

## MORNING STORIES TRANSCRIPT

*First Thanksgiving: Morning Stories producer and director Tony Kahn tells us about his first Thanksgiving, and the trip this most American holiday has been for him.*

### **Tony Kahn:**

Hi everybody. It's Tony Kahn the director and producer of *Morning Stories* from WGBH-FM in Boston. In the true spirit of podcasting, we're going to start breaking a tradition right away. Normally we podcast on, on Fridays, or actually Thursday Eastern time, but as soon as it's Friday somewhere on earth, like Tokyo. But this is Thanksgiving week so we thought we'd podcast before the, the T-day actually comes. Thanksgiving is the holiday that more Americans travel farther for than any other holiday during the year. So I thought we might tell a Morning Story this morning about, well the kind of trip that Thanksgiving has been for me, starting with my very first one, a long time ago.

The first Thanksgiving I remember was in 1947 in Beverly Hills. Given the chill in the air, it might as well have been the North Pole. A month before, the House Un-American Activities Committee had accused my father and nineteen other progressive screenwriters and directors of being Communists and traitors. Since then, Warner Brothers had refused to renew my father's contract and no one was calling with work. He'd been blacklisted and knew he'd never see another paycheck unless he cooperated with the Committee, recanted his views, and informed on all his friends. [piano music and background party conversation] Instead, that Thanksgiving, he invited them all to a feast, with two turkeys, tons of trimmings, and a small fortune in fine wine and liqueur.

I remember how noisy the grownups were that day – their jeers at the committee, their cheers of support for the nineteen blacklisted men, and through it all, my father, lifting everyone's spirits, sweeping up the ladies in a tango, and at dessert, gracefully jiggling a chocolate pudding on his palm – a display that not only confirmed his reputation for irreverence, but concealed the fatigue and chest pain that had been troubling him for weeks. It was quite a performance for all of them. For beneath the hilarity lay silence and fear. Nineteen of them had already lost their livings for having the wrong political ideas. Who would be next? And how well would any of them hold up to the hard realities of being jobless in Hollywood? Or the soft persuasions of the Committee, that all you had to do to clear your name was call someone else a "Red?" When you think of it, it was a classic American Thanksgiving – a gathering in a wilderness with a common determination to ride out the winter together.

[Recording of congressional hearing, "Are you a member of the Communist Party, or have you ever been a member of the Communist Party?]

[Ominous sustained bass note]

I now know what no one knew then, that the winter of that cold war would last over twenty years, that it would blanket not just Hollywood, but the entire country in denunciations and fear, and that the group gathered around our table that Thanksgiving would soon fall apart. To escape persecution some, like us, would flee the country. Some would stay and try to make a living under another name. Some would capitulate to the Committee and, in a desperate attempt to save their names, drag someone else's through the dirt.

Over forty Thanksgivings have come and gone since then, and have given me, if anything, an even greater feeling of poignancy for the impermanence of all our ties. Perhaps that's why every year, my wife and I now try to welcome at least one new face to our Thanksgiving table, and to remember the family and friends no longer there. It's also why this Thanksgiving, the first my young son may remember, I plan to raise a special toast to my father, who though he died blacklisted and with next to nothing in the bank, left me something that appreciates in value every year – [sounds of people at a party in the background] the example of his unfailing good humor, his refusal to sell out his principles or his friends, and, for a so-called un-American, the most American virtue, the courage, if conscience demanded, to stand alone. [party laughter]

*Morning Stories* is produced by WGBH-FM in Boston, and we podcast to you, well, once a week. We used to do it on Fridays and we'll kind of keep to that schedule, but, come on, it's a podcast, so whenever we think we got a really good one, we'll have it coming to you, but, at least, once a week. In the meantime, if you downloaded this before Thanksgiving, well, Happy Thanksgiving, and if it's after, happy trails and many safe returns home. And from my assistant, Gary Mott as well, your Thanksgiving wishes, Gary?

**Gary Mott:**

Well, Tony, you know, it's Thanksgiving. It's a day when family comes together, you know, maybe this is the only time you'll see your family this year. But, we are asking you to, to put a smile on your face and a spring in your step, as the, the breast of the turkey moistens in the oven, and the cranberry sauce [Tony's voice in background, "Like blood, floats across the table" [laughter] "congeals and coagulates"] No, no, seriously, you know, have a great Thanksgiving and, you know, watch a little bit of football and try not to eat too much and just enjoy, you know, enjoy some time with your family, because this is ... In these times, we, we really need to hold on to those people we love. So, best Thanksgiving wishes to you and we'll see you next week on the *Morning Stories* podcast.

[End of recording]

Transcribed by: Susan MacLeod

Note from Liz:

Speaking of holiday feasts at which escape was a thought on some people's minds, and during which performances were made - Every year my Jewish father used to cook a big Easter feast for my Christian mother and those of her friends and colleagues who had no families to join for that holiday. One of the regular guests was a woman who had escaped through the snow (wearing a white wedding dress to escape detection) from Czechoslovakia during the 1950s, the era of Communist show trials there. I heard about her experiences at that Easter table. And there was an old doctor at the table who had been a Nazi. He had no idea that my father was a Jew (or if he knew, he didn't ever let on that he did). However, he did not spout any fascist ideas at the table; what I remember him for is his bringing his "notes" (his term for "sheet music") to play the piano for us.