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Oral history interview with Vaino Kola, 1991 Sept. 12

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Transcript

Preface

The following oral history transcript is the result of a recorded interview with Vaino Kola on September 12, 1991. The interview took place in Norton, Massachusetts, and was conducted by Robert Brown for the Archives of American Art, Smithsonian Institution.

Vaino Kola has reviewed the transcript. Their corrections and emendations appear below in brackets with initials. This transcript has been lightly edited for readability by the Archives of American Art. The reader should bear in mind that they are reading a transcript of spoken, rather than written, prose.

Interview

ROBERT F. BROWN: An interview with Vaino Kola in Norton, Massachusetts. This is September 12, 1991. Vaino, maybe we could just talk about some of your early memories and then sort of lead into what you finally did.

VAINO KOLA: Sure.

ROBERT F. BROWN: I know you were born in—you were born in Finland.

VAINO KOLA: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

ROBERT F. BROWN: Or well, when it was—

VAINO KOLA: Well, what was then [part of] Finland, which now is on the Soviet Union side.

ROBERT F. BROWN: Oh, you were that part of eastern Finland?

VAINO KOLA: Mm-hmm [affirmative]. Uh, near the so-called Karelian Isthmus—

ROBERT F. BROWN: Right.

VAINO KOLA: —in the city called Viipuri in Finland, V-I-I-P-U-R-I, Vyborg in Swedish, which is what—the name by which the Soviets go by also. And after—yeah, I was two and a half years old when the Winter War started in 1939 and we had—we were evacuated out of there. In other words, we became refugees, really.

ROBERT F. BROWN: Yeah. Vyborg was even then, though, getting some sophisticated architecture there.

VAINO KOLA: There—

ROBERT F. BROWN: Were all the other things there?

VAINO KOLA: Yeah. Railroad station, library [the work of Alvar Aalto -VK].

ROBERT F. BROWN: Yeah. Yeah.

VAINO KOLA: And it was very—a very cultural city. I had heard this from my relatives that it was a very sophisticated type of a city where many people from the continent summered, for example. It was particularly popular with wealthy Germans who had villas there and so on. And on the outskirts, there were many villas—which they're still visible, but in pretty bad shape now. [They laugh.]

ROBERT F. BROWN: Maybe

VAINO KOLA: Yeah. So I was two and a half years old when we left.

ROBERT F. BROWN: Was it for your—for your family as a permanent home, or it was—had been a summer place, or—

VAINO KOLA: It was a permanent home. My father had a business there and we lived in the upper stories. [00:02:02] I don't know exactly what floor of the same building where the business—businesses occupy the first floors and there were apartments in the upper floors. So it was a permanent home.

ROBERT F. BROWN: Mm-hmm. Mm-hmm [affirmative]. During the—you had—did you leave Viipuri then when the Winter War came?

VAINO KOLA: Yes.

ROBERT F. BROWN: Because you were on the lines, practically.

VAINO KOLA: Well, uh—

ROBERT F. BROWN: Soviet Union.

VAINO KOLA: We had very little notice, actually, but a massive Soviet air attack when the war broke up, an air attack on the city. So my father was in the military and managed to—he was an officer so he managed to secure a car and a driver for us, and we went all the way up to a city called Tornio, which is on the Swedish and Finnish border just below the Arctic Circle. So we went very far away. [Laughs.]

ROBERT F. BROWN: Hmm. Hundreds of miles.

VAINO KOLA: Yes. The reason we did that was that I had an uncle and aunt living up there and we wanted to refuge with them. And I think we stayed up there throughout the Winter War and then meandered down to the southern part of the country. My father came from a very large family of [six -VK] children, I think. So they were all distributed throughout and we stayed with various relatives for a while, while he was in the war.

ROBERT F. BROWN: Well your—your early memories then, are what—they're pretty tiny, but privation I suppose, wasn't it?

VAINO KOLA: Well, some. I don't—

ROBERT F. BROWN: Pretty hard—

VAINO KOLA: —remember that sort of, but I do remember the presence of the war all the time because then the war started—that war of '39 began in early November and in the following March, and then there was the troops. And Finland entered back into the fray when Germany declared war on Soviet Union. So indirectly, the two were allied—

ROBERT F. BROWN: Yeah. [00:04:02]

VAINO KOLA: And Finland was interested in regaining its former territory. They—the Soviets took 10 percent of the territory. Which they still had.

ROBERT F. BROWN: In the Winter War.

VAINO KOLA: In the Winter War.

ROBERT F. BROWN: It's interesting whether they might be negotiable on that now.

VAINO KOLA: Well actually, Finland is so wealthy now, they offered to buy it back a couple of years ago but the Soviets were not interested in selling. And I—I doubt that they'll give them up because the territory would stay—they think and I—when you look at the map, it's understandable, actually. Our—probably strategic for their security because the old Finnish border was something to the order of 15 miles from Leningrad [St. Petersburg] -VK]. And I think that's awfully close.

ROBERT F. BROWN: Yeah. Yeah.

VAINO KOLA: And then, a section in the center on the eastern border gave the Russians a wider corridor to the Kola Peninsula and where Murmansk and Kirkenes are.

ROBERT F. BROWN: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

VAINO KOLA: And then they took a hunk which Finland had going into the Arctic Ocean. Quite a sizable area of rich nickel mines and so forth. And so now Norway and Soviet Union border one another up there.

ROBERT F. BROWN: There's no Finnish corridor up there.

VAINO KOLA: No Finnish corridor into the Arctic Ocean any more.

ROBERT F. BROWN: Yeah.

VAINO KOLA: So there were three separate parcels of land that the Soviets demanded as part of the war reparations, and so on. But they were—times were tough because the rest of Finland had to absorb something [close to 500,000 -VK] refugees from that area, mostly from the southeastern part of Finland as a result of the war. Karelians, mostly. We're not Karelians even though we lived there. My father was not a Karelian, so.

ROBERT F. BROWN: Mm-hmm [affirmative]. Were you—do you remember crowded living conditions?

VAINO KOLA: Oh, yeah! [Laughs.] Oh! Oh, yes. Absolutely. Incredibly crowded living conditions. [00:06:01] The place I remember most vividly in the early childhood was when we moved to a city called Heinola, H-E-I-N-O-L-A, which is where we lived before coming here to this country. And we—the first place we lived in had a kitchen and two rooms and there were four children—six eventually but four at the time. And my eldest sibling sister, I remember she slept on a dining—on a dining table every night. [They laugh.] They had to prepare a bed for her on a dining table. Yeah, which was a sort of combination—well two rooms, so one—in one of those rooms served as a dining room, living room, part bedroom. Yeah. So, yeah, very crowded. Definitely. But that was not unusual. I think other people had similar situations. In fact, I think it was mandated that if you had an X amount of space, whoever the people were working for local government or you—would come and see how much space you had. You had to take in people. It was the only way they could accommodate these [close to 500,000 -VK] refugees.

ROBERT F. BROWN: Were—did you start school during wartime?

VAINO KOLA: Yes.

ROBERT F. BROWN: Was that again?

VAINO KOLA: Yes. Started school in '44, so that was the year before the war ended. And within two or three weeks of starting school, first grade, I was taken out of school and my other—I had two older siblings—both sisters, my sisters. And the younger of the two—I was seven. She would have been 10 or 11. We were sent to Sweden for the remainder of the war. We spent a little over a year there, because it was clear that Finland was going to lose the war once again, and my parents were concerned about Finland being absorbed into the Soviet Empire, or at least be occupied by Soviet troops like the Baltics were. [00:08:14]

ROBERT F. BROWN: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

VAINO KOLA: And so they wanted us to escape, so along with [75,000 -VK] of other Finnish children, we went to Sweden and lived there till the war ended. Then the peace was signed and so forth. Then we returned. School had started again when we returned, and so I had missed a whole—I had missed a crucial year of school that first—first grade. So I when I returned I was put into second grade but I—I didn't—[laughs]—know how to read or write! [They laugh.]

ROBERT F. BROWN: Less at stake.

VAINO KOLA: Yeah.

ROBERT F. BROWN: It turns out.

VAINO KOLA: Oh, it was tough. I had to work really hard to get caught up. [Laughs.]

ROBERT F. BROWN: What—it was—your father was in the military, so he—he had been involved in—

VAINO KOLA: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

ROBERT F. BROWN: —some of the fighting too, I guess.

VAINO KOLA: Right. He was wounded twice. There were long, long periods of time when we didn't see him at all. And so, I mean—when Finland got back into it again, that went on for, oh, I think over four years.

ROBERT F. BROWN: Yeah.

VAINO KOLA: And we hardly saw him.

ROBERT F. BROWN: Were German troops around too or did they—

VAINO KOLA: No, no.

ROBERT F. BROWN: —they supplied aid.

VAINO KOLA: Finns and the Germans did not fight together. In fact, part of the second peace treaty was among all kinds of demands the Soviets made out for Finland was that the Finns had to declare war on Germany and drive the German troops out of Lapland. So Finns did that and in retaliation, or in revenge, the Germans burned down every town and area of human habitation in Lapland, including Rovaniemi, which is the capital city of Lapland. [00:10:00] It was burned to the ground. And, but they succeeded in driving the Germans out, and the only time I saw German troops was after this when they—when they had been defeated and they were

retreating back to Germany. And columns of them would come through our city, which was on a major north-south route. Day after day, mechanized German troops would be pouring through in armored vehicles and motorcycle sidecars. But we stood on the sidewalks and watched them. They were quite—they were friendly to us. They gave us things and whatever they had. So we didn't see them as threatening in any way.

ROBERT F. BROWN: Okay. Was your family—in those years, was there much talk, political talk? Now of course, you were very young, so I guess you wouldn't have heard it.

VAINO KOLA: Great deal of political talk. I was indoctrinated from a very early age to be a staunch anti-Soviet [laughs] person. Well, they represented the enemy, because Finland had been under Soviet rule for over [109 - VK] years, and had fought wars, 49 wars with the Soviets, lost every one. Most of those wars, when Finland was a part of Sweden for over 600 years. Sweden was an empire and never fought its wars on Swedish soil, always elsewhere. Lots of times on Finnish soil [laughs] and Finns did most of the fighting. So yes, the Soviets were regarded very much as the enemy and also the picture I grew up with of the Soviets—well then—well they were Soviets already in my childhood, but we called them Russians, of course, as many of—many Americans do too. They were—as is typical, I guess, the image I had of them was of an uneducated, uncivilized lot. [00:12:05] They were the boogeyman in Finland. That's how we were brought up, that the Russians were stupid, incapable, and they—some of this may have been caused by the fact that they suffered incredibly in the war with Finland, the Winter War in particular—the Finns—Finns were extremely successful against them and the only reason the Soviets won was through their overwhelming numbers and weapons and so forth. But the Finlands—Finns killed a phenomenal number of them. And many in fact—many of the Soviet troops came—Khrushchev talks about this in his memoirs very critically against the generals. They sent troops which were ill-clothed, ill-fed, ill-trained, and that particular winter happens—happened to be one of the coldest in memory and many of the Soviet troops perished due to freezing to death.

ROBERT F. BROWN: Yeah. Yeah.

VAINO KOLA: In summer—summer—summer outfits. Yeah. They would find thousands of them frozen to death. So it was awful. So the Soviets bungled things terribly and that's the way we thought of them. That's the way we grew up. And my father was, having fought them, very strong anti-Russian, and I grew up with that attitude too, which I should say I don't have at the moment [laughs] currently. But that's how I was brought up. We played—all the games we played as children, the bad people were the Soviets or the Russians. We always invented these games where the Russians were the bad guys, and so forth, and so forth. Yeah.

ROBERT F. BROWN: Did your—another—you know, it was nearly a refugee life, but I mean, in your family were there other interests and certain cultural interests? [00:14:03]

VAINO KOLA: Oh, yes. My mother was—

ROBERT F. BROWN: What was her background? She was—

VAINO KOLA: She was actually born in this country, not very far away from here. She was born in Worcester [Massachusetts].

ROBERT F. BROWN: Oh.

VAINO KOLA: Both her parents were immigrants from Finland so she was second-generation American Finnish. And early on in her childhood, her parents divorced and neither of them wanted her or her brother. So they were sent off to foster parents. So my mother was brought up by a Finnish family in Brooklyn, New York. And became very interested in music, and in fact, attended the Julliard School and Columbia. And her background was in music, so there was music in my home from a very early day—not at the time of the war and so on, but as soon as the war was over and we became a little bit more established. A piano was purchased and so forth. And so from then on—and both of my older sisters were taught to play the piano and so—and so there was music around a great deal. That culture in that form—and my parents considered themselves to be well-educated, so we talked about cultural things all the time. In fact, as I became a little older and interested in girls and so forth, the first question my father always asked me, "Are her parents cultured or educated?" That is more important than, "What does the father do?" [Laughs.] For women, are they wealthy or whatever. But they prided themselves on being well read and cultured. That was very important.

ROBERT F. BROWN: So your father wasn't simply a businessman. [00:16:00] He was also a—

VAINO KOLA: No.

ROBERT F. BROWN: [Inaudible.]

VAINO KOLA: No, no not at all. Yeah. And drawing or art making started very early on in my life. The very first

thing I remember drawing was when we were in Lapland, and when I was, oh, less than three years old. It was a picture of a reindeer. And I remember drawing reindeer pictures for quite a long time, mostly on sort of glossy newsprint which my mother obtained from the butchers and so forth, which meat was wrapped in, high-quality newsprint with kind of a glossy finish on it. So I always remember asking her to bring paper from the store and she would bring several sheets. [Laughs.] And that's what I drew on.

ROBERT F. BROWN: So you very early on—

VAINO KOLA: Yes.

ROBERT F. BROWN: —this, you were really interested in—

VAINO KOLA: In drawing.

ROBERT F. BROWN: —early on.

VAINO KOLA: Very early on. And it never stopped. As I became a little older, say four, or five, or six, and that continued till I came to this country, actually. I was just under 14. Friends of mine, other boys and I, would get together regularly at each other's houses one or two nights a week and draw. Draw pictures. Pictures which reflected our current interests. Pictures depicting war, pictures depicting athletes, picture depicting—in fact I still have one little book [laughs] from that era. [This activity took place in Finland -VK.]

ROBERT F. BROWN: You didn't draw from models, you'd draw each other.

VAINO KOLA: No, no. We drew entirely from imagination. Mostly battle scenes. Our games, and understandably so, because of having witnessed war pretty first hand in the sense that many a night we were woken to air raid sirens and had to get dressed and run off to a public air raid shelter, and knowing that the older—my sister's classmates, the older boys in school, were—were let go out of school and trained to hunt down Soviet Agents-Saboteurs who were dropped out of airplanes. [00:18:12] And also seeing the results of Soviet bombings, very close to our home. Our house was not—the apartment house we lived in in Heinola was not hit but there were craters very nearby and much of the city was bombed. And so this was a—this was a continuing part of my reality. And in the summertime, when we managed to rent the—a little house in the country, quite often, we—we could hear the war, even though we were [many, many -VK] miles, perhaps, from the battle—

ROBERT F. BROWN: Wow.

VAINO KOLA: —but the—Finland being so sprinkled with lakes, the sounds would carry. And we could hear it. And we could even, at nighttime, we could see the sky lit when Helsinki and other bigger cities, which were about 70 miles away, were burning. We could see that and occasionally we would see a Soviet pilot, two or three, maybe reconnaissance planes or fighter pilots, fly over so low that we could—we could actually see the pilot in the cockpit. And we would—we would—we learned to recognize planes. We could recognize Finnish fighters and bombers. We could recognize Soviet bombers and fighters just by the sound, at a very young age. And then we would run into the spruce forest. We thought—my mother thought that was the best place to hide rather than in the center of the house because they're—you could never be seen in a forest and they wouldn't drop bombs in the forest or shoot in the forest.

ROBERT F. BROWN: Mm-hmm. Mm-hmm [affirmative].

VAINO KOLA: So and so—

ROBERT F. BROWN: Your mother was a pretty resourceful person.

VAINO KOLA: Well, see she had to carry their whole thing. My father was not around. [00:20:00] I remember as soon as I became old enough to row a boat, I remember in the summertime spending days—two, three days a week with her rowing from one farmhouse to another, trying to buy food, which was very scarce, and—or barter for food. Unfortunately, as so often happens in various societies, an awful lot of black market profiteering took place. You could—in fact, we always thought that as we became a little older, and certain people would even be accused of it, teachers in the school, that they favored the farm kids who would bring them hams, and eggs and things like that. So this was quite widespread, that kind of stuff going on. But so I had to row the boat to—from farm to farm. Not all the time; my mother would row too but I would go with her.

ROBERT F. BROWN: You lived along lakes, I gather.

VAINO KOLA: Well, yeah. All these summer places on lakes. And the lakes are all—they're really waterways. They're all interconnected so you could go to many, many places. So it would be very easy to go, many farms, which usually would be on lakeshores, and try to buy food.

ROBERT F. BROWN: I'll tell you. Your mother had come—you mentioned, to Finland, where she met your father. Is that—

VAINO KOLA: No. They met here. My father had very much wanted to go to the—go to the Finnish West Point, the military officers training academy. But back in those old days, each student had to bring their own horse. The horses were not supplied. The horses were part of the training. Now they weren't training cavalry officers, per se, but it consisted—part of their training. So my grandfather refused to buy him a horse, so he couldn't go and instead he was forced to enter an agricultural college. [00:22:04] And he hated that. So he—at some point, either I guess the beginning of his second year, or the first year, or at the end of his first year or whatever, I'm not sure on these facts—he quit and left for America.

ROBERT F. BROWN: Were his family gentry or something if they—instead of military or agriculture—

VAINO KOLA: They were civil servants.

ROBERT F. BROWN: Civil servants. Hmm.

VAINO KOLA: Yeah. There's a long history of civil service on my father's side. My father—grandfather was a stationmaster in a fairly good size city. With railroads being what they were back in those days, that was a really important job.

ROBERT F. BROWN: Yeah. Yeah.

VAINO KOLA: Yeah.

ROBERT F. BROWN: So your father came over here, then.

VAINO KOLA: Yes. And—

ROBERT F. BROWN: With what in mind?

VAINO KOLA: As an adventure, just to see what would happen in his life, I guess. And arrived in New York, and became in contact with the New York Finnish community, the Brooklyn Finnish community, of the Greater New York Finnish community. And the Finns were very highly organized in doing very active, social fabric and had halls where cultural events would take place, and dances, and so forth, and that's where he met my mother. She performed at one of these functions. She sang something or whatever, some celebration or some event, and that's how they met. So they—my father stayed here seven years on that trip. They met and married and lived here, as I said. And then my father wanted to go back to Finland. They went back to Finland in the early ‘30s, I think, or perhaps the late ‘20s. Somewhere around there, early ‘30s, I think. And he had—they had both worked here and saved judiciously, and so he had—he had made enough money to go back to Finland and went to Viipuri and bought this building and started a business. [00:24:11] Who knows what would have happened if the war had not started? I know—I've talked to relatives, and my older sisters, who obviously knew more than I did. Whether they would have stayed there, or come back here. I had heard my mother was quite homesick for America and was trying to—not pressure, but influence my father to move back to the States eventually. But when the war broke out, that changed everything. [Laughs.]

ROBERT F. BROWN: Yeah. Yeah. Well you were—after the Second World War, then where did they settle? Back in Viipuri?

VAINO KOLA: No—

ROBERT F. BROWN: [Inaudible]—Soviets.

VAINO KOLA: In between, actually. Many Karelians, during the truce with the Soviets, went back to their old homesteads and so forth because apparently—I think the first time around, after the Winter War, the Soviets took a small amount of territory. But they did take Viipuri and so forth, and but we did not, obviously, because Viipuri was on their side. We stayed in that small city of Heinola, which is about, as I said, about 75 miles north of—due north of Helsinki. And that's where we stayed until we came here, just before—at the very—very end of 1950.

ROBERT F. BROWN: Hmm. Did your father start a business again? Or what did he—

VAINO KOLA: When he came here?

ROBERT F. BROWN: No, well here what did he—I mean in Heinola.

VAINO KOLA: Oh, he—he tried various things but having been an officer in a military effort, he was classified as

a kind of—as a war criminal. The Soviets pressured the Finns to—in fact in—to create new laws under which the highest-ranking military officers, the president, the cabinet, were all—all prosecuted and served time in jail. [00:26:09] And he never served—my father never served time in jail but he was—he was followed in the early years by the government police because there was all—Finland came very close to having a Communist takeover immediately after the war, which the Soviets were behind.

ROBERT F. BROWN: Fanning flames, yeah.

VAINO KOLA: Yeah, that kind of thing. And my father was involved in hiding weapons—weapons, good size, weapons cash, with—with a friend of his who was a history teacher in a local high school. They, I guess, wrapped a whole lot of weapons in oilcloth and boxes and so forth and they were sunk into a pond, which they're still there by the way. [Laughs.] In case this Communist takeover occurred, they were ready to fight it. But so he—he was a—he was blacklisted. He was supposed to get the civilian military job of being the head of the county military district, and that got taken from him. And then so he resigned from the military, and he had difficulty finding suitable employment. Well, we essentially lived on—well it was the government compensation for the loss of—loss of our home, and the business, and the building which was bombed to smithereens in Viipuri and the government compensated people for their property losses. So we essentially lived on that. He did have various kinds of jobs, but they were meaning—I think friends of his got him these jobs and so forth. But so they decided that it was time to come here, so that's what they did.

ROBERT F. BROWN: Well you were—you were still in elementary level or middle level? [00:28:02]

VAINO KOLA: Well—

ROBERT F. BROWN: For school—

VAINO KOLA: The Finnish system being different, where you have the high school if you pass the entrance examinations, you—you take entrance examinations into high school in the spring of your fourth year of elementary school, and they're pretty rigorous exams. Written and oral two-day examinations.

ROBERT F. BROWN: Were you on your way to being a scholar or what? What was—

VAINO KOLA: I don't think so. No, I was—

ROBERT F. BROWN: Schooling was—

VAINO KOLA: I was not a seriously committed student. I was kind of a hell raiser, really. [They laugh.] I was not a—I did not apply myself. I would say that I was a definite underachiever. I had enough wits to get by on. I think I did the minimal work in subjects that I didn't like. I did lots of work in things I liked. My favorite subjects, of course, were art and geography. Loved geography. I still do. I'm a map fancier and lover and so on and those were my favorite subjects and I did very well. But I took the—I looked upon school at the time, purely as something that you had to suffer through and I did as little as I had to in order to get by. In fact, I can remember just before coming here, that spring I had—that summer I had to go to summer school in geometry. I received a grade, which was not high enough to pass, which would have promoted me to the next grade in high school. So I was promoted to the next grade in high school on condition that I go to summer school and they—study [geometry -VK] under a private tutor. Actually there were three of us, I think, and the tutor was the regular [geometry -VK] teacher in the high school—not geography. [00:30:05] Geometry.

ROBERT F. BROWN: Geometry? Yeah.

VAINO KOLA: Geometry. And then we took exams at the end of the summer and I passed. But it was purely through the laziness. I was much more interested in various children's activities. A lot of art, as I said, but also sports. Sports were very important in my life. I belonged to a club in Finland. Sports—schools and colleges do not provide you with—you had physical education classes but the sporting activities are through private clubs that you join, they sponsor all the programs, youth programs and so forth, and all the way up to international, world-class level. So I belonged to one of those and depending on the season, there would be soccer, Finnish version of baseball, cross-country skiing, jumping, swimming, all kinds of sports. Gymnastics. And I did all those and I—I was—I think I was mainly interested in enjoying childhood. I was having a great time and I was not a scholar at all. Definite underachiever. [Laughs.] In fact, I even cheated. In the summer, for botany classes, we had to each—each summer in high school, we had—the first year, we had to collect 50 plants and dry a flower, and dry them and put them in the portfolio, and study them, find out the Latin name, and what sex they were, and all kinds of scientific information about them, and label them. And then in the fall, we would have an oral examination on this part. I—one year I got most of my plants from my elder sister's portfolio when she had been in the grade I was now in. [00:32:03] [They laugh.] Reused her stuff just so I wouldn't have to do the work so I could spend more time having a good time. And so I certainly was not an exemplary student in any way. I had no major problems if I applied myself, I just wasn't very interested in applying myself.

ROBERT F. BROWN: Well what about art, you talked about your friends getting together.

VAINO KOLA: Oh, yes.

ROBERT F. BROWN: But the time you—in 1950 or so, or were there instruction in schools or—

VAINO KOLA: Oh, yes. And I was the star pupil in my school and in my class. And as a result of that, and my mother's urgings, I also began to enter art contests. I won several prizes for drawings in various local contests and provincial contests, and so forth, and I still have a couple of books, which I received as prizes. They were books of poetry and so forth. And so—

ROBERT F. BROWN: Would these be drawings from nature, were you now doing studies?

VAINO KOLA: Drawings from nature. Yeah. Drawing directly from the landscape. I was observing and drawing. They were mostly landscapes with—done with pencil and color pen—and the skies were done—they were—consisted of landscapes with outrageous sunsets. The sunsets were always done with color pencil. [They laugh.] The only part of the drawing that had color. [They laugh.] They were—I mean, the typical kind of thing. Very romantic kinds of drawings and so on. So—

ROBERT F. BROWN: What did—in school, what had the art curriculum been?

VAINO KOLA: As I look back, it was really terrible. Mostly, I remember the teacher simply sitting in the—on—at her desk in the front of the room and would give us topics to do. [00:34:03] And I don't remember any direct instruction where she would go around and make suggestions about your work. We had to provide all the materials, even though this was public education. We had to provide the material. It may be because this was after the war, obviously the school systems were not well equipped and didn't have much money, and so forth. The country was very poor. But the instruction wasn't terrifically good. It was mostly self-instruction, and so on, so. The more serious instruction started when I came here to Worcester.

ROBERT F. BROWN: So you came over here in late 1950.

VAINO KOLA: Yes.

ROBERT F. BROWN: Your whole family came.

VAINO KOLA: Well, my mother, and my three younger brothers, and I came first. And—because we were citizens. We were born after the Congressional Citizenship Act whereby dependents of American citizens, no matter where they were born, would be citizens, even if only one parent were a citizen, and my mother of course was.

ROBERT F. BROWN: Your older sisters weren't.

VAINO KOLA: They were—they were outside of that. So they—my father also, of course, was not an American. We had dual citizenship, in other words. So my father came—we came at the very end of November. As a matter of fact, it may sound awfully corny, but we came on a Swedish freighter all the way from Finland to Portland, Maine, with a stopover in Gothenburg, Sweden, the ship's home port. We stayed there several days. I remember that journey vividly. And we arrived in Portland, Maine and actually on Thanksgiving Day—

ROBERT F. BROWN: Wow.

VAINO KOLA: And went to a Thanksgiving dinner at the home of my mother's closest childhood friend, a woman who was now living in Saco, Maine, which is near Portland. [00:36:07] And I remember also that they had no electricity. There had been a major hurricane a couple days before. The electricity had been knocked out so they had no water to flush the toilets, and so forth, so we had to bring water from a neighboring farm to flush the johns.

ROBERT F. BROWN: Great introduction—

VAINO KOLA: Oh, yeah.

ROBERT F. BROWN: —to this country.

VAINO KOLA: So I remember that very, very closely and then we came by train from Portland to Worcester, via Boston. And we went to Worcester because my mother's mother was living there. My mother's father was living in Fitchburg, Mass where he—he was an associate editor of the—for a Finnish language newspaper, one of the major newspapers for Finns in this country. So we had a place to go to. So that's how we ended in Worcester. My mother immediately enrolled me in the children's art classes at the Worcester [Art] Museum, and that started

my—the very first painting in my life, in the Saturday morning classes. And I remember that the paints were water-based. They were sort of poster paint, type paint. They were very difficult to control and I found it very frustrating. And I did many paintings of—based on scenes from my hometown. I think I was quite homesick. And did paintings of various parts of the little city where we lived in, and so that's where the first paintings occurred. And then also, almost simultaneously, she enrolled my—the brother next to me who was—he was 11—and myself in Worcester Boys Club, the Lincoln Square Boys Club, which was fairly close to the museum and also fairly close to where we were living. [00:38:11] And they had—they had various kinds of classes, including art, one night a week. Free supplies and so forth. So that's where I started painting for the first time with oils. And a marvelous man who was a high school art teacher in Blackstone, Massachusetts drove up all the way from Blackstone to Worcester to give this art class at the Boys Club. I don't even know if he was paid for it. I remember he was a very dignified, gray-haired Irishman who always wore dark suits and ties. And mostly, the painting consisted—he didn't really teach a great deal and it consisted entirely of copy. We would look through the *Saturday Evening Post* and other magazines that were lying around, for topics that we liked, and then we would do paintings. He provided the canvas and the paints, and the brushes. We had all the equipment we needed, totally free. And I painted all kinds of things—first to see whether I had any ability, he had—he looked up, and I remember that very clearly. He leafed through a *Life* magazine and picked out an ad for Stetson soft hat. I remember the profile of this handsome Hollywood type wearing this gray Stetson hat, and he asked me to draw that. I spent hours laboring over that, two or three different evening sessions, and after it was completed I guess he was satisfied and he said, "You can paint!" So I [laughs] remember that's how the painting started, and then I entered for—I spent the remainder of the years—as I said, we arrived—

ROBERT F. BROWN: [00:40:06] November.

VAINO KOLA: —and in Worcester, it was early December. The remained of the school year, till early June, I spent at an immigrant school in Worcester with—

ROBERT F. BROWN: An immigrant school?

VAINO KOLA: Yeah.

ROBERT F. BROWN: What was that?

VAINO KOLA: A special—special class set up in one of the elementary schools in Worcester, way down on the south side of the city. I had to—I had to—it was quite a long trip for me to get there. I took public transportation and then walked. It was many, many miles away. It was called the Lamartine Street School and it was a regular middle school. But within that school was one classroom, which was set up for—English as a Second Language school.

ROBERT F. BROWN: What we'd call that, yeah, today.

VAINO KOLA: Uh, the teacher's name was Miss McCarthy and the class consisted of people of all ages from many different countries. I think I was the next to youngest. The youngest was a little boy who was—I think he was 11 years old. His name was Giacamo. He was from Naples. And there was another Italian fellow who was about 15 or 16. There was a young Swedish boy who was in his late teens, a young Norwegian fellow in his late teens, and we were the youngest of that. Then people—there were people in their late twenties, early thirties, up to early sixties from various eastern European countries and Baltic countries. And—

ROBERT F. BROWN: This was a type of displaced persons kind—

VAINO KOLA: Right. Immigrants of all sorts. And Miss McCarthy taught us all English and American—civics and American history. We learned all those kinds of things.

ROBERT F. BROWN: Well, how would she do that? How would she lead you from—to learn in English?

VAINO KOLA: Uh, we had books, and I don't remember the technique very specifically but somehow it happened. [00:42:04]

ROBERT F. BROWN: It worked.

VAINO KOLA: But I think I learned perhaps just as much, if not even more quickly, simply having to use it because I started going to the Boys Club immediately without speaking any language—any voice at all. I knew one expression when I came here, which I learned aboard the ship. It was the Swedish sea—the people who work on the ships, the stewards and so forth, were constantly yelling at us for, "Close the door!" Because one of my brothers and I, we were—had the run of the ship, the 11-year-old and I. We would roam all over the place. [They laugh.] I guess we didn't close the doors properly, so I went to my mother and said, "What does close the door mean?" And she told me. So I knew that. Oh, and one other sentence, which she had taught me in Finland,

mainly, please write your name. I collected autographs from American athletes who started coming in the early —in the late ‘40s and 1950. American athletes, track and field athletes, were the best in the world and were in great demand. And Finland being a sports-loving country, usually two or three times a summer, one or two American track stars would come to a meet in my town too.

ROBERT F. BROWN: So you had learned to say, "Please write your name."

VAINO KOLA: "Please write your name." [They laugh.] In fact, I still have those too at home.

ROBERT F. BROWN: Your mother didn't teach you all English.

VAINO KOLA: No. That was strange, why they made no attempt to teach us any English because my father and she spoke it, but they used it as a kind of a secret language, although we didn't hear it very often. Occasionally they would, I guess, to prevent us from understanding would say something or other to each other in English, but normally they didn't use it. [00:44:03] We spoke Finnish at home. I don't think—from what I understand my —and actually I know, since my father does—didn't die till 1981 or so, that his English never was very good, even after we came back here and he came in 1951. And so he lived here 30 more years, and having lived here seven years, he never really learned to speak English very well.

ROBERT F. BROWN: Yeah.

VAINO KOLA: He associated mostly with Finns—

ROBERT F. BROWN: In his speaking.

VAINO KOLA: —yeah. In this country, and he spoke Finn.

ROBERT F. BROWN: Well, now would people of their assorted—Finland have also known Swedish?

VAINO KOLA: It's pretty bilingual. Swedish was a mandatory language in school. About 10 percent of Finns are Swedish speakers, or Finnish—or Swedish lineage. But it's a mandatory language in school and I had studied Swedish for several years before coming here, and also German for three years before coming here.

ROBERT F. BROWN: Yeah. Yeah. The—what did—how did a place like Worcester appear to you? I mean, what was it like for you?

VAINO KOLA: Well—

ROBERT F. BROWN: Compared to where you'd been.

VAINO KOLA: Well, it was strange. I was obviously—Worcester was—the city I came from only had about 10,000 people. It was a little—it was a city but it was small.

ROBERT F. BROWN: And isolated and far away from most other places.

VAINO KOLA: Nature was immediately—the city ended abruptly and nature began. Nature was extremely accessible and then I spent an enormous amount of time in nature, in all the seasons. And I was disappointed not to be able to duplicate that in Worcester. I wish I could—had access to real forests nearby, and that kind of thing, and clean lakes. I was disappointed at the fact that it was very dirty, and I had never seen slums before, and I had never such a disparity between the different classes of people. But on the other hand, the signs of the city, which I guess Worcester at the time may have had maybe 130,000 or 150,000 people or so. [00:46:04] That was exciting. The vast variety, the ethnic diversity was exciting. I never really associated with people of color before, and there were many, many kids like that at the Boys Club. And I remember staring at them and nearly got beaten up one time because obviously the kid I was staring at didn't know why I was staring—didn't understand what I was starting at, and I remember I knew some English now and understood more, his, "What are you looking at?" And I had—I tried to explain. [They laugh.] It was fairly awkward, of course. Yeah, so those kinds of things were exciting but I remember still, though—I remember, however, very clearly getting off the train at the railroad station and while my mother was sort of arranging to get our baggage and so forth, I remember quickly walking out the front door just to see what it looked like, and being very disappointed at the condition of the—what I saw before me. The dirt, and the rundown appearance of buildings, and shops, and so— and I had thought that America, having not yet been exposed to that much of it, just simply coming through Boston on the train and so forth, that it would be wealthy or would appear—that the wealth would be more visible in our cities. And so that was a bit of a disappointment. But I wanted to return briefly to one—one moment, which was very important to me in that immigrant class, because I think that we remember these kinds of moments. These moments are very important as part of our development, successes, namely. [00:48:05] That probably one of the reasons I continued doing art is that I recognized very early on that I was good at it and received praise for it, that consequently this was a way—and athletics. Those two areas were the

two areas where I was really good at and excelled in. So obviously, it was natural to continue and to continue doing things which you would receive praise for, and you would be better than most of—most of your contemporaries. But so—and praising, generally, I think is an important part of our development, and I remember one time, apparently a frustrated seventh or eighth grade teacher came into the immigrant class and asked Miss McCarthy whether she had anybody who could come to her class and spell Massachusetts on the board. So I was selected by Miss McCarthy and I went up there and I wrote Massachusetts on the board, and it was right, and then I stood there while the teacher berated her class and called them idiots, and nitwits, and whatever, and [laughs] [inaudible]. She said, "Now, this young boy here who has been in this country only two or three months can spell Massachusetts. [They laugh.] You natives can't do it, what's wrong with you?" [Laughs.] And I remember kind of being embarrassed and sort of—I guess I felt badly that I made them look bad. Things being as they were—but it—things like that stay with you because I was very proud that I was able to do it. But the reason I was able to do it is that I was—I was learning English phonetically. The way I learned to spell all these words was to pronounce them to myself the way they would—I would pronounce them as if they were Finnish words. In other words, I would pronounce every letter phonetically. [00:50:00] So everything I learned, I also learned to spell immediately. I never had to worry about it, so it wasn't that hard.

ROBERT F. BROWN: Well were some of these highs and lows, was this a contrast from what you were used to, like the teacher berating her students? You also mentioned the slum-like conditions.

VAINO KOLA: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

ROBERT F. BROWN: Was—you weren't used to such great distance between—

VAINO KOLA: No and also—

ROBERT F. BROWN: Achievement or grades and—

VAINO KOLA: No. No.

ROBERT F. BROWN: —despair or poverty.

VAINO KOLA: No. And in fact, I suffered from embarrassment too. In Finland, we had considerable status in our community because of my father's military background and my mother being an American. That may not be apparent, but in a small town, that establishes you as being different and that gives you a type of status. And my father came from an old, well-educated family, and so on. So we were—Finland is a very class-conscious society and the level of education, particularly, is an important discrimination and so on. So we enjoyed fairly high status in Finland and when we came here, we had none. We lost it all. And we were not well-off economically. In fact, my mother's brother, who had always stayed here and was doing quite well, helped us. He sent us a monthly check. I don't know how much. And I don't think without that we could have survived. So we lived in a very shabby apartment. In fact, so shabby by contrast of what we had had in Finland. The last few years in Finland, we had lived in a rather nice house and so forth, with a nice orchard and gardens, and beautiful location on the edge of a park and that kind of thing. [00:52:09] I was—I was so embarrassed by our—

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VAINO KOLA: [00:00:00] We had an icebox. We didn't have—well hardly anyone had televisions. Not many people, I guess, did in '51. They were just starting to come in on a large scale, but some of my friends—had them and the various homes of my friends who I had met at school, by the time I went to high school the following fall, or at the Boys Club, because I became very involved in swimming at the Boys Club too. So I made many friends and they—when I went to their homes, I recognized that they had—had all kinds of things which we didn't have, and we didn't have a car. We didn't have nearly anything that, at that age, gave you status. So I never invited any of my friends to our home because I was too embarrassed about the way it looked. And so I—this was difficult and—because I always thought of myself as not being in that class of poverty. In other words, that we had had that kind of status so that was part of my self-image, that we—I came from a different kind of a family but yet we were living in such poverty that there were conflicting signals that I was receiving, so.

ROBERT F. BROWN: Hmm. There was family, the uncle who was perhaps—

VAINO KOLA: He lived in—yeah he lived in Washington, D.C. and he came up every Christmas. I remember his Christmas present to us always was a crisp bill in a special envelope, you know, sort of like a Christmas envelope, and things of that sort.

ROBERT F. BROWN: But right around Worcester there wasn't much. Your grandfather was in Fitchburg near—

VAINO KOLA: My—yeah but we were estranged because—

ROBERT F. BROWN: Oh.

VAINO KOLA: My grandparents had left my mother, really, essentially orphaned her or discarded her or whatever, displaced her. [00:02:04] My mother didn't want anything to do with them. In fact, we moved into the apartment in which my grandmother had been living, and she had lived with us for a while, but then I think she was forced to move out or something of that sort. I don't really understand the details of that fully, but I remember there was a pretty big confrontation between my mother and—

ROBERT F. BROWN: Did your mother ever—in other respects, tend to re-adapt, coming back to America fairly well?

VAINO KOLA: It seemed that way but I think that she had difficulty with our social conditions as well. And also, she had undergone a mastectomy in Finland in '49 and apparently they didn't get it all, get the cancer in time so she was relapsing into that and she died pretty shortly after we came here, I think—

ROBERT F. BROWN: Wow.

VAINO KOLA: —in the fall of '52. So—

ROBERT F. BROWN: Well, that was a major trauma—

VAINO KOLA: Yeah, I was—

ROBERT F. BROWN: —for you, then.

VAINO KOLA: It was, and my siblings. Yeah, so. And my father was then working in a steel mill.

ROBERT F. BROWN: He had come over by then.

VAINO KOLA: Well he—well as I said, we came at the very end of '50 and he came the following March with the younger of my two older sisters. But that particular sister was then 17 years old and very far along in her studies and also had a serious romance or boyfriend back in Finland, so she didn't want to stay here at all. And my parents, after much arguing, told her she could go back but she had to earn her own passage. So even though she attended the same school for a little while as I did, she quit. She knew English already. She had been studying it in Finland. She took on an au pair job and by the end of the summer had saved enough to go back, and she left. [00:04:00] But my father, when my mother died, things were obviously very difficult. There was also a recession in the early ‘50s so he was laid off for a while. So my two youngest brothers went off to a foster home. In fact, I think they were in two different foster homes through the Worcester Red Feather Agency or whatever. It was—it was—it was a difficult—

ROBERT F. BROWN: Hard.

VAINO KOLA: —yeah time and I—I visited them sometimes with older friends who had cars and we would go and visit them, and sometimes with friends of my father and so on. And so I think I—I at that age, 14, 15, 16—one is so self-involved, and self-centered, and self-indulgent, I don't think I paid a lot of attention to the real serious difficulties my father was involved in, having lost his spouse, and job, and all kinds of things. He—I later learned that he actually even had thought of suicide. I was not aware of that.

ROBERT F. BROWN: Hmm. Did he think of going back to Finland?

VAINO KOLA: He did, in fact.

ROBERT F. BROWN: He did.

VAINO KOLA: He went two summers in a row. He used the money, which was still in the banks of—in a bank in Finland, which the government had paid—

ROBERT F. BROWN: Compensation.

VAINO KOLA: —compensation and my eldest sister, who was still in Finland, I guess, bought the tickets over there or paid for the tickets over there. So he went back two summers in a row with my youngest brothers. He took them out of the foster homes. And the second time they went, they—he was going to stay, in fact. They—they came back. By then, I was in my first year of college, art school, at Mass College of Art, and my sis—elder sister had come from Finland to look after my youngest brothers but now had taken on a job at Dartmouth College and moved—[00:06:05]—she was uh, I don't know exactly what she did. She was in—she was a biochemist or she worked in a lab. And so my—when my father eventually returned from Finland with my two youngest brothers, they—they all moved to New Hampshire with my older sister. But in any case, so he did go

back to Finland and the real purpose of going back, I think, was to investigate if he wanted to stay there, but also was to see if he could find a new spouse and a mother for my youngest brothers who desperately needed a mother.

ROBERT F. BROWN: Yeah.

VAINO KOLA: And he did succeed in it, actually. [They laugh.] Yeah. Very impressive and very comical. I have heard many great tales about his courtship and an awful lot of humor associated with it, and how he coached my youngest brothers when they went back the second time, which finally convinced the woman that—convinced her to say yes, agree to the whole—the proposal and so forth. Apparently, my youngest brother ran up to her when they arrived and said, "Mother, mother!" with open arms [they laugh] and that broke the camel's back. [They laugh.]

ROBERT F. BROWN: Yeah. He had been well trained.

VAINO KOLA: Yeah, exactly! [They laugh.] Devious. Yeah.

ROBERT F. BROWN: Your father could have stayed back there. It—had the—

VAINO KOLA: Right.

ROBERT F. BROWN: It was no longer—or what—was he still suspect, or rather—

VAINO KOLA: Oh, no, no. The times had—

ROBERT F. BROWN: It had changed by the—

VAINO KOLA: —times had changed a great deal and I really actually never asked him this directly, and I should have. What prompted him to return here at all? Because for a while, he enrolled my brothers, the youngest brothers, at the American school in Helsinki and so on because they were now English speakers, although they spoke and understood Finnish fully too. [00:08:00] But they were very fluent in English and so they went to the American school. And oh, perhaps—perhaps appropriate jobs didn't come along or whatever. I don't know why he—why he finally returned here but he did.

ROBERT F. BROWN: Well you finished up your high school in Worcester, then.

VAINO KOLA: Right.

ROBERT F. BROWN: You didn't go up to New Hampshire. That happened just after you—when you went to college.

VAINO KOLA: It happened, yeah. That's—my, uh, yeah. I think he went back to Finland the summer I graduated from high school and then returned and then the following summer after my first year of college, he went back again. And then I—I no long—I didn't have a base in Worcester anymore. So essentially, when I graduated from high school, I was on—I was on my own.

ROBERT F. BROWN: How had high school gone?

VAINO KOLA: High school in Worcester? Well, it was a terrible high school academically, but I—my mother enrolled me there because it had a huge and a rather good art department. Many different art teachers, many different courses. Painting, sculpture, graphic design, drawing, all kinds of things. And I did quite well and I did—I found the high school unbelievably easy after the rigorous demands in the Finnish school system. So I didn't work particularly hard. I didn't have to work particularly hard, although English—English did give me trouble, but many people were very helpful. I remember one particular social studies teacher taking me under his wing, and he and I would meet in the auditorium early in the morning before classes and I would practice pronunciation. He would have me standing in the corner and speaking into the corner so I could hear my own voice echo back and he would correct—correct my pronunciation. [00:10:06] And so I appreciated that very much. And the thing I dreaded the most was having to read out loud in class from a textbook. I always tried to hide so I wouldn't be called on.

ROBERT F. BROWN: Yeah, sure.

VAINO KOLA: That was just horrible. I remember being soaked in perspiration when I had to do that because—because kids are cruel. They would giggle and make comments and so forth. They're so eager to pick on anybody's weaknesses to establish their own superiority to themselves, and so forth. So they were difficult moment and I certainly didn't have any kind of confidence in male-female relationships and so forth. So I avoided those, essentially. [They laugh.] And again, threw myself into art and swimming. I swam competitively

and I was quite successful and did a lot of art, and was successful at that too. Won some prizes and so forth.

ROBERT F. BROWN: The athletics was still, for you, a major outlet? Or major—

VAINO KOLA: It definitely was. And a source of great pleasure. But I—as soon as I won the national Boys Club 200-yard freestyle championship and I had achieved—

ROBERT F. BROWN: Hmm. You [inaudible].

VAINO KOLA: I did. Boys Club. Which may sound like a huge achievement, but—and there were Boys Clubs from various parts of the country taking part but I don't know if it was all that competitive. And I think I took—no I won the Massachusetts high school championship also in the 200-yard freestyle, but the level of competition at that time in high school swimming wasn't anything like it is today, in the number of schools participating and so forth. [00:12:08] In fact, I think my high school team—we didn't even have a team. The team consisted of guys who swam on the Boys Club team and I remember we went to the high school championships with one of the guidance counselors from our high school. We had to have official representation and the four of us amassed enough points to take second place [laughs] in the whole state.

ROBERT F. BROWN: There probably simply weren't many schools with swimming pools back then.

VAINO KOLA: No. There weren't many schools with swimming pools. In fact, most—and barely I understand it's true today that most of the high school swim teams consist of club team—club swimmers.

ROBERT F. BROWN: Sure. I think—

VAINO KOLA: There are all kinds of private clubs here: The New England Barracudas and so forth. And the various college courses, to make more money, have clubs of their own, and the high school swimmers are club swimmers.

ROBERT F. BROWN: Yeah.

VAINO KOLA: But many schools do have pools now, but at any rate. So that provided an outlet and pleasure, but then I lost interest. I became bored. I found the training particularly uninteresting and so that my last couple of years in high school, as soon as I—in other words, at 15 I won the national championship in the Boys Club level and that was the last year that I could swim in the junior age group. So after that, I would have moved on to the seniors and I just didn't have the motivation to train. I began to be interested in other things and so forth. And I began to investigate various kinds of social aspects of being that age, and so forth, such things which—rites of passage, as getting a bottle of whatever, and with a bunch of other guys, at age 16 or 17, and drinking ourselves silly, and throwing up, and all that kind of stuff. [00:14:13] [They laugh.] Yeah.

ROBERT F. BROWN: But you also—were these art classes taught—you said it was large. Was that partly because inherently there, the art for industry? I mean, were a lot of these people would have gone on to as [inaudible]?

VAINO KOLA: In high school? I went to—yeah. The high school was called the High School of Commerce and it doesn't exist anymore. In other words, this was a commercial high school

ROBERT F. BROWN: These were—this was to be applied art in many ways. [Cross talk.]

VAINO KOLA: This was—right, yeah, applied art. Absolutely. And also, the most of the majors in the high school, I think there was a college track. Most of the majors in the high school were definitely business-oriented. As I said, it was called the High School of Commerce. So I think that most of the students took various tracks, which allowed them to gain employment immediately upon graduation that I don't think many people went on to higher education.

ROBERT F. BROWN: Would that apply to the art people who did the regular work in the art courses?

VAINO KOLA: Yes.

ROBERT F. BROWN: They would have gone to—what, be draftsmen or something like that?

VAINO KOLA: Oh, they may have gone on to school such as Vesper George or something like that to learn more graphic design, or they would go and maybe get beginning level jobs in advertising firms or whatever, newspapers, and so on. Yeah. I think that kind of thing happened a lot.

ROBERT F. BROWN: What was the course with—did the teaching reflect that a bit? Was it sort of—

VAINO KOLA: Uh, it had both. My painting teacher was a fellow by the name of Lincoln Levinson who was an

exhibiting artist in Worcester, fairly well known in Worcester, had gone to Yale Art School and was a serious painter sort of in the kind of early American Gilbert Stuart. Not as abstract as that but—not Gilbert Stuart. [00:16:02] I mean, uh, Stuart Davis.

ROBERT F. BROWN: Oh.

VAINO KOLA: Stuart Davis, a Cubist kind of tradition, but not as abstract as that, but sort of taking naturalistic imagery and dividing it into planes. And I never—he and I didn't really see eye to eye because I never could understand why he wanted me to do that. I remember always asking him, "But why?" I think I had been sort of a realist.

ROBERT F. BROWN: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

[Audio Break.]

ROBERT F. BROWN: —talking about Levinson.

VAINO KOLA: Yes. On now? Okay. Uh, he and I had difficulty because I couldn't understand the philosophy behind his teaching. In other words, I had always been a kind of a realist or naturalist. I—no one had pointed me in any other direction in my youth. So he was trying to get me to divide whatever it is I was painting—was trying to get me to divide the canvas into a serious of diagonal lines. So I would work with planes or shapes or something, and I really didn't like doing that. And I remember asking him why, and I never understood why. So we didn't really get along all that well, but I painted and—

ROBERT F. BROWN: What would you have learned from someone like that? Do you recall? I mean, could you—would he look closely at what you'd done and make observations about it?

VAINO KOLA: Well, yeah, but he was trying to impose his own—

ROBERT F. BROWN: Impose his own. Mm-hmm [affirmative].

VAINO KOLA: —own system of—and so I resisted very severely and I don't—consequently that—that created a severe barricade to learning whatever he was trying to get me to learn.

ROBERT F. BROWN: Sure. Sure.

VAINO KOLA: I think I learned more from some of the other faculty where such barriers were not created. [00:18:00] One fellow by the name of Trippi who still teaches at—this high school, the High School of Commerce, doesn't exist anymore. And it was replaced by a high school called Doherty High. I don't know if—how commercially oriented it is, or career-oriented it is, but that's apparently where he teaches now, so.

ROBERT F. BROWN: And what's—what did he teach?

VAINO KOLA: Studio art. Also art courses.

ROBERT F. BROWN: And would you have had set ups, still lifes?

VAINO KOLA: Yeah. All kinds of things. Yeah. And we could work on various kinds of things. We could set things up and so on. Typical sort of high school kind of projects. And it was—I befriended one fellow particularly well who—he and I ran on the high school track team, cross-country team. I had then had—I did continue doing that all through high school. No longer swimming, but I did running. That kind of thing. And he was planning on going on to art school. I don't even know for sure what I wanted to do after high school. So I think he influenced me in going through the application procedure. Both of us, we came to Boston—we went to Boston and took both the entrance exams to Mass Art and the Museum School.

ROBERT F. BROWN: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

VAINO KOLA: And that's how I ended up a Mass Art. It was the one place I could afford because as I said, I was on my own. I received a scholarship through the Worcester Boys Club.

ROBERT F. BROWN: Really?

VAINO KOLA: There's a foundation there. It's still—still going, the Washburn Foundation for members of the Worcester Girls and Boys Clubs, and not a lot of money. [00:20:01] I think by the time I—I think I had received about $800 or something like that altogether, but the tuition, I think, at Mass Art was something like $100 a year. So I had to earn my room and board money, and expense money during the summer, and during the year. So I always had jobs during the school year in Boston and lived in inexpensive places, and got by on very little.

Yeah.

ROBERT F. BROWN: So you didn't go to art school with any particular goal in mind. You just knew that you liked it or—

VAINO KOLA: Yeah. And I didn't know what I was going to do with it.

ROBERT F. BROWN: Yeah. Did you have any conception of what—

VAINO KOLA: I also—

ROBERT F. BROWN: —what it meant to be an artist?

VAINO KOLA: No, not really. I was also once approached by an alumni from Yale who lived in Worcester who took me to lunch at the University Club. This was while I was still swimming. I think I was a sophomore in high school or something like that, and he had read about me in the Worcester papers because I was quite successful in swimming. And he was, I guess, acting as an alumni recruiter for Yale, which as you remember, had a famous swimming program.

ROBERT F. BROWN: For years.

VAINO KOLA: Kiphuth. No longer so, but it was the—I guess the best swimming team in the country for a long time. So he took me to lunch at the University Club and asked me if I would be interested in perhaps going to Yale. That was a very frightening idea to me.

ROBERT F. BROWN: You would have known that Yale was an important school—

VAINO KOLA: Oh, yeah. Exactly. Oh, definitely.

ROBERT F. BROWN: You had heard all that.

VAINO KOLA: Oh, yeah. I had heard all that and I remember when I was still in Finland, I followed all the sports. And just before coming here, I remember reading—John Marshall, the Australian, was at Yale, [00:22:04] every time he stepped in the pool, he set a world record. And some other Australians too. They had world-class swimmers at Yale, and so it was well established. And I was concerned because I already was losing interest in swimming. I did not envision going on to higher education with the pressure of being a swimmer, of performing on that level and having to do all that. And I had thought that if I were going on to higher education, that I—I wouldn't want anything like that. The other thing was that I didn't feel confident in having been academically—or that I wouldn't be academically prepared well enough, and of course I didn't have the social confidence. I knew from talking with friends that places such as Harvard and Yale, and socially, were for the socially elite—

ROBERT F. BROWN: Yeah.

VAINO KOLA: —in America and mostly for the wealth—children of the well-to-do and so on. I certainly didn't feel confident in—

ROBERT F. BROWN: Sure.

VAINO KOLA: —moving in those circles. So there would be a lack of academic confidence, or lack of academic preparation, the social status, and not wanting the athletics. So I—he—I remember he was telling me that we can take care of the academic part, that you can go on to prep school after this school for a year or so and get ready. This was all—just sounded too—too much for me. I was familiar with prep schools because the Boys Club swim team did compete against such places at Deerfield and Andover, and so on. And so I had visited those places and they seemed to be like a world removed from my reality.

ROBERT F. BROWN: Hmm. Hmm. Did they seem more like what you thought America might have—might have been before you got—came to America?

VAINO KOLA: That's—I thought so but on the other hand, I had never—I had never been exposed to private boarding schools before, so I mean, they were beyond that. [00:24:08] I mean, it was clear that these were boys who were very well-off, and I mean, and lived in lux—under luxurious circumstances with wonderful athletic facilities and were obviously the cream of the crop, the elite. And I certainly couldn't identify with that on that level at all.

ROBERT F. BROWN: Did your—your class consciousness, it persisted from Finland, hadn't it?

VAINO KOLA: Oh, definitely. Yeah. Yeah. But in a weird kind of way because I—inwardly, I placed myself on a

different level. I had that—I always thought that I came from a very well-educated, good family, unlike the parents of most of my friends who were working-class people. And I didn't identify with the working class in that sense. We lived below the working class [laughs] families and I was embarrassed about it.

ROBERT F. BROWN: But you knew that there were special reasons for your family—

VAINO KOLA: Yes. That's what I—

ROBERT F. BROWN: —lacking better odds.

VAINO KOLA: —understood it to be, that I realized that when you came to this country and if you were not an English-speaking professional class person—well as a matter of fact, my—they were friends of my fathers who had been officers in the Finnish military who were working as custodians and so forth. And it's also even if you were a medical doctor. It's very difficult to be—get a license to practice in this country. You have to go through hell. Not—at least then, not so now because I think that our hospitals depend on many foreign doctors.

ROBERT F. BROWN: [Cross talk.] Yeah.

VAINO KOLA: They wouldn't survive without. There's a shortage, as you know, so.

ROBERT F. BROWN: Yeah. Deliberate shortage.

VAINO KOLA: Right.

ROBERT F. BROWN: Well the—the coming to art school, then, you had no clear idea of vocation but you thought you liked art. You liked—

VAINO KOLA: [00:26:04] Yes.

ROBERT F. BROWN: —you liked at least working with—

VAINO KOLA: I think I probably vaguely thought that I would—I would go into commercial art. That I would have—try to earn a living and so forth doing it. And so I ended up going with this friend. We both went to Mass Art and we were roommates. We went looking for a place to live. We found a small, two-room apartment beneath street level, the basement of a house on Brookline Avenue. So when we opened our shades in the morning, let our shades up in the morning, there was a bus stop right outside our window, we could see people's ankles. [They laugh.] And we could hardly ever open the window because all the dirt off the street would blow right in. That—so that's where we lived. I lived there an entire year, he only a half of year because he was homesick for his girlfriend so he became a commuter the second semester all the way from Worcester.

ROBERT F. BROWN: And what was the school like when you got there?

VAINO KOLA: Oh, overcrowded. It was—it only had the Brookline-Longwood Avenue facility at the time, that one building, and it was vastly overcrowded. We were not allowed to work in the studios beyond the closing hours of the school, which was three o'clock or so. We had to all leave.

ROBERT F. BROWN: Why was that?

VAINO KOLA: The studios were not open in the evening. You couldn't get in. I don't know whether it had to do with state funds or what, but we were not allowed. Once school was—classes were over, you had to leave. You couldn't come to work. So whatever work you did outside of school, you did at home. Some students, I think, rented studio space, got together. I couldn't afford that. I worked in my room at home. I lived in a different place every single year. Every summer I asked friends who were staying on the summer as well if I could rent closet space or something, store all my belongings, and pay them something. [00:28:11] Then in the fall I would come back and look for a new place to live.

ROBERT F. BROWN: In summers, would you go back—

VAINO KOLA: Summers were—I would go—

ROBERT F. BROWN: To New Hampshire.

VAINO KOLA: I had jobs. No, I never—

ROBERT F. BROWN: You never lived there.

VAINO KOLA: —never did. The first two summers, I worked at a boy's camp on the Cape as a water safety—

waterfront director and made money that way. And then after that, at Lake Placid at a private resort, made money that way. That continued through graduate school as well. So summers were used as a means of earning money as much as possible. Did very little art during the summer. And so, but Mass Art was interesting. We took an enormous number of courses. I can't remember the exact number, but it does seem to me as though they may have been as many as eight or 10 courses a semester.

ROBERT F. BROWN: God.

VAINO KOLA: Drawing, two-dimensional design, three-dimensional design, painting, graphic design. I mean, just tons of classes all day long. You never had any breaks. In other words, school would—usually classes started at nine. You had one class after another all day. So you had many different courses.

ROBERT F. BROWN: And you were fragmented too, weren't you?

VAINO KOLA: Very fragmented.

ROBERT F. BROWN: A little bit here, a little bit there.

VAINO KOLA: Yes, very fragmented. It wasn't this focused in any one particular area until you started majoring, which didn't occur till your junior year. And so by that time, I knew I didn't want to be a graphic design major. I became—I think it was called painting and illustration, which included printmaking, of course, and drawing and so forth.

ROBERT F. BROWN: How did it all begin? What was the first—were there first courses that were prescribed for everybody? [00:30:02]

VAINO KOLA: Yeah. They were sort of freshman-type courses.

ROBERT F. BROWN: And what were they?

VAINO KOLA: Which would be—which would be drawing—depending on who you had. Some friends of mine were in the drawing section where the people had you working from plaster casts and things like that. I wasn't in that.

ROBERT F. BROWN: The very old-fashioned type.

VAINO KOLA: Yeah, some of it. It varied from instructor to instructor. All of the instructors were professional artists. I had people like Calvin Burnett and Otis Philbrick and Gavin who was a real highly respected teacher in the traditional method, sort of Sargent painting technique and I had him for anatomy. And—who were some of the—uh, Tom O'Hara, Charles Demetropoulos. They're all Boston artists who exhibited in the various Boston galleries. And David Berger.

ROBERT F. BROWN: Yeah. Well, let's take some of those people, the most memorable teachers. Was Burnett one of your teachers?

VAINO KOLA: Yes. I had Burnett.

ROBERT F. BROWN: He would have been a fairly young teacher at that time.

VAINO KOLA: He came when Otis Philbrick retired.

ROBERT F. BROWN: Okay. Philbrick you also had.

VAINO KOLA: Yes.

ROBERT F. BROWN: He would have been way up in years.

VAINO KOLA: Otis Philbrick. Yeah. Very old, very old. Yeah. I had a printmaking course with him, I think.

ROBERT F. BROWN: Was he—how was he as a teacher, Philbrick?

VAINO KOLA: Uh well, I may have been too young to fully appreciate him. I think the upper class students appreciated him more because I think he was a very low-key, philosophical type of fellow.

ROBERT F. BROWN: You didn't feel he was leading you or teaching you.

VAINO KOLA: Well, yes. Techniques, printmaking has so much to do with techniques. Oh, I had Robert Neuman too who was—became a very well established Abstract Expressionist in Boston in the early, late ‘50s and early ‘60s. [00:32:05]

ROBERT F. BROWN: Mm-hmm. Mm-hmm [affirmative]. How was he as a teacher?

VAINO KOLA: [Laughs.] It's a good thing this is all confidential. [Laughs.] He was—he let you do essentially whatever you wanted to. It was very difficult to talk to him because he would just keep walking. After class or in-between class, you'd have to sort of just keep on walking next to him and keep talking. And I think many of the Mass Art teachers were having to teach things where they didn't really have expertise. He, for example, taught various courses in printmaking. I don't think he had had that much training in printmaking. I think he was more a painter. So I don't think that he had an awful lot to give to you in that area. I never had him for painting. I only had him in printmaking, and I remember that he didn't really seem to—in retrospect—I know that now. I didn't know at the time because I didn't know anything either, but that he really—certainly he didn't have the technical expertise that a printmaker would have. He was not a printmaker. So I think—Calvin Burnett came in to teach perspective. He may have taught some other things too, but that I remember. I had him in perspective. He was very thorough, a very good teacher. And perspective is a deadly thing to study. I mean, imagine a whole year of perspective. Oh, God. Terrible. The worst—I hated it. But you know, it's like practicing vocabulary, I guess, if you're studying a language [laughs] that kind of thing.

ROBERT F. BROWN: Did he make a reasonable effort?

VAINO KOLA: He tried but it's very difficult to make perspective exciting. [Laughs.] All those diagrams on the board and all these rules. I mean, he taught perspective as though it would be taught for someone who is learning to be a craftsman. [00:34:06]

ROBERT F. BROWN: Sure.

VAINO KOLA: Mechanical drawings, actually, to a great extent, so.

ROBERT F. BROWN: Was he a very forceful teacher, or was he rather gentle?

VAINO KOLA: Pretty dynamic, yeah. Well-spoken, very intelligent, and so forth. Yeah, he was good. Uh, I'm trying to remember some of the other people. We had everything, ceramics. I remember I did quite well in ceramics. The two people teaching ceramics, Doucette and I think the other fellow's name was, oh, Abbott—Charles Abbott a well-known ceramicist. And both—they were trying to talk me into becoming a ceramics major but I didn't want to major in ceramics.

ROBERT F. BROWN: What was it about it? Too limiting in terms of your inclination?

VAINO KOLA: I didn't want to—I didn't—I enjoyed making images and pottery, it didn't give me enough. I didn't want to just focus on vessels and so forth. I enjoyed it but I think it was too limited, too specialized in that sense. I think that I was interested in images. So I think that the teaching—the teaching was fairly good overall. I think we suffered intensely from being overcrowded. Oh, I had Kupferman, of course.

ROBERT F. BROWN: Oh, Lawrence Kupferman.

VAINO KOLA: How could I forget Kupferman? I had him as a freshman in a painting course and if you know Kupferman at all, he would rant and rave for hours about concepts, artistic concepts, and philosophy, and so forth, and so on. He loved talking about that. And—

ROBERT F. BROWN: Did that impress you?

VAINO KOLA: As a freshman, no, because I couldn't—I didn't buy into those concepts at age 18. My idea of a great artist was still someone who could do it representationally with—where the technique was visible, and I certainly didn't comprehend Abstract Expressionism. [00:36:12] And Kupferman was then taking that course in paint technology at Northeastern, and you know, he started doing these—all these poured enamel things on animals—

ROBERT F. BROWN: Oh, some sort of [inaudible]?

VAINO KOLA: *Landscapes of the Brain*? That series?

ROBERT F. BROWN: Yeah.

VAINO KOLA: Yeah. That's what—he was into that stuff and that's what he would talk to us about. And he was trying to influence us very strongly. He was trying to break us down and get us to move our work nonrepresentationally, and as a freshman, I resisted that severely.

ROBERT F. BROWN: Yeah. Yeah.

VAINO KOLA: And then I—of course, he was my major teacher when I was a junior and a senior. I had him for painting and then it was better and I understood more. But by—at that time, I went through a Cézanne phase and junior year, I was—went through a Cézanne, highly Cézanne influenced my senior year. Also, Monet influenced, and then the West Coast figure painters: Diebenkorn, Park, Bischoff, and I was trying to—I adapted to that kind of an Abstract Expressionist brushwork to figurative kind of painting. I did purely nonrepresentational painting as a senior also, but it just never fully satisfied me. Then somehow I always felt better when there was some—much like Picasso. Picasso was never a purely nonrepresentational painter. I felt better when I had an image to play around with or some kind of literal content because I—and I still believe that. I think, to me, the content is everything. I don't mean that it has to be literally recognizable, but the painting has to make—make some kind of a statement about something. [00:38:05]

ROBERT F. BROWN: There's got to be something in it, in that—

VAINO KOLA: The formal elements by themselves aren't enough.

ROBERT F. BROWN: Then you're back to what the teacher in high school was trying to force you to—

VAINO KOLA: Right. Right, yeah.

ROBERT F. BROWN: Patterns and so on.

VAINO KOLA: I demand more for myself now. I don't want—I don't get enough out of the interaction between the formal elements. It's just not enough, although I recognize fully that you can express a great deal symbolically through the formal elements and so on. But for me, it's not enough. I want there to be more. But that's something we could probably talk in more depth later on, yeah. Any—anything more about—

ROBERT F. BROWN: Yeah. I'd like to—Kupferman as a teacher, once you were, say, junior and senior year—

VAINO KOLA: Yeah.

ROBERT F. BROWN: Was he still trying to ram ideas down your throat? Or was he—

VAINO KOLA: Well, we took him with a grain of salt. He's sort of a character in a way. He would rant and rave about ideas, and he had a certain speaking style and so forth. And uh, I think he was interesting. Many of us actually—although when I looked at it later on, many of us were in a way more impressed by his wife's work, Ruth Cobb, who was very well established and more successful too. And at that age, that influenced us too. Ruth Cobb would have sellout shows, and you know.

ROBERT F. BROWN: Yeah. Marvelous watercolors.

VAINO KOLA: Yes. Very sensitive, very delicate attitude and approach, and we felt—you know what I was really impressed by at that age, was Kupferman's earlier work! Oh, those etchings he drew?

ROBERT F. BROWN: [Cross talk.]

VAINO KOLA: The [James Abbott McNeill] Whistler etchings and so forth? What a tremendous craftsman, and he left all that, and then he became this nonrepresentational painter. And I didn't really fully appreciate his nonrepresentational work, and I haven't seen it in a long time so I can't—I don't know how I would judge it through very different eyes now but—

ROBERT F. BROWN: [00:40:07] Yeah.

VAINO KOLA: At the time, I didn't think it was all that great. But then again, who knows? Yeah. David Berger I responded to very well. I responded to the gentleness of spirit, his approach, and in that he didn't try to make us work like him. He tried to really help us become better at what it is we were doing, or interested in doing.

ROBERT F. BROWN: What kind of work was he doing at that—

VAINO KOLA: Well, I mostly—mostly I had him for painting from a model. We would have a model in every class, different kind of model—I mean different models. A man, male, female, different ages, clothed, unclothed. And that's what I focused on. I think I also had him for silkscreen—also had Kupferman for silkscreen. God, I can't believe the number of things we had to take.

ROBERT F. BROWN: The techniques you had learned or were supposed to learn.

VAINO KOLA: You name it, everything. Sculpture, the various kinds of sculpture, photography, various courses in graphic design and illustration, architecture too. Two years of architecture. We would actually design things,

draw the plans. Construct models.

ROBERT F. BROWN: What was the result, do you think, most people just got a smattering, little bit of everything?

VAINO KOLA: I think so. I look upon it almost as like as a basic foundation, lots of stuff and which necessitated graduate school to focus on a thing you really were interested in.

ROBERT F. BROWN: Well were [inaudible] students steered toward secondary or elementary art teaching?

VAINO KOLA: I think possibly the largest major in Mass Art was teacher education.

ROBERT F. BROWN: It was set up as an art teacher training school.

VAINO KOLA: [00:42:00] It—or I think it was. Right. And I think art education was the largest major.

ROBERT F. BROWN: So those people would have been, what, just learning a smattering of this and that—

VAINO KOLA: They had to—I think the first—excuse me—first two years we all went through the same program and then the last two years you were picking a focus and I think their—then their studio courses were geared perhaps—they weren't in the same studio courses as we were any longer. I think that they were teaching methods type courses.

ROBERT F. BROWN: And you somehow didn't want to go into any of that.

VAINO KOLA: Definitely not, no. No, I didn't want to do that. I didn't want to be an elementary or high school art teacher. I wanted to become an artist, actually. I began to realize that fairly early on and then I—I thought graduate—I went to graduate school primarily in order to get a master's degree in order to get a teaching job to support myself, in order to be able to do art. Yeah. That was the main reason, yeah. No, I wanted to be an artist. Yeah. Good time to stop—

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