

Interviewee: CONRAD SCHMITT  
Interviewer: MARY EMMA HARRIS  
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**[BEGINNING OF SIDE 1, TAPE 1 ]**

**MEH:** [GIVES IDENTIFICATION]. Conrad, how did you come to be at Black Mountain?

**CS:** My sister, Elizabeth Jennerjahn, was very sold on Black Mountain. She'd been down there, and so she sold me, and she sold my parents and the whole family on Black Mountain.

**MEH:** Of the four Schmitts that went, Betty went first.

**CS:** Right.

**MEH:** And then – Did you go before Elaine?

**CS:** Yes, then I went down for a short period. I dropped out of high school to go down.

**MEH:** And your parents let you do that?

**CS:** Yes, because I thought I was going to be drafted, and so they thought it'd be a good idea if I got a little bit of college in before I got drafted, and so I dropped out of my senior year in high school and went down there. As a matter of fact, I had been going to a Jesuit school. The Jesuits – I had enough credits to get a diploma, but the Jesuits felt that because Black Mountain was considered a "Communist school" at the time, that they wouldn't give me a high school diploma. So, I just left anyway and went down.

**MEH:** How did your parents react? I mean the Jesuits thought this was a Communist school. They weren't at all concerned about having their four children go down to this subversive place?

**CS:** Well, they didn't really believe it was that subversive. They believed it was a good art college. The family was in that business and so they –

**MEH:** When you say the family was in “that business” –

**CS:** They made stained glass windows and decorated churches.

**MEH:** So, had you all worked in the stained-glass business with your parents?

**CS:** Yes, I had worked since I had been fourteen, so I had worked after school and on Saturdays.

**MEH:** This was in Milwaukee?

**CS:** Yes.

**MEH:** So, you went really with a high school – Black Mountain accepted you without a high school diploma?

**CS:** Yes.

**MEH:** How did you find – coming, really as a kid, into this community – how was it?

**CS:** Well, it was very exciting. The freedom was exciting for me. The fact that I could select my classes and so forth. But it was really way above me. Philosophically and intellectually it was way above me.

**MEH:** Did you find that you could essentially find your own level at Black Mountain? Or did you just feel lost? Did you find yourself rising to meet the –

**CS:** Oh, I think I was in more of an adolescent never-never land. It's just like I – One of the first classes I took was the Psychodynamics of Creativity by a very esoteric

philosophical genius from Harvard. Why, I mean it was so far above me I had no idea what they were talking about. But I sat through the classes and enjoyed it. I think I got really most of what I got was out of the interaction with the faculty and the other students.

**MEH:** Expand on that. What do you think you really got out of the interaction, and what type of interaction?

**CS:** Well, I think— I think I was for the first time exposed to concepts – well, concepts like atheism. The hereafter and – I'll never forget. I was – During the Easter holidays we were hitchhiking down to Florida, another student and myself. His name was Marvin Daniels, and we'd been hitchhiking down in Georgia all day long. We couldn't get a ride, because the State Patrol – any time anybody'd pick us up, they'd arrest the people that were going to pick us up, and it was very difficult to get a ride. But I'll never forget standing out on the highway, discussing all of these – the hereafter and our purpose in life and why are we here. These are concepts that I'd never thought about back in Milwaukee. So, now Marvin and I are discussing this on the highway while we're hitchhiking to Florida. There was a little – there was a bug crossing the highway, and Marvin looked at me. He said, "Conrad," he said, "do you know what's going to happen to you when you die?" I said, "I don't really know." So, he went over and stepped on the bug and squashed the bug, and he said, "That's what's going to happen to you." Well, that just – that was quite a shock to me. That incident affected my whole life. It really did. But I think there were lots of things like that that for the first time in my life I started to think about other things than what we did in Milwaukee.

**MEH:** What courses did you take other than Psychodynamics?

**CS:** I took a course in Physics, and Mathematics, from Max Dehn. Then art from Albers.

**MEH:** Did you have any idea what you wanted to study at that point?

**CS:** No, I was – I was led there by my sister and my family because I was the chosen son to take over the family business, so I kind of was involved in art because "art" was the thing that the family did, although I'd never had a burning desire to be an artist. But I was down there studying art because I'd never really had any interest in it, even though I was working at it because the family was in it.

**MEH:** Did you – What did you think of Albers' class as someone without a burning desire to study art?

**CS:** Well, no, he made it very exciting for me because he was – It's like – I mean, this was my first exposure to nudes and so on. We were studying nudes. He would come up to me, and he would say, "Conrad," he says, "Why don't you get excited like Eddie?" He was speaking of Eddie Woldin – Judd Woldin. Eddie must have gotten excited with the nudes, and I was just lackadaisical, so – But that's the way Albers taught.

**MEH:** Did you – Do you have any other particular recollections from Albers' class?

**CS:** Oh, I remember him saying "Donnerwetter!" That was always – Donnerwetter was a favorite expression of his.

**MEH:** Was that approval or disapproval?

**CS:** No, that was excitement. Thunderstorm! That was it.

**MEH:** Right. What about – You said you took a course with Max Dehn? That was mathematics or philosophy?

**CS:** Oh, he mixed it up. I don't know exactly what it was called.

**MEH:** Did you take part in the work program?

**CS:** Yes, in fact, I built a bridge with Max Dehn. Max was – Max – I was in charge of the bridge-building, and Max – This was kind of interesting at Black Mountain because they'd put students in charge of projects, and then the faculty would work on the project for the student. So, Max was working for me on the project. You know, we worked together, but I think I had the responsibility for it. What it was – it was not – this was not the Golden Gate Bridge or anything. This was – they laid a pipe through the middle of a road, and it was a culvert-type pipe. Then we had to build stone retaining walls to keep everything in place. In fact, Judd reminded me of this. I had an ability – What we'd do, we'd take the dump truck and we would go – where would we go? We'd go somewhere and we'd pick up a lot of rocks. Then we had to make our own cement. Then put the rocks in there. For some reason I had the ability to look at a pile of rocks, and I could go and pick out a rock and bring it over to the wall and fit it into the spaces that needed a rock. So, I could, I could – I had that ability to do that. Max Dehn always marveled that I could do that. That was a fantastic talent! (LAUGHS)

**MEH:** That's a real visual ability to be able to visualize the shape needed. Then select it. Did you – You ended up not going into the family business? How long did you stay at Black Mountain?

**CS:** Well, I was there for less than a year the first time, and I – See, at that time, I wanted to become an architect, and I wanted to study with Mies van der Rohe at the Illinois Institute of Technology. So, I really had a burning desire to be an architect at that time. But then because of the family business, they wanted me to go to Catholic University. So, when I left Black Mountain and I went to the Catholic University. At Catholic University they had me rendering Greek temples and Gothic cathedrals – that was part of our training. Going from a place like Black Mountain that was creative and free into a very structured Catholic university, it just took all of the, all of my creative fires had just kind of – You know, it just squelched it. That whole desire just died, and I really didn't – Then I ended up, I ended up leaving Black Mountain (SIC) and moving to Greenwich Village, and living with a group that I'd stayed in contact with from Black Mountain, and we lived in one of those, you know, the old cold water flats on McDougal Street.

**MEH:** Who were these people?

**CS:** Oh, I don't, I just don't even remember their names. Don't remember their names. We had – You know those were the greatest days of my life. We walked around in our sandals and never took a bath, and we were the Bohemians. I used to – I was making little mobiles. I was doing little wire mobiles and making jewelry and things like that that we would – we would sit around on the floor, eating bread and drinking wine with a little candle and philosophizing and discussing the, you know, the evils of the world and so forth. But it was interesting because the

Catholic University just kind of squeezed it. It just killed it, you know.

**MEH:** So, did you end up being drafted?

**CS:** Then I went – Then I went back and I worked in the family business for a couple of years, and then I went back to Black Mountain again. So, I went back with the idea of really learning, studying stained glass with Albers. So, Albers set up a special program for me to work with stained glass. I went back in '48 then and stayed until '49. Actually, I think I probably stayed until '50. I worked – I was working very closely with Albers at the time. I assisted him in a lot of things. But I just really ended up making one – I made one – My one creative work of art in collaboration with Albers was a crucifixion. That I did down there, and he actually designed it, and I just put it together.

**MEH:** Was that in stained glass?

**CS:** Yes, [AFFIRMATIVE].

**MEH:** Do you have any idea what's happened to it?

**CS:** I still have it.

**MEH:** You still have it? Oh.

**CS:** In fact, I gave Betty and Elaine – I just took a picture of it, so I gave them a copy of that.

**MEH:** Oh. I'll have to see it. That's interesting.

**CS:** Yeah, it was done – I mean it's amazing I've kept it for 45 years, but it was the –

**MEH:** How big is it?

**CS:** It's just a little, little panel. But it was something – What it was, it was my project but then Albers really designed it. Then I cut the glass and leaded it. I was more of a craftsman than a designer, so I put it all together.

**MEH:** You did not go into the family's stained-glass business, or didn't stay there anyway?

**CS:** No. Well I went back to it and – But it was really funny, I just felt because I was not a religious person, and I just didn't feel comfortable decorating churches and making, doing artwork for churches. I felt a person really ought to be religious if they're in that field, and I didn't feel very religious. I didn't go into it.

**MEH:** So, what did you do after you left Black Mountain the second time?

**CS:** Well, then I went into the service. I went into the Air Force. That was during Korea. Then when I got out of the service, I went into – This is kind of interesting, because – Well, by the time I got out of the service I was twenty-five. Then I went to the University of Chicago to study business, but I got right into the graduate school.

**MEH:** On the basis of your Black Mountain credits?

**CS:** Well, no. It was just on the basis of testing, but it was amazing that the – Because I didn't have a high school diploma, and I didn't have a college degree, and I had my, you know, maybe a total of two years at Black Mountain. Then life experiences. But then I was able to pass the tests at the University of Chicago and go right into the graduate school.

**MEH:** And what have you done since?



**CS:** (LAUGHS) I've just, I've been – I have been involved in just a multitude of – I studied finance. Then I was a stockbroker, and I was involved in insurance and investment banking. What would really happen, I guess – See, I'm an alcoholic, and I was, I was drinking my way through a lot of various activities for really what amounted to about thirty years. Just leading a very frustrated life and being involved in various businesses and promoting businesses in New York and Europe and around the country. Then when I – Then I finally sobered up. Then I got into the, I got into various activities dealing with treating alcoholics, so I set up treatment centers for alcoholics. That led me into the whole mental health field. I got involved in mental health clinics and chronic pain, and so it led me into the healthcare field.

**MEH:** You were telling me night before last about particular interests now you've had in health care that are nonconventional.

**CS:** Yes. It's, you know, what I've done is develop a, what you might call – It's a new paradigm in health care. It's a new model healthcare plan.

**MEH:** Could you just briefly describe it?

**CS:** Well, the emphasis is on getting people healthy as opposed to treating disease, et cetera. Our present healthcare model is a disease model where we pay doctors to treat symptoms of disease. I think that that's the fundamental problem is that we're paying people to treat symptoms and what our system is, we're paying people to get patients healthy. That might sound simplistic, but –

**MEH:** How does that differ from preventative medicine?

**CS:** Well, preventative – The concept of preventative medicine is that if you lead a healthy life, and you prevent disease that – that's one phase of it is to prevent the disease. But now when you get sick, when you have a disease, you weren't able to prevent it, then you have to go to the doctor for the doctor to fix the problem. I guess where we differ is that we believe that even if you have not prevented the disease, that once you are sick, that the body has the ability to reverse the disease process, That if you treat your body correctly, that you can reverse the disease process. So, it's – There are a lot of misconceptions in the healthcare field, and most people have very definite ideas on health care. It's a lot like religion. They have beliefs and attitudes relating to these various issues, but the – We look upon it – it's a very simple issue – that the body is a self-regulating, self-healing cellular system. If you stop abusing it and remove the obstacles to health, then the body will heal itself far better than any disease treatment, any drugs or surgery, could do. Even though drugs and surgery are necessary, we feel they're necessary in maybe ten or twenty percent of the typical cases that you might encounter. But for seventy to eighty to ninety percent of the cases, we feel we're better off to deal with those problems ourselves, and our whole objective is to educate people and increase their knowledge of health care and empower them to take care of themselves. To get them into a position of becoming self-reliant. It's the old story: you either teach a person to fish or you have to feed them the rest of your life. This is the same thing. We have the ability. The technology to teach people to take care of themselves, so why not do it?

**MEH:** Makes sense. Going back to Black Mountain, your second time – You studied stained glass. He set up a program, Albers did. Did you take other courses, or did you just work with him?

**CS:** Oh, it was mostly, you know, mostly the – I was just taking some art course. I just – I can't recollect everything I was doing. But I know I'd set up a little studio there, and I had brought a lot of glass from Milwaukee. I loaded up my car with a lot of glass. I remember I think I took some of those big washbuckets. I just put in thousands of little pieces of glass from all over the world and brought them down and set up a little studio down there.

**MEH:** Were you involved in other activities that you recall?

**CS:** I really don't recall.

**MEH:** What do you think the impact of Black Mountain has been, if any, on your life?

**CS:** Well I think it –

**MEH:** Positive or negative.

**CS:** I think it has aided me in being very non-conventional.

**MEH:** Coming from a ver – Well, yours wasn't a totally conventional family. It was Catholic, but not – The fact that they were in –

**CS:** Yeah, all of my friends. See all of my friends became doctors, lawyers, professional people. They were all very, very conventional, and I was the only one that was kind of far out. So, I was – When I came back from Black Mountain, they all thought, boy, I was a real oddball. I mean I came back to Milwaukee wearing sandals and, you know, we made our own sandals down there so we'd make our sandals – I'm still wearing sandals today! (LAUGHS) But – No, it was

funny. It had – I guess it did, I think in Albers, too, to look at life differently.

Whether I would have done that, I don't know. But then I— see I became a promoter, and I promoted businesses, so I organized and ran lots of different businesses. I don't know. You know, you never really know.

**MEH:** I think that's true.

**[END OF INTERVIEW]**

**[END OF TRANSCRIPT]**