

A TEI Project

Interview of Christopher Trumbo

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1. Transcript

1.1. Session 1 (December 12, 2010)

Ceplair

One thing I'd like to start with, Chris, is that you've spent a lot of time doing a play ["Trumbo: Red, White & Blacklisted"] of your father's letters and then working on the documentary film, and you were planning to do a biography. I'm wondering if that was kind of just a filial devotion, or you have a larger purpose in mind with those projects.

Trumbo

Well, when I did the play the first time, it was supposed to be one night. Nancy [Escher] had joined a group which was going to put up a statue or some kind of art project at USC [University of Southern California], and years before I'd mentioned about maybe doing a one-man sort of show, but I'd abandoned that idea. But when Nancy came to me in, I guess, '97, '98, probably '97, she proposed that it might be a good way to raise money for me to write something for the stage, and then they could put that on and get fifty or a hundred bucks out of people at a shot, rather than approaching them one by one.

Trumbo

And I said, "Sure." But I really didn't know how to do it, and so I had a great many constraints on how it would be done, how I'd write it and put it together. What I decided to do was make it a more personal story about the

blacklist, rather than accumulations, "They're bad; he's good," and all of the legal questions over which people would get very hot. But none of that is interesting. It has no drama to it, has no force to it. Nothing propels it, as in "Jarndyce v. Jarndyce" [Charles Dickens, "Bleak House"]. Nothing propels it. So I decided to make it the story from the beginning of the blacklist, because it starts in 1947, until it sort of dribbles away into the past. So having figured that out, I then had to decide what sources and how to use it. I realized that "Additional Dialogue," which was Trumbo's collected letters that were published--use those as a guide. Edit them, fill in some information to lead to the next letter and on and on and on until the end. So that's what I did. The next problem, and another problem, actually, that I have to think about is people memorizing parts, because I'm not going to get anybody to memorize for one performance. So that meant that I would have people reading. They could stand at different podiums, sit at the same tables, sit at different tables, I didn't care. Then I had to get actors. So I called up Steve Martin, who--he and my younger sister were close in the early sixties or sometime around there, and Steve said, "Sure." And he said, "What part do you want me to play?" which I thought was wonderfully modest. And I said a long time ago, "I want you to play Trumbo," because he'd met Trumbo. Then I got Ed Asner to play the moderator. He's the one who's going to keep me going in between, explaining events letter to letter. And for that first production, I also got Jeff Corey to read a passage from the "Congressional Record." Who was on that committee? The really bad one.

Ceplair

[J. Parnell] Thomas?

Trumbo

No, not Thomas. This was the really anti-Semitic one.

Ceplair

Oh, [John] Rankin.

Trumbo

Yes, Rankin. He played Rankin. And then I got Jennifer Salt to read the message from the producers of the Waldorf agreement, and after that, "We're

not going to employ these people." And that's all I had. Later I narrowed that down to the Trumbo part and the moderator part, which was me at this point, Trumbo's son. So that involved figuring out dead people talking to live people and all that. He also, that character also plays a couple of other people. He would just switch it by tone and stance.

Ceplair

Did you have a particular image of your father you wanted to get across? I mean, did you select the letters for that purpose, or did you select them just for their kind of comic or interesting quality?

Trumbo

Well, I wanted the comedic, definitely, because I wanted to have a balance between all of the defeats. That he was writing those kind of letters at the same time as he was handling all this other stuff gives you a larger picture of, like, what he was and what he was like. And if you notice in the correspondence, there are a number of letters that are quite funny. Actually, I have from Wisconsin--I went and copied a lot of the stuff, so I have a little correspondence between Gordon Kahn and Trumbo, and it's always about money. [laughs] I somehow have the idea that the same five hundred dollars was going in this great circle.

Ceplair

In all the other correspondence I've read, money, like [Ring] Lardner [Jr.]'s, for example, and Hunters, money is always the central focal point.

Trumbo

Yes, [unclear]. And at the end, and taking care of a family more than anything else, the question how it was, how do you do that? And that's, you form a black market. Within two days after Trumbo returned from the hearings in Washington, a producer named Frank King called him up, and he needed a rewrite on a script. I can't remember the sum of money, but it was under ten thousand dollars. It was either twenty-five hundred or seventy-five hundred, something in there, which, if you compare it to his--that's a 90 percent drop in the standard fee at that time. And he took it, and that was the beginning of the black market, and then it expands as time goes by. One of the things about

the first couple of years, from '47 until they go to jail, is that nobody knows what's going to happen, what their legal position is. But later the Supreme Court membership changes. But they had many supporters, who favored the Hollywood Ten. It didn't work out that way. So when, in that intervening period between 1947 and 1950 or '51, nobody is sure that the Ten aren't right, so it's a much looser environment, and people are more willing to buy. It always has to be done through an agent, of course. George Willner was Trumbo's agent at the time, and George was able to sell things. And Trumbo has an ability to write almost anything, even if it--and he had a way--she's heard this story--was if he knew the story wouldn't really work, he'd present it in a way as if it would.

Ceplair

Well, let's go back to your memories of those days. I mean, like, you were, what, about seven or eight when the subpoena--

Trumbo

I was seven when he went to the--

Ceplair

To Washington?

Trumbo

Yes.

Ceplair

Do you remember what it was like when the subpoenas came, or the lead up to that hearing? Do you have any memories of that?

Trumbo

Not really. We were living at the ranch at that time, so we were ninety miles away from everything, and we don't have a telephone. So we were, in a sense, not in on meetings and all sorts of stuff. Pop would go into town, but we were sort of divorced from that, the things like the Cole kids may have gone through, or the Lardner kids and all that sort of stuff. In fact, when my father was in jail, my older sister was given the American Legion award for good

citizenship or something like that, which is to my mind, you can't beat America. You never know what will happen.

Ceplair

So did your mother, for example, just try to protect you guys from what was going on and just keep you separate from it? Or was it just the distance that did?

Trumbo

Well, we lived in Ventura County and went to school in Kern County, and the closest school to us was probably twenty miles away. So we would drive in in the morning and they'd drop us off and then we'd wait for the school bus, and we'd get on the school bus, which would take us the final leg. So it was pretty isolated. And it's 1947, and there's no television of any consequence, so there really isn't much interest in us. They've known my parents in that area since the late thirties.

Ceplair

So no one was picketing you?

Trumbo

No.

Ceplair

No FBI agents skulking around?

Trumbo

No. I mean, they'd have to disguise themselves as sagebrush or something. And I can remember when the neighbor moved into the valley and we saw a light at night, and they were two miles away.

Ceplair

There's that famous picture of you, I think, and you sister and your mother, along with all the other Save the Hollywood Ten People. I guess that was when they were going off to prison?

Trumbo

That's when Trumbo was flying to Washington. That's where they all went and from there they were filtered out into the--

Ceplair

The prison system?

Trumbo

Yes, for the misdemeanor kind of low crime rate. It's not Leavenworth.

Ceplair

So when you went to Washington for the hearings in '47--

Trumbo

I didn't go to Washington.

Ceplair

You didn't go. Did your mother?

Trumbo

She did a little later, because one way or another it was this all-male group, and they were like a bunch of gangsters. [laughs] So they wanted some flash during the hearings, so she was flashy, so.

Ceplair

Did they talk about the hearings when they came back home, to you guys?

Trumbo

Not really. We weren't that interested, in a sense. And there's not much to talk about. I imagine if you were involved in it, you think there's a lot to talk about. But from my point of view, there wasn't much. They had explained to us earlier that there was a possibility that he might go to jail. That was from early on, so that was never withheld from us. And the other things my parents decided, which I think was something nobody else did, is that they didn't want a two-tiered family, one of the secret discussions and one of the, "Watch me, Mom," so they decided to tell us the truth about anything, about anything we asked. They weren't shoving stuff, but if we had a question, they would always answer it frankly. So I think that was, for us, an advantage.

Ceplair

Did your father change noticeably before the Senate hearings and afterwards, when he came back? Did he seem to you, from your perspective, a different person?

Trumbo

No. No. He'd been away for I guess I don't know how long, six weeks to maybe a couple of months, in the South Pacific, and he got back in time for Hiroshima, dropping the bomb, which is an interesting thing, because his immediate reaction was, "Good," because he had just been there. It was a horrible war, and so the fact that it would be over I guess was--but the next day he changed his mind. And then I guess a little later, John Hersey wrote that article for "The New Yorker"[Hiroshima]. But that was his series of reactions.

Ceplair

Then he went to San Francisco, right, for the United Nations conference? Didn't he do some work for--

Trumbo

Yes, he did some--

Ceplair

For [Henry] Stimson, maybe?

Trumbo

No, Secretary of State [Edward] Stettinius. And he'd gone up there because he'd been asked, because they didn't think their speeches were particularly good, which were all mostly done by State Department employees, who have--well, look at our foreign policy now. You'll see how apt they were. But it was Walter Wanger who volunteered Trumbo to Stettinius or whoever it was. That was all he was doing was polishing the prose, which became difficult because it kept on contradicting itself, but the idea was to untangle this and put it together in a straight line with some humanity in it. But they later changed it back to something else, or on to something else, which he was a little pissed off about.

Ceplair

He was in the Communist Party at that time, wasn't he, when he was--

Trumbo

Yes.

Ceplair

Kind of ironic.

Trumbo

Well, it depends on what you think the Communist Party is, and then what individuals who are in the Communist Party think the Communist Party is. Trumbo took the Communist Party to be a legal party in the United States. Joining it had no more importance for him as joining the Catholic church or whatever else is there. You go, you say, "Oh, I like what we're doing. It's effective," until the point you say, "You know, I'm not going to do this anymore." So but that was his idea about being a citizen. You have the freedom to express yourself in any way and in all ways really. So the significance of--I mean, he couldn't even remember what year he joined the Communist Party.

Ceplair

The concept of citizenship loomed large, it seems to me, in much of his writing. Do you know where that stemmed from and why that was such a significant element of his thinking?

Trumbo

Well, probably had something to do with where he grew up, and it may have something to do with his father, who was sort of a questioning soul rather than an obedient one. But also in there is the idea of the West. Colorado was the West and the traditional ways of thought that come with the West, some of which are immensely conservative, and others it's the reverse. The whole Populist Movement, for instance, is sort of an example. Colorado elected a Populist governor in--I can't remember the year--so that was part of it. His grandfather was always in law enforcement, and he didn't believe in treating--he believed the prisoners were human beings rather than law breakers, not

human beings, so I think that all had something to do with it. And then when his father died when he was early twenties, he became the chief support for his mother and two sisters. His sisters were nine and seven years younger than he was, so he went to work at night at a bakery, which was the Davis Perfection Bakery. But it, Davis Perfection, and Helm's Bakery basically had the city split up between them. They both had trucks that drove around that would stop at your door. They'd ring bells and you'd run out and buy a cupcake.

Ceplair

So this is in Los Angeles?

Trumbo

In Los Angeles. And he was particularly aware of injustice and particularly working in a bakery, the idea of labor and the way people are treated, which is very much as objects. He rose in the bakery from just being a guy who was shoving boxes around to being an estimator. An estimator is somebody--you would have had to work there for a while. So you're estimating what we're going to cook for tomorrow, which is a fairly responsible job. He knew he should get a raise, and he tried to unionize the place, but that really wasn't possible, so he and three other men who performed his function or something also on that level got together and said, "We're not coming in until you make a better deal," so they were able to make a better deal that way. That was the way of lots of labor organizing anyway, start at the top and finally get everybody together. And as he said, "I was earning more money at the bakery when I started working there than when I finished working there." So things weren't going well.

Ceplair

Was he an autodidact? I mean, did he pretty much educate himself?

Trumbo

Very much. Well, books were always in his house as a child. His father had a complete set of [William] Shakespeare, which was, of course, not common.

Ceplair

Right. Especially in Grand Rapids, I suppose.

Trumbo

Junction.

Ceplair

Grand Junction, right.

Trumbo

And his mother had high ambitions for her son, and I think that drove him on its own for a long time. My grandmother became a member of the Christian Science church, which was, again, a daring thing at that time, and so my father was raised as a Christian Scientist. In some letters from college, he describes how he thinks he's winning over one of his classmates toward Christian Science, so there's always a little proselytizing with these people. But when they moved to Los Angeles, his father came down with pernicious anemia, I think, and they had no cure. One would develop later. But his mother refused to have his father looked at by a doctor, and I think that was another very important snapping point. It's a combination of things. He had been--forces in western Colorado were sort of looking forward for him to get a law degree, practice a little bit, and run for senator, so that sort of thing, get ahead was--but for some reason, he decided to become a writer, which I think was the result of his mother's wishes.

Ceplair

Was it difficult to be his son? I mean, he's a kind of larger-than-life personality, the really bright guy, funny, witty, etc.

Trumbo

Yes. I never thought so, but I think it's because I had a very distinct sense of who I was. And besides, I didn't want to be him, I wanted to be me.

Ceplair

So in the period between the hearings and jail, your life just pretty much stayed the same. You still lived on the ranch?

Trumbo

Yes, we lived at the ranch. Sometimes people would come up and visit. Larry Parks did a couple of times, which was really cool, because he drove up from Los Angeles on a motorcycle, and then managed to top the motorcycle by flying up in a Piper Cub and landing in the orchard.

Ceplair

Was he a friend of the family?

Trumbo

No, he was a friend of my father's. But I know he certainly--once in Los Angeles, Cleo [Trumbo] and I were walking down Hollywood Boulevard, and he popped out of a store, I mean out of a theater, and recognized her immediately. Larry was probably like my mother, I think, about ten years younger than my father, so there was kind of a--it was like having a man who's older than you are who was a friend that you can essentially kind of seek advice from.

Ceplair

Do you remember any other people who came up during that time?

Trumbo

Butlers, Lardners, and Hunters could be there at any time.

Ceplair

So that was kind of a little--

Trumbo

The four of them were--or the four of all of us, four families were--but later on, after the hearings, Alvah Bessie, Adrian Scott, and people like that would come up. But the Hollywood Ten were really diverse. My father actually only knew Ring [Lardner]. So all these other people like even when Eddie Dmytryk had directed "Tender Comrades," he never met him, so the structure of the business was different at that time. The close relationship was producer-writer. We produced the script. Then we'd hire a director.

Ceplair

I suppose the older guys, like [John Howard] Lawson, [Samuel] Ornitz, etc., they must have been completely out of your orbit.

Trumbo

Mostly. I don't think they ever came up to the ranch. All these people had other friends. I used to, when I was a kid and we were living in Beverly Hills, I'd wake up because people were laughing downstairs. So what I'd do, I'd sneak downstairs and curl up in like a barrel chair so I couldn't be seen, but I could hear laughter and witty conversation. But the kind of people that came to those kind of things were Groucho Marx and Charley Butterworth, Hy Katz [Kraft], who had written "The Second Banana. So this was a whole different kind of mix, and, in general, there was a lot of that. A very busy social life in L.A., which my mother wasn't much for, so she made that known and we moved to the ranch, starting in 1946 and gradually more and more. But it also happened to be at the same time the political forces were really rising against the Left and the Motion Picture [Alliance] for the Preservation of American Ideals particularly. But everything else that was happening at the beginning, all the little tornadoes that are leading up to the cold war as policy.

Ceplair

Do you remember any political meetings at your house, I mean distinctly political? No. When your father--

Trumbo

Except Ring and Ian [Hunter] or Hugo [Butler] or a combination, they might talk politics, but it was not political meetings in that sense.

Ceplair

So you're still living at the ranch when your father goes to prison.

Trumbo

Right. So we're isolated from anything.

Ceplair

Have you become more focused politically?

Trumbo

No.

Ceplair

So you're just a ten-year-old boy going about ten-year-old boys--

Trumbo

Yes, trying to live my life. And pretty much I didn't get politically interested in things until later.

Ceplair

Did you ever visit him in prison?

Trumbo

Yes.

Ceplair

What was that like?

Trumbo

That was fantastic, because Cleo and Mitzi [Trumbo], my younger sister, got on a train and traveled I think to St. Louis and then from St. Louis down into Ashland, Kentucky, where the prison was. And the first thing that struck me is, why are those black people sitting over there? And why do these signs say whites, blacks? That was just extraordinary to me. I mean, I was aware in the same ways that anybody who knew about segregation, but seeing it, was an eye opener, definitely. The prison stuff wasn't particularly interesting, visiting him once inside. But I then went down to the--I think they may have had Mitzi or--but I went to a double bill at the theater, and I liked to sit in the balcony, so I just started climbing up into the balcony. "You can't sit in the balcony. Balcony is for black people only." So that was pretty eerie.

Ceplair

What was your father's attitude like about being in prison?

Trumbo

He didn't like it. But that's the way the system worked. They were going to take ten months from him. And since, actually, he believes in the United

States and everything that it professes in terms of freedom doesn't mean it can't make a mistake. But you accept that. That's part of the way it works; not on your side all the time.

Ceplair

So he wasn't particularly bitter about it?

Trumbo

Never. It's so interesting, because the word bitter is the one that right-wing critics keep throwing at the Hollywood Ten or anybody else. As far as 'm aware that none of those people knew each other, I mean the blacklisted people and the right-wing critics. They're either making it up, or I have no idea with what evidence--if they happen to be writing complaining articles about their condition, that doesn't make you bitter necessarily. Bitter people behave quite differently. They slink around in the shadows.

Ceplair

What did he do at the prison? What was his job there?

Trumbo

He ended up being a chief clerk, which was--and when he left, he said that his position was soon taken over by Dashiell Hammett.

Ceplair

So when he comes home or when he gets out of prison, things change radically, I assume, for the Trumbo family.

Trumbo

Well, at that point new hearings have begun. He gets out in 1951, and the blacklist is accepted, and he's still able to get some work, because George Willner was a great agent, a funny man, and he and my father liked each other. His daughter is still alive, incidentally. But the question had to do with where we were going to live. Now, staying at the ranch would have meant that my older sister would have had to make the trek from the ranch into Lebec, where we picked up the school bus. But she could now pick up a school bus that would take her to Bakersfield, because that's the nearest high school. So that's a commute of like an hour and a half each way, and that didn't seem

a reasonable kind of thing to do. Also, the cost of maintaining a place like the ranch is large, so we decided to sell the ranch and move somewhere else. We didn't quite know where. Couldn't get a passport, so we couldn't go to England or France like the Wilsons or Hunters. So it took only a tourist card to get into Mexico. This is also the time when rather than destroying the concentration camps that we established for the Japanese, they were freshening them up, and there was a sense that if some kind of state of war was declared by any-- we could all well be rounded up and tossed into a concentration camp, which would not have been a happy event.

Ceplair

So that was a palpable fear among--

Trumbo

Well, no, not in our family. It's just that was part of it, I think.

Ceplair

Part of the atmosphere.

Trumbo

Yes, among blacklisted circles or people who were avoiding subpoenas.

Trumbo

That's one thing I want to ask you. A lot of the so-called right-wing critics were, lots of people say, "Well, they were blacklisted. Big deal." I mean, they don't seem to understand what it was like to be blacklisted and see your friends being blacklisted. Maybe you could--I mean, what was going on every time someone got a subpoena or someone testified or someone--

Trumbo

Well, once again, we were outside. Trumbo would go back and forth between L.A. and the ranch, but we didn't, so it wasn't that. [Interruption]

Ceplair

Okay, let's pick up. So let's see, we were at, you guys were pretty isolated, but your father would go back and forth.

Trumbo

Yes. And the first people, or among the first people to go to Mexico were the Kahns, and so very much relying upon Gordon's guidance, we decided to move to Mexico City. It just seemed to be better to be out of physical reach.

[Interruption]

Trumbo

So we moved there because, one, school; two, money, save money living in a much cheaper country; a modicum of safety from government interference with our lives. Of course, other people were almost literally kidnapped out of Mexico, so that's another problem.

Ceplair

What was your feeling about going to Mexico?

Trumbo

Mostly it was about, what are we going to do there? And so I didn't move necessarily reluctantly, but it wasn't something that I was anticipating with any kind of pleasure. And when we got to Mexico City, after a year I realized that we would be going back to the United States, which we did another year and a quarter or something like that.

Ceplair

So you went in a caravan with the Butlers, right?

Trumbo

Yes. We went down, yes, in a little caravan. At the same time, there was a Grand Prix race, international racing, so every once in a while a Ferrari would go [demonstrates sound] and pass us in the dust, which was sort of exciting.

Ceplair

What was the attitude of those two families as you were driving? Were you happy, sad, scared, or just bored?

Trumbo

No. I was never scared about any of this, about what would happen to me, that kind of existential large sense of things. I figured things would work out, but it's not going to work out this way.

Ceplair

But Hugo had been ducking a subpoena, hadn't he?

Trumbo

Yes, he was. He had managed to duck one. You watch the [Trumbo, 2009] documentary; Jean [Butler] tells the whole story, much of which is true. But everybody with age--we conflate memories, we forget things.

Ceplair

Had your father made arrangements for scriptwriting that he could do while he was in Mexico, before he went? Had he set up any--

Trumbo

I don't know. But there was sufficient cash to take a break, and when that ran out we went back.

Ceplair

Now, as I remember, he did maybe about three or four, at least, black-market scripts just before going into prison, or he's like doing them sort of one right after another.

Trumbo

Yes, right.

Ceplair

Were you aware of that?

Trumbo

Yes, absolutely.

Ceplair

He was just always writing, basically?

Trumbo

Yes. Also we asked, what are you doing, and he'd tell us. So that was interesting, because when they decided to change credits in, what was that, '94?

Ceplair

Ninety-five, '96, yes, somewhere in that area.

Trumbo

Trumbo's name got put on "The Prowler," and a couple of weeks later Michael Butler said to me, "I didn't know your father wrote 'The Prowler.'" So that gives you different ways that a family treats information.

Ceplair

Now, when Hugo was fronting for your father, would they meet to talk about it, or the script would just go to him and he would--

Trumbo

Well, I assume that they had--Hugo's mission, as he saw it and they saw it, was to try to keep the script as close to Trumbo's script, rather than become an extension of Joe Losey's ego, so as to preserve the story. The same thing was true with the [John] Garfield picture, I can't remember, "He Ran All the Way." And Guy Endore was doing that, and Hugo maybe as well, I don't know. But when the script changes were being--and while the attribution of credit was being changed, Gita Endore called me up and said, "Did your father write that?" And I said, "Yeah." "So take my father's off it." Two different--Jean had not--[dogs barking loudly] had the same attitude--if you close that door--

Ceplair

Okay. A little red car just came in. [Unrelated Comment]

Trumbo

So once again, it's different attitudes towards credits, toward ego, toward a whole bunch of different things get handled differently.

Ceplair

I guess also Hugo had fronted the cowboy movie, although it didn't get made until--

Trumbo

Until later.

Ceplair

Yes, when Edward North rewrote it. So Hugo, he fronted at least three films for your father. Did he do that for anyone else?

Trumbo

Hugo? I don't think so. A little hard to have that much business.

Ceplair

I guess that's right. Do you think he was a--you said Gordon Kahn, but do you think the Butlers also were kind of a factor in the Mexico decision, that they were kind of eager to get out of the country and wanted company?

Trumbo

No, they stayed.

Ceplair

They stayed.

Trumbo

Yes. They didn't see a way of getting out, economically. I think eventually there were six children?

Ceplair

No, I'm talking about leaving the United States.

Trumbo

About leaving the United States?

Ceplair

Yes. Were they more eager than, say, your folks were to go to Mexico?

Trumbo

No. Mexico was like the last resort. Neither of them had yet been subpoenaed, so at least they are politically clean, except that somebody else had said something about them. So that made a difference, I'm sure, as a selling point.

Ceplair

So what did your father do in that time? You were there, what, you said about fifteen or sixteen months?

Trumbo

Well, we were there from--we left in January of '54, and we left, I think, in November of '51.

Ceplair

So a little over two years.

Trumbo

Yes.

Ceplair

What did he do during that time?

Trumbo

Hard to say. He wrote "The Brave One," which he sold to the King Brothers, which later turned out to be an invaluable asset. But in Mexico there was an attempt by Americans, or blacklisted Americans, to work into the Mexican film business if they could. Hugo wrote two scripts that were directed by [Luis] Buñuel, but Lardners came down for a while, moved to New York; Hunters came down for a while, moved to New York. They couldn't see any future in Mexico, but they came to look around.

Ceplair

I guess by that time Willner had been blacklisted--

Trumbo

Yes, that was--

Ceplair

--so he couldn't do much for you.

Trumbo

Right. That was a major blow.

Ceplair

Wasn't George Pepper kind of active down in Mexico, trying to produce?

Trumbo

Yes, and he did. He produced at least one documentary that Hugo did, directed, wrote and directed, and there were some other things, I guess.

Ceplair

He didn't do anything for your father, or wasn't able to?

Trumbo

Well, that's one I haven't been able to really untangle, the relationship between Hugo and George and then money people here and stuff. It was fairly complicated, but it didn't work out, mostly. What I think was the most important thing at that time for Trumbo is that he was able--there was enough cash that we didn't have to keep scrambling, so it gave him more time to think about things, and it was at that time that he came to the decision that he was going to break the blacklist, and he couldn't see things going on this way. You're always in a defensive position, where you're kind of like a beggar on the village outskirts. So that, I think, was the most important thing about Mexico, that and "The Brave One." But he wrote other stuff down there, but I'm not sure what it was and what it was not; not much, and certainly not for any money of significance.

Ceplair

Did your family have any contact with the Maltzes when you were living in Mexico?

Trumbo

Some, but not much. The Maltzes, Margaret [Maltz] and Albert [Maltz] had adopted two children, just as the Bibermans had adopted two children. They, I think, may have had some confused [T.D.] Lysenko idea, because of the Hollywood Ten, it seemed to me that they were the least likely to be good with children.

Ceplair

Well, of course, later we'll get to that. I know your father and Maltz disagreed about the "only victims" speech. But were they at all friendly in those days?

Trumbo

Oh, yes, yes. Mostly the differences grew over the years, because Albert had the conviction that he was right about almost everything, so disagreeing with him on something is--there must be something wrong with your mind, Trumbo. So over the years, that changed.

Ceplair

So from the early days, many of the blacklisted--I know your father brought a breach-of-contract suit against MGM when he was fired after the hearings, but from that point on, did he just stay away from litigation? Did he just think that wasn't the right way to go?

Trumbo

He just bowed out, because he didn't see a future there. It's very difficult when you're trying to get your job back, to sue the people that are going to employ you, for fifty million dollars or whatever the fuck it was. So how they thought that would make friends and influence people I have no idea. But those are, again, the--that's the way some people think things ought to be done, is through proper channels we have access, that the law is on our side, which it never turned out to be, because it's an incorrect idea about the nature of power.

Ceplair

What about the notion about some of the producers said, well, okay, if you sign the affidavit admitting that you were a communist and that you're no longer a member, then we can hire you? Did that ever come up for your father?

Trumbo

Oh, sure, probably started with it. But because he and Mike Wilson and Ned Young in three or four years just gobble up awards, it became more and more difficult to sustain, and neither Trumbo nor Wilson was going to back an inch down, which I think didn't help Mike a couple of years later. But it's your name on the lawsuit. "I'm the one who's going to--." So he had a very difficult time getting back, even though he had a fistful of enviable credits.

Ceplair

Well, suppose if after prison someone like Harry Cohn had come to your father and said, "Okay, if you sign this affidavit that you were a communist and you no longer are, we'll hire you," would he have done that?

Trumbo

No.

Ceplair

No. Just a matter of principle?

Trumbo

Yes. Once you're in there, you're swimming. His idea is to swim over there. Cohn's idea is to swim over here. So, no, he thought it was just unconscionable. And besides, "[he thought] I'm going to win."

Ceplair

So when he was contemplating breaking the blacklist in Mexico, do you think he thought it was going to happen the way it actually happened?

Trumbo

No.

Ceplair

What do you think he envisioned himself as doing?

Trumbo

He just set that as a goal.

Ceplair

I see.

Trumbo

Because anti-[unclear] hadn't happened. But it's the only way that he could see to go forward. "They never give me credit, and I'm not going to tell them a damn thing that I wouldn't tell the committee. That's it. Those freedoms that I alleged in all the briefs filed, I still believe those things. Those were just, and so I won't sign anything else like that." Mike Wilson took the same position. Others, once Trumbo was out, signed letters saying that, I was a communist. That's one of the things that either Universal--well, suppose you wrote us a letter in whatever form you like, and just sort of include a sentence saying, "I am not now a member of the Communist Party." That would be--"No."

Ceplair

When you come back from Mexico then--so you said that was January '54?

Trumbo

Yes.

Ceplair

Where do you live then?

Trumbo

Well, Cleo and my two sisters move in with Trumbo's youngest sister in Altadena. He and I are camped out in a motel just a little east of Hacienda. It's the one that had--the rooms were shaped like teepees, like Teepee Village. He and I stayed there and the dogs and the cat until he could rent someplace, which turned out to be a house in La Cañada, so we moved there. And once again, I decide this was the disaster neighborhood. I didn't think we'd be there long. But the problem of the blacklist on the political side or the theoretical side is that it doesn't take into account how you actually live in it and through it, which is, to my mind, always much more interesting. I'm interested in how the black market got built and how that develops. But if you are someone who has spent a year in federal prison, and you have been paraded before the nation in the newspapers as an un-American person, and you don't have any

money, how do you buy a house? Who's going to give you a mortgage? So, I mean, that's a very practical aspect as was just renting an apartment in New York. How would you do that?

Ceplair

Well, why don't you tell us about that, about how the black market was built and how one, at least the Trumbo family, lived on the blacklist?

Trumbo

I'm not able to do that as well as describe what we--Trumbo's first job on the black market was a rewrite of a film called "Gun Crazy," and Frank King gave him a pittance for it. And they bought "The Brave One" later on. They've got kind of a production company-writer relationship, in which they hold the upper hand, of course. So the King Brothers were the first perhaps steady flow, and then you increase it somehow or another. Word of mouth gets out for other producers who need good work cheap.

Ceplair

Well, [Sam] Spiegel and [John] Huston came before.

Trumbo

But that was all before. And Huston was always a supporter. There became a point where you couldn't be so public.

Ceplair

So there was a kind of a foundation, a black-market foundation in place?

Trumbo

It was growing. It was built. But coming back to Mexico, you've got a two-year hiatus, and who are you? He got some work from the King Brothers, and the King Brothers had been in the slot-machine business in the 1930s, when Los Angeles was even more corrupt than it is now, and they migrate into the movie business, sensing that the happy days of corruption in L.A. were coming to an end and they should get into something legitimate. Frank King is definitely the brains of the operation, a very smart man, uneducated really, but really a smart man. [Interruption]

Ceplair

Okay, so the King Brothers.

Trumbo

Yes, so the King Brothers [unclear]. A guy named Lionel Sternberger, who owned a chain of about six restaurants, and Lionel didn't like the government either, because they wanted to restrict his [unclear] straight-up food faddist. The King Brothers had gone to high school with Lionel [unclear], so they met, Trumbo, Lionel, and the King Brothers, and Lon assumed a note on his own, so it was financed by him, and Trumbo paid the mortgage to Lon. But it was none of that paper bullshit, credit ratings and stuff like that. It's three guys making a deal, which is really kind of strange when you think about it happening that way, because Lon had never met Trumbo. Lon Sternberger, it turns out if you research it, is credited as being the man who invented cheeseburger.

Ceplair

So he was the one who got you--that's how you got your house.

Trumbo

Yes, we got his house. His mother had just died. He had lived with his mother until she died, so the place had too many associations for him. So that's how we got a house, as improbable a way of getting one as I can imagine.

Ceplair

Now, is it also true that your father was offered more scripts than he could actually write himself?

Trumbo

Yes.

Ceplair

And he sort of was farming them out to various people?

Trumbo

Yes. Paul [Jarrico] is one that Trumbo [unclear].

Ceplair

Your "Green-Eyed Blonde."

Trumbo

I don't know if it was that. It could have been.

Ceplair

Yes. That was not a happy experience, I think.

Trumbo

Well, they had met. I mean, Trumbo tries to set up these things so that it won't happen. [unclear] Sally Stubblefield and Paul and Trumbo meet and they all agree what it should be. But Paul then goes off and writes something else, so Trumbo has to go back and rewrite the script that he'd guaranteed. The same thing happened with Jack Lawson on what I think was "Terror in a Texas Town." So I don't know how many others like that happened.

Ceplair

But ultimately, he held himself responsible that what was delivered was what had been asked for.

Trumbo

Right. If you don't like it, I'll do it. But what he's trying to do is build the black market, because only in that way is anybody going to be responding to demands for redress. And he spread the rumor [unclear].

Ceplair

So he was deliberately spreading rumors from well before "The Brave One" came up, the award, and he was kind of--

Trumbo

It may have been around that time. "The Brave One" provided the key for press access, because it's a story that has delightful aspects to it. Everybody likes to see the Academy [of Motion Picture Arts and Sciences] get mud thrown on it, given its image of perfection.

Ceplair

Were you all surprised that it won an Academy Award?

Trumbo

Absolutely. I don't think I saw the other pictures, one of which was written by Jean-Paul Sartre, but that was once again in the documentary. Mitzi gives her take on what had happened. " Great! Let's go pick it up."

Ceplair

So that's when the serious planning began.

Trumbo

Leverage. But this is just more. That way he can use all of his charm and charisma on reporters.

Ceplair

Did he go to Bill Stern and Lou Irwin, or did they come to him?

Trumbo

I don't know. Bill Stout--

Ceplair

Stout, I'm sorry.

Trumbo

--and Lou Irwin.

Ceplair

They were the ones who kind of went on television.

Trumbo

Well, Lou Irwin I think--I don't know that he was television, may have been just radio.

Ceplair

He was on Channel 7.

Trumbo

Was he?

Ceplair

Yes.

Trumbo

So he gave stories to each of them and would write notes, "Sorry, could you hold yours for a week and I'll give you some more later?" Because Bill Stout [unclear]. And so it was all jerry-rigged and a matter of taking advantage of what appeared. But the idea of breaking the blacklist was just a statement of purpose, but as to how it was going to happen, he didn't know. Things would come along, and he was the right person in the right place. So in a sense, he was orchestrating this as much as he could, and it didn't hurt that Mike Wilson had "Friendly Persuasion" come out, and then it didn't hurt when Ned Young pops out of nowhere with "The Defiant Ones," and it doesn't hurt when "The Bridge on the River Kwai" sweeps in, so all of these written by--they had more Oscars floating around in a four-year period than anybody needed for a scandal.

Ceplair

You also were involved, weren't you, in cashing the checks?

Trumbo

Oh, yes. In order to persuade the producers that no one would be able to trace their checks, they would send a check in the name of Doc Abbott or whatever pseudonym he was using, to a fictional person with a bank account. Even we had one back in La Cañada, and so I would take a check to Doc Abbott and I would deposit it at the bank, and then I would take--Trumbo would write a check to another name, which was also a fictional person, and I'd deposit that one over here, so it's just a kind of multiple covering. In La Cañada one time there was a bank vice president said, "Who's this person that you seem to be depositing all these checks for?" And I said, "My father." And he said, "Well, why all these names?" "Well, he writes pulp westerns," and under different names. And then later our main bank started nosing around, and Trumbo went down and talked to one of the vice presidents there, who happened to be politically toward our side than the other, so then that's when I got out of the banking business. Except--when was that, about seventeen? [unclear] went over to, can't remember the name, but it's around where

Sunset Boulevard and one of those canyons going up--found a house down in--well, went to the place, got some impressionist paintings and furniture that I wouldn't like, and I picked up ten thousand dollars in cash, which was a hefty sum in those days, and carried that across town to the bank in Pasadena.
[Telephone interruption]

Trumbo

So that was kind of fun.

Ceplair

So when did your father finally decide, okay, I'm now going to go public and say I wrote "The Brave One"? Did he just think the time was right for that to happen?

Trumbo

Well, he couldn't say all of this. The idea is to get the MPA to say that, so that Universal acknowledges that they hired him, or whatever it is major studio, or United Artists, Association of [Motion Pictures produced], or Otto Preminger. And it was [Otto] Preminger who decided to announce that he'd hired Dalton Trumbo--

Ceplair

For "Exodus"?

Trumbo

For "Exodus."

Ceplair

But he'd already been working--maybe we should back up a little bit to get the chronology straight. So it had already become clear that he had written "The Brave One" before [Kirk] Douglas and Preminger hired him, wasn't it, if I'm not mistaken?

Trumbo

No, I don't know that it had become clear.

Ceplair

But the rumor is all over the place.

Trumbo

Yes.

Ceplair

And he couldn't, because that was part of the honor code, that the writer couldn't come forward.

Trumbo

Right, because if you do that, you're going to destroy a carefully built-up system of exchange, which was the black market.

Ceplair

So you could plant rumors, but you couldn't yourself say, "I did it."

Trumbo

Probably, but I don't think he ever did that, or tried to plant rumors, because it leads you into perilous waters, because when you start leaking stuff like that, you're out of control.

Ceplair

I see.

Trumbo

If you have your own standard, let them say it and then like Jesus said, "Thou sayest." But there's no profit in starting rumors. It doesn't get you where--and it can get you into much trouble.

Ceplair

But you answer the questions about the rumors in ways that leave the possibility open.

Trumbo

Yes. I don't know anything about that. I sit over here in Highland Park. Nobody fancy is coming over here.

Ceplair

Well, what do you think brought Kirk Douglas and then Otto Preminger to your father's door? I mean, those were big movies. I mean, on the black market, he wasn't writing big movies. Now all of a sudden there's these two very big movies that come his way. What do you think--

Trumbo

Kirk Douglas and Trumbo get together, or Eddie Lewis, Eddie Lewis is the big factor here. They have decided that the black market is a good place to buy, and they had a script already by Jack Lawson and somebody else, which they don't like. But they had decided to buy on the black market from any number of people, which they did. Trumbo and they come together in December of '57, and in January he's got a job for "Lonely Are the Brave," which they won't make for a couple of years. But in the meantime, they start sending in stuff for his opinion on it, and they come to rely upon his judgment, because it's informed, a top-rate opinion for nothing. So at the same time in 1958, they hire [Howard] Fast to adapt "Spartacus," his novel. I think that was a condition of buying it. Well, he's coming in with pages, and, "Trumbo, what can we do with this?" He says, "Well, why don't we agree on what we want him to--this ought to be the way you see it." So his outline turned out to be over a hundred pages long, and he suggests the others fill in the blanks.

Ceplair

And they were going to pay him for this?

Trumbo

No, no. Trumbo didn't get paid for that. At least there's no record of it.

Ceplair

So he's just building goodwill, in effect.

Trumbo

Yes. And I think he wrote another script or two in '58 for them that was not "Spartacus" and wasn't he meant, "Lonely are the Brave," but two unrelated things that as far as I know [unclear]. And Fast turns in his screenplay from the outline. They hate it. So Trumbo says, "Well, of the writers that are available

to you today," and I think he named four and what he considered the strengths of each of these writers, Calder Willingham among them. So he's not angling for "Spartacus." He's helping Douglas, which always is a good strategy. Help people out. Maybe they'll hire you for something else. So then they decided that Trumbo should write the script, to which he said okay. And there's another picture called "The Gladiators" that threatens to get made. It's been written by Abe Polonsky.

Ceplair

From the [Arthur] Koestler novel about Spartacus. He was adapting Koestler's novel.

Trumbo

Yes. And that was going to star Yul Brynner and some other people. So there's a particular urgency to get a copy of "Spartacus." Now, "The Gladiators" wants certain English actors that Bryna Productions wants also, [Laurence] Olivier, [Charles] Laughton, [Peter] Ustinov, and those guys. So what Trumbo does is before writing a script, he writes their parts the way that they will fit in, but they don't have the screenplay. They didn't get around to it. So they send those scenes to attract the actors to it. But now Trumbo has to put it all back--it's a complicated process. But so that all worked out.

Ceplair

Did he get paid anything near his value?

Trumbo

It got more and more. [Telephone interruption]

Trumbo

So I can't remember what the "Spartacus" screenplay ended up at, but I think it was around seventy-five thousand. He was coming back. And among other things, the first contract that he had for "Lonely are the Brave" was that--which I think was for ten grand--that it would only cost them five grand if they put his name on the script. So he's working that angle already. [unclear]. So he's pushing in every kind of direction he can and when he takes over "Spartacus" and remember that Bryna Productions decided to make it a policy to hire blacklisted writers, more bang for the buck, but they also didn't like the

blacklist, and there had been talk about putting his name on it or not, so they would have liked to have done it, but they had certain relationships with Universal, which is a major studio. And in '59, Preminger comes to him with "Exodus." He has two scripts already, one by Leon Uris and the other by Albert Maltz. Among the problems was Albert's script is about 240 pages long, so I imagine there were other things that they didn't care for. So he came to Trumbo, and so the deal worked out through Ingo [Preminger]. I think it was forty-five thousand dollars for [unclear], which he did, and for about six or eight weeks, Otto Preminger would arrive in the morning and then he'd leave at night as they whacked out this script. And then in January of '59, they announced--no. The film was made in 1960.

Ceplair

It came out in '60, I think.

Trumbo

Yes, it came out in '60. I have the documents.

Ceplair

I'm pretty sure it was '59 when [actually, January, 1960] and Preminger made the announcement.

Trumbo

Well, I don't know, but he announced. But his contract with United Artists gave him freedom to give credit to whoever he wanted, so he did. Many people, in a sense the right wing, have said, "Well, he did it for publicity reasons." Untrue. [Telephone interruption]

Trumbo

But Preminger had always been his own man and certainly toward the left. He was offered in Vienna-- [Telephone interruption]

Trumbo

Don't they know it's the Lord's day? [Unrelated comment].

Trumbo

So he had been offered the directorship of the Vienna State Opera, in the thirties, and as part of doing that, you would sign a piece of paper saying that you weren't Jewish. It was like one of those pro forma things everybody thinks--Preminger didn't consider that pro forma. He refused, and he didn't get that job, which is highly prestigious, so that's one act of principle that you can trace back to him. And then he ended up fighting the--for, I think, "The Moon is Blue,"--

Ceplair

That's right, the censors.

Trumbo

That whole thing; he took a stand against that and then worked himself out of that contract and started his own company. So he has more going on the other side than anybody has for him as doing things for publicity.

Ceplair

Going back a little bit, did your father work by himself in this breaking the blacklist after "The Brave One," or were there other people who were kind of agreed with him and--

Trumbo

Yes, well, he considered that as allies to whom he would constantly be in touch about the matter were Albert Maltz and Mike Wilson and then some other people. So they were all aware of what his efforts were and the stage of development that had been growing and that was successful, as opposed to Jarndyce and Jarndyce, so it was simpler. It was a practical approach to achieve what is essentially a political goal. But as you said about the other correspondence, how do we make a living? That's our main concern. How do you do it without dishonor, as it were.

Ceplair

Well, speaking of that, there's another thing I wanted to ask you. Your father didn't do any of the scripts for Hanna [Weinstein]?

Trumbo

No.

Ceplair

He didn't get involved in television at all?

Trumbo

He might have done something, but it was maybe about one or two over twelve years, but that just wasn't--as far as he was concerned, it wasn't enough money.

Ceplair

In television scripts?

Trumbo

Yes. Because you've still got to write the damn things.

Ceplair

So he had finished "Spartacus" when he started working on "Exodus"?

Trumbo

Yes, pretty much, because he tried to keep the flow going.

Ceplair

So is my chronology correct? Preminger announces in January. Then I think it's not till June [actually August] that Douglas announces.

Trumbo

Douglas can't get a release from--he's not reluctant. He can't get a release from Universal, with whom he has ten-picture deals or whatever. So he literally can't, or suffer heavy losses. So while he wants to, he doesn't, but it's not through any lack of desire of his.

Ceplair

But he finally does. At that point, do offers start to pour in, or not, to your recollection?

Trumbo

Well, I don't know what pours in, because he'd been building--he had [a] series [of] relationships that--he did a whole bunch of other scripts for Douglas, including the rewrite of--I can't remember the title. It's a picture that Robert Blake was in, an accused G.I. after World War II, and Douglas has been appointed his lawyer. I can't remember the title of the picture [Town without Pity].

Ceplair

I'll look it up.

Trumbo

But Trumbo actually wanted credit on that. He'd put in enough work and believed he should have it. Douglas kind of won't go there. He's more interested in maintaining other [unclear]. One of the clues that Trumbo wrote it is that quote about justice being the poetry of the soul that you pointed out, "Where did he get that?" It's in there.

Ceplair

There's an interesting letter that Arnaud D'Usseau wrote to Paul Jarrico. It's sometime like '61 or '62. He said, "You know, there's all this talk about the blacklist being broken, but not many people are getting work except Trumbo, who's mining a vein of pure gold," or something to that effect, that the walls didn't just come tumbling down, and people just didn't start going back to work.

Trumbo

No, no. Everybody thought that would happen, and it didn't. It turned out that a precedent had been established. Now you had to make them apply it to you in one way or another.

Ceplair

Were there people who were on the blacklist who were resentful or angry that your father had made this significant breakthrough and they weren't and they couldn't?

Trumbo

I don't know if it was true because of the breakthrough, but he'd always had differences with fellow Leftists, because, one, he thought they were full of shit, but he didn't like the kind of totalitarian ways in which they thought, you know, "Our way is right, and we'll go that way until the sea swallows it up." Because he wasn't enthusiastic about the lawsuits, for instance. He just saw them as totally ineffective. Besides, it was against his self-interest to do so. Essentially, he'd say, "You've had your shots over eight years. The only person who has not benefited from it is your clients." So he said lawyers, blacklisted lawyers are working, doctors are working, on and on and on. Who isn't working? Only the screenwriters.

Ceplair

Did he and Ben Margolis have arguments about that? Because Margolis was a significant, strong person about--

Trumbo

Yes. They liked each other, so he and the lawyers got along well. It's just that--

Ceplair

They had different views.

Trumbo

Yes. "I'm not going to be associated with that. I won't hurt it. I'll give you some money, whatever that is, but I don't want to be associated with this stuff. It's going nowhere." But he certainly never opposed it at all.

Ceplair

Because I know later on, when Lester Cole wrote his autobiography, he basically said that everyone who'd gotten a job had to have gone back in secret. I mean, was anyone saying that in the early sixties, that you or your father heard about, that somehow or other he had--

Trumbo

No. They may have been saying it, but, who cares?

Ceplair

At that point, once the breakthrough for your father had come, was he still able to get scripts to give to other people to do?

Trumbo

I don't know what happened to the pass-along business. I assume some. "I'm too busy. Try so-and-so." But he was always trying to pass the work along.

Ceplair

What was his attitude toward his work on the screen? I mean, was he proud of it? Or it was just a job he did? I mean, like when "Spartacus" came out, when "Exodus" came out, was he--

Trumbo

Well, some things turn out better than others. He took the jobs after the blacklist because he'd already agreed to take some and owed them. But when he chose projects that were offered to him, he'd take things that interested him. If they don't work out--lots of movies don't work out, except where every once in a while he would get enraged at a certain person's attitude or changes or these kind of things. Anyway, his quarrel was mainly with the execution, which he felt led to it being a lesser product.

Ceplair

Was he pleased with "Spartacus" on the whole?

Trumbo

Well, the battles over the script were enormous.

Ceplair

Really.

Trumbo

So people who--generally, also, he never takes these things personally. Once again, it's a thing in itself. That's what we're talking about. It's not you. Yes, there were just too many people fiddling with the script from the time he assumed the writership, I guess. But it's sort of a thing that had already been established with the previous--Howard Fast. So [Stanley] Kubrick wants to make a different--he wants to do "The Gladiators." So he's kind of trying to

change everything to "The Gladiators." Trumbo is opposing, but he's on the sidelines. He can't go to meetings, show up at sets, make his opinions known.

Ceplair

There are some hilarious letters that he writes, your father writes to Kubrick, where he does plays on his name.

Trumbo

Yes, kind of like A. Koestler.

Ceplair

Yes, those were so amazingly funny.

Trumbo

So what happened is they went ahead and filmed something, and they had a rough cut assembled. I guess this was in 1959, probably. And I drove Trumbo over to Universal, where we entered with a pseudonym and in the evening, so nobody will recognize us--to a screening room, where a projectionist does not show the film. The editor of the film shows it. That's how secret that sort of stuff was. We watch the movie, go home, and a couple of days later Trumbo produces a forty-page memo, which he sends over to Douglas, who comes out of his dressing room and says something like, "Trumbo doesn't like it, and he's right." Whereupon millions of dollars of retakes are done in order to fix the film, which is very expensive. But that's because of all the subtle pressures that people with different needs end up getting on the screen, and somehow it just becomes uncontrollable. So they had to decide to go back to what is described as big Spartacus, where Spartacus is open, generous, and good, sensitive, unique gladiator, and getting rid of the suggestion that slaves cannot organize themselves, you know, leave them alone, they're helpless or debased, whatever lies behind all that, which was the Kubrick vision. And as a result, there are so many different things in the script that you really can't--and he doesn't want to call that, but you can't because he--Kubrick disowned the film. And in terms of who was the author--it was Kirk Douglas' film, because it gets so confused, and part of that is because Kirk Douglas is trying to build his Bryna Productions into a major independent company, and he lacks time. He can't be paying attention [unclear]. I think that's part of that.

Ceplair

Were there any sort of ideological quarrels about the film, that Spartacus is a precursor of the communist sensibility or the great leader of proletarian uprisings or what have you?

Trumbo

Actually, the prologue of the movie says, "So-and-so many years before, the appearance of Jesus Christ," so it has a more Christian reference to all of the men being brothers, don't hate your enemy and all of those kind of things, where some of it refers primarily to Christianity, long before communism comes along.

Ceplair

And who wrote the prologue?

Trumbo

Trumbo, I guess.

Ceplair

Okay, why don't we stop here. [End of interview]

1.2. Session 2 (December 24, 2010)

Ceplair

All right, Chris. Today, for our second session, which is December 24, [2010], what I'd like to do is go back to some of the things from the first interview, and I think I'm going to start with your father's testimony before the Committee [on Un-American Activities] in October, 1947. Maybe you could tell me about when you sort of heard it or read it, and if you had any conversations with your father about what he thought he was doing there, or what he hoped he would be able to do there.

Trumbo

No, it was presented as that he was being called to Washington at the demand of the committee in order to answer questions. As I recall, I don't recall asking if it was about communism or not. But we were living at a very remote ranch

about ninety miles from Los Angeles, and it wasn't--among other things, since nobody believed, the Hollywood establishment included, that there was going to be anything like a blacklist when they went to Washington. So he said he had to go testify and then he would be coming back, and that's essentially what happened, except that at that time the studios changed their thinking and did institute a rule to guide the industry in matters of employment in the industry, based upon a person's [unclear] about the people's political affiliations. And when he came back, my parents explained what had happened in more detail. But it would now depend on the courts to either agree with the committee's demands for censorship based on political beliefs, or that they couldn't do that. So the Hollywood Ten.

Ceplair

Did he ever talk to about the debates that went on among the Unfriendly Nineteen prior to the testimony, as to actually what they would do and his thoughts about it?

Trumbo

No, no. I don't know how much of a plan any of them had. I think they were formulating plans. There were people in the Hollywood Ten who I don't think ever even knew each other. It was a very loose aggregation, so they were working out a strategy there in order to deal with the political future, which meant that you had to take nineteen men of different political persuasions to agree to formulate a strategy for a defense against what they had been accused of, which was contempt of court. So they didn't know, we didn't know, and they mostly figured it out in Washington, D.C. with the lawyers and others who were involved with everything that was going on between Washington and Hollywood. And what they ended up with was their legal position, which, if you look at it now, was perfectly reasonable. And then it went to appeal, and then it went to appeal, and it was no longer heard--it wasn't heard by the [U.S.] Supreme Court.

Ceplair

So your father never expressed a regret that he or they had done what they did differently. I mean, he was reasonably satisfied with the position they had taken before the committee?

Trumbo

Yes. I remember it had to be something that satisfied all these diverse people, some of whom had never been communist. Some were people who had been communist that no longer were, and some people were those who were communists currently, members of the Communist Party.

Ceplair

Do you recall seeing the newsreel footage of his testimony?

Trumbo

No. I don't know when I saw it.

Ceplair

But when you did see it, what was your impression?

Trumbo

It was sort of like seeing myself in a movie, so, oh, look, these people are doing this, heading to Washington, heavy tones, drama, except I never saw that, because we lived up at the ranch and rarely came into Los Angeles at all.

Ceplair

Because I remember when I see the footage, he's amazingly sarcastic and really kind of funny; I mean funny, I guess, black comedy of a sort, but unlike the others. I mean, he didn't have the anger of [John Howard] Lawson, or the reasonableness of someone else. It was almost like he was making fun of what they were doing.

Trumbo

Yes. Well, it's pretty much an existential position--this is absurd, and you are all absurd--rather than outraged at how you treated my child, or outraged that you don't serve pie in your restaurant. It was just a profound contempt for the whole proceeding, and sometimes he thought that they'd prevail, and sometimes he thought they wouldn't. But the positions that he had already taken about things, as expressed in the pamphlet, whose name I can't remember right now, laid it out. It is, in effect, a piece of propaganda. It's intended to inform, enlighten, and maybe change your mind.

Ceplair

You mean "The Time of the Toad"?

Trumbo

Yes, "The Time of the Toad." That's what it does. And when you read all of that and then you look at the next thirteen years, you don't see any real change in the way he's doing what he's doing. And there are basically two factions on the Left, one of which was, "We'll sue the bastards, because they broke the laws," which had already--or, "We'll continue suing these guys over a battle that we already lost," and now they're going after small change. But his position about what you do next wasn't set down at that point. He did not have an idea of what he was going to do next. And then when he went to jail in '50, 1950, when he got out, he was probably as angry as--basically, as angry as he could be. I don't know if angry is really the word. It's almost like he was offended at the way the government was working. "What you did ain't there over in practice. You don't practice--you don't do what you say."

Ceplair

There was, of course, one public example of his anger. It was November 1947 when Dore Schary and that committee comes to the [Screen] Writers Guild to sell the blacklist, that he gets up and delivers a very angry speech against him.

Trumbo

Yes, which I think was pretty extemporary.

Ceplair

Yes. I learned about it in an FBI report. I guess the FBI was present at that meeting, or an informer was. Just as he was getting out of prison, I think just after he got out of prison the new hearings had begun, and Larry Parks had given his testimony. What was your father's response, reaction to what Larry Parks had done?

Trumbo

Sadness.

Ceplair

Really?

Trumbo

Yes. Larry was probably ten years younger than my father and looked up to him. Once he drove up to the ranch on a motorcycle, which I thought was just great, this machine. [Interruption]

Trumbo

So it becomes a matter of, from that point of view, if we look back, what's really going on is the rearrangement of the world, which is going to take place between 1945, '44, until about 1950, and then that's where American foreign policy for today is built. And this is, you could say, the cultural side of the new world order. So this is merely part of a cycle, and at some point [Dalton] Trumbo says somewhere that essentially there was nothing on Earth that would have changed these events. It was at a scale larger than anybody conceived it at the time, though there are leftists then. There was the Communist Party and socialists or whoever they may be, who are aware of that and allege it, but unfortunately, they've been crying wolf too long, and nobody wanted to hear what they had to say. So there was no way for the Hollywood Ten to win.

Ceplair

Okay. I'm thinking now maybe we can go through the scripts and the various things your father wrote after the 1947 hearings, and you can kind of tell me what they were about and how they fit in. The first one, I guess, is "The Beautiful Blonde from Bashful Bend." That's the first script, I guess, that came that was actually produced.

Trumbo

Yes. Well, he wrote a script and then it was Preston Sturges who ended up buying it, I guess, or they were going to collaborate in some way. And Earl Felton was Trumbo's front on this, Dalton being a person that--he and Trumbo had been very close to each other in the thirties. And Earl had a number of problems, like holding jobs and stuff. He drank too much, and anybody Trumbo is close to drinks too much. But then Sturges just basically takes it over, and I think it ended up a different script than the one Trumbo wrote.

Ceplair

Was this script brought to him by George Willner, this project? Or did he get it on his own, or do you know?

Trumbo

Maybe. I don't know. But even at the time it was unclear as to what was going on or not going on, so it's one of those things that's buried in history, that Trumbo is involved at the beginning from that, with the script. Now, how it got all stirred up and around, I don't know.

Ceplair

That same year he wrote his only play, "The Biggest Thief in Town."

Trumbo

Yes.

Ceplair

What prompted him to try the stage at that point?

Trumbo

To make a living, since the blacklist hadn't extended to the stage, he can write plays or books or--the trouble is, it takes, unfortunately, a while to develop or regain the abilities you had in those other fields.

Ceplair

And also that year he wrote "The Time of the Toad."

Trumbo

Right.

Ceplair

For him, that was a major attack on the whole blacklist atmosphere, cold war atmosphere?

Trumbo

Yes. Sort of as to the extent we had fallen as a nation of law, and lays out pretty well who's responsible for what. I have a little set of notes around that from other material that fits into the same area, which is much more exhausting.

Ceplair

Did he do a lot of research for that book? I mean, did he sort of comb the legal archives for background, or did he just kind of off the top of his head from what he'd been--

Trumbo

It's always both. He used to be a debater in high school, so he was aware that you really need to know deeper than first level the second or third, in order to present a real case, because you have to know what the other guy is thinking or what's open to him, as well as what you want to formulate, so he was a pretty heavy researcher. Along the way, he bought his own library.

Ceplair

Okay. Then in 1950, "Gun Crazy" appears, fronted by Millard Kaufman.

Trumbo

Right. He has that, no--yes, in a sense-- [Interruption]

Trumbo

After two and a half or two days after--Frank King gets in touch with Trumbo, and the King Brothers need a rewrite, so they ask Trumbo if he could do it. He said, "Yeah." They say, "Twenty-five hundred dollars," and I think his rate for doing a screenplay was about seventy or seventy-five thousand for, whatever, polish or whatever that was. So Trumbo said, "Sure," because he has two sides. One is, I've got to protect me; I've got to protect my family. And that, in a sense, is what guides him in terms of financial things.

Ceplair

Had he had any dealings with the King Brothers before?

Trumbo

No.

Ceplair

So they just came to him because they figured they'd get a good screen writer cheap?

Trumbo

You've got it. Frank King was a very bright man. For Frank, think of an American Otto Preminger. The difference is that Frank just wants to make money, and Otto wants to produce movies--

Ceplair

Art.

Trumbo

--art, yes. That kind of stuff. But Trumbo doesn't know if he's ever getting another job; take this one. And years later, Millard Kaufman will come forth and say, "I didn't write it. It was Trumbo."

Ceplair

Had Trumbo and Kaufman been friends? Or the King Brothers just bring Kaufman in?

Trumbo

Never met, never met, ever, no. Though there is an apocryphal story about meeting in the [Hollywood] Roosevelt Hotel Bar at some point later on, which is--I think that's got 1 percent of reality to it. It didn't happen. I happened to ask Molly and Nancy asked him two or three times whether he had ever met Trumbo, and Millard was [unclear], the person who always inquires about that.

Ceplair

Was he churning these things out at a fairly rapid rate? I mean, like on "Gun Crazy," did it take him days, weeks? I mean, he's legendary as kind of a very fast writer anyway.

Trumbo

Yes. Yes, he always was. But sometimes the other thing he's doing is churning out originals. There is some story in the archives at Wisconsin that was about how he sold a story that he knew wouldn't work, but that was their problem, not his problem. But he got forty grand for that. He got something for--a good sum for "Cowboy," at the same time for "Roman Holiday," so those three projects within, I don't know, a year or two, and those are the only ones I remember right now, were--he knew the game. He knew how to write a picture for that time and that place, and that's what good screenwriters always are. They're people who can--though I think it's diminished a lot. You don't survive unless that's what you can do. You could be today's miracle, but what about next week? Trumbo was able to do that, and people liked working with him. What's that guy's name? Oh, did I tell you the story of Arthur Gardner?

Ceplair

No.

Trumbo

Oh, okay. Arthur Gardner and the King Brothers, or Frank King, had met in the late thirties, because Frank King liked to play bridge. So there were bridge clubs around town, and that's where they met. And Arthur Gardner had been an actor. He's one of the two actors still alive who played in the original "All Quiet on the Western Front." But he knew this wasn't kind of working out, this actor business. But show business appealed to him, and one day Frank said to him, "Art, we're going to make a movie." Art said, "How much you got?" And he said fifteen or thirty thousand dollars, something really low end. He said, "Here's the deal. You and I have been talking about your career and all this other stuff." He said, "I'll tell you what. Here's my proposition. For \$180 you can play the lead, or for \$150 you can be the assistant director," which is a staff job. And he says, "I'll take the \$150 and the assistant directorship." Then he said, "You know, I've got a friend who I think [unclear]." So Frank says, "Send him in." So it turns out the person he thought of was Alan Ladd, who's going to take the 180. He gets the lead. So that to me is very interesting in terms of the way those things turn. All these people are literally working themselves into a business and a world from the outside. They're not part of the Jewish mafia or whatever you want to call it, or as it is often called. So

Frank keeps on going, producing this stuff, and comes to Trumbo with the project. The reason I'm giving you all that background is because when I talked to Arthur, he said, "You know, your old man had taught me more in one afternoon at," whichever restaurant, "more about movies than anybody else." So that's a function of what a good screenwriter is, to be able to explain all of these things, the whys and why you don't, and particularly in those days it was the censorship, getting it passed by all the nitpickers and how to do that. And the other thing is that Trumbo gives you his total attention. When he's writing a screenplay, no matter what the deal was, he would give it as much attention as if he were writing "Exodus." It's that same commitment to an honest day's work and giving what you've got and sneaking in three rewrites if they want them. I mean, that's his business, and he's very good at that. And in a sense, if you look at all the people who are considered the great screen writers, they're all like that in some ways. The age of [Joe] Eszterhas, the coke writer, is later. It is another indication of the way that Hollywood has changed. I just said Hollywood. I mean literally Hollywood and sometimes I mean the industry Hollywood. So those are the reasons, or many of them. Oh, and he is absolutely trustworthy, so that's how he's able to help build the blacklist, because you can only do it--you can't do it without being able to show that you're in this and you're not going to tell. This is, of course, a fear. How do I know that that poor blacklisted son of a bitch isn't going to rush to the FBI? [laughs]

Ceplair

One thing's interesting. Three of the movies he wrote in those years, "Gun Crazy," "The Prowler," and, "He Ran All the Way," are now sort of included in the film noir category. Did your father or any of his friends have any notion of such a thing as film noir when they were writing?

Trumbo

No.

Ceplair

How is it that these movies had a certain kind of stylistic quality to them? Is it just because of the subject matter?

Trumbo

Partly it's subject. Part of it, even though it's a fringe thing slapped on these group of pictures that will be filmed later, they're films done by Americans about America. It's a reflection of the way society is ordered and the way it works and the way it doesn't. So in that way, they are--to be truthful with a storyline, you have to--you can't idealize all this crap, because the people who are watching it know that it's idealized crap and that you haven't delivered. So it has those kind of appeals. And I think that also what makes them--they all have a dark side to them, corruption, untrustworthiness, fear of getting ripped off, whatever it may be. They had all that stuff in them, and that's something we all know. I [unclear] know all about, Jack fell down in bed and stayed there the rest of his life holding court. I mean, whatever people are doing now, it's not about their lives, in some ways. It's not about America as a cohesive kind of place, and that the same sense of national unity, which was part, up to 1945 or so, is very different than it is now, because after the war, or very quickly after the war, unions are going on strike. "We need more money. We're not at war anymore. What the hell are you doing?" And so there were all those political problems that rise out of feeling that they're not getting their share. "We're not getting what you were promising." So, in my opinion, they invent the cold war to keep everybody in line.

Ceplair

So these films were kind of ways in which your father is sort of viewing the society that has now come into existence.

Trumbo

Yes. I think I made a note to myself someplace that--oh, I may have done it in an interview I did for the DVD they're going to release about "Prowler." It was that it's about an unsettled society, so in that sense it can't be trusted, because it doesn't have the value set that has been set up, that has been built. It's a period of transit. We're transiting from one point or another, and so this is the great unsettled couple of years where nobody has quite got the message except that the communists will come and kill us. That was the easy sell. Ooh, Russians. Thank god they're far away.

Ceplair

And then after those three, we get "Roman Holiday."

Trumbo

"Roman Holiday" is written before this.

Ceplair

It was written before?

Trumbo

Yes.

Ceplair

What was the genesis? Was that just something that your father came up with as kind of--

Trumbo

With an idea that struck him. At some point, there was a point where Princess Anne went on to Europe, I guess, on a big British boat around Europe and maybe further. But apparently, there may have been some scandalous things she was involved in, so that's "Roman Holiday." What was she doing? So Trumbo puts on his inventor's cap and decides that she was missing one day, and nobody knows what happened. Here is the story of what happened.

Ceplair

So did he write a full script that he then gave--

Trumbo

Yes, yes, yes. Forget that other stuff. In fact, putting pressure, without talking to him, on Tim Hunter to make a statement saying, "I came up with some vague letter, and now I realize that Trumbo did--," just something like that, because then I can get the fucking credit changed.

Ceplair

So, basically, Trumbo wrote the script, gave it to Ian Hunter to front?

Trumbo

Right. And he actually didn't want Ian to be the front. He had somebody who he felt would be better for that job. But that fell down because the other guy

got politically hot. I think the other guy--the only person I can think of was maybe Nelson Algren, but that's the only vague association I have. Yes, so then it goes to the Liberty Films people, who put it together. William Wyler ends up directing it, but [Frank] Capra had owned it and sold it to Wyler, as best that I can figure that. Wyler makes it. Wyler has people in rewriting the script, among others, Ian, so that script is presented as Ian's script, as the writer. And then he hired other people, other opinions and all of that, a pair of Italian people and I don't know who else. I know that they consulted with Michael and Fay Kanin, who passed on it, for what reasons I don't know. And both of them later were graylisted, in the classical sense. And I've got a lot of notes there. But as it turns out, they had a deal with Gregory Peck, and Peck had read it. They've now--their latest version is sort of a middle-European state that their princess is traveling, because they don't want to offend Britain, and that makes it a much weaker vehicle, if you name what country it's from. You can assume any country. She doesn't have to be English. And Peck said he didn't want to make that movie, the first one, and there's some correspondence between him and Wyler, and that's the way it ends up. They don't say she's--I don't think they say she's the princess of England. So it's basically Peck, not knowing it's a Trumbo script or anything about it, said, "That's the project. This other stuff is--what are you doing there? Because this princess stuff, that's stupid." I have that correspondence between people. You'll find some of it at the Guild. But then the fact that it just jumped to center stage and got Oscars was beyond any body's thought. That created all these other problems. The old man referred to that it caused an outbreak. He wrote to Ring [Lardner, Jr.], I think, it appears that this publicity had, more elegantly phrased [by him], set Ian off on a binge, into exercising his [I lost that thought].

Ceplair

When "Roman Holiday" was the success it was, and when it won the Academy Award, whatever the category it was going to be in, did your father--how did he use that in his ongoing effort to break the blacklist?

Trumbo

"Roman Holiday?"

Ceplair

"Roman Holiday," yes.

Trumbo

Didn't.

Ceplair

Didn't use it. Why was that? Too early?

Trumbo

Too early. There was yet no thriving--black market was still growing, and so how do you prove this? Let's say you have a way to prove it, and prove it. What's that going to do? You know, what do I get out of it? I've got the information. I've got the scandal, but that's not what I want. I want whatever scandals we can get to help us go somewhere, and there's no way that it can do that. Now, you can later use that as an arrow, as a weapon, when there's a time to use it.

Ceplair

So the original script your father wrote disappeared somewhere along the way? The original script for "Roman Holiday" has somehow or other vanished into some black hole or other.

Trumbo

Yes, I know how. Because when the old man was sending stuff to the Wisconsin [Center for Film and Theater Research], Pop said to me--we were living in Highland Park--that he would hold back sending all the "Roman Holiday" notes of his and the script. His reasoning was that Ian will never have to face up to that he had been the front and not the real person. And I wasn't farsighted enough to say, "Why don't you just hold it back and keep it?" Because he sent them nothing. It's a whole blank on "Roman Holiday" there. So as with any body's papers, they don't give you everything, so this could have been something he didn't give. I know there was other stuff. But I would say he was like 98 percent honest in sending them what he did.

Ceplair

So what happened to those papers?

Trumbo

I think he burned them.

Ceplair

Really. So the ultimate protection of a front.

Trumbo

Yes. But then around the middle sixties, he wanted credit, and I think some of that had to do with that he had written it and for that to be acknowledged, and that he wanted to be a writer with two Oscars, not one. And the irony is that both of them sort of come out of the blue. These were films that were written, well, at least "Roman Holiday" was written before the blacklist, and that the other one was written during the blacklist, "Lonely Are the Brave"--

Ceplair

"The Brave One," you mean.

Trumbo

The boy and the bull.

Ceplair

"The Brave One," yes, which he had no idea was going to get an Academy Award, I imagine, "The Brave One."

Trumbo

Well, that developed differently. But anyway, so he wanted two of them. There's fewer people who have two of them. And I think it also had to do--was that--I shouldn't go there.

Ceplair

Okay, well, let's see. So then after "Roman Holiday," he did "Carnival Story." Anything particularly interesting about that?

Trumbo

He did that for-fucking-ever. [laughs] It was Groppo, was it? I forget, the giant monster in the circus, all of that strange kind of misfit lives that these people

have, that are really no different than our own. I think that's what I think he liked about it, or found as a handle on how to do this. Meanwhile, you've got a director to satisfy, or directors, and also the King Brothers.

Ceplair

Who was this Marcel Klauber? Was he a front as well? Or just someone the producers threw on?

Trumbo

Frank could have hired people at any time. Now, whether he hired them as fronts or not, we don't know. But there may have been others as well.

Ceplair

So when your father gave a script to the King Brothers, would he give it without a name and then they would determine what name--

Trumbo

They can do what--they have to find somebody.

Ceplair

Would they come to him and meet with him to talk with him about it? Or would they do it through correspondence? I mean, how did they tell him, well, we would like this changed, or this changed?

Trumbo

I think mostly by letter. There are a bunch of letters regarding "Lonely Are the Brave," [The Brave One] talking about it, how not getting paid wasn't helping anything. [laughs] And various other things.

Ceplair

Then there was a script called "The Boss."

Trumbo

Yes. John, what, Payton?

Ceplair

Ben Perry.

Trumbo

Oh. Who?

Ceplair

Ben Perry is the name on that one.

Trumbo

Oh, yes, I know. Ben Perry, I think, actually is an existing writer, but I don't know whether they got it first from him or they got it first from--they didn't get it first from Trumbo.

Ceplair

So that's a rewrite.

Trumbo

Yes, I would assume.

Ceplair

Now, at that same time, he does another political pamphlet, "The Devil in the Book," about the California communist leaders.

Trumbo

Right. He got so pissed off at that that he rejoined the party. As he expressed it, something like, the only way to express himself politically was to ally himself with the people who were even afflicted more greatly, and that happened to be a whole bunch of people he didn't particularly agree with at all. The same arguments, politically, go on all the time as common practice all over the world, which is intense competition not to let those guys have power. They're all revolutionaries in that sense. "No, do it my way." So he rejoined the Communist Party, he said because he had decided that the only way that he could protest the present condition was to write a pamphlet or write something that the C.P. could then publish, or whoever ended up doing it. And he wants their cooperation, so that he's not basing what he's saying on things that are wrong information as possible. And then having written the pamphlet, it was published, and he quit the Communist Party. So, I mean, he is politically consistent, but therefore all over the place.

Ceplair

Wasn't he afraid that this would hurt his effort against the blacklist, to be identified once again with the Communist Party, publicly?

Trumbo

Well, since it's still a secret organization, nobody is out there reporting or thinks it's worthwhile enough.

Ceplair

So his name wasn't on the pamphlet?

Trumbo

No, on the pamphlet, yes, but not on the screenplay.

Ceplair

Oh, I see. So it doesn't really matter. I mean, it's not going to hurt his livelihood.

Trumbo

Part of it is, what more can you do to me? And the other part is, that's what we do in this country. We express ourselves. It's what a town meeting is about, all this stuff, working out these problems, or trying to.

Ceplair

So the King Brothers didn't get all upset about this, then?

Trumbo

No, they don't care.

Ceplair

One thing I guess we should go back and talk about, then, is I think just after your father got out of prison, he was approached by [Herbert] Biberman and Adrian Scott, who were putting together a production company, to write--

Trumbo

And [Paul] Jarrico.

Ceplair

And Jarrico, yes, to write a screenplay for them about a black woman who lost her daughter because she was a communist, I think, something of that sort. And your father first said, "No, I can't, because I have to earn money." And then he decides to do it.

Trumbo

Well, first of all, IPC [Independent Productions Corporation] was the idea of establishing a leftish film company of some kind, to deal with real things, real people problems. But that letter saying I can't do this was for "Roman Holiday," I mean the coal miners' story in Arizona that Mike [Wilson] had been--

Ceplair

"Salt of the Earth."

Trumbo

Yes. That was what he turned down. "I've got too much that I've got to do." So Mike took that picture, which, I think, was as smart a choice as you could make, because Mike had two or three Oscars, "Bridge on the River Kwai," "Lawrence of Arabia," "Friendly Persuasion." I mean, he's a blockbuster. Did Jean Lees [Field, not Lees]--

Ceplair

No, that was Robert Lees' wife. It's Jean something.[Field].

Trumbo

While we're in Mexico, and he has no real idea of what the fuck to do, he is sitting there in dry-dock, but he is importuned by Adrian and Biberman to do something for them. And he agrees, and that's the project he chooses, and off they go. The conflict comes, as far as I know, from the attention that was paid to Jean what's her face's comments, and there's a certain irony into it in that while Adrian and Herbert are sort of the editorial board, and they have put her on the editorial board also--now, I think the reason they put her on that board of people who make comments about the screenplay is because she's black and she's a woman. So they're doing it for, in a sense in some ways, as a way

of expunging their anti-feminism or anti-black or all of those, the good liberal feelings that we're supposed to have toward each other. Trumbo is offended because he was not aware that there was anybody else that he was going to have to deal with. It wasn't that he would have to deal with somebody who is not a professional, knows shit about movies, and I believe, well, there's a whole bunch of correspondence. It was just Trumbo's--it wasn't part of the deal. She has nothing to add. But she does have these things in her criticism, one of which was, there is some discussion of "her baby's little brown hand." Racist. It was that level that he just said, "I don't want to work on this anymore. I mean, we're out." And he's not angry at any of these people. It's just that it was a waste of time. The chances of it getting financed or anything like that were zero, as it turns out, and the reason he took it on was that he felt that he had some kind of obligation toward countering the beliefs and the current ways of thinking about blacks and all that kind of stuff and thought he could do something with the story, because he wants to be part of a movement, in a sense, part of people who want to make these kinds of films, and that turns out to be counter to what happened. But he also thinks that this is also a demonstration of the collapse of the Left-political organizations in the United States, and that this means that he's going to have to figure out a new way to attack the problem of what do you do, how do you handle this. And that's where he really just steps out on his own, that, "None of your ways have worked," to the Left in general. Lawyers are doing good. Everybody's doing good except the fucking screen writer. It's very difficult to ask people to hire you and, "Oh, give me thirty million dollars in reparations," at the same time. This is--they reached into principle and turned it into madness. You've got to find a way out, and the organizational tactics have done almost nothing. They didn't have a way to counter the IATSE [International Alliance of Theatrical Stage Employees] on release of the projections and all that kind of stuff. They ran into a black wall, but they decided, if we can get a good one off, then the market will appear. I don't think that was particularly a sound way of it, but you've got to take a risk. So that's where he kind of formulated the idea, I'm going to have to switch in doing myself all this piety, all this--you're killing me. It's not attractive, and it gets you nowhere. So that's when he went out and said, well, I'm going to have to out-write you guys. And there was a series of fortunate events for the good guys in that Mike Wilson has the goose picture, with Cary Grant.

Ceplair

"Father Goose"?

Trumbo

No, no, no, not "Father Goose." I think of it as the goose picture because Trumbo and his friends would always speak in some kind of code, but it's because he was a Quaker then. "Friendly Persuasion." So that was like a shoo-in for the Academy Award. So the Academy passed a special ruling that no script written by anybody who was-- before they had been blacklisted, they couldn't get credit for those pictures either, which meant that Michael wouldn't get anything. At the same time, "Lonely Are the Brave," I mean "The Brave One" won an Academy Award, and Trumbo is, "So, what are they going to do about that one?" Well, nothing much. They just don't do anything. But there is a huge scandal evolving from that. Who is Robert Rich? I have a lot of stuff on Robert Rich, including a hilarious article from "Life" magazine, where they go off in search of Robert Rich, and they have composite sketches and all sorts of who is Robert Rich? And Trumbo uses that and perpetuates the joke and builds it higher. Then you get "Friendly Persuasion," and then you have "The Bridge on the River Kwai," and you have--

Ceplair

"Defiant Ones"?

Trumbo

--"The Defiant Ones," and that's a heavy load of pictures for those four years, five years, whatever. And that's what he capitalizes also. This is all strange. This is weird. And Trumbo gets, by ridicule, where he's unable to get through traditional means, so it's a series of circumstances all coming together. Then Trumbo went on the radio a couple of times. [Interruption]

Ceplair

All right. So when all these Academy Awards were coming together, your father was still doing, let's see--"The Green-Eyed Blonde" came out in '57--

Trumbo

Yes, I've got notes on that.

Ceplair

--and "Terror in a Texas Town" in '58.

Trumbo

Right. Both of those were people that he guaranteed who didn't perform, so he had to rewrite them. That's how much he believed in the blacklist process, ending it. Somebody's got to sacrifice, and if you'll hire these guys, I'll do whatever you want if you don't like their work. That makes more people getting jobs, maybe more rumors.

Ceplair

Then also in '58, "Cowboy" was finally made, which your father I think had written back in 1949 or something.

Trumbo

Yes. Ed North was put on the script, which he said he didn't do enough rewrites to deserve sole credit.

Ceplair

Yes. Apparently what happened is I guess Hugo [Butler] had fronted it and then they pulled his name off too, so it was known as the [John] Houston script, because I guess Huston had originally asked your father to do it and then when North went to the Guild, he said, "I don't deserve the credit." They said, "Yeah, but the guy who wrote it is blacklisted, so we can't give him credit," sort of thing. Then "The Last Train from Gun Hill" came out in '59. I guess he wrote that under a pseudonym, Les Crutchfield?

Trumbo

Yes.

Ceplair

So he actually did a fair number of cowboy movies in those years.

Trumbo

Yes, it's interesting. You don't think of him in Westerns.

Ceplair

No, you don't. Actually, those were some--certainly "Lonely Are the Brave" was a first-rate movies.

Trumbo

Fun.

Ceplair

So then he gets the "Spartacus" assignment, and we talked about that last time, and then shortly after that the "Exodus" assignment, and so then his name is now--he's now restored, theoretically.

Trumbo

With "Exodus"?

Ceplair

Yes, with "Exodus" and "Spartacus," with his name now getting credits.

Trumbo

Well, he finishes "Exodus" in '58.

Ceplair

Well, it comes out in '60.

Trumbo

No, or in '59. He writes it in '59 and then announces that Trumbo will get credit in January of 1960.

Ceplair

Correct. Well, did anything change--all of a sudden did studios now say, we'll use you, at that point?

Trumbo

Not really, because you have to--it goes through the process which is the most important one, which is box office. "Exodus" was a bigger box office in that year, in '60-'61, than "Spartacus" was, and when "Spartacus" and it are huge hits, and when nobody in the Guild and nobody in the Academy can object anymore, in a sense, and they are free to attribute credit to anybody they

want, you now have a blacklisted writer, under no compunction or with no reward in sight, is back on film, and so that's part of what happens. The next part is it's got to hold up, so that it's almost like these first two, okay, so that was a fluke. Prove it again. So it's not open to everybody. Trumbo may be an exception; you don't know. So he's got to be aware of how fragile the dismemberment of the blacklist is, and it can go away again, just as it came. They don't have to justify it. But what the situation has come down to is the ridicule all of these people have had to suffer, and they don't like that because it's bad for industry, and it's bad for the business, and Trumbo and all those other guys, and they had some very funny guys who were blacklisted just out there taking potshots. It becomes embarrassing. It becomes embarrassing internationally. It becomes embarrassing the more you hear it to what our country is purportedly about, so that works against them. They don't need that. They don't need to continue to engage in a battle that the other side has already won, and you can't really stop that from happening, because it's done. But if you can give them any reason to pull back, they will. So the next part is different people coming back under different circumstances, none of which was easy. Mike Wilson couldn't get, despite his credits, he can't get them to put his name on a script, which I think is because he was suing them for--he's the front man on a lot of money. And when "The Sandpiper" comes along in '74, '75--

Ceplair

Sixty-four.

Trumbo

Yes, but in writing, not released, writing.

Ceplair

Early sixties. I think it was released in '65.

Trumbo

I think it was probably '64 when he takes on the project.

Ceplair

Yes, that's right.

Trumbo

And he gets the guarantee that Mike Wilson will write a story based upon a screenplay that a man and a wife in California wrote, that was bought by Marty whatever his name is.

Ceplair

[Martin] Ransohoff?

Trumbo

Yes, by Ransohoff. So Ransohoff hires Mike not to write a screenplay, but to write a story proposal, which is quite long, and he's a terrific writer. Then Trumbo will write the screenplay over--no, no, that Mike will write the story, the outline, then Trumbo will write the screenplay, and both of them will share credit as screenwriter. Like as if you look at the film stuff, you'll see sometimes it says, written by, and sometimes it'll say, written by two people. There's a whole secret code as to who was doing what. Sometimes it's an ampersand, sometimes an and. That's if two people have written the script. That would be Wilson and Trumbo or whichever flows. So Michael Wilson can only get back shiny and innocent by forcing the deal in that way, so that's what happened there.

Ceplair

Did your father and Wilson start on this together, or did Wilson then brought in Trumbo?

Trumbo

No, it was offered to Trumbo going to--see, sometimes there are some vast blocks of time that get separated out, but as I recall, it was Trumbo getting a call that [Richard] Burton and [Elizabeth] Taylor wanted this script that they had read, that they wanted to talk with Trumbo about blah, blah, blah. And, in fact, I don't think Pop even knew before he met them that they were the people who were going to be interested in it. And this deal for a quickie rewrite, as it had been presented to him, was suddenly a picture starring the two most important movie actors of the time. And he said, "This is no rewrite." So he and Mike were brought in and they made a deal between

themselves, and eventually it was made. It was Ingo Preminger who brought that particular mouse close enough. [Interruption]

Trumbo

And Trumbo, to my mind, got out of line later, or got out of line where he then said, "Well, I actually wrote all the--," said, "I should get screenplay, you should get," some other lesser credit before--

Ceplair

Was he paid his full salary for "Sandpiper"?

Trumbo

It depends what a salary is at different times.

Ceplair

But I mean substantially more than he was getting--

Trumbo

Before the blacklist, sure. Oh, yes. So Trumbo and Mike are having a blowout about this, Trumbo believing that a writer's livelihood depends upon his credits, and so I think he decided that he wanted to have that credit. But Mike will have received half of whatever the fee was, and so he's not being shorted on cash, but the credit of screenplay was of much higher value, so that's what he wanted. And one of them suggested that they should pick an arbiter who would decide the matter, or I think Mike suggested that, if I remember that. Trumbo says, "All right, we'll do that." He said, "Who would be acceptable to you?", Trumbo to Mike. And Mike says, "Your son." A little Shakespearean twist there. [laughs]

Ceplair

Indeed. How did the son feel about that?

Trumbo

Trumbo said you'd share screenwriting, script recognition, co-script. I mean, that's it. And that was the last thing Trumbo ever said about it.

Ceplair

That wasn't a big box-office success, was it, "The Sandpiper"?

Trumbo

It didn't turn out that way.

Ceplair

Was that a setback in terms of future assignments?

Trumbo

No. By this time, the blacklist is crumbling. How many refused to sign a document I don't know. There are a number who did that nobody knows about, and that involved saying to the Committee, "I'm not a communist now," which, of course, was the deal that they'd offered my father years ago, and he said, "No, I'm not going to do that." I think Waldo Salt, for instance, made that kind of deal. "Yeah, I was. I'm not now. I don't care." But Mike held out longer and so did some other people like Ring and others. But that--we're into a different part of who's going to do what, why, where.

Ceplair

Now, you were out of college at this point, were you not?

Trumbo

Yes. Actually, I think that my official grade or class was '64. And at that time, my father was in Italy working on a film for Dino de Laurentius. I think that was lodging and maybe something for traveling, plus I think about two hundred grand for other pictures that didn't get made. So he was back there. There were hardly any people in that range of screen writers that he--

Ceplair

Were you working with him at that point?

Trumbo

Well, what happened--no. My mother was in Rome with him, and she came back to Los Angeles to oversee the birth of her first grandchild. And Mitzi [Trumbo] was in college. So I flew to Rome to be with him, and that was, I don't remember exactly what time. But my younger sister joined us in

December. She came over and we all spent Christmas there. But it [Film for De Laurentius] was about fifteenth-century Turkey.

Ceplair

The rise of the Ottomans in Turkey, that sort of thing?

Trumbo

I don't know when the Ottomans rose, but it may have actually been at the period of the last Crusade.

Ceplair

So he actually wrote a script and the movie never got made?

Trumbo

Right.

Ceplair

But he got paid a lot of money for that.

Trumbo

Oh, yes. But the reasons it didn't get made I don't know.

Ceplair

Was that after or before he wrote the script for "Hawaii"?

Trumbo

After.

Ceplair

So "Hawaii" was another big--

Trumbo

Boy, that's hard to figure. It's another huge project that went from one movie to two movies to three movies, which was sort of out of hand, because nobody had ever done anything like that before, and it was expensive. But Trumbo wrote the last version of the script and has, I guess, a sharing credit

with Daniel Taradash, who also wrote [the script adaptation of] the James Jones novel--

Ceplair

"From Here to Eternity"?

Trumbo

Yes. Taradash wrote that in 1950, I think.

Ceplair

Then according to my list, "The Fixer" was the next major movie on which--the Malamud--

Trumbo

Yes, probably.

Ceplair

How did that come about?

Trumbo

Well, that's Eddie Lewis, who used to be running Kirk Douglas' stuff, and now he's running his own stuff. Something ["Harold"] and Maude is the title of a film. Ruth Gordon is the star. Any rate, they did that film and a number of other things. They would be kind of the conscientious liberal persuasion politically. So he wrote the script for them, and they put it together with all those wonderful actors, and Pop was now going around speaking those little Yiddishisms, you know, "Shouldn't I eat food of the goat?" that kind of stuff. The script is really too long, but you've got to have people like directors who are strong enough in the way that they see a project, to persuade Trumbo the other way. And it's hard. Trumbo has reasons for his positions, and so that was a difficulty, as far as I'm concerned. Also, in some ways it's a prison picture so you don't get to get outside a lot. People were housebound, being tortured. Just small doings, but still. So that didn't work out in terms of box office, and I think mostly because it didn't have a center that really worked. The trouble is Trumbo is so entrancing to people that it's like, what did I just go through, that kind of stuff.

Ceplair

Now, in 1970 he gets the Laurel Award from the Writers Guild and gives that famous speech. Do you remember what he was thinking when he wrote that, or what message he was trying to send?

Trumbo

I think he was trying to do a number of things, and one was to provide another perspective to either right-wing or left-wing, and essentially sort of attacking it from the position of, how can we get the most we can out of the situation we're in? And he sort of twists the events so that you look at them in a different way, and what we're trying to get rid of, that, "I was right and you should go to prison," or, "You wronged me. Admit it. Face up. Speak up," that kind of thing. Because it's only by getting through that particular bump that you can go forward, and the idea is to try to promote a unity rather than to insist upon your virtue as an upholder of American truth, like James McGuinness or someone like that, and to get away with, "I'm the protector of the American way, I was picked upon and abused," and on and on and on. Now, it both worked and didn't work. That's true of so many things. [laughs] I got this, that, or whatever it might be. But it did force people to think about what this is all about, or what it was about, and that we have to resolve these kind of issues. And he doesn't say, "Go out, take an informer to lunch." But what he's not willing to do is condemn them on the basis of a number of examples, which he serves up to Albert [Maltz]. And Albert is saying, "Yeah, well, that's not enough." So Albert is always the theorist more than anything else. Albert went to Columbia. Albert comes from a family with some money. Trumbo is a college dropout. His family had no money. He had to take care of his younger sisters. He felt that was his duty, and he did until they were old enough to kind of venture on their own, and only then did he leap into the writing business as what he really wanted to do, and not being their sole provider anymore, he felt free to do that. He would support them as much as he could, but he couldn't live out his life for them.

Ceplair

Was Albert's the only negative response to the "only victim" speech?

Trumbo

Oh, no, a whole bunch of people, including Jean Butler, who ten years later said, "You know, your father, he was so right." A lot of those--every range of response, which he didn't much care what they thought. Never having wanted to be a leader of the Left in any way, except that he was associated with the Left, and he would not be dissuaded from that, he didn't want to present this as something you must do. It was something, you know, we ought to think about this, talk about this. We need to look within the community that exists and see how we can get along. So a lot of people who were informers took this wrongly. They thought that he was saying, you are forgiven, and that's what the left-wing objections were, that Trumbo was saying, "You're forgiven." Nothing of the sort. So it's a complex kind of position, and as he says, writes to Albert--what was that? I lost that thought. But that's what he was getting to. He does want people not necessarily to become one, but become more accepting. Think about all of this before you automatically say stool pigeon, which I think is actually a misapplication, stool pigeon meaning, I think classically, you are an agent of some kind sent in to gather information, as opposed to something like an informant. That would be someone who was in the game already, or somebody who decided that they had to go get those commies and join the party, etc., etc., etc. So kinds of things there are a little more complicated, the terms, rather than all being the same.

Ceplair

Okay, I think we'll stop here.

Trumbo

Yes, I think. [End of interview]

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