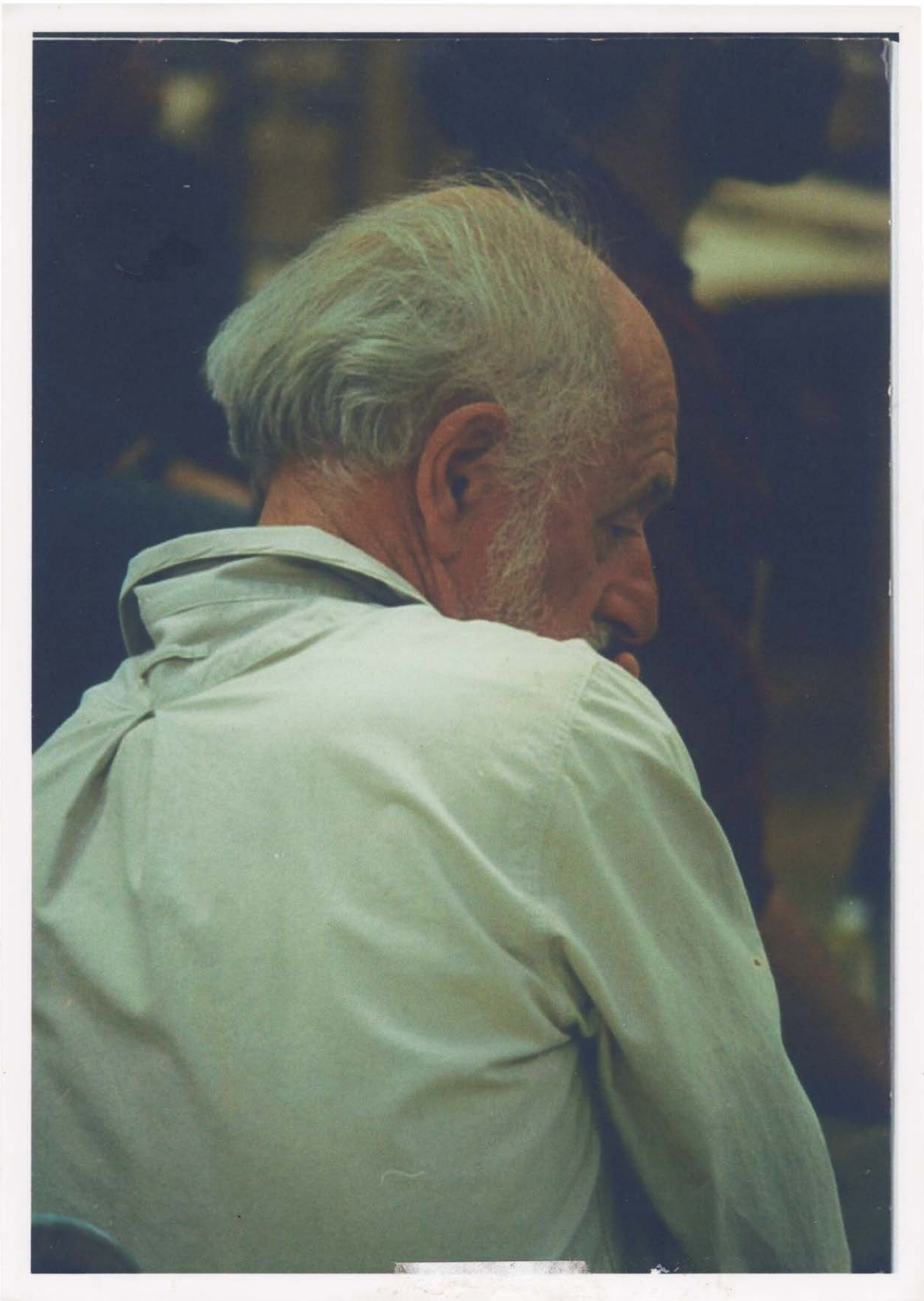




James Krenov:  
*Leave Fingerprints*

Brendan Bernhardt Gaffney

JAMES KRENOV: LEAVE FINGERPRINTS



*Photo by Paul Arnold.*

# James Krenov:

## *Leave Fingerprints*

Brendan Bernhardt Gaffney



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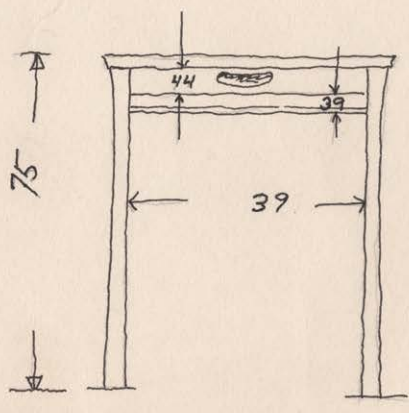
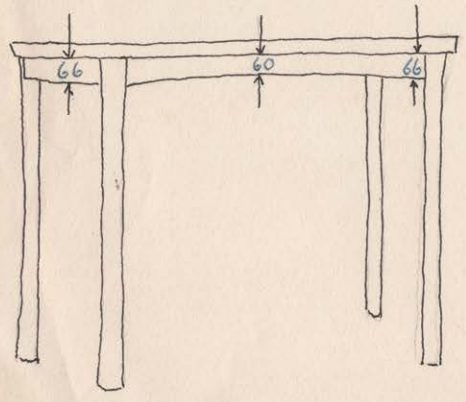
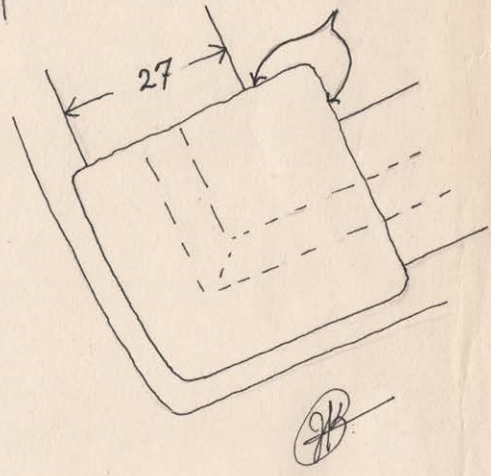
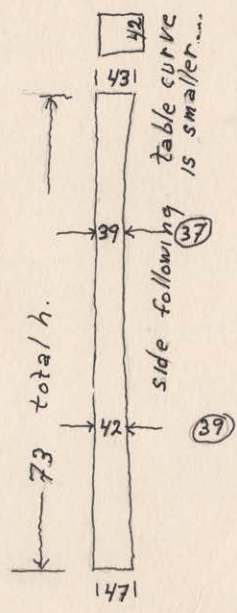
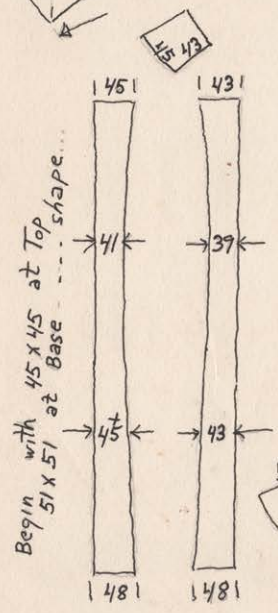
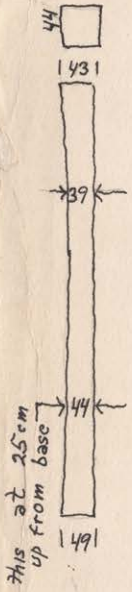
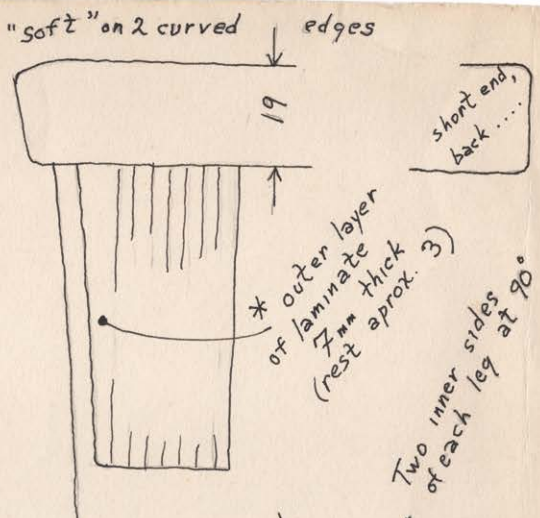
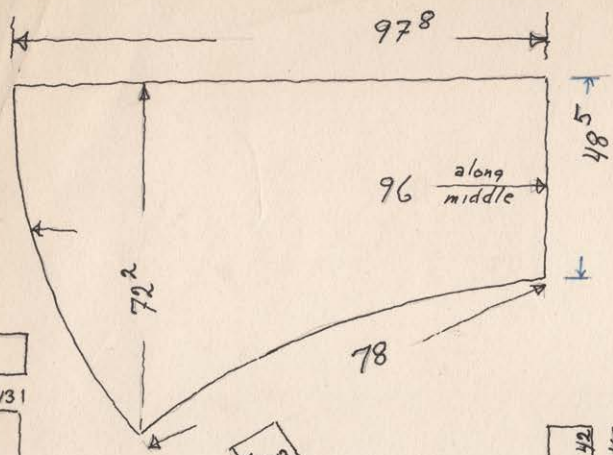
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*Dedicated to*

My dad, Robert Emmet Gaffney, a writer, designer, amateur cabinetmaker and an enthusiast to his core. He shared these passions with me, and passed on much more than I can express.





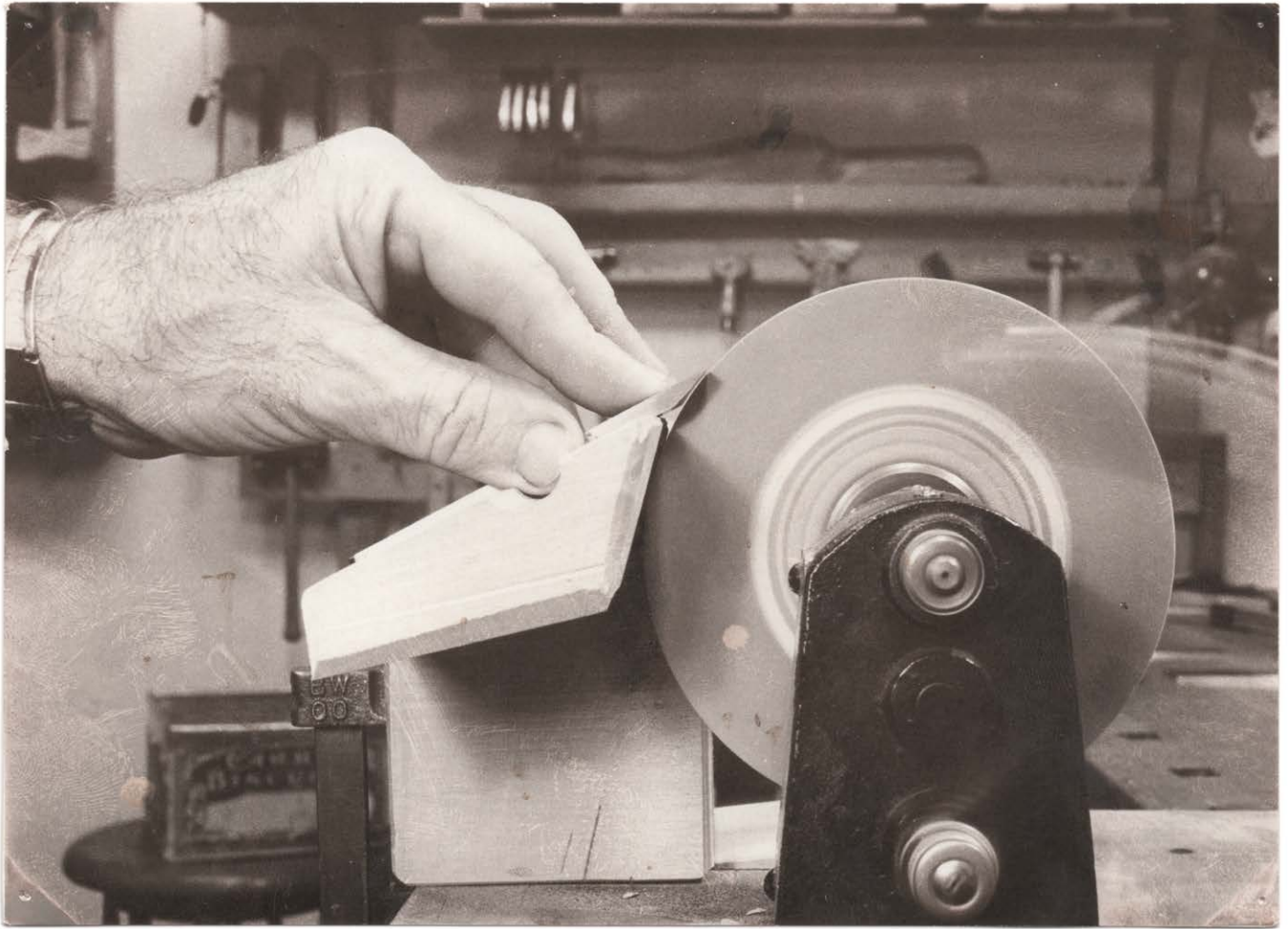
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# Acknowledgments

*So we sat on a stone and became close friends, and I promised faithfully to go and visit him in his barracks in Algiers: I was to sail from Naples to Algiers. He wrote me the address on his card, and told me he had friends in the regiment, to whom I should be introduced, and we could have a good time, if I would stay a week or two, down there in Algiers.*

*How much more real Algiers was than the rock on the Rigi where we sat, or the lake beneath, or the mountains beyond. Algiers is very real, though I have never seen it, and my friend is my friend for ever, though I have lost his card and forgotten his name.\**

Writing this book would have been impossible without the help of so many. First, Katya Krenov-Hoke and Tina Krenov, joined respectively by Creighton Hoke and Dave Matthews, lent insight and guidance only a family can provide. They met with warmth and generosity the deeply personal task of helping me write about their father.

The alumni, teachers and community members of the school in Fort Bragg, too, were eager and capable partners. Chief among them was David Welter, the glue of the extended alumni network and a keeper of the flame, without whom I would have been stuck spinning my wheels long ago. Beyond his treasure trove of a Rolodex and his donations of time, words and perspective, he is a great friend and sounding board, which is a burdensome task when dealing with a loquacious caller such as myself.

The staff at the school, many of whom were my own teachers years ago, were also indispensable. Laura Mays, the school's current director, was not only a guiding force in my own development as a woodworker but a keen eye and ear to my writing efforts. Ron Hock and Linda Rosengarten, who have generously opened their beautiful corner of Northern California to so many, were kind enough to do the same for me with caring advocacy and strong coffee.

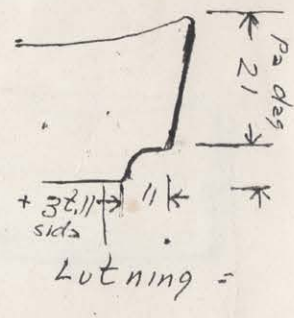
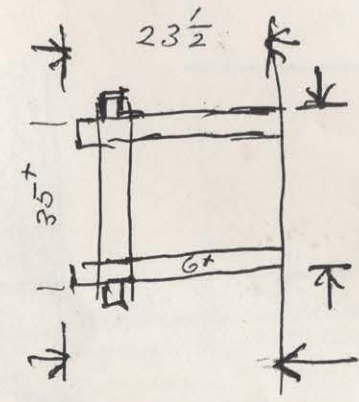
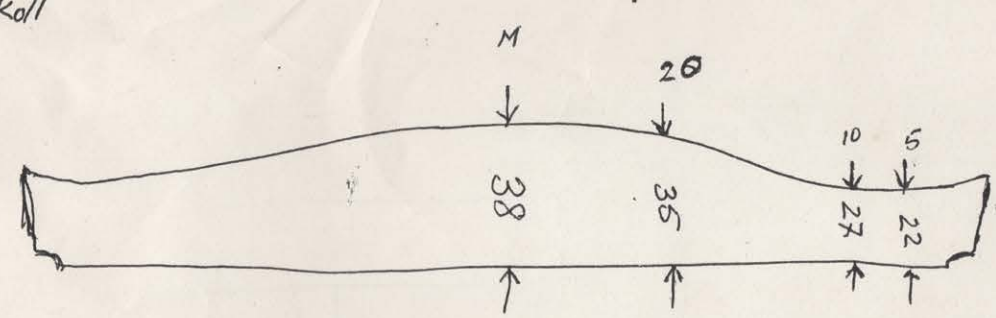
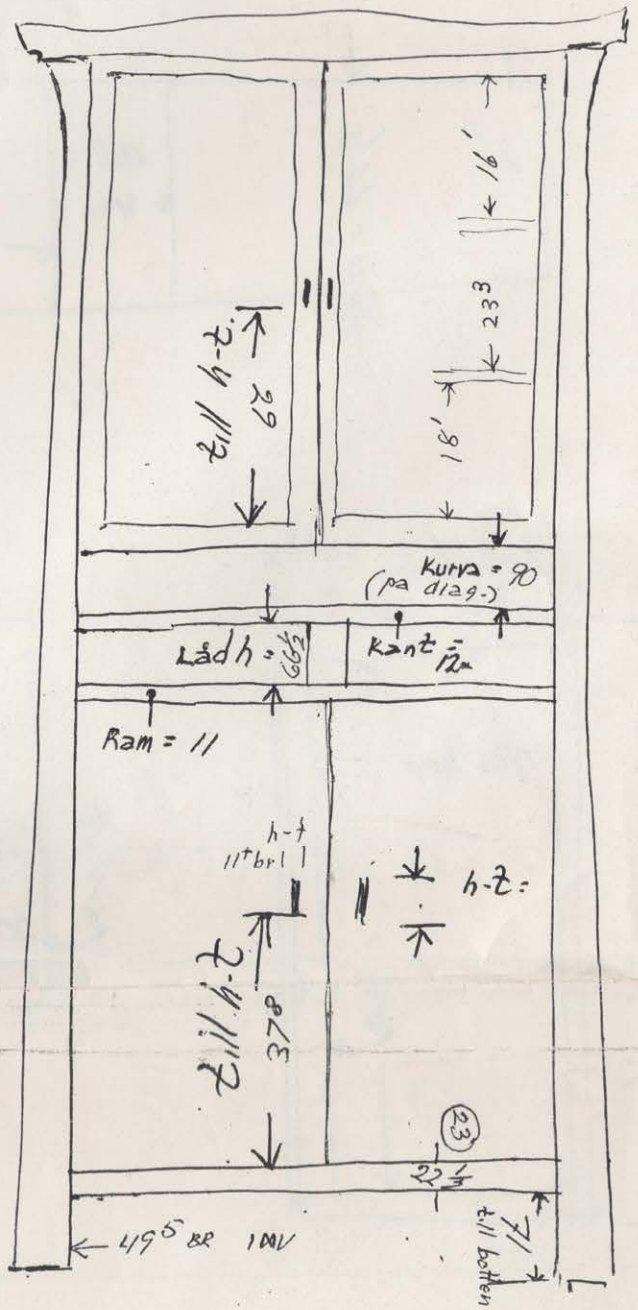
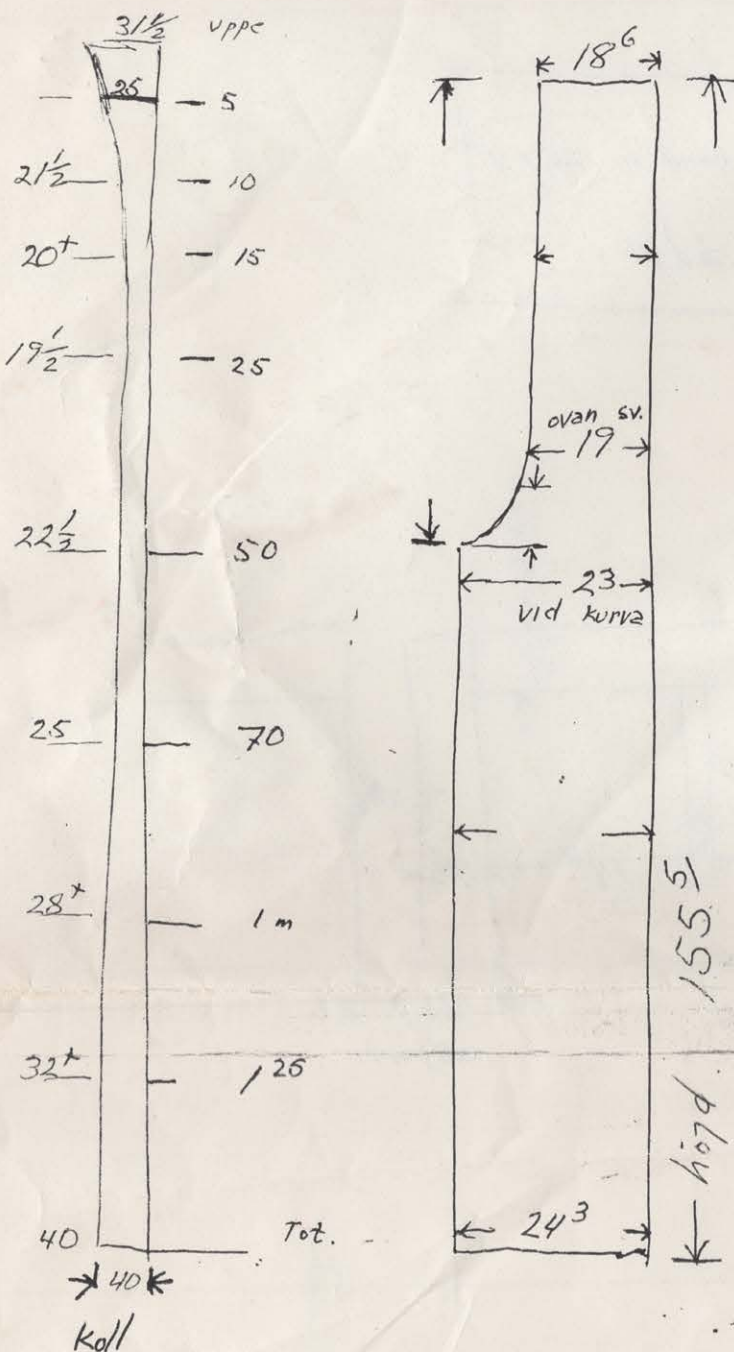
Christopher Schwarz was the one who started me down this path, and I only hope to do justice to the faith he put in a 27-year-old first-time author three years ago. I could not ask for a better colleague and collaborator, even better knowing that he is a great friend and has lit the way for so many of us lucky enough to find ourselves under his guidance.

This book is, at its core, a journalistic pursuit, but it is also a compilation of stories and recollections. I have had the privilege of interviewing and talking with scores of friends, students, classmates, colleagues, supporters, detractors, clients and partners, each of whom became a voice in the chorus that helped illuminate and recount the complex and rich life of James Krenov. There are far too many to thank individually, but to those who lent their energy and memories to this work, I am forever grateful.

And lastly, a deep appreciation goes to my wife, Josselyn, who has not only the patience to deal with someone with such consuming pursuits but is crazy enough to support them and join in.

\* An excerpt from D.H. Lawrence's "Twilight in Italy," published in London by Duckworth and Co. in 1916.

**Figure 1:** (*opposite*) Krenov grinds a plane iron on a hand-cranked grinder, his first step toward a well-sharpened blade. Image courtesy of the Krenov family.



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 16  
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# Foreword

by David Welter

*You are always experimenting. You are playing with textures, tensions, the things that happen, and, if you are sensitive, if you are lucky enough, then you may exceed your expectations. I've never believed that you have to be all that inventive. Form, for me, is not the primary thing, form is only a beginning. It is the combination of feelings and a function; shapes and things that come to one in connection with the discoveries made as one goes into the wood that pull it all together and give meaning to form.\**

James Krenov's lyrical books on the craft of cabinetmaking have drawn an audience for more than two generations. His romantically impractical approach initially appealed to searchers in the mid '70s who were drawn to ideals of honest simplicity.

Jim's books, particularly his first, "A Cabinetmaker's Notebook," establish the philosophy beneath his approach to craft. There is no need to expand upon his writings. An attempt would be foolish and futile; the writing needs no explanation. Rather, the need is to address the fact that until now, at the centennial of his birth, there has been no comprehensive presentation of his life.

While the image of the wise and humble sage never lost its glister to many, others in association with Jim came away with an altogether different impression. In my two years as one of his students, 16 years as a member of his staff, and in later ups and downs I witnessed the full range – Jim could be an endearing charmer or someone to approach at a different time.

Given the emotions engendered in those who knew Jim it is fortunate that we have in Brendan Gaffney an adroit investigator and thoughtful scholar. Having never met Jim, Brendan presents him as an individual, unsullied by personal interaction.

Jim's life story has an appeal that could reach a larger audience than those familiar with his work as a cabinetmaker.

He not only made history with his insight and cabinets, but was touched by historical events. His mother, Julia, was a young woman of privilege in St. Petersburg before the Russian Revolution. Jim would say of her in that period that she was the sort who would browse for dresses in shops that had no sign on the street – "if you didn't know what was behind that door, you didn't need to know."

Drawing on Julia's unpublished memoirs, conditions of Jim's youth are depicted. He was born and raised in his parent's exile in the far north with a period in Shanghai. After growing up in Seattle, he worked in shipyards there during World War II. In post-war ramblings in Europe, he discovered furniture making taught by a master, Carl Malmsten, himself a product of honorable familial and craft lineage.

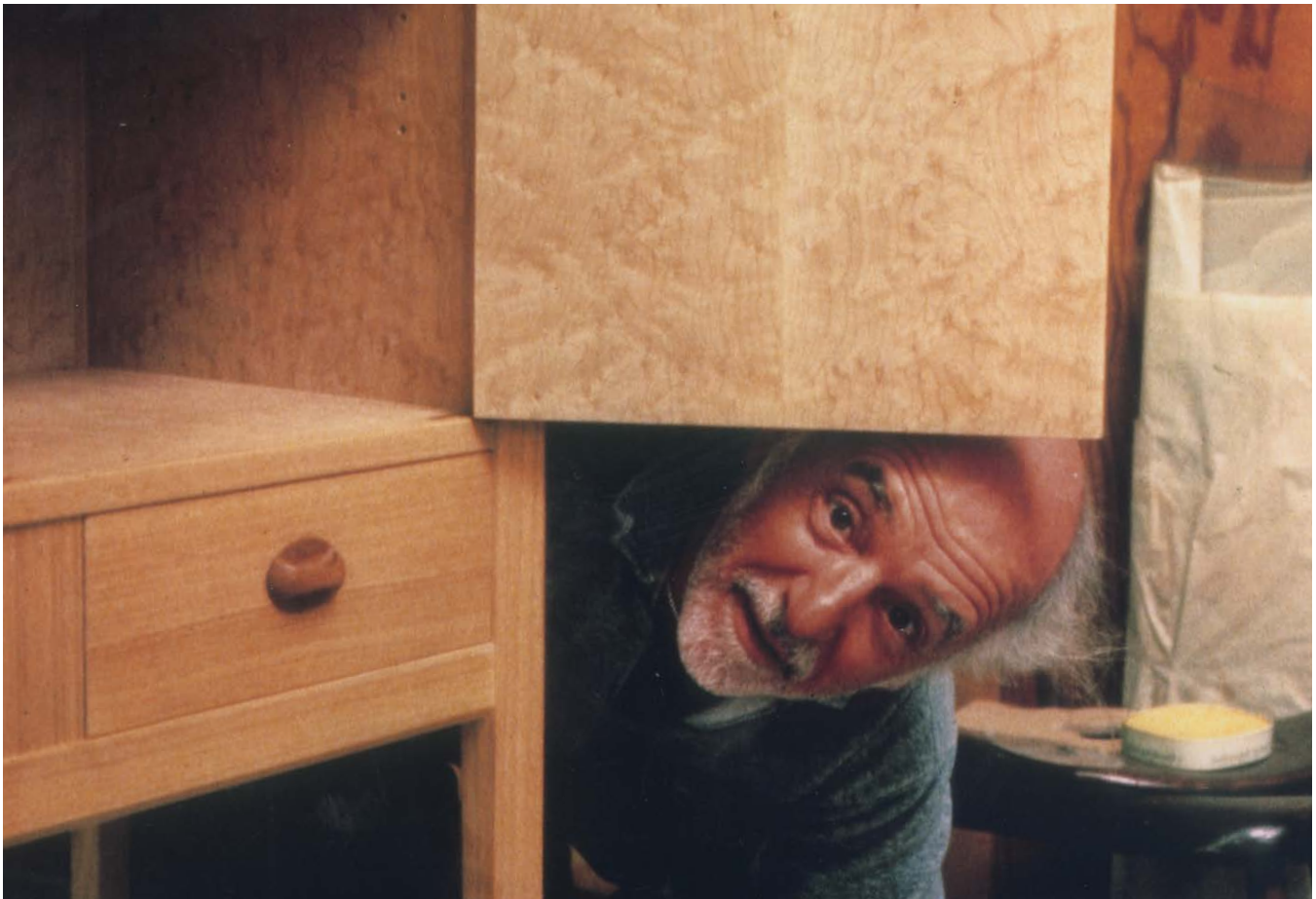
\*An excerpt from James Krenov's first book on woodworking, "A Cabinetmaker's Notebook," published by Van Nostrand Reinhold in 1976, p. 14.



**Figure 3:** The "Pagoda Cabinet" from 1971 in European cherry, a classical form with the Krenov touch. Krenov ended his first woodworking book with a series of photos of this piece. *Photo by Bengt Carlén.*

**Figure 2:** (opposite) Details recorded by Krenov from the "Pagoda Cabinet" after its completion in 1971. *Image courtesy of the Krenov family.*





**Figure 4:** A playful Krenov peeks from behind a veneered cabinet he made in 1984, his first full year as a resident at 440 Alger St. The container of yellow substance is Goddard's wax, an early favorite finish. The bird's-eye maple was used in the cabinet interior only. *Photo courtesy of the Krenov School.*

In the solitude of his basement shop, Jim began formulating a philosophy of craft that led to the publication of four books. The recognition gained from publication led to a demand for speaking engagements and finally, after frustrations in teaching, an opportunity to found a cabinetmaking school (his definition) of internationally high regard.

Brendan Gaffney acquired an interest in making at a young age in his father's shop (echoing an experience of many applicants to Jim's fine woodworking program), an experience second only to being with his grandfather in his shop. Brendan's initial formal education in music and technology led to his realization that he most enjoyed making objects. Fortified with his father's copy of "The Fine Art of Cabinetmaking," Brendan attended the school founded by Jim for, among other projects, making a zither with movable bridges, reminiscent of a Chinese guzheng. Not the first musical instrument at the school, but the most unique. After his year at the school, Brendan has been engaged with woodworking in a variety of roles: tool sales, toolmaking, author and teacher, while managing to have some time at a workbench.

Brendan has been resourceful in researching the background of Jim's career: finding classmates at Malmsten's; associates affected early in Jim's development such as Martin Puryear; supporters of Jim's initial American excursions; his photographer; his book editor; individuals instrumental in

the creation of the fine woodworking program in Fort Bragg, California; and finally, students from throughout Jim's life as a teacher.

Jim considered himself to be an amateur in the classical sense, one working with an open mind and a passion for the sake of creating. His work was done with great care, but to the disappointment of the mechanically inclined, not focused on perfection. "I never made a square cabinet in my life," he said. Creation to him was an intensely personal process, a collaboration of maker, tools and material. A conscious maker works with a project rather than working on a project. He said of one project that "I just watched it come together," a Zen-like attitude that impressed a Japanese visitor.

Jim's approach to cabinetmaking was as unique as his character: formal in technique and appearance but constructed in an evolutionary manner. A sketch would become a mock-up, and each stage of construction was subject to evaluation, all without the hindrance of measured drawings and preconceived notions. For Jim, a good piece was one that quietly invites investigation rather than shouting across the room. Apart from his unerring sense of proportion and color, he gave life to his cabinets by incorporating elements of tension: a curve "like a blade of grass in the wind"; supporting members shaped as if straining with a load; graphic flows unifying individual pieces of wood. In later work, Jim seemed to shy away from symmetry; panels and veneers are less likely to be bookmatched, doors are not the same size. It's a reflection of the personal involvement in making these cabinets, that he said "I'm a little off-center myself." Life and tension seemed to be as much a part of his being as his cabinets.

Jim often said of his program that "other schools teach you how to do the work, here we teach you why we do the work." Those waiting for elaboration were left to fend for themselves. While the point may have been that searchers have to find on their own, the mystery served to enhance the aura of the master.

As some of his students with personal experience will testify, Jim disdained glossy finishes. A thin coat of shellac "polish" or even just beeswax allowed the user to be engaged with the wood. It is my hope that, in this unvarnished presentation of Jim's life, the reader may become engaged with the man.



**Figure 5:** David Welter listening in with Jim and Britta Krenov sometime in the late 1980s. *Photo courtesy of the Krenov School.*



**Figure 6:** A shot from a series of photographs illustrating the installation of knife hinges, taken in 1995. *Photo by David Welter.*



Handwritten characters in a cursive script, possibly representing a specific dialect or a form of shorthand.

Two lines of handwritten characters, continuing the script from the first section.

Two lines of handwritten characters, continuing the script from the second section.

Handwritten characters with the word "ay" written above them in a different script.

Handwritten characters with the word "ay" and the phonetic sequence "ya u u 441" written above them.

Handwritten characters, continuing the script from the previous section.

Handwritten characters, continuing the script from the previous section.



# Prologue

*Much water has flowed under the bridge...*

*I work, look and listen to the world. Young voices so clear, so distinct: “Tayga... tayga... We are romantics. We kindle bonfires with songs. One dreams at times of BLUE CITIES that have no names. We will build these cities, we’ll give them names....”*

*And somewhere in the fabulous land of Kublai Khan, someone cycles over the precipitous passes to save the children of Tibet. And thousands of the young live and work for the people of the jungle. And some lone adventurers sail round the Cape Horn or cross the Atlantic in a tiny craft, or even a raft. Before them I bow my head in humility. They are the ones who make the world a boundless fairy-land.\**

The interviewer’s first question was met with a peppery retort, one that might sum up the flow of the introductions ahead and its subject’s demeanor:

“Well, let’s start from the beginning. Where were you born?”

“Where was I born?”

“We’ll start from the beginning.”

“Well, if you read ‘Notebook’ a lot of what you’re asking me is in there.”

James Krenov, the man sitting across from the interviewer, Oscar Fitzgerald, was uninterested in repeating himself. Fitzgerald was there to take down an oral history for the Smithsonian, yes, but surely an interested party could find it in “A Cabinetmaker’s Notebook,” Krenov’s first book on cabinetmaking from 1976, nearly three decades old by then.

Fitzgerald pried a few details out of the old cabinetmaker. He was born in Uelen, Russia, in 1920, he and his parents had lived in Shanghai, then they had worked for the Bureau of Indian Affairs in Alaska.

“I see,” Fitzgerald said. “When you were growing up, did you ever tinker around making things or were you interested in making things?”

“I made things all my life,” Krenov replied. “I made my own toys when I was 5 or 6 years old.”

“Did your father have a lot of tools?”

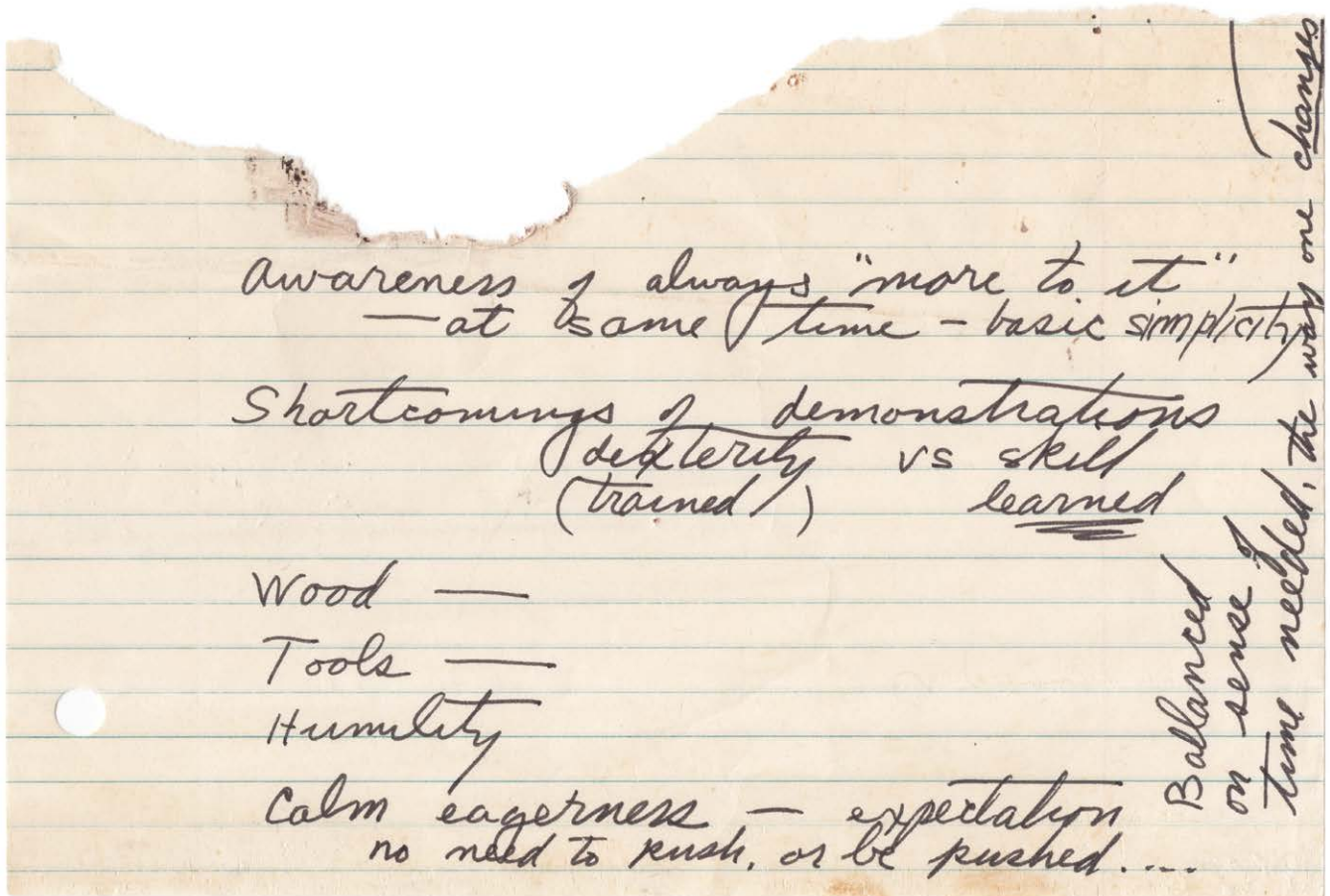
“Look, you’re trying to pin down a basis for my learning,” Krenov said. “There is no basis for my learning. When I was a small child, I had no one to play with because the Indian kids would say, ‘I will play with you yesterday morning,’ and there was nothing in that, so I made my own little boats to sail and things. I’ve always had good hands. I’ve always been fairly good at carving little things. I was just a handy, imaginative youngster and I was a very, very good shot. I was a good hunter, too.”

Krenov knew there was interest in his backstory, but was unsure if such a story would, or could, illuminate his motivations or actions – though admitting Fitzgerald into his home hinted that he thought it might.

“People say, ‘Well, you’re going to write one more book,’ and I say, ‘no,’ but if I do it’s going to be called ‘Things I Don’t Remember,’ which is a nice title for a book.”

\*The opening passage of Julia Krenov’s unpublished memoir, written in the late 1930s.

**Figure 7:** (*opposite*) A drawing by Kym-Yr-Gin, a 12-year-old Chukchi boy from the village of Uelen, Russia, given to his teacher Julia Krenov in 1920. *Photo courtesy of the Krenov family.*



**Figure 8:** Krenov's notes for a lecture, written on a scrap of lined paper. The notes concern woodworking, but at their core, the aphorisms he jotted down applied to more than his approach to his craft. *Image courtesy of the Krenov family.*

Krenov never wrote that book; he lived only another five years after the interview with Fitzgerald, and failing eyesight would have prevented his writing at all. At 31, he penned a 10-page memoir, well before the vast experiences of his 89 years. In his 70s, he'd approached a friend with the prospect of working together on a biography, but it had fallen through. And in the last months of his life, at the suggestion of his family and close friends, he dictated some autobiographical snippets on a small cassette recorder. But the aging storyteller cared to talk more about salmon traps on the Kuskokwim River and sailing as a teenager in the Puget Sound than the exact trajectory of his life, and the exercise resulted in only two recordings.

The truth is, Krenov's story is an epic. His life spanned several continents and was shaped by the political, cultural and aesthetic upheavals of the 20th century. His first act in life was sucking on a piece of walrus fat like the Chukchi children born in Uelen, Russia; he was the first white Russian born there. His parents were exiled Russian nobles, pushed to the easternmost reaches of the Asian continent. Before the age of 5, he and his family sailed around the world, living in Shanghai with the exiled architect (his grandfather) of the tsar and on the temple island of Putuo in the East China Sea before settling amongst the indigenous people of the remote Alaska Territory. The family left the Alaskan wilderness almost a decade later for Seattle, where Krenov's mother, Julia, raised him on a Works Progress



Administration salary, joined by the dockworkers and sailors of the Pacific Northwest, far from the palaces of St. Petersburg in which she had grown up.

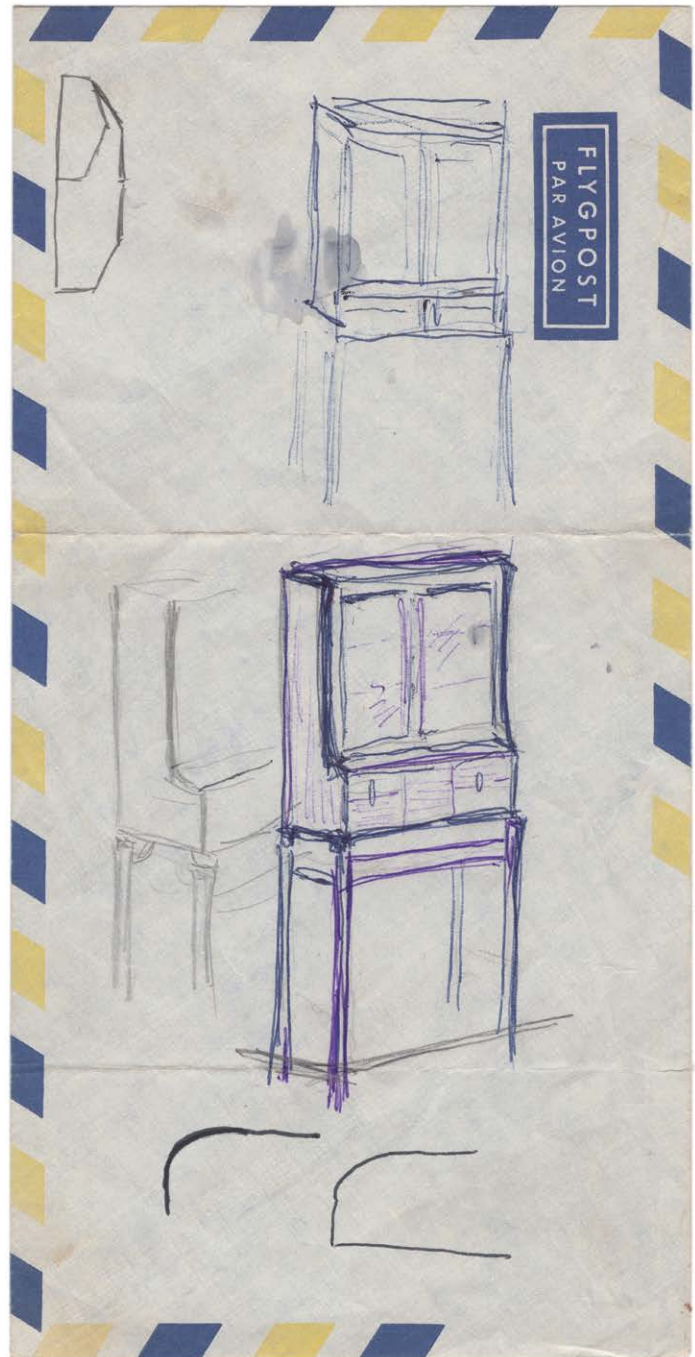
Krenov left America for Europe, living a “pre-Kerouac” lifestyle through most of his early adulthood. He spent his summers bicycling around post-war Continental Europe and the Swedish countryside, writing short stories and travelogues. In the winters he worked industrial odd jobs. After meeting his wife, Britta, who became the support and comfort that allowed him a chance to flourish, he pivoted and attended Carl Malmsten’s prestigious furniture school, turning from wanderlust to disciplined study and cabinetmaking in his late 30s.

Two decades later, his books on his craft captured a wide audience, escaping the monotonous practicality of woodworking publications in the middle of the 20th century. Krenov was an exceptional storyteller and lecturer, and his readers found much more than technique or instruction in his writing. His philosophy appealed to those seeking an alternative to the material culture of the 1970s, replacing efficiency and practicality with care, sensitivity and fulfillment. Krenov launched thousands of individuals into woodworking through his books, which are arguably the most influential woodworking texts of the 20th century. Today, a wide swath of craftspeople can trace their inspiration to his first book, “The Cabinetmaker’s Notebook.”

Krenov’s writing brought him renown, which would ferry him around the world and eventually to the Mendocino coast of Northern California, where he established a woodworking school that today bears his name. He was a complex force in the world of furniture; he was antagonistic and conservative when considering his contemporaries while also being a touchstone for sensitivity and “quietness” in expressions of craft.

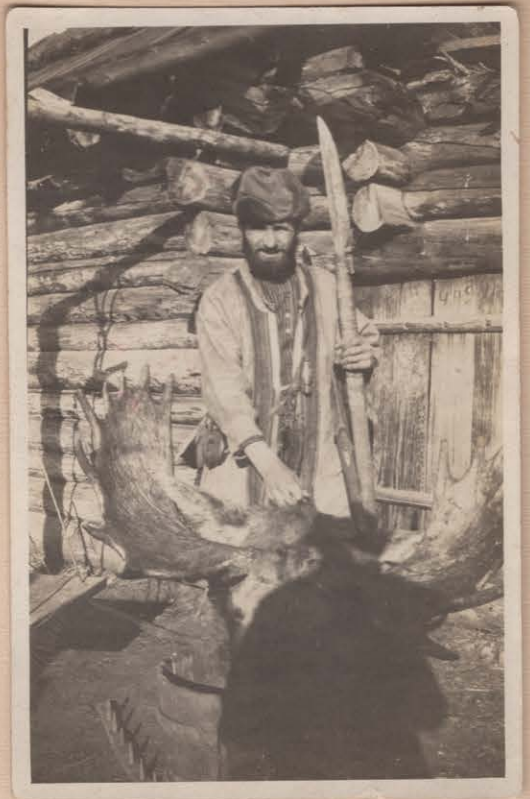
His reluctance to share the finer details of his biography (or to reiterate them for inquisitive interviewers) left a gap in our understanding of Krenov. Among all the things he never wrote down, the story of where he began and where he wound up, there is material for a whole book. And in that material, there are more than just biographical details, just as his books on woodworking contain more than instructions and plans.

Behind the dates and places there is an incredible journey. That journey, and the cultures and environments through which it wound, sheds light on the gifts, flaws and humanity of James Krenov, and the fingerprints he left on the people and the world around him.



**Figure 9:** Krenov’s pieces often began with a simple sketch, and among his papers are dozens of such sketches that show his tentative approach to form. This approach to design, while deliberate, also afforded him the freedom to work out a piece of furniture while he was in the process of realizing it. *Image courtesy of the Krenov family.*





Tayga





# Chapter 1

## Away to the East

*Once upon a time the world was wide. The Arctic Coast, the Siberian TAYGA – virgin forest – were fairy-lands. Adventures, coloured with romance, were fairy-tales. The world has shrunk. Romantic adventurers have given way to tourists, who may spend a weekend on the Kamchatka, or have a look at the Sakhalin. There seem to be no fairy-tales. I have lived in some enchanting ones.\**

The small indigenous community and trading settlement of Uelen (pronounced “wellen”) is the easternmost settlement in Russia; the coastline of Alaska lies only 50 miles to the southeast. The nearest city is Nome, Alaska, – across the Bering Strait, across the international date line, on another continent. A more remote place is hard to find.

That James Krenov came to be born in such a remote place reveals the elaborate foundation on which his life’s tale would be built. In many ways, Krenov’s life began not at his own birth in 1920 but with his mother’s story, and the stage of his first decades would be set by her life’s journey as much as his own winding ventures through three continents. Julia Krenov detailed her path from St. Petersburg to Uelen (and beyond to Shanghai and America) in an unpublished memoir, a 175-page document that forms the basis of much of this biography’s details of Krenov’s childhood; in fact, her memoir colors in much of the detail her son only outlined in his own retellings.

Julia’s departure from the luxurious bosom of her European-Russian upbringing to the wilds of Eastern Siberia would come to represent a theme reprised throughout her son’s life – the single-minded pursuit of a passion, of a thread pulled and followed to its root, of a delight taken in the winding journey to some storied destination.

Julia Alexanderovna Khrenova (née Von Meier) was born in St. Petersburg, Russia, in 1889 to an old Russian family with German heritage in the upper-class strata of Russian society. Her grandfather’s godmother had been the tzarina (Russia’s empress), and the family was granted a vast estate in southern Russia. Her father was a general in the Imperial Army, and his family’s noble blood set them at the top of 19th-century Russia’s class structure.

Julia’s early life was defined by her family’s clout in Imperial Russia. As a young girl, Julia spent much of her time on her grandmother’s estate in the southern provinces that had been granted to her husband by the royal family. This estate was managed by her grandmother, Julia Von Meier (her namesake), after her grandfather had died at a young age. Julia remembers her grandmother’s own drastic change in life after the death of her husband, “from the ‘clinging-vine’ type of a wife” into the woman Julia knew

\*An excerpt from the first chapter of Julia Krenov’s unpublished memoir, written in the late 1930s, p. 2.



**Figure 1.2:** A young Julia clad in the luxurious clothes of her upper-class strata before leaving St. Petersburg for the far eastern reaches of Russia. *Photo courtesy of the Krenov family.*

**Figure 1.1:** (*opposite*) A page from the scrapbook of photos that Julia kept with her memoir, which begins with these first images of her and Dmitri’s honeymoon in the taiga. *Image courtesy of the Krenov family.*





**Figure 1.3:** The Smolny Institute for Noble Maidens, photographed at the end of the 19th century, around the time of Julia's enrollment.



**Figure 1.4:** The last class that graduated from the Smolny Institute in 1917. Just a few months after this photo was taken, the Bolsheviks took up residence at the Smolny Institute, and Vladimir Lenin even lived in a two-room flat in the building with his wife for a short time before their eventual move to Moscow at the establishment of the Soviet Union.

as a child, “an administratrix of her possessions [who] reigned supreme over her estate.”

This vision of old Russia, an old noblewoman inspecting the work of the peasants that worked the arable land of her estate under the wide brim of her veiled hat from a cabriolet drawn by her favorite chestnut horse, is one that encapsulated the facet of old-world Russia that young Julia lived in. After spending time on the estate and in the privileged circles of St. Petersburg in her early childhood, Julia was enrolled in a boarding school in St. Petersburg at her grandmother's insistence.

This school, the Smolny Institute for Noble Maidens, was established in 1764 in a decree by Catherine II, the empress of Russia. It was the first educational institute for women in Russia, though its entrants were required to have fathers or grandfathers listed in the “Book of Nobles” (an imperial Russian tome that noted the classes of distinguished individuals, usually based on military service or high-level civil service) and knowledge of French, Russian and a religious education.

With her traditional upbringing and military family, Julia was granted admission to the school, which was housed in a palatial building along the Neva River in central St. Petersburg. The education at the institute was long, lasting 12 years, though Julia entered in the third year, and so attended from ages 7 to 17. The curricula of the school concerned itself not only with culture, literature and history lessons but also a sort of “finishing school” education, in which the girls were instructed on all manner of ritual and etiquette.

“We came out of the school well-mannered, fluently speaking French and German, interested in arts, and absurdly helpless, not knowing how to cross the street,” Julia wrote in her memoir. “The ideal pattern was that of the Turgenev heroines – exquisitely frail and dainty in white muslin frocks, pure of mind, high spirited,

fastidious in taste.”

Her school years were marked by a rigorous schedule, with long days of study under the careful supervision of a governess who kept the girls in line. The girls were sponsored in their schooling by a wide swath of the gentry, counts, barons and so-called “guardians,” who both financially supported their studies and lavished the young women with gifts on holidays. In retrospect, Julia supposed that most of these men were courtiers, hoping to attract the young women after their studies were completed. Empress Dowager Maria Feodorovna also visited the school and presented gifts to the students, and oversaw the school's functions in a manner similar to how Julia's grandmother had surveyed the crops that grew on her estate.



After 10 years at the institute, Julia returned home to her parents. Her father, eager to introduce her to the world (not to show the world to Julia, as she noted in her memoir) took her on a trip to visit his brother in Warsaw, Poland, which was a part of the Russian Empire and its third-largest city. It was at her uncle's residence where she met Avenir Tchmerzine, whom she identified only as "T" in her memoir. This "dashing officer in the Corps of Engineers" was a friend of the family, and after a short courtship of a few months the two were married.

Tchmerzine was 12 years her senior and was rapidly ascending the upper class of the Empire. Their newlywed home was around the corner from the Winter Palace in St. Petersburg and they would soon move to what is now known as the "Palace Embankment," a row of palatial buildings along the Neva River in which the nobility and royalty kept homes. Julia was ignorant of her husband's business matters, as was "proper" for a woman of her status, but her husband kept a stable of successful racing horses and a number of business enterprises. His wealth and status were such that, in 1908, he imported the famous racehorse Cresceus from the United States, to improve the bloodline of his own horses. From what little Julia overheard or understood, there were gold mines, oil fields and other elaborate incomes that fueled their lavish lifestyle.

**Figure 1.5:** A colorized photograph from 1910, around the height of Avenir Tchmerzine's success, looking at the Palace Embankment from across the Neva River. Julia and Tchmerzine lived just out of the frame to the left, at 24 Palace Embankment – next door to the palace of the Grand Duke Vladimir Alexandrovich, brother of Emperor Alexander III and uncle of Emperor Nicholas II. Tchmerzine owned and ran what Julia supposes in her memoirs was St. Petersburg's first electric vehicle, in a time when (as illustrated above) the majority of transportation into the city was still by horse and sail.



But this lifestyle relegated Julia to her home or cultural events, and she was embarrassed by the extravagance of their privileged lives. This included luxuries like monogrammed silver from Hempel in Warsaw, Parisian crystal from Baccarat and imported carved figurines from China. As she saw it, “this conglomeration of expensive, extravagant things had no style, no coherence, displayed no personal taste, did not make a home.” While she took issue with the material life around her, perhaps more upsetting was her social life. Her husband dealt with the upper strata of the Russian empire, but made no social calls – as she recalls, he kept only business relationships. He preferred to “hold these prominent people in the palm of his hand.”

Over time, Julia became aware of a suspicious nature of her husband’s flow of wealth. She spent an increasing amount of time alone at home. For three consecutive winters she ventured to England to learn English and attend ballets, operas and other cultural events. But at home in St. Petersburg, she continued to feel “caught in a web.” Her life rarely intersected with that of her husband’s, though she remembers coming upon Count Witte, then prime minister, at the steps of their home on the Quay of the Palaces one afternoon.

Shortly thereafter, she overheard one of his clients accuse him of some “ethical inexactitude.” Tchemerzine fled to France, and Julia left their home, never to return. While the exact details of Tchemerzine’s business dealings have been lost to history, Julia passed on stories to her children and grandchildren that told of scams, criminal intrigue and even an alleged murder that she found out about years later. She mused in her memoirs that Tchemerzine “must have been attracted by my naiveté, bordering on obtuseness or innocence,” but she harbored no particular ill-will, blaming their poor pairing as much on her own ignorance as his desire to manipulate her and the nobility.

Julia’s life was reconfigured from that of a social exile back to that of a student. She returned to her parents, and enrolled once again in school, studying Russian literature and attending the concerts, plays and exhibits which had been her only solace in the years with Tchemerzine. While still with her husband she had been introduced to a law student three years her junior,

Dmitri Alexandrovich Krenov, whose family was also of the upper caste. Dmitri’s father, Alexander Sergeyeovich Khrenov, was an artist and architect of note, having designed a number of famous buildings in St. Petersburg.

Dmitri and Julia were reintroduced when she returned to school, where Dmitri was working at his degree in law. They found a kinship in their appreciation of the arts, and further shared a love of travel. Dmitri and Julia married after a year of courtship, and he introduced Julia to the Taiga of his childhood, far from the European environment of St. Petersburg and the southern provinces around which Julia had been raised. Many years later, Julia’s daughter-in-law Britta would remember that Dmitri’s family had Bashkir heritage, an ethnically Turkic group from the Ural Mountains, and the Krenovs’ family history included the raising of famous racehorses, which are mentioned by Leo Tolstoy in his short work “Kholstomeer, The Story of a Horse.”

**Figure 1.6:** A photo from Julia’s album of photographs from her and Dmitri’s travels, beginning with their first trip into the Taiga. Julia can be seen atop the left horse, with their “Old-Believer” guide Vassil in the middle and Dmitri’s horse on the right, with its rider behind the camera. *Photo courtesy of the Krenov family.*



Dmitri's family, while fully Russified and as upper-crust as Julia's, also had their roots in the wilds of Russia outside the cosmopolitan cities of the west.

"He thought we had had enough of Europe. Now he was going to show me his beloved North, the forest and groves of Novgorod," she wrote in her memoir. "He would teach me to love the outdoors."

This shift, from the more continental life of Imperial Russia to the wilds of the Urals and hunting parties would stir in Julia a passion for the wilds of Russia that would come to reroute the course of her life.

After their marriage, Dmitri wished to take Julia on a honeymoon to the "far corner of Siberia," a long journey that the two young nobles could afford to take, having no monetary worries. This trip to the Taiga may have been influenced by the situation arising in the Russian Empire at the time. In 1914, unrest and small outbursts of revolution were brewing in St. Petersburg, which led to the October revolution and the overthrow of the Tsarist government just a few years later.

This adventure in the Taiga would last several months, during which the young couple spent their time in the company of the traders, far-flung "old-believers" and indigenous peoples of Siberia. The two crossed the Ural mountains, eventually reaching the Angara river, which flows a thousand miles from Lake Baikal on the border of Mongolia to the Yenisei river, which in turn runs north to the Arctic Ocean. On the Angara River, the couple were ferried north to the Taiga and to their eventual destination, a small trading post on the Podkamennaya Tunguska River. Julia learned to hunt and shoot, taught by Dmitri and the array of characters they met on their travels.

They had traveled so far in part to see the "Tungus," the old Russian name for the Evenk people indigenous to Russian Siberia. They had been lured by the descriptions of these people in texts at the University in St. Petersburg, which described them as "the French of the Taiga," because of their refined cultural practices. The couple did meet these people, while hosted by a group of Russian traders, who resented the burden of the innocent tourists but tolerated their presence for the significant sum paid to them for room and board. Julia was enraptured with her first encounters with indigenous peoples; in her memoir, she recalled their bewildered belief in the supernatural with awe. These first experiences with the native peoples engendered a fascination with indigenous culture.

After their journey into the wild, the couple returned downriver to Boguchany, a small outpost on the banks of the Angara River. They spent another length of time in the town, entertained in the company of the pioneers and hunters of the remote people of the Taiga. But one morning, just

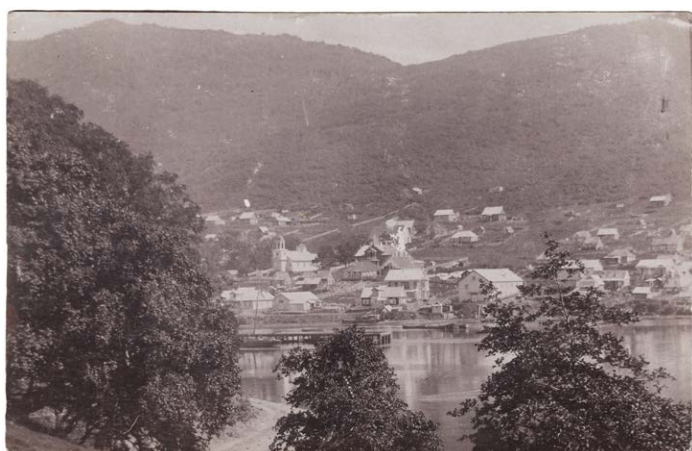


*Tungus + myself*

**Figure 1.7:** Julia on the banks of the Angara river, meeting a group of "Tungus," the Evenk indigenous people of Siberia. The surrounding bank is loaded with bundles of furs presumably brought to the river to trade, and in the background a small herd of reindeer can be seen, which the Evenks bred and domesticated for their milk and use as pack animals. *Photo courtesy of the Krenov family.*



**Figure 1.8:** A group of Evenk traders in a photograph Julia took during her trip through Siberia with Dmitri. Julia's fascination with the indigenous people of Russia, sparked by these first ventures into Siberia, would shape her and Dmitri's story. *Photo courtesy of the Krenov family.*



**Figure 1.9:** Julia's photo of Petropavlovsk in the summer of 1917. The Krenovs were stranded through the coming winter in the city, which became an inflection point in their trajectory. Petropavlovsk's headmaster, who employed Julia in teaching English through the winter, mentioned a post in the far northeastern Chukotsky District that Julia took in 1918. *Photo courtesy of the Krenov family.*

before the onset of winter, an unwelcome message was brought upriver. The young couple, who were supposed by the villagers to be officials of some kind, were notified that war had broken out. World War I had come to Russia, and the Krenovs were swiftly brought down the Yenisei River to Krasnoyarsk, where they boarded a train back to St. Petersburg.

Julia returned to find that her youngest brother had been killed in the fighting on the Northern front near the Baltic states, and persuaded her mother to take her to see her eldest brother, who was fighting in Austria. After their short visit, during which Julia recalled only the carcasses of horses and burnt-out villages, they returned home to be followed by the news that this brother, too, had been killed by a sniper.

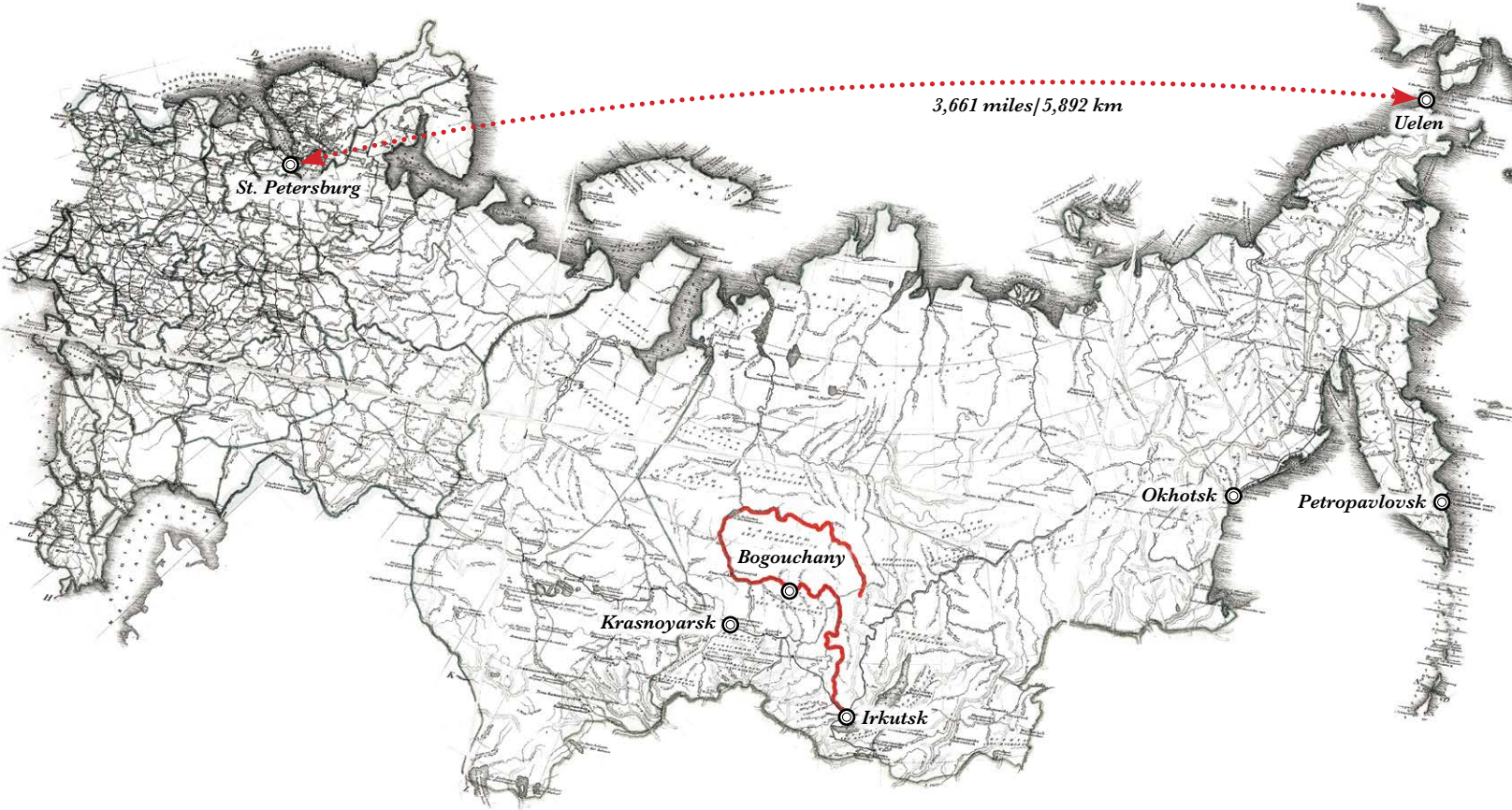
Dmitri enlisted in the fighting, but soon thereafter his brother was also killed and his mother, in another sign of their privileged status in Russia, insisted on her son's safe return home. It was arranged that winter for him to take a job consulting with a gold mine in Okhotsk in the far East, as a part of the war effort, on the other end of Russia. His aunt, the wife of a cabinet minister, arranged the post, and Julia was due to join him the following spring. She would leave her parents to move, and with a widespread strike in the trenches at the front of the war, her timing in escaping St. Petersburg may have saved her life from the onslaught of revolution that would soon follow. This was the last time she would be in the company of her parents. Julia would not return to St. Petersburg until much later in life, after the death of Stalin a half-century later; by then, it would no longer resemble the Russia of her childhood.

Her trip across the country to join her husband, first by train then followed by a sled driven by reindeer and dogs, was a trying journey. Upon her arrival in Vladivostok, her purse was stolen; this was the first harbinger of the slow descent to exile and obscurity she and her husband would face, driven by the tidal shift taking place for those who came from privileged nobility in Russia. Julia continued on her adventure, still supported from home by her mother. In Vladivostok, she boarded a merchant steamer and took time to explore Tokyo before meeting her husband in Okhotsk.

She arrived in Okhotsk to find that Dmitri had not gotten along with the mine owner, and he was no longer in his employ. After a brief stay on the "gray bare and dreary spit of land with no trees" that was Okhotsk they returned to the city of Petropavlovsk on the same boat that had delivered her a few days earlier. In Petropavlovsk, a city on the eastern coast of the Kamchatka Peninsula, they were put up in the governor's residence as guests from St. Petersburg, and soon thereafter found their own little house, with "two rooms, a kitchenette and a Chinese boy ... to do the housework and the cooking." Julia offered to teach English at the school without pay, and was smitten with caring for the young boy and the schoolchildren of Petropavlovsk.

The couple received telegrams from their parents warning them not to return home. The uprisings had begun in earnest, and the mass emigration





of their parents and those nobles spared in the ensuing outbreak had begun. The couple were marooned in Petropavlovsk over the winter along with a number of other white Russian émigrés who had fled the unrest in the west.

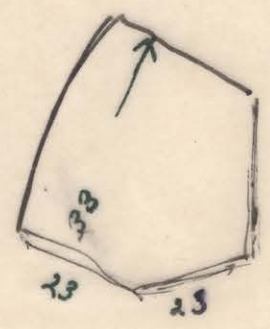
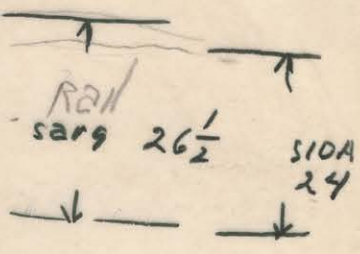
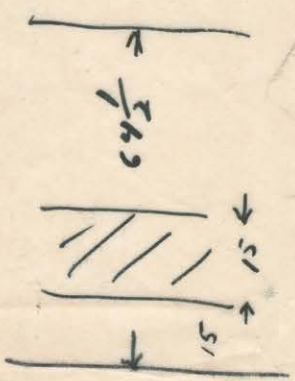
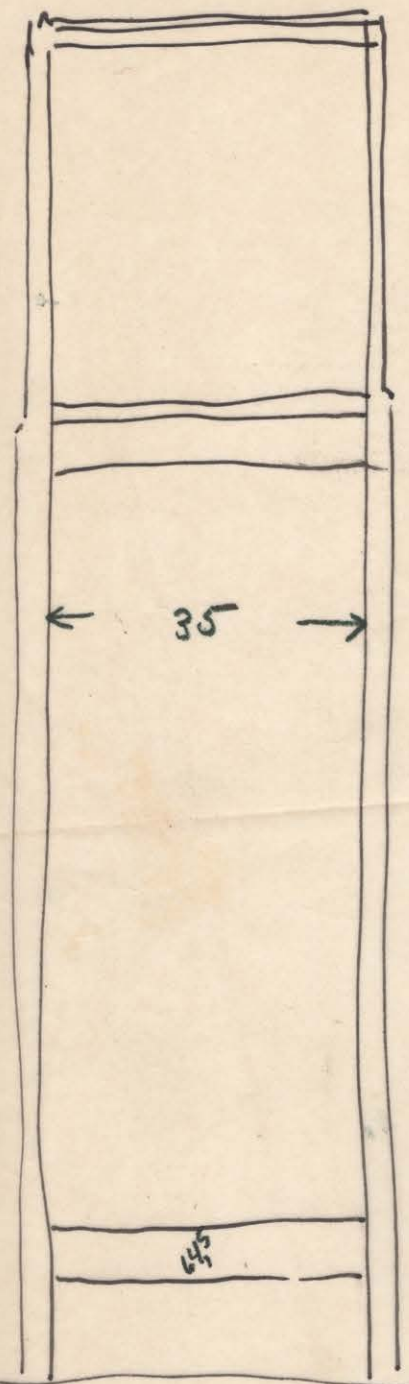
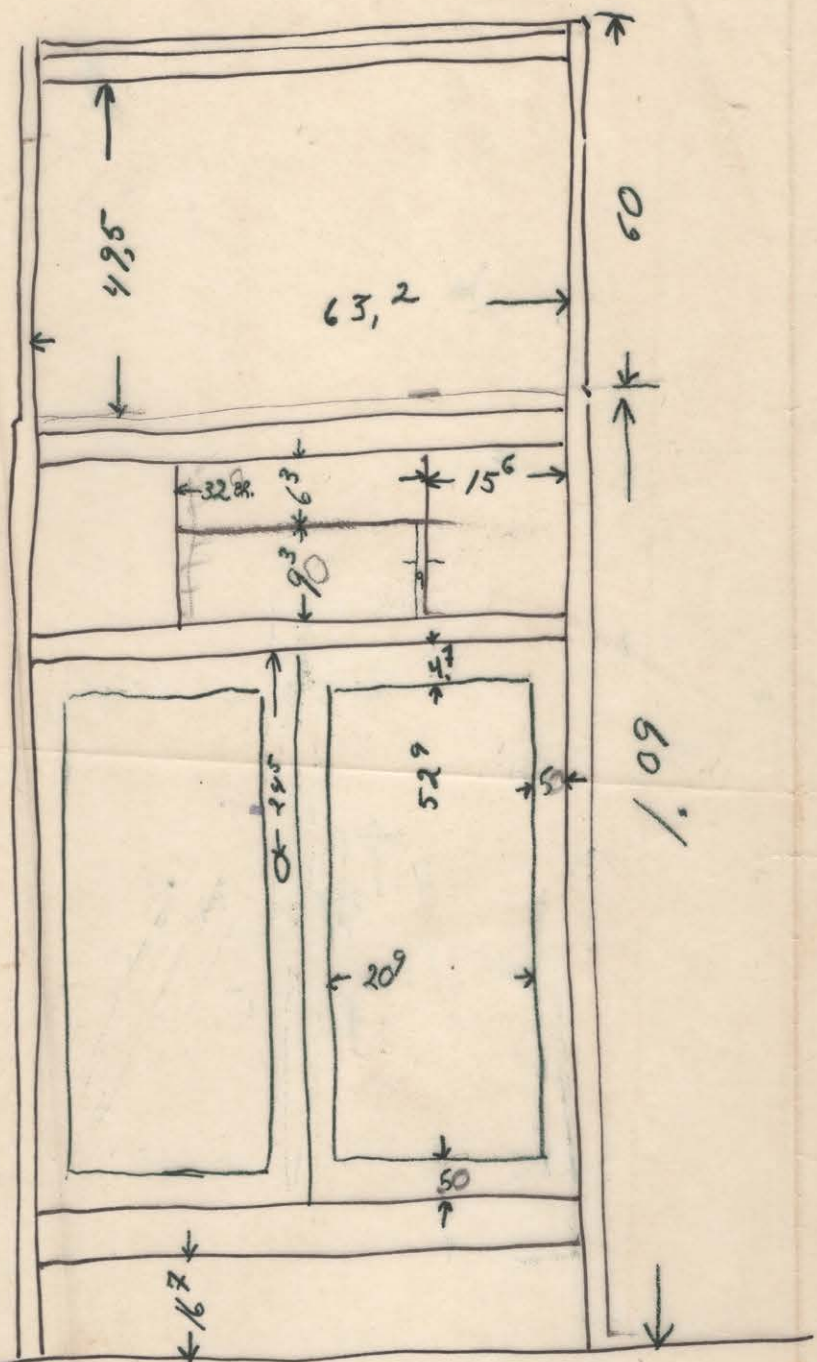
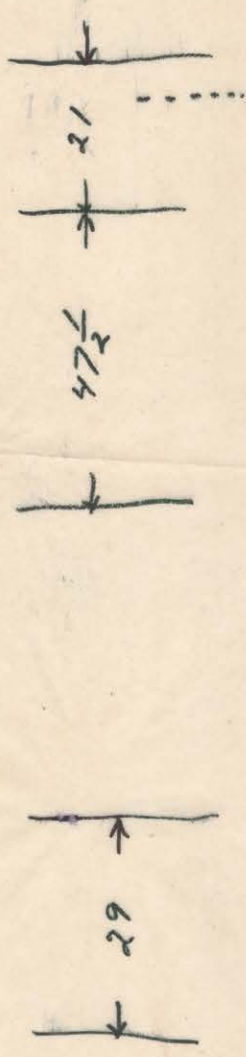
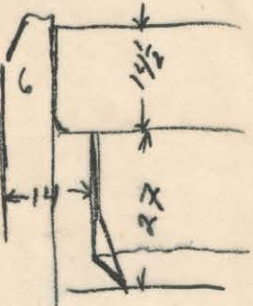
In the spring of 1918, Dmitri planned to sail on the first boat to Irkutsk, a city a thousand miles west on Lake Baikal just north of the Mongolian border, where he could resume his law studies at the university. But as fate would have it, the local headmaster of Petropavlovsk confessed during a visit with Julia that he was having trouble finding a teacher who might be able to take a post at the far reaches of the northeastern Arctic coast, where a small trading post had been established to facilitate trade with Alaska and the other countries along the northern Pacific.

Julia volunteered for the job. Her response provoked laughter from the headmaster, who took it for a joke – and a shocked silence from Dmitri, who understood the intention and purpose of her words. Julia had been captured by her fascination with the Evenk people, and the chance to live among an indigenous population, however isolated, was an allure she could not resist.

That spring, Dmitri ventured west for Irkutsk while Julia made ready for her adventure to the Arctic. She was to be the first Russian teacher at the first Russian school on the Arctic Coast. Her pupils would be the Chukchi children of Uelen, 1,000 miles northeast of Petropavlovsk on the edge of the Asian continent. Julia had taken the reins of her journey, and the couple's trajectory would now follow her own love of the wild and native peoples of the arctic. After a year in Uelen alone, her husband would follow, and they would stay until the spring of 1921 – just a few months after the birth of their first and only child, Dmitri Dmitrievich Krenov.

**Figure 1.10:** A map showing the vast travels of Julia and Dmitri in their first years of their marriage. On their honeymoon, they traveled in central Siberia and took a canoe trip on the Angara, Yenisei and Podkamennaya Tunguska (the solid red line). After a brief return home at the onset of World War I, Dmitri was sent to work in Okhotsk. Eventually the couple met and spent a winter in Petropavlovsk. But, in the spring of 1918, Julia went to Uelen in the distant northeast, 3,661 miles from St. Petersburg as the crows flies – almost exactly the distance between Washington, D.C., and London.





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## Chapter 10

# Working Away in the Basement

*But here's a person who sort of summarizes the attraction of doing something that has an elusive element in it. Over the years he methodically discovered many of the secrets. He found, despite practical skill, knowledge of techniques or familiarity with materials that chance, sheer chance, could still play a feckless part in the quality of the finished instrument. One could make judgments from experience, he always had, and it seemed at every stage there were intangible factors that could affect the final outcome. And the haunting uncertainty was that you did not know for sure where or when or even if they occurred.\**

After Krenov's graduation from the Verkstadsskolan, the Krenov family's life settled into a ritual that would remain largely undisturbed for the next two decades. The small home, at Anundsvägen 43 in the Norra Ängby district of Bromma, was modest but large enough for the family of four. The family routine, related by Katya years later, paints a portrait starkly contrasting the irregular and unsettled years prior to the family's move to their new home.

Every morning at 6:15 the family's cat, Kiri (named for the opera singer Kiri Te Kanawa) would wake Krenov. He prepared breakfast for the family, before Britta had to be up and out of the house early on her way to her job at the St. Jacobi Gymnasium, where she worked from 1960 to 1979, just two stops away on the train or a 20-minute walk from their home. After getting the kids their breakfast, often hot chocolate and toast or porridge, and sending them to school, he descended to the basement for the rest of the day, only returning upstairs when Britta arrived home from work, when the two would take an afternoon nap before Britta made dinner. After dinner, Krenov would return to the basement for the evening.

This routine was interrupted on Friday evenings when the family watched cartoons and ate popcorn made in a broken pressure cooker that Krenov had been given by his mother, who had disabled the seal out of concern for its proclivity to explode. These Friday gatherings were the Krenovs' "Fredagsmys," a Swedish tradition that encourages time on Friday evenings with close friends and family doing cozy or quiet activities around the house. On Saturday evenings, Krenov and Britta would prepare some finer food, like avocado or shrimp, open champagne and listen to classical music. Tina recalled that this was sacred "parent time," not to be interrupted.

This Rockwellian vignette of suburban life outside Stockholm paints a quaint scene, in contrast to Krenov's childhood, which had been plagued by instability, domestic strife and transplantation. Stability was what Krenov had promised to Britta seven years prior, in the letter written after Katya's birth. Britta's recertification and her steady employment made it possible.

\*An excerpt from Krenov's lecture at Preston Hall, Mendocino, Calif., Sept. 8, 2001.



**Figure 10.2:** An early photo of Krenov's workshop, showing his bench space in the basement and piles of wood being shuffled around for consideration in an upcoming piece and to check on their dryness. *Photo courtesy of the Krenov family.*

**Figure 10.1:** (*opposite*) Krenov's drawing of the "No-Glass Showcase of Lemon Wood," made after its construction for his own records and reference. *Photo courtesy of the Krenov family.*





**Figure 10.3:** Krenov and his daughter Tina on her first fishing trip in Härjedalen in 1964. *Photo courtesy of the Krenov family.*

**Figure 10.4:** One of the Krenovs' cats, either Raya or Kiri, sitting on one of Krenov's projects in the basement. *Photo courtesy of the Krenov family.*



Krenov's new career had dulled his proclivity for long stints away from home, and instead his energy was focused on his woodwork. The family still made summer trips to Härjedalen, where Krenov and Britta shared the natural beauty of the landscape with their children, perhaps hoping to instill the same wonderment and awe they had found in their earliest trips.

This quiet home life was not without difficulties, many of which were born out of Krenov sharing the house with his cabinetmaking practice, and the strong reactions he had to disturbances or bad days. Katya remembered that she could not have her classmates over, as her father couldn't handle the noise or mess around the house while he was working below. Days where their father was doing important work in the basement, like glue-ups or hosting potential customers, were also to be minded carefully. His daughters recalled tiptoeing when an assembly was in process, and the mood of the house might depend on that glue-up going well. Tina even remembers making a call to the phone line in the basement dedicated to Krenov's business, pretending to be an older woman interested in one of his cabinets – she wanted to cheer him up, hoping to encourage her father's craft pursuit.

Another memory from Tina details the toll that her father's pursuit of his practice in the basement took on Krenov. When she was growing up, she recalls that her father frequently had severe migraines that came when he was working to finish certain pieces, which she remembers may have been

stress-induced. She also notes that her father frequently referred to “let-downs,” the depressive lull he went through after he’d finished a piece. Krenov’s newfound dedication consumed not only his attention and passion but even, at times, affected his well-being.

Krenov was a hard father and husband as Tina remembers, and he was sensitive about the children interrupting Britta’s personal time and the house’s order and tidiness. Krenov employed a housekeeper who came every other week and he would employ the kids to clean the house carefully before her visits. As Tina recalls, their cleaning sprees stemmed both from Krenov’s desire for the family to appear proper and composed in the eyes of their visitor, and from a guilt or embarrassment that the family employed a housekeeper, an uncomfortable status symbol that clashed with his idealism about the working class and his place in society.

In addition to settling in at home, the family was also settling into a small community of craftspeople and artists in Stockholm. Vidar Malmsten, Carl Malmsten’s son, had met Krenov at his father’s school, and the two became close friends until Vidar’s premature death in 1969. Krenov’s daughters remember visiting with Vidar and his family for holidays, and their family became one of just a few close friends and associates. Vidar’s own home life was fraught, but his work was successful in the Swedish market; in later years, it would feature prominently in his father’s catalogs and exhibitions. Krenov mentioned years later in a short autobiographical passage that he and Vidar had collaborated on a number of commissions, though there are no notes or directives as to what these pieces were. Vidar did, on occasion, come to work with Krenov in his basement workshop.

“He came on his bicycle, with the chair nearly finished, he had not yet decided on the back piece,” Krenov recalled about one chair design that Vidar completed in his basement. “He turned my shop into a disaster area. He would keep sawing blanks for the back piece. And he would put one in and he would draw on his pipe. He had a low voice and a calm way, he’d look back at that back piece and say ‘Ya, well, maybe, what would happen if we turn it upside down?’ and we’d turn it upside down and now that wouldn’t work. And then he’d saw another one and the clock was going around and around. It was one o’clock and two o’clock and finally he put a piece in there. He looked at it and then he went over to the band saw and he took a little bit here and a little bit there and he put it in there and



**Figure 10.5:** Vidar Malmsten and one of his children, in a photo taken by Krenov sometime in the mid-1960s. Britta remembered Vidar and his family as one of the Krenovs’ closest friends, and his daughters recall visiting them during holidays and special occasions. *Photo courtesy of the Krenov family.*

**Figure 10.6:** An example of one of Vidar’s chairs, made by Dylan Green, a student at the Krenov School in 2018. The chair has become a mainstay in several schools that teach woodworking under Krenov’s influence, and the Krenovs themselves used them as dining chairs for decades. *Photo by Todd Sorenson.*







**Figure 10.7:** An example of Einar Telander’s silver pieces, a sterling pitcher made in 1975. Einar went on to commission several pieces from Krenov, including a kitchen cabinet to store many of his own silver pieces, which the Telanders used at home. Einar and Kajsa were close friends and helped support Krenov’s cabinetmaking practice as customers and owners of Telander’s gallery in Stockholm. *Photo courtesy of Bukowskis Auctions.*

**Figure 10.8:** An early sliding door cabinet, pictured in the news story on the opposite page. This cabinet betrays Krenov’s roots in Malmsten’s interpretations of Swedish country furniture, with a plate rack above, simple joinery and understated composition. *Photo courtesy of Jacksons.se, Stockholm.*



he backed off and he said ‘Ya, well maybe it’s better that way.’ And that was the back piece for the chair, the way it is now and forever. And it is not to my credit but the only thing that I cherish is the memory because he did not live after that.”

This chair design, which Krenov would later bring to his students in America, would come to be known as “Vidar’s Chair,” and the Krenovs themselves had a set in their dining room many years later.

Another friend of Krenov’s at the time was Kinau (last name unknown), an eccentric younger Swede who came to visit the family on occasion. Kinau’s father was a painter, and Kinau himself became a sculptor and artist, as Krenov’s daughter Tina recalls; Tina also remembers his eccentricity in keeping an owl as a pet. One of his sculptures, a small geometric Plexiglas piece, hung over Krenov’s bed for several decades. But the artist’s eccentric lifestyle led to a blowout with Krenov; Kinau developed an ether addiction, and after an unpleasant experience between the two, Krenov cut ties with Kinau, though he treasured his small artworks and displayed them in his home for many years. It was not the only friendship that would end precipitously; Krenov’s quick temper would lead to a difficulty in maintaining friendships for the family, as perceived slights or disagreements were difficult to mend or forgive.

The Krenovs also became friendly with Einar and Kajsa Telander, a Stockholm couple they met when Einar’s crafts were shown alongside Krenov’s in an early show in Stockholm. Einar was an important civil engineer for a large shipping company, as well as a certified silversmith whose work can still be found in collections today. Kajsa was an author and journalist who worked throughout the latter half of the 20th century as a translator and writer. The Telanders also co-owned a gallery of handcrafted goods called Galleri Telander, in the Gamla Stan neighborhood of Stockholm. They worked throughout the 1970s as important curators of fine Swedish crafts alongside their partner in the gallery, Märta Österdahl (herself a fiber artist and important curator of handcrafts), and even hosted one of Krenov’s solo exhibitions in 1973. It was the Telanders who gave Krenov a tape recorder for his 50th birthday in 1970, a tool that became important to his writing later in life, as evidenced by his insistence that his writing could be described as “the spoken word” put down in text.

Krenov’s ability to focus, almost singularly, on his craft in his first years outside the school would garner attention, and he won some early successes. In November





Jim  
önskas

En lyckosamt 1960  
en lys och gla' Helg

Tilgivne  
Carl

**Figure 10.10:** The inscription Carl Malmsten wrote inside a copy of “Hav Och Människor” (“Sea and Humans”) that he gave Krenov in 1960. Translated to English, it reads, “Wishing Jim a successful 1960 and a bright and happy holiday. Affectionately, Carl.” *Image courtesy of the Krenov family.*

**Figure 10.11:** Another early Krenov wall shelf made in pear wood, undated and undocumented in Krenov’s records but bearing his carved “JK” signature. The cabinet first came to light in a 2013 auction, and was recorded with a date of construction in the late 1950s, which, if accurate, makes it one of his earliest known pieces. *Photo courtesy of Uppsala Auktionskammare, Sweden.*



That Krenov already had a mature aesthetic, just a year out of school, showcases his innate talent in the medium and the results yielded by his passion. We can see from publicity and Krenov’s own documentation that he produced a large body of work in a short time, with results that seem to be in keeping with the quality and careful construction that he would become famous for. These earliest works also show his aesthetic base, that of the Swedish and Danish modern movements occurring at the time and Malmsten’s unique blend of Swedish and English roots. When prompted for his influences by Oscar Fitzgerald in 2004, he would yield a little to these foundations. “I wasn’t influenced by anything except maybe Malmsten to a certain extent, with gentle lines and soft edges and so on.”

In spite of how he would minimize the old master’s influence in his later interviews (and tease Malmsten’s personality), Krenov and Malmsten had a relationship after Krenov’s attendance at the Verkstadsskolan. One anecdote Krenov later told his colleagues was that he had served as a translator between Malmsten and the Elliot family, who owned the farm that became Malmsten’s second school, Capellagården. Malmsten called on Krenov for his help when the sale was made in 1958, and Britta remembered many years later that her husband spent a significant amount of time at Capellagården in the first year after Krenov graduated from Malmsten’s school.

Another snapshot of the relationship between the two cabinetmakers is found in a book that Malmsten gave Krenov in 1960. This book, “Hav Och Människor” (“Sea and Humans”), is a collection of Swedish stories about sailing and the sea written by Roland Svensson, a famed Swedish painter and writer. The book’s subject illustrates Malmsten’s familiarity with Krenov’s fascination with all things naval, but more telling of their relationship is the inscription (translated): “Wishing Jim a successful 1960 and a bright and happy holiday. Affectionately, Carl.”

Tina Krenov, who found this book among her father’s possessions, notes that Malmsten chose to use a familial choice of words in this inscription, not the formal words one might use with a student, employee or associate. Malmsten uses the word gla’ instead of glad (Swedish for happy), a choice one would make when addressing a close friend or family member. This choice of caring words and the book’s subject, one dear to Krenov, indicates a level of mutual respect and familiarity. Looking at Krenov’s furniture from the time, like the pear wall shelf at left, it’s clear that his time in the school and his relationship with Malmsten’s legacy and body of work had a deep impact on the first pieces that emerged from the basement workshop.

There are relatively few pieces of furniture that Krenov shared from this early time in his basement workshop. The time between his graduation from school and his first solo exhibition in 1965 was a prolific time, judging from the few surviving photos of that exhibition and his own notes. But among the scant seven pieces made before 1965 that have confirmed dates and photography in his later publications, there are more than a few attributes and details that would remain constant in Krenov’s work for decades.

There are a few pieces that stand out from this period as indications of the cabinetmaker’s early development of both his handwork and his aesthetic. The first, what he would come to call a “Silver Chest,” was a box

of drawers sitting atop a stand, which he first built in 1961. From perhaps the most reductive point of view, the piece represents Krenov's first construction of carcass work supported by a stick-framed stand. Later in his career, he would be known most as a maker of "cabinets on a stand," and this first iteration shows that this form was an early pursuit, and one that must have grown in his interest.

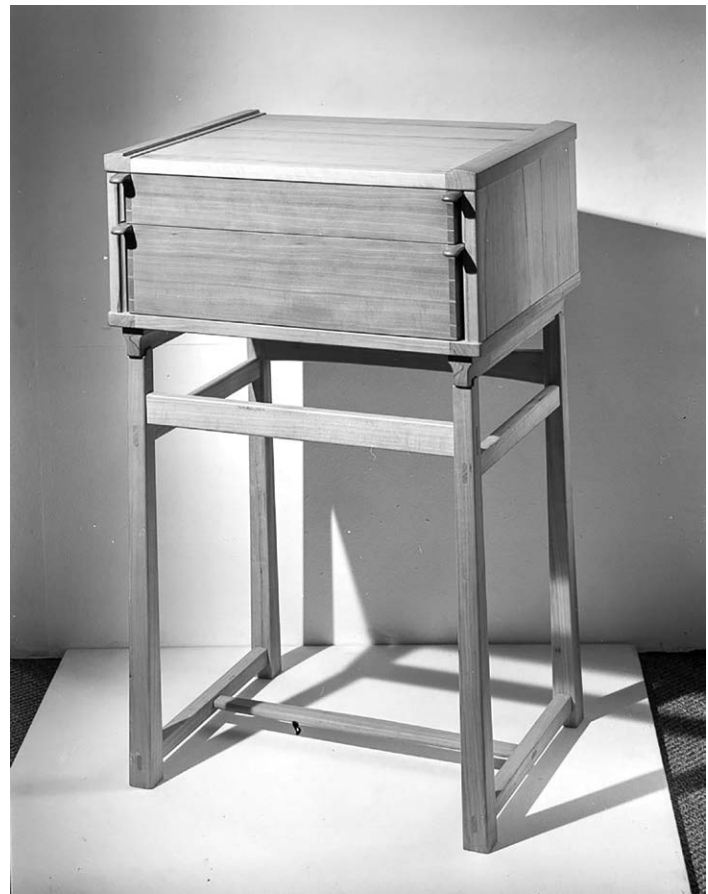
In its more subtle shaping, the piece reveals the cabinetmaker's influence from Malmsten's body of work. The legs, which widen in a flared curve toward the floor, are reminiscent of the legs on Malmsten's Stadshusstolen (City Hall Chair), as are the staggered rails between the legs. In later iterations, these curved members would evolve, and feature even more tension and interplay in their curves. In this first stand, the incorporation of these curves give the piece a subtly non-rectilinear stance, something that was more in the camp of Malmsten and away from the Danish modern sensibilities, informed as they were by a need to accommodate mass production into their designs. The exposed joinery also shows the influence of the English Arts & Crafts movement and betrays that the piece was made in a more bespoke or "honest" manner, choosing to display the sturdy joinery that holds it together.

The chest's design also served another purpose – it provided large uninterrupted show surfaces to showcase fine woods. It was also more technically challenging than its relatively simple form implies – the carved pulls are integrally dovetailed into the drawers and function as the drawer runners, a complicated dual purpose that highlights Krenov's technical abilities even as early as the first years of his career outside of the school.

"People have come to me through the years and wanted me to make one for them, and usually I say, 'Perhaps in the autumn after summer vacation, when I feel relaxed and able, I might just try it,'" Krenov wrote years later about making the chests. "If I have some very special wood I haven't used in it before, and I know I want to try one again."

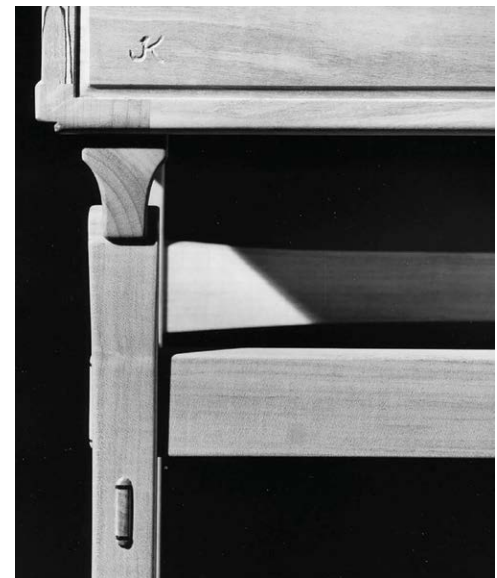
This chest, as he describes it, was a form he returned to not simply by request, but with all of the right conditions in place – this would be a recurring theme in Krenov's output, where a certain plank of wood or a reflection or attitude would have him return to a previous piece with a new idea or inspiration. According to his writing, he rarely returned to a form for the sake of a commission.

He would remake and redesign the chests a number of times during his career, but perhaps most interestingly, in its earliest incarnations the chest's stated purpose alternated between being a "syschatull" (sewing chest) and only later was described as a "silverschatull" (silver chest). Marita Lindgren-Fridell, a writer for the Swedish design magazine *Form*, wrote in 1965 that "it could be an ingenious and utilitarian sewing table or a box for silver



**Figure 10.12:** Krenov's first "Silver Chest," made in 1961. The stand and carcass are chestnut, the drawers are pearwood. *Photo by Bengt Carlén.*

**Figure 10.13:** The back of Krenov's 1961 "Silver Chest," showing his carved signature, through-mortised stand and pillowed edges. *Photo by Bengt Carlén.*





**Figure 10.14:** The “No-Glass Showcase of Lemon Wood,” made in 1962. The stand is made from doussié (*Afzelia spp.*) and the panels are from lemon wood (*Calycophyllum candidissimum*). Photo by Bengt Carlén.

on a well proportioned stand,” the first mention of the piece as a silver chest, not a sewing chest. Krenov later noted that this first iteration was built to store silverware. These competing intentions may indicate that Krenov was grappling with his furniture’s place in the context of Swedish society, whether his work should be within reach of a wider, less-moneyed public, or reserved for the people who owned fine silver. This question continued to come up in his career, and he would begin addressing it in his writing practice just a few years later.

Another piece that stands out in Krenov’s earliest work is the “No-Glass Showcase of Lemon Wood,” which he completed in 1962. This was a central piece in his first solo exhibition in 1965, and in at least the first decade of his work, it stands out as perhaps the largest and maybe most technically challenging construction. The piece is a large cabinet, with its top third unenclosed by wood or glass, instead fashioned as a roofed negative space in which one could display some sculpture, heirloom or relic – “a little theater or stage for little things,” as Krenov wrote. The lower cabinet is divided in two, with the larger bottom partition of the cabinet enclosed by two large doors, with movable shelves inside. The top third has two centered drawers, which take up about half of the available pocket. In the empty but enclosed space on either side of the drawers, Krenov built two small removable panels in the back of the cabinet. The surfaces, drawer fronts and panels of the piece are lemon wood, a tropical wood from Latin America (*Calycophyllum candidissimum*), and the frame and structural members are doussié, a common name for woods in the *Afzelia* genus from Africa and Southeast Asia. Both of these woods figured largely in Krenov’s oeuvre; the same purchased batch of lemon wood was used across a number of his early pieces. Doussié would continue to be featured in his pieces throughout his career, and he was the first to

bring the species to the attention of many of his contemporaries.

By his own later estimations, this piece, both in its technicality and size, was a product of his being “younger then, optimistic, and with a surplus of energy.” He later mentioned that most of his work was generally small in scale – most standing cabinets he made were around 5' or 5' 6" tall, below his own eye level. He noted the preciousness of wood, the smaller size of his workshop and his affinity for small details as causes for the relative smallness of his work. This early piece is an exception, and may have informed his decision to generally work at smaller scales, as it is substantially larger and more involved than any other work that would follow it for a few years.

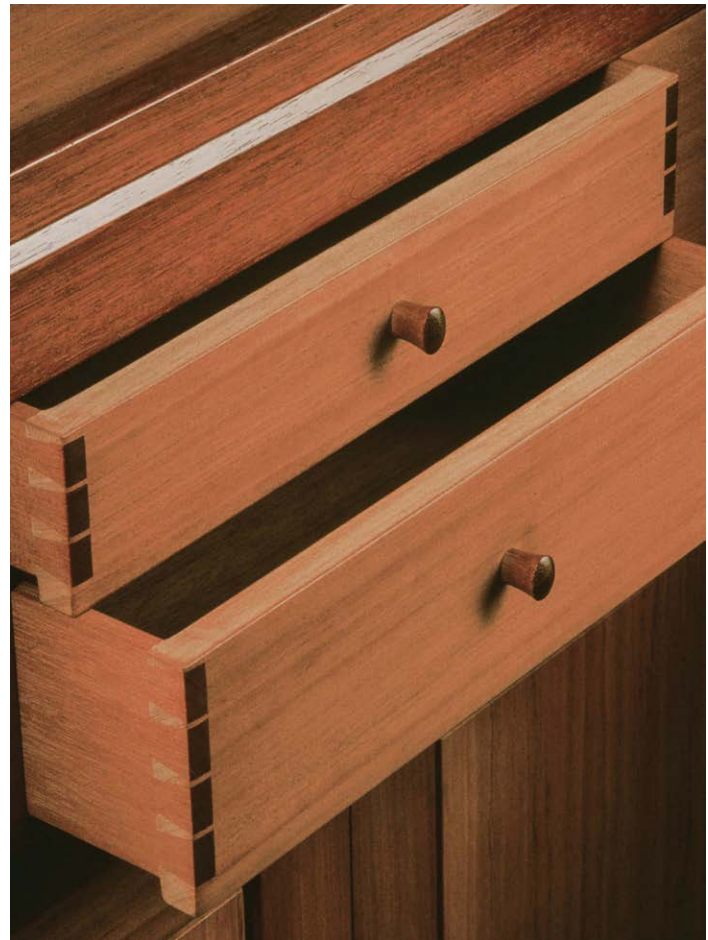
The piece represents Krenov’s first attempt of a standalone cabinet form – the “skåp,” or cupboard, a mainstay of Malmsten’s body of furniture. Large standalone cabinets and storage furniture were common as center-



pieces in the homes of Sweden, having been central in the homes of the peasantry of central and northern Sweden. Where Malmsten often used the pieces as large canvasses for elaborate marquetry or painted decoration, Krenov adapted these much larger-scale pieces to a more modest size, and later narrowed his work almost exclusively to the legged cabinets he referred to as “cabinets on a stand.” This first large “skåp” more closely resembles a traditional Swedish cupboard than the later cabinets, with storage in the base and the display area above, though the omission of glass or encasement in the upper space is unusual. It isn’t clear what inspired this initial tweak to the showcase cabinet form, but Krenov would continue to consider the various possibilities for showcasing objects in cabinets. He would later build all manner of glass-enclosed spaces with curved glass doors, glass shelves hung by chain and a number of variations on the possibilities of displaying fine objects.

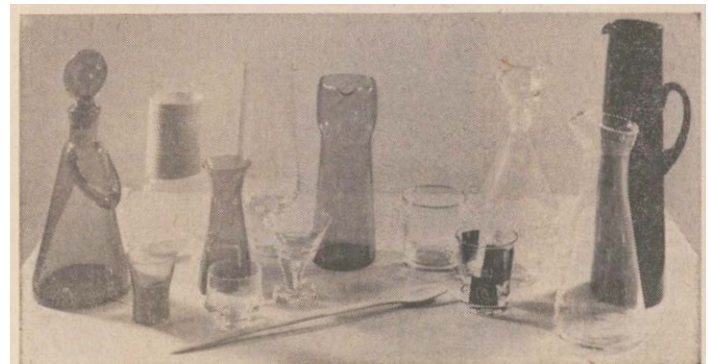
His earliest commissions were mostly display cabinets, many mounted on the wall. This niche, higher-end showcase cabinets for fine small craft items and treasured objects, was likely a market that he could reach through the small exhibitions and galleries his work made it into. His affinity for toying with the possibility of the display of fine things also grew out of his appreciation for the work of other talented craftspeople. Years later, he would relate his love of the work of craftspeople like Bernard Leach, the English potter, Eva Zeisel, the Hungarian born ceramicist and designer, and masters in other disciplines as much or more than he discussed his contemporaries or influences in woodworking.

While Krenov’s work did not make big waves among a wider public in these first years in the basement, he set the stage for a rapid expansion of his name, approach and aesthetics. While he showed his work in a few small group exhibitions before 1964, it seems his focus was to produce work and develop his craft – which would not go unnoticed for long. In 1964, Krenov had the opportunity to show his work in the largest and perhaps most influential design exhibition of Stockholm in the 1960s, an opportunity that would expose his work to a large Swedish audience. This show began an interaction between Krenov and the Swedish public that would color and inform his place in that country’s culture. This interaction, which fueled his writing and output of furniture, would propel him through the next several stages of his career, and began to build his desire for an opportunity that would allow his approach to expand beyond his basement workshop.



**Figure 10.15:** A detail from the “No-Glass Showcase of Lemon Wood” showing the through-dovetailed drawers and carefully carved pulls, both details that would come to be signature touches in Krenov’s work. *Photo by Bengt Carlén.*

**Figure 10.16:** An image in *Svenska Dagbladet* in June 1963 notes that the martini spoon in an exhibition of glassware was made by “James Krenow,” a misspelling that may indicate Krenov’s relative obscurity at the time.



Karaff för sherry med glas av Erik Höglund, Boda, rottingvirad blandare av Kai Franck, Notsjö, grön blandare signerad Kjell Blomberg, Gullaskruf, och en portionskaraff som passar både till juice och cocktail i grönt glas av Tom Möller, Rejmyre. Det låga glaset kommer från Litta-la, Finland och det större glaset på fot från Kosta. I gruppen t. h. ett lågt glas med guldkant formgivet av Josef Frank och ett glas med myntbilder på guldgrund från USA. Karaffen med propp i form av katthuvud kan användas för sherry och både den ofärgade blandaren och den röda tillbringaren till både cocktail och juice. Sked i entré för dry martini av James Krenow.