railroad.

[END OF FIRST AUDIO FILE; BEGINNING OF SECOND]

Mekas: There were three or four brothers. Two were in business. He decided to go into the arts, theater, painting and design. And he became one of the great sponsors of arts, of musicians, and also saving, photographing, recording on film the books of many monasteries in Europe, which now Google is doing differently.

I met him around [19]58, or somewhere there, after he made the film on Albert Schweitzer. He was also a filmmaker. He made films on Grandma Moses, Albert Schweitzer, [Carl Gustav] Jung. So I wanted [him] to do a piece in *Film Culture* on it. And he did. So that's how I met Jerome Hill. He made one, now [a] classic film in autobiographical cinema, called *Film Portrait*, where he traces his own life and interest in cinema—a film that traces his life and also the history of cinema itself. He became interested in what was happening in poetic cinema. He made also a couple of narrative films. And I introduced him to Stan Brakhage, to Peter Kubelka, to the independents. And he helped a lot. He helped me a lot when I could not pay bills of *Film Culture*. He always paid.

Then in the army, he was together with a certain [Joseph] Martinson, [the] Martinson Coffee guy. Joseph Martinson became chair of the Shakespeare Theater [Public Theater] on 425 Lafayette. And since they were very close, Joseph Martinson and Jerome, Martinson says, “We are fixing the [building]. We'll have [a] theater [in it]. But there's one area we don't have enough money [to fix], one end of the space. Do you want to do something with [it]? Put a cinema there?”

So Jerome called me. He said, “We have this space offered. Do you want to do something with it?” And without a second of thinking, I said, “Yes!” That's one of my problems. I always say yes. So that's when he sponsored fixing up the area and building a special theater. And we opened there Anthology Film Archives. That was the beginning. And he sponsored the collection, paid for all of the prints and building this very special theater.

But as I'm telling [you] this, I forget the initial question.

Zapol: It was about how you raised the money for the space.

Mekas: Yes, so okay. So then we opened, and two years later [Jerome] dies. Cancer. And we are stranded there. Our contract, in two years, was expiring. So I had to prepare to move somewhere else. And already, in [19]67, George Maciunas, in what's known now as SoHo, began thinking about creating cooperative buildings. And he bought the first cooperative building on 80 Wooster Street in like August [19]67. And I joined, with Jerome's money really, [I] bought for the Cinematheque the ground floor in the basement. And that helped George to buy the rest of the building for \$90,000. Each one of us paid like \$8,000. And we owned the building.

[00:05:17.05]

[And that's where, after Jerome's death, I moved Anthology Film Archives. But in] his will [Jerome] left us a little piece of land in the Florida Keys. At some point, I got interested, what is that piece of land? So we sent out a friend, a lawyer, to take a look. And he returns and he says, "Let's sell it immediately. The ocean is eating our land. There will be very little left soon of it." So I said, "Let's sell it." So we sell it, and we get \$50,000. I put that money in the bank. I said, "I will use it only when we really need it." Jerome Hill's money, \$50,000.

[As Anthology's activities and collections expanded, the 80 Wooster Street space became too cramped, and we needed a larger space. By chance, I discovered that the 2nd Street and Second Avenue corner courthouse building was still available. Dilapidated, but available. So I went to the Building Department and told them I wanted to buy it for Anthology. When Ellen Stewart of La MaMa Theater heard about it, she decided that instead of Anthology buying it, the city should simply give the building to her—to La MaMa.]

[What followed was a] long fight with Ellen Stewart for this building. And I told the problem to Geldzahler, who was the Commissioner for the Arts [Commissioner for Cultural Affairs] for Ed [Edward] Koch, at that time. "They are putting this building in auction. There will be many who can outbid us. How can we—?" So he managed to restrict it to non-profit corporations. So auction day comes, and Ellen Stewart's representative comes to me, says, "So you are bidding for this?" "Of course I'm bidding, I'm here." "So how high do you think you will go?" Why is he asking that? [So] I said, "As high as is needed." But [I knew I had] only \$50,000!

[The auction begins. The Courthouse item comes up. And the voice of the auctioneer announces the prices: \$50,000. I stick my hand up, I stand up, and I shout, "\$50,000!" and then I listen. An eternal five-second silence follows. Then clunk! The gavel. And that's how I got the building, the present home of Anthology Film Archives. Thanks to Jerome Hill, to his \$50,000.]

Zapol: And then tell me about the transformation of the space itself. You said it took time.

Mekas: The architect's plans are [there] behind you. You can see the original [plan] with the library on the side. [The construction budget] came up to about \$1 million. So the first thing I did was to sell 80 Wooster, which I got for \$8,000. And I got \$280,000—a very good investment. So that gave us a beginning, and the work slowly began with those \$280,000. [Then in 1981], I decided to issue an art portfolio. I got Andy Warhol, Rauschenberg, everybody to be part of the

art portfolio, limited edition. **[0:10:00.0]** And I asked Agnes Martin [to join in.] I don't know if you know Agnes Martin. [She] lived in Arizona in some desert. I really liked her work. So she sent [me] a note: "I don't think I have any work that I think would fit [into the portfolio], but I will buy ten portfolios." "Yes," I said, "but it will be like \$10,000 per portfolio." "Still, I'm buying the portfolios, and I will give them to the museums in the South," which she did! "Go and get a check from Pace Gallery, from my account." So Agnes, thanks to her, I managed to produce this portfolio, which brought me another \$400,000, maybe close to half a million.

Before I even produced the portfolio, I went to check with Marian Goodman and with those who had brought out portfolios before, because I had no experience. I didn't have any idea what I was doing. And she said, "Look. In the corner there, do you see those portfolios? Those I brought out to help [Meyer] Shapiro's chair at Columbia"—Shapiro, the art historian for Columbia University. "Nobody is buying. See, they're still sitting there. And all the big names, the same that you have, are there." And then I go to the guy, Alexander [phonetic] **[00:12:00]**, who also was known for issuing portfolios. He said the same. So that, of course, would have stopped anybody. But it did not stop me. And I sold them all. I sold them all. A few years ago, Marian Goodman was opening her new gallery in Paris. "Do you remember what you told me?" [laughs] I said, "I sold them all." Because if there is a need, you push them and you sell them.

Black Monday came when we began the construction. That did not help at all. So I called also Danny [Daniel] Selznick, Irene Selznick's [son], the big Hollywood family, and said, "You have to help." So he comes, looks at the building. "Hopeless. Don't do it." [Later] I invited him to the opening. "Huh? You said it could not be done." It can be done. I did it.

And so I faced those who rejected me and those who helped. And it took me ten years, but I did it. Ten years. It was the most challenging and miserable period of my life, because it was tough. It was tough. But it changed the neighborhood. And one more thing is left to do, and this is what I'm doing this year. See, the space is okay for screenings. We have two auditoriums there for screenings. But most of the films are stored somewhere else, and paper materials, paper library—which is huge—and is used by scholars and students, half of it is in boxes. And we still get more material, and it cannot be made available. **[00:15:10.21]**

So we need more space. Plus, we operate on approximately a \$300,000 deficit each year, so we have to constantly look for foundations, for individuals, for contributed art that we sell. So to solve this problem, I decided to build. Next to Anthology there is a huge Manhattan Storage

building, and in between there is a comparatively narrow space, which we own also. That's where the police used to bring in the prisoners, because the courthouse also had fourteen prison cells. It was also a prison, not only a courthouse.

So I engaged the same architect who supervised the renovation[, Kevin Bone,] to design a café. There will be a café which is accessible from inside for patrons, and from the street for anybody who wants. And I hope that that will help us eliminate the deficit. Because Angelika and Film Forum, they get more money from their small café on the corners. They lose on exhibitions, but they cover it from the cafeteria. [And on the roof we'll build an extra floor for the library.]

So now [I am] trying to raise—it will cost us about \$[6] million. But it's easier today than it was in 1980, because we are more known and more people see the necessity, that there are so few venues where films from other countries, new films, can be shown. And also where you can still see film as film and not film as video, which is just completely something else. So that's where I stand on that.

Zapol: On the growth of your space?

Mekas: This is like a cathedral of cinema. And all cathedrals, it took some of them hundreds of years to finish. So if ours has taken five decades, that's not so bad.

Zapol: Talk to me about how you feel about the space when you walk into it.

Mekas: I don't think of it anymore as a prison[. In 1993 we opened a film, *Ulysses Gaze*, and Harvey Keitel, the star [of] *Ulysses Gaze*, walks and [I] was coming to greet him. He is coming in, and he stops right there in the door, in the entrance, and looks in horror. "This is the place where I had my first and most horrible job as a stenographer!" [laughs] The memories were coming back, and they were not very pretty, I guess. [laughs] **[00:20:01.18]**

But now it's cinema. All the people, friends, filmmakers, so much film, the space has been cleaned from all the miseries of those who spent time in those jails.

Zapol: And then talk to me also about the change that's in the neighborhood now, how you see that change.

Mekas: Well, one of the real bad changes happened two years ago when they destroyed—

closed—the Mars Bar. Mars Bar, corner of 1st Street and Second Avenue, just around the corner from Anthology, was maybe the last bar that retained all the dirt and all the whatever people thought was bad—and they never want to go into a bar in the lower part of Manhattan. And there were a good number of such [bars] on the Bowery. But they were already destroyed, or changed.

But Mars Bar remained there, and it was not at all just a Bowery bar. Like no other bar, where you could just go in and you always find the same people there, who were drunk already. We took filmmakers [there] who came to Anthology from other countries. Many of them have been there. It was really our place.

I did a lot of filming and taping there. I have a film I made on it. And then that building was destroyed, and now there is a bank. Just opened there where Mars Bar was. So that whole corner is beginning to change, but fortunately this side of Houston—north of Houston and east of Second Avenue—much of it has been protected by the Landmarks [Preservation] Commission. The Anthology Film Archives building is now in the protected [areas]. But the south from it, and the west, it keeps coming up—new huge structures.

Zapol: So a lot of change is still happening, beyond the landmarks?

Mekas: I think that now what is there already at this side of Third Avenue, between Houston and 14th, I think much of it will be protected. As far as I know. Maybe some areas are not, but large chunks of neighborhoods are on the map protected by Landmarks Commission.

Zapol: And how do you perceive who is living in the area around? How has that changed?

Mekas: So the changes will be not so much architectural, but what's happening in those buildings, because I hear that people that live there, the artists, those who wish to have cheaper apartments, are being pushed out. There are a lot of Japanese moving in. So it will be more like a museum. It will be cleaned up a little bit, I think, by the new owners, even if the buildings remain. It's like in some European cities, some old famous neighborhoods. They are still there, but you go in and it's like a mausoleum. The people who are still there are alive, but as they die out—it's what happened to MacDougal Street, like what happened to Dante. Caffè Dante was one of the best espresso coffee places in the Village, in that area, MacDougall and Houston. And it was there and did not change for fifty years. [00:25:54.14]

And now last year I think the place was sold or rented, I don't know what. And it was

already changing, and inside it was becoming almost a tourist place. It's gone. It's gone. Caffè Dante's gone. Like what happened to Williamsburg—the same.

Zapol: And now you live in Brooklyn. You are here in Brooklyn.

Mekas: Yeah, because I moved, [my] last place in Manhattan was 491 Broadway, corner of Broadway and Broome. So SoHo was my life for thirty years until 2004. [It was] the last cooperative building established by George Maciunas in [19]74.

I moved to [Greenpoint], Sutton [Street] and Meeker [Avenue], and everybody was telling me who was visiting me there that something's wrong here. And what was wrong was [the house] was on part of the big oil spill [Greenpoint Oil Spill], and you could really feel it. So I had to move out, and moved into Clinton Hill—which was also still quite a bad area fifteen years ago—not far from Pratt Institute. But during the last ten years, according to those who know—I moved in here five years ago—began changing. Even next to this building it was just empty lot, now they're finishing a building there.

But this has become an area of restaurants and cafes, and changing very rapidly. This area, Clinton Hill, was the most expensive area at the end of Nineteenth Century. Rich families with horses, stables. There are many buildings here that have stables. And then they began to move into Manhattan, into Park Avenue. Then a lot of African people moved in. [00:30:19.21] Fort Greene, Walt Whitman's place. And the Clinton Hill area is a very mixed area. Many different nationalities.

Zapol: I think we should probably conclude, but as you think about the Village, about the East Village, is there a particular hope that you have for the future of the neighborhood? Maybe you can be more specific and talk about the Anthology Film Archive and its relationship to the neighborhood?

Mekas: The neighborhood likes us. We have [a] very good relationship, because we helped them and they support us. We helped to really bring the community back to life. So we'll be there, but the school across from us there, the LaSalle Academy [00:31:48], I think will be moving out. I don't know what will happen there. But the neighborhood is very unpredictable, because the money is always very tempting. And I think all those areas will end up with different owners. All those buildings, eventually—I think you cannot stop that.

Zapol: Do you ever think about moving?

Mekas: Anthology? No. We cannot easily move. We have been offered. I bought it for \$50,000, fixed it up for another \$2 million. And the other week someone, some fashion guy from Italy, said, “Here is \$30 million. Will you sell?” I said, “No, we cannot sell for \$30 million.” Because what can we do with \$30 million? We have to buy then another building. And we'll spend exactly the same \$30 million or more, just in another place. We like our building, and we like where we are. And we're not going to move.

When people ask me, “How [long] are you going to last here?” I say, “Yes, we'll last for at least 500 years, because the building was built as a prison. Very well-built. So we are going to stay here for at least 500 years.” No, no, we have no plan. That's why we want to build some additions, just for practical, functional reasons. And that's it.

But the nature of who will live there, it will keep changing. Like the little bar on the corner, Anyway Café, 2nd Street and Second Avenue. You still come in during the afternoon, you're by yourself, have your vodka—Russian bar. And I walked in the other day. I could barely find a corner to sit down. Already tourists are coming. So it's changing. [00:35:05.29]

And no more only Russians—I can see they were all from somewhere else. So you cannot stop that. I think Manhattan is done in that sense. But then, the same with all areas here. I have been five years here. And I see changes, and that not all of them may be for the good. Because I know that as the new restaurants and places are opening, and more— Five years ago, I could not get a taxi here. Now you can very easily. You can get a taxi here. So that means many, many other people come already from Manhattan, from other places. And that means that some of the people will be pushed out soon. The menus of restaurants, they are beginning to change from simple food to gourmet food. So it's not all for the good. But that cannot be stopped. Same as what's happening in the world in general.

Zapol: Is there anything that I haven't asked you about in terms of the East Village or your stories about the East Village?

Mekas: I don't know what I could add. That's it.

Zapol: Great. Thank you for your time today.

Mekas: Still one of the better places in the New York area, the East Village and Greenwich

Village. For another twenty years or so, it will be still okay.

Zapol: Thank you.

[END OF INTERVIEW]