

MORNING STORIES TRANSCRIPT

Rainy Season: Tony Kahn remembers life on the run from the Hollywood Blacklist

Tony Kahn:

Hi, Everybody. This is Tony Kahn, the producer and director of *Morning Stories* on WGBH. The holiday season this year marks the sixtieth anniversary of the start of the Hollywood Blacklist, a time when all across America, thousands of people lost their jobs and their reputations, in some cases even their family and their friends if they had or were *rumored* to have left-wing political ideas. It's hard to believe that it happened, but it did, and it lasted fifteen years.

[Sound of wind, thunder, eventually rain]

Tony Kahn:

A few years ago I told the story of what happened to my family during that time, as a radio series called *Blacklisted* and for today's Morning Story I'd like to play a small part of that series for you. It's a segment set in Mexico around 1955, when I was 10. My older brother Jim, my father Gordon, my mother Barbara, our French poodle Mimi had all fled there five years before to escape the Blacklist. My father had been a Hollywood screenwriter and for five years in Mexico he had tried to make a living under another name, with no success. And now we were headed to Manchester, New Hampshire to live with my mother's father, who had offered to put us up. What we faced in New Hampshire was unclear. The Blacklist was still going on. As for Mexico, it was the rainy season, a time of year when every day, like clockwork, it rained and rained and rained.

[Sound of storm]

[Sounds of typewriter, and of singing in Spanish]

Gordon Kahn:

Cuernavaca, Morelos, July 15, 1955

Dear Lou,

Your willingness to narrate the grim scroll of my general failure to Barbara's father is deeply appreciated. It is not news of the best kind for a man to be told that his wretched son-in-law was throwing wife, sister-in-law, two grandsons and their dog back into his tender care. If I were in a position to command it, I would insist on a separate place for us, and a completely independent existence. But possessing no furniture and scarcely the traditional pot to cook in gives me no choice. It's all a great mess and I am conducting my activity as if the only source of income I will have for the future is from my writing. I have produced 2,000 pages of manuscript as "Hugh G. Foster" which, if it isn't transmuted to gold during my lifetime will form part of my shabby estate and perhaps appear as the posthumous works of ... well ... who knows what name? If I were a more cheerful philosopher I'd console myself with the fact that forty percent of the

disaster was due to the collapse of the peso, but the rest of it is entirely my fault, for being the kind of man I am.

I might say that one thing has not only retained its true value in these crises, but has increased, in my estimation: Barbara's loyalty, and that makes up for an incalculable number of things. With, well, I might say the world crumbling; it is wonderful to see the family ties growing firmer. Between chapters, a man gets a lot of time to think about these things.

Hasta la vista,
Gordon

[Mexican vocal music, followed by sound of children playing]

Tony Kahn:

The next day, at recess, Gordon came to pick me up at school and take me to my flight to the States. To save money, only my aunt Janet and I would return by plane. The rest of the family would crowd into the family car and drive north. The class stood outside to wave goodbye. Pablo, my best friend; Rudy, who told the best stories in the world; Diana, whom I'd never had the courage to tell I loved; and all of whom I'd probably never see again. I was walking backwards, waving goodbye, trying to think of one last thing to say, when I got the idea of tripping on a rock and falling over. It was something I'd learned from my father: leave them laughing. [children's voices, laughing]

Gordon Kahn:

Come on, son, let's go.

[Storm sounds; family background noises: "Mimi, stay in! Sit! Sit down!"
"Don't stray. Gordon! Please, Jim! Help your father, now!"]

Two weeks later, on August 1, on four retreaded tires, the rest of the family squeezed into the car and, with fenders flapping, took off on the 3,000 mile journey from Cuernavaca to my grandfather's house in Manchester, New Hampshire.

[Sound of car]

There was one consolation: New Hampshire was the last place on earth anyone would think to look for a blacklisted Hollywood screenwriter. Besides, by then the Committee was hunting for Communists in areas far removed from show business and would probably have little interest in a man in the middle of nowhere trying to write his way out of a hole.

[Echo voice...]

J. Edgar Hoover [Head of the FBI]:
Office of the Director, FBI

A former associate close to Kahn suggests Kahn and his family will soon leave Mexico for parts unknown. A review of this file reflects subject has a brother, Joseph Victor Kahn, Bureau file

100 dash 40074, living in Poughkeepsie, New York. In the event a specific address is determined for this subject in the United States, it is requested that the Mexico City office be advised at once.

[Sound of storm]

Tony Kahn:
I'm here with Gary Mott. Hi, Gar –

Gary Mott:
This is the sixty-year anniversary of the Hollywood Blacklist.

Tony Kahn:
Yeah.

Gary Mott:
What I heard, listening to the three-hour series, *Blacklisted*, is this happened, not so much because of what your father believed in, but because he refused to inform on his friends.

Tony Kahn:
That's right. If you informed on your friends, they gave you a free pass to keep your job, to feel the FBI was not going to be after you.

Gary Mott:
I think there are a lot of people out there who say, "I will do anything for my kids. My kids need food and I don't have money. I'll steal it. I'll lie. I'll..."

Tony Kahn:
"... inform on my friends."

Gary Mott:
"I'll inform on my friends." And for your father – and for me – this is not something that I can do.

Tony Kahn:
Even if you might put your family through some hard times?

Gary Mott:
I certainly hope that I would – that I would take that stand.

Tony Kahn:
You know what? I, I feel that you would. And it's not because we believe in the same things. It's not because we even necessarily have the same political beliefs, and I don't – I know we don't have the same religious beliefs. But there's something about your character. We've been doing this show for about three years. We've sat across from each other *so* many times talking about other people's stories and what they bring up for us. I just know that whatever you feel is

right you're going to stand by, and you don't think it's right to betray a friendship.

Gary Mott:

I think about the biblical verse, don't point out the, the speck in someone else's eye when there is a log in your own.

Tony Kahn:

Somebody once asked me, "Well, is this a story with a happy ending?" You know? It's like saying, "Is your *life* a story with a happy ending?" My only answer to that is, "Well, it keeps changing. . ."

Gary Mott:

Just like all of our lives are – a work in progress. You talk about this being the sixtieth anniversary of the Blacklist, and, and every September 27th, I think about my accident because that was the day it happened in 1980. And this past September 27th it was really kind of weighing on me. You know I started to think about that phone call that my dad got at work saying that, you know, your son is in bad shape and you need to get over here right away.

Now I have children. My oldest daughter is ten years old, and I think, you know, what would that be like? To get that call. It seems unimaginable. It kind of gave me a greater appreciation for ... you know, all the stuff that my folks have dealt with over the years and how they've endured all of it, you know, largely because of their faith, which they, you know, handed down to me.

Tony Kahn:

You said something yesterday. You said "Well, I regret that you don't feel the same way that I do because when we die we won't be able to continue our friendship in Heaven." What a lovely thing to say, but does that mean then that I don't get to Heaven? [laughs]

Gary Mott:

Well, you're taking an off-handed humorous comment and *I* believe that, that the God of the Bible has a plan for each one of our lives. I have faith that if I submit to, to God's plan, things are going to work out for the best. Holding on to, to fear, to resentment, to feeling, you know, angry about people or things that have wronged me in my life, you know, I can't do it. And it's incumbent on me to forgive because I've been forgiven.

Tony Kahn:

With me to get to practice it every day. [laughs]

Gary Mott:

That's right. Every morning I say, "Dear God, how, how can I make it through another day?"

Tony Kahn:

Well, I guess when somebody says, "Does this *Blacklisted* story has an end for me?" I'd say that I know that it begins in fear and I hope that it ends in forgiveness. That's all I really want. I hope, that's all I really want.

Gary Mott:

[laughing] Well, I mean if your mother is any example, you know, you've got another good thirty years in you.

Tony Kahn:

My mother is on my left hand and my cardiologist is on my right, and well, they should talk to each other! [Tony and Gary both laugh.] I'm going to stay out of it!

GARY MOTT:

Maybe in Heaven!

TONY KAHN:

OK, well thanks, Gary. We promise we won't have this conversation for another three years. If you want to hear it three years from now, support the program.

Gary Mott:

That's right. Go to <wgbh.org/morningstories> and we love getting e-mail at <morningstories@wgbh.org>.

Tony Kahn:

And if you'd like to hear the *Blacklisted* story go to <wgbh.org/blacklisted>.

Gary Mott:

And please also go to iTunes and, and search for *Blacklisted*. That's a, a quick and easy way to download all six episodes of the *Blacklisted* series, produced by Mr. Kahn.

Tony Kahn:

We'll see you again real soon. Bye-bye.

[Spanish is sung with storm background, briefly]

[End of recording]

Transcribed by Bev Sykes

Bev's comments

I meant to add to this that I found Gary's comments at the end very moving. I have been in the position of receiving a couple of "those calls" (we have buried two of our children) and one of our sons is about to make us grandparents for the first time. I wonder how he is going to feel when he, like Gary, looks at his daughter one day and remembers the time when we received that first call, telling us his younger brother had been in an auto accident.

I had heard "Blacklisted" before I transcribed this podcast and in transcribing the podcast was

struck again, as I was the first time, about what strong values Tony's father must have imparted to his children, despite their circumstances for so long. It takes a very strong man to do that.