

Interviewee: ATI GROPIUS FORBERG JOHANSEN
Interviewer: MARY EMMA HARRIS
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**[BEGINNING OF DV CASSETTE 1]
[INTRODUCTORY COMMENTS NOT TRANSCRIBED]**

MEH: Where are we?

AGJ: At this time of taking these pictures? We're in the house that John Johansen, my husband, built, which is in Dutchess County, New York State.

MEH: [GIVES REMAINING IDENTIFICATION] Ati [INTERRUPTION]. How did you come to be at Black Mountain College?

AGJ: It was a college that my parents knew all about. In fact, my father, the architect Walter Gropius, was I believe on something, the equivalent of a board. He'd known about the college through friends and through faculty there for many years. He was very interested in it. He thought very highly of it, aside from the fact that there was a teacher there from the Bauhaus called Josef Albers, whom my father thought I would be privileged if I could study with him. So against all my own volition, I was shipped off one summer age sixteen and a half to spend a summer session at Black Mountain and in the Work Program.

MEH: This was the summer of 1943. Do you remember physically how you traveled to Black Mountain the first time?

AGJ: Well, I get it mixed up with all the other times, but we always took that dreadful train that started out from Washington. Getting to Washington was one of the B it was wartime and the trains were full of GIs and things. But then came this unbelievable experience of B I suppose it was the Southern Railroad, but it ran all night with open windows, with the soot flying in and it covered me from top to bottom. I forget how many days. We could have gone across the outback in Australia, I think, the same amount of time. But sooner or later we did – I did arrive, and it was July. It was in the middle of the summer. It was baking hot, and I arrived at Black Mountain College.

MEH: Did you have any idea what to expect?

AGJ: A little bit, I suppose. I had seen the catalogue from Black Mountain. I'd seen pictures, mostly of students working, so B because the last thing in the world I wanted to do was to work, and I was already filled with a certain amount of apprehension and fear. These ladies with hammers in their hands and young men stripped to their waist. It didn't look good, but I was hoping against hope that there might be some corner I could crawl into.

MEH: Had you graduated from high school at that point?

AGJ: No, I had not. I had one more year to go.

MEH: Where were you in school?

AGJ: I went to a place called Concord Academy for Girls. At that time, a girls school in Concord, Mass. Since then, coeducational and the place where the Kennedy children went.

MEH: You went that summer. What did you think of the college?

AGJ: Well, I arrived to this hideous scene of seeing people – came in through the front gate and saw these people standing there on the road, with hoes and rakes and columns of white dust coming up. I mean, clearly I was coming to this work camp, the very thing that I had wanted most to avoid, and so my heart sank. This little man in white, you know, giving them B I thought I was back in Nazi Germany B giving them orders about what to do. Granted in a soft voice, but still. Of course this turned out to be Albers, later on. I settled in to one of these dreadful communal rooms feeling that I was truly in a work camp. Within B I think it was a day and a half, Mary, before I said, "I will never leave this place." It didn't take long. It took I think one evening, one day of classes B I must have gone to classes. I was certainly part of the Work Program. But that wasn't it. It was the atmosphere in that place B even in that summer, during the war, with no men there, and a summer session B but it was like no atmosphere, you know, that I had B No, that's not true. It was an atmosphere that I recognized. But it wasn't like anything I'd been in [LAUGHS] in Concord Academy or in Nazi Germany, for a long time. I immediately said, "This is it. This is where I've got to be."

MEH: How would you describe that atmosphere?

AGJ: Well, that would be awfully hard to do because it's made up out of so many, many things. Ultimately, I think it's the atmosphere that everybody experienced at Black Mountain and that made in exciting. Well, the first thing you realized is you were not in an institution. That's the first thing, that very clearly this was not

an institution. This was a minute-by-minute inventing-itself group of people, tremendous freedom B I mean the freedom was heady stuff because right away you noticed that you were able to choose whatever you wanted to do. I mean nobody was, you weren't signing up and you were not being B you were not a cipher and you were not being put into categories, but this all had to do with your own volition. You were treated with respect. I was a sixteen-year-old, and I was treated from the beginning as though I was twenty-five or thirty-five, as though I was an adult. We always were. I mean, there was not that divide between the faculty and the students. It was this sense that you were all completely one, in one area. Well, that does something to you right away. You stop being sixteen-years-old, when the person next to you, a man in his fifties or sixties, talks to you like an equal. [LAUGHS] It changes you I think almost immediately. Those were some of the things with the atmosphere. I think I must have gone to some of the classes and found them right away engrossing. I don't know whether I went to an art class or whether I went to a weaving class or whether I went to an English class, but of course they were college level and I had been in high school level, and immediately I was fascinated by the material and the way it was being presented. I think I even within the first twenty-four hours learned to swallow the Work Program, which was the thing that [LAUGHS] I had loathed most because, again, it wasn't B I mean, this was not a chain gang. This was not a prison. Everybody was doing what they were doing because they wanted to. Everybody was B I mean that little group of girls

that summer, they were so motivated to get these jobs done. You felt responsible. You felt part of a B as though you were pulling a riverboat down the river into the open sea. I mean it was a very exciting, heady situation B every part of it. [INTERRUPTION IN TAPING]

MEH: What type of work were you doing that summer?

AGJ: One of the first things, we were working in the lower pasture, clearing a pasture-clearing, together with Nell Heyns, a student who's still writing to me, and some of the farm boys. In fact, I think there were only the two of us there. It was heavy farm work. We were digging post holes, clearing brush and stuff like that. We were warned about the copperheads. I found it all B I thought the work was extraordinarily hard, I mean just agonizingly hard. But I looked at Nell and she wasn't passing out, and the farm boys were singing, and so I figured, you know, just buck up, Ati, stay with it. [LAUGHS]

MEH: Had you ever done that kind of work before?

AGJ: No. The worst I'd ever had to do was to work in my mother's garden, which I detested. I was never one for physical work, either at Black Mountain or since then. In fact, Black Mountain may have helped convince me that I was not born to do anything with my hands [LAUGHS]. Because later on I got all sorts of soft jobs. I mean, that was the worst of it, that first summer, and then I talked my way into becoming a milkmaid and then I did music copying. I managed to do things where I never had to be out in the fields again B moved from a field slave into a house slave.

MEH: That summer they had the Seminar for Refugees. You were not one of those; you were part of the Work Program. That was a Seminar for Refugees, basically to sort of learn some English and get acclimated.

AGJ: I don't remember them at all.

MEH: Did you think of yourself as a refugee?

AGJ: Oh, no. No, not at all. Not at any point, not even the day after I left Germany. We were not refugees. I mean, well, I suppose my parents left Germany, after all of their own free will. Certainly they were not at gunpoint or anything like that. We lived in England for a while, you know, and came to America because he was offered a job at Harvard, so B

MEH: So you left Germany in 1933?

AGJ: My parents did. I left a little bit later B '35.

MEH: So, even though you were not refugees in the sense that the Jewish refugees were refugees or the people who came out later, you certainly could not have returned with your father's association with the Bauhaus?

AGJ: Oh, I imagine if he had wanted to play his political cards right, if he'd said, "I'm dying to work for the Third Reich," he could have returned, you know. He could have probably technically returned anyway, but he would never have gotten any jobs.

MEH: I mean, of course, Albers felt, even though he was not Jewish, that because of his art and because of his being associated with Bauhaus at the end during the

Hans Meyer years, that he felt politically threatened at the point the Bauhaus closed because he was associated with Bauhaus when Hitler came to power.

AGJ: Yeah, Albers left a little later, didn't he.

MEH: He left in November '33.

AGJ: I'm not exactly sure when my parents left. I mean, they left in a somewhat devious way, too, and maybe Albers was right in his perceptions.

MEH: So, you didn't see yourself as a refugee. You saw yourself B

AGJ: No. No.

MEH: But you don't have any memory of the refugees who were there that summer.

AGJ: Strangely enough, I don't. I must have been working on that upper field all the time [LAUGHS].

MEH: They kept you in the field.

AGJ: I think so. [LAUGHS]

MEH: But you stayed. You didn't go back to finish high school?

AGJ: No. You see, that was the thing. I fell desperately in love with the place, and immediately said, "I cannot ever ever go anywhere else." I made that perfectly clear to my parents and to the school, and by the time September came and school was out I had dug myself in. I was going to chain myself to trees and all of that, but anyway they somehow made it possible for me to stay. So I never finished high school, and I stayed then nonstop. Never took any time off again until I graduated.

MEH: Well, why don't we start with the main classes. You took Albers's classes.

AGJ: Yes. Yes. I had an adviser. I believe my first adviser was B I had Anni Albers. Anni. Then Ted Dreier. I believe that was more or less it. Anyway, I was advised to take certain classes amongst one of which was Economy with B what was the name of the teacher who taught B?

MEH: Economics?

AGJ: A little goatee beard, older man

MEH: Miller? Herbert Miller.

AGJ: Miller. Yes. Well this was not a free choice, but I was advised. I took English, and Economy, and no, I don't think I took history. I took art. I believe I did at some point have to take a little science, but I've eclipsed this mercifully from my memory. The classes that I took of my own free will and that I learned to adore were, obviously all the art classes, obviously all the English classes, drama classes, in fact all the humanities. But I also in time learned to take math classes from Max Dehn B not the first year but in the second year B and I adored those too.

MEH: Okay, let's go back and sort of move through the ones that you remember. Albers. How would you describe Albers as a teacher?

AGJ: Funny, the first word that came into my mind was "conspiratorial," as though you were, he was letting you in on a conspiracy, as though he was almost whispering about something that you were going to do or that was going to happen. Now the other people didn't know about it, but you knew it was going to happen. [LAUGHS] So you already start to shake with excitement, you know.

"What is it that's going to happen?" Then out came this voice with these wonderful sentences, half, you know, half dream sentences, terribly funny, other times terribly descriptive, of something that you, in all honesty, had never seen that way before. And everything, whatever it was B around you, on the side of the road, on the dining table or whatever B suddenly these things all became part of this conspiracy of something marvelous to be observed and thought about, that something might happen to.

MEH: This was how he handled his class B this sort of sense of drama and excitement.

AGJ: Yes. Yes. Yes. I think not only the class. I think just, just, you know, at the dining table. Any time, being with him, it was this B I mean the man was always on fire. It was a fire, granted, that made only a little noise like "chh, chh, chh," like that, you know. It wasn't one of these "UHH" sort of Valhalla fires. But it was there, giving off little sparks all the time, as I remember it.

MEH: How did he conduct his drawing class? How did you go about doing things?

AGJ: Well, that would take a long, long time, I mean, to outline all the exercises we did. Is that what you mean, the sort of stages we went through?

MEH: Instead of outlining each of the stages you went through, could you describe the process, what he was working toward with each of the stages?

AGJ: Well, I think what he was B what he said was you have to train the hand and you have to train the eye, so it was sort of half and half in which, especially the beginning, there was a lot of hand training, the kind of discipline you have to

use for good penmanship, where you have to know how to hold a pen or pencil in order to get the pressure and the flow that you want. I mean, that's an instrument that you need for drawing, and he taught us that, but at the same time the observation of what you see and what you're doing wrong while you're doing it. We moved from that kind of training to more observational training: things like drawing glasses. I mean, wine glasses or bottles or things of that sort, were always done with tremendous emphasis on observation of really seeing what was there and not doing it through mechanical means (such as translating it onto a grid on a piece of paper and going four points up and three points over). The whole emphasis was on noticing what it was. Whether you could then actually do it was another and perhaps even a less important step. So he wasn't interested in the end result of a mechanically correct drawing as much as in seeing whether you had observed truly something. You might even exaggerate it, and it might be inaccurate in your final version, as long as he could see that you had seen it. That was what mattered. Of course, that's what made it alive, and made it exciting. Then when we moved from that into plants and ultimately into the human figure, essentially it was always the same emphasis and that was to really see what was going on. What were the relationships between these contours, between these areas, curves, lines, horizontals, and all. Ultimately, in the figure drawing, a sense of expression came into it too. He didn't use that word, but the way he talked about a figure and its posture was so full of feeling. You couldn't end up making a mechanical

drawing that showed a person sitting with a straight leg and their arm behind them, because that wasn't it. It was the posture and what it meant to both the sitter and the viewer, what it conveyed in terms of body language, and the whole feeling about it was what he gave us through his talking. We tried our darndest to convey it somehow in the way we drew. [DISCUSSION OF PILEATED WOODPECKER DELETED]

MEH: The drawing class – most of the work was done in the class.

AGJ: Yeah, all of it I think.

MEH: The design class – did he handle that the same way?

AGJ: No, there was homework for the design class. There were many many aspects of the design class. Much of it was done in class, but for particular studies like the *matière* studies, you needed to go out and collect materials. You couldn't do that in class. You needed to collect things for compositions or a collage of different materials, to illustrate certain relationships between them. There were also leaf studies, where you collected leaves which we used to press in wax in our studies. I forget what other homework. There was often homework to do with the design class.

MEH: How would you describe Albers as a teacher in his color course – his mannerisms, his presence?

AGJ: Well, I don't know that I can add much to what I said before, in terms of his manner. This infectious excitement and almost this air of something conspiratorial B he was letting us in on a secret: ALook at this, look at this, look

what's happening over here. @ Unbounded, tremendous enthusiasm and deep love in him for what was happening in these color relationships, which infected us all, I think. Ultimately we shared all our work by putting it on the floor for a crit from Albers, but while we were working separately, he would come around and make individual comments, always helpful. I don't recall B and I used to admire that B that he ever said anything critical. I mean of course I was super sensitive to criticism. I mean, if he'd ever said in the drawing class or any class, "No, don't you see that that doesn't work," I think I would have curled up and died, you see. But he never did. He never did. He was one of those teachers who taught through always the positive, you know. He lifted out the thing that you could do more of, and "see that over there B that works," and so on. I guess the worst thing that could happen to you was if he said nothing. I mean, that showed you that you weren't really quite in the ballpark yet. But even then you could take refuge and say, "Well, he's too busy," you know, or something like that. Generally speaking, he B and I had another marvelous teacher in my life, a dance teacher, she also never never made a remark that was in any way negative. She never said, "Don't move your elbow," or "Straighten your back." Albers was like that. For me he was the ideal teacher. He made my heart beat so fast! He whipped up such a fervor, I think, in all of us, that I suffered from heart palpitations that first summer. I mean, you know, I used to have to go down after class, go out – I was only sixteen – to lie down flat on the ground somewhere and just let my heart stop beating. It was just so violent!

MEH: It's interesting that you say that he was not really critical of people in class. Especially in the post-war years, apparently he would really attack people in class.

AGJ: I have heard other people talk about him very differently, and I can't say anything. I can only say this was my own experience, during the time I was there or during the classes I was in. If he ever criticized anybody in the class, I wasn't aware of it perhaps. Perhaps he was very very quiet. Generally the whole focus was on looking at the work. He was always showing us something: "Oh, look over there! You see how he did this," rather than saying "This is not right." It's so easy to point out what's wrong, and I've always remembered that Juppi didn't do that.

MEH: That's interesting. I think there was maybe a change, as he got older, as there were a lot more pressures in the later years. Maybe he felt his back was up against the wall a little more.

AGJ: Yes. That could well be. We had a very small class. We were all girls. Yeah.

MEH: What was he like just in the community in general? Out of class?

AGJ: Well, he was very talkative and communicative and very much there, for instance, at the dining table. But I'll have to say that there was a sense of presence that was not to be taken altogether lightly. But I knew about that from home. After all, my father wasn't to be taken altogether lightly either, you know. [LAUGHS] These were men of the older generation, and I grew up with a sense of deep respect for that generation. Sure, you were affectionate with them and

so forth, but you were well aware that this was a kind of royalty, and you treated them a little bit like royalty. I don't mean that Albers himself was condescending or anything like that. It's just that I think there's a difference between somebody like that and let's say a young American teacher who's in his thirties and European professor like Proff. Dehn or Proff. Jalowetz or Proff. Straus. They're all from that time. Does that answer the question?

MEH: Yeah, I think so. I think it was probably much easier for you. Many of the American students found were uncomfortable with this distance.

AGJ: They were not used to it, I suppose, and felt perhaps that they were being personally discriminated against. Perhaps. I don't know. I always knew that they were all fond of me. I never doubted that. But at the same time, though Juppi would ask us over to his cottage and give us lovely things to drink and some of his German snacks and goodies, we were always a little cautious. You didn't just say "Oh, give me another glass of beer." [LAUGHS] You didn't just say "Oh, I think I'll drop over tonight." I borrowed paintings from him quite often to hang in my study, but I knew I was a special favor. I mean, if you had gone into Klee's studio and said, "Mr. Klee, could I borrow a picture?" you would also have been a little bit on your tiptoes. That's all I mean. [INTERRUPTION IN TAPING]

MEH: But he would actually let you borrow a painting and take it to your studio?

AGJ: Yeah. Some of the studies for paintings, too. Some of them I tried to abscond with. I would ask, "Couldn't I have a little tiny paper study? Couldn't I keep this?" "No, no, no, no." You could never get to keep anything, however small.

MEH: But you knew the Alberses a little differently than the other students, because they were friends of your family and you had known them in your home.

AGJ: Yes, right, yeah.

MEH: So your relationship was a little different than B

AGJ: That's true. Yeah, yeah. They were personal friends. I mean, I knew both of them from before. He had come up to Harvard and taught one summer, summer course, and I was in that class. So I knew him.

MEH: Did he stay at your home at that time?

AGJ: Yeah, he would come out for dinner and stay overnight sometimes. Yeah.

MEH: You took Anni's weaving?

AGJ: Yes, though I didn't like weaving. But I loved Anni, and the course was exciting and B Yeah. [INTERRUPTION IN TAPING]

MEH: What was Anni like as a person?

AGJ: Well, Anni B well, again, she was a marvelous teacher, and she was a highly intelligent, highly intellectual woman whose every sentence was a jewel. I'm not trying to say that Juppi's every sentence wasn't, but they were so different. Anni spoke better English than Juppi did. Juppi's sentences were not to be believed! But Anni's were as though you were reading something. She said so much in every sentence! It was as though you were communicating with T. S. Eliot. She said beautiful things, incredible things, all the time B in this soft, gentle voice. I mean, she was explaining about philosophies and life and Zen-Buddhism while she was telling you about how a thread went through a woof. You felt terribly

honored that somebody would talk to you as though you understood
[LAUGHS]. Anni intimidated me a little bit more than Juppi did, though she was
very gentle and very nice to me. I had no reason to be scared of her, but she
was just such an intellect. Juppi was warmer and funnier. Anni's jokes were
more sophisticated. I mean, little plays on words and so forth. Anni didn't
exactly hug people, whereas Juppi did, all the time. He hugged all the girls all
the time. [LAUGHS] But Anni, as a person B well, I remember her mostly, not
so much in the classroom as at home in Black Dwarf [Roadside]. It was a
wonderful environment, that Black Dwarf [Roadside] cottage, with those rooms
that were just luminous with white and Anni's dress and the way she moved
and the kind of conversation was all fairly rarefied stuff. [LAUGHS] I've never
met anything that outdid it, in terms of sensibility and fineness of perception. It
was really right up there.

MEH: Black Dwarf [Roadside] was the house they shared with the Dreiers.

AGJ: Right. Right. A little log cabin. I mean these were hovels, the simplest of the
simple, and there was very little in them, but what there was B Well, I think the
comparison could only be made to a Japanese house, you know, the simple
bamboo hut, with maybe one tatami mat and one little vase on a stool. But ah!
It sang and said everything.

MEH: And they had painted the interior white.

AGJ: Yes. Yes. I'm sure it wasn't white to begin with. It got to be whiter and whiter
and whiter than anything you can imagine.

MEH: Was the interior of the Dining Hall white also?

AGJ: Yes. I personally helped paint it white. It was a dreadful job. I forget what it was before B light green or something. Molly started to paint it I think all one night through, painted and painted and painted, because the price of having it professionally done was astronomical, and, of course, there was no money anyway. Finally, I think some professionals came in and helped with the rafters and all that, but it was an awful job. No, getting white into those dark brown stained buildings was a labor of devotion. It was really like the Buddhists painting something white way up in the mountains. White meant something!

MEH: What did it mean?

AGJ: I don't think I can answer that off the cuff. That's too big a question.

MEH: It did sort of take the edge off the camp-like atmosphere, I would think. The rustic.

AGJ: Oh, very much so. The choice to live in such totally white environments that even the floor is white, and your dresses are white and is close to I suppose almost monastic or religious. Many religions have chosen it. There is something about the quality of white that says a whole lot. I'm not talking about purity. I'm talking about the fact that somehow puts you into a different frame of mind. I believe that white is the ultimate wonder.

MEH: How do you remember Max Dehn?

AGJ: Well, I don't seem to remember his coming, but he wasn't there at the beginning of my time. He came later on and then B well, there was this

absolutely charming little man, who obviously was much too good for us.

[LAUGHS] Well, they all were. I had no interest in math whatsoever and had never intended to study any of it, but somehow got roped into or talked into taking his class, maybe because other students had talked about how wonderful he was. And he was. I don't think I lasted but a brief time, but in a way Max Dehn was the parallel to Albers: as Albers was about visual things, Dehn was about numbers. I mean, he gave you that same conspiratorial sense that there was such a universe of marvels out there! I mean, these exciting relationships of numbers! Even if you didn't understand a word, [LAUGHS] you got infected with that. Certainly you fell in love with him. I even managed to do quite well for a little while, without having, I think, really a clue what it was about. But the way he talked about infinity and about zero I'll never forget. I thought then: there is such a beauty, such a wonder to numbers, that I never knew before! He wanted me to go on studying math. He thought I had potential. Ha! [LAUGHS] Aside from that, I had only brief meetings with him B going up and down from the buildings and sitting with him at dinner. He was just a very very dear man. Other students I think had more contact with him than I did.

MEH: Jalowetz was still living when you were there.

AGJ: Oh yes. He was there from the beginning, and died while I was there. Both he and his wife became my very good friends. I loved them dearly and rode down on the train with them sometimes and was often a guest in their house, though I was not a music student. But I did sing in Jalo's chorus, without having the

ability to read one single note. I took his harmony classes, without having a clue where middle C was. I didn't know the sound of the notes that I wrote down. I just stumbled my way through. Jalo's tolerance was not totally blind, but he didn't mind what level you were at. He took people at the rock bottom level and somehow managed to give them an idea of the wonder that was there. I mean, in a sense Dehn, Jalo, and Albers were all people of the same cast. They came from such different directions, but yet they were all marvelous teachers, and all had that same quality, the same scope, I think.

MEH: It was interesting that they could adapt from having been in situations where they were teaching professional students and really the cream of the crop to the assortment of people who came to Black Mountain.

AGJ: Ja. I think the explanation has to be that these were people who were totally in love with their own métier. I mean, if you're an English teacher and you simply adore the relationship of words to each other, you can even start with a prime reader for a child of three, and you can find some excitement in that. I think that that's what they were doing. For instance Jalo's excitement with Beginning Harmony, Albers love affair with color and form. What did it matter that they were doing it over and over and over again [LAUGHS] with a gifted student or with advanced partners or with people who hadn't a clue? When I was young, I used to say "Albers loves us so. He loves his students" because of the amount of attention he gave us. Tremendous attention. And because his education was a gift of a lifetime for us. I used to think that was love. Maybe it was, but as I get

older I think that his real love was for the thing he was teaching. He loved us mainly as a connection with that.

MEH: As is the case with true teachers, he loved not just this personal excitement about the visual world, but he loved sharing it.

AGJ: Yes. Yes. Exactly. Yeah, that was the point. Yeah. He was a communicator. They don't come much better than that.

MEH: Are there other classes that you remember in particular? What was Molly like?

AGJ: I never took a class from Molly. I was too inept. She was much more of a pal. She was a real friend. I'll get back to her, but you were going to ask about other B because I did take classes from Eric Bentley, which were very exciting to me. What other classes did I take that meant something to me? Well, a little bit of dance from Elsa Kahl. Yeah, a little bit of that. Eric's English classes were to me mindboggling. I mean, really B electrifying. He just threw us head over heels into deep poetry. We started with Early English, Beowulf etcetera and careened on through, at a breakneck speed to Yeats and the moderns. I think it was all in one semester. Every bit of it was way beyond me, and he made us work so hard that I was in tears a lot of the time. We used to sit up until two o'clock at night to have your paper ready for Eric in the morning. He had no qualms about saying: read eight poems, analyze them, and by day after tomorrow have a paper of eight pages. I mean, it was cruel. I did go and complain to him over and over again. But his classes were breathtaking and exciting. He was brilliant in his field, and his passion for literature was infectious. I was one of those

people who was a member of the "Eric Bentley Club." I very much loved his wife, Maja, who was a very good friend of mine. So I was very thick with that group. At the same time, I was so to speak, like a niece or a cousin or something in the Dreier and Albers households. In due time I came to feel like Solomon's baby – split down the middle. But it was very difficult for me to take sides with one or the other.

MEH: How did you handle that?

AGJ: Not well. I mean, for me there was no conflict, you see. I didn't understand what the issues were in the conflict between the two camps. It was my second summer at the college. I was – and only just beginning to catch on to the dynamics of the community. But I did sense that some of the people in the Eric Bentley crowd were not quite my cup of tea. The way they thought and talked was alien to me. There was a whole group around the history professor Clark Forman that seemed very politically motivated. I didn't feel comfortable with that. There was a certain rhetoric that went with it, and a certain persuasion for causes, which I didn't like. I was more inclined to belong in the more reticent, soft-talking, non-cause-directed art group. But, as I say, I loved being in the Bentley household and listening to his wonderful talk. But at one point Bobbie Dreier asked me, "Where are you going?" and I said I was going visiting the Bentleys, Just the way she said, "Oh?" gave me food for thought. I realized that I had a foot in both camps and that I was not comfortable with that and I'd have to withdraw my foot from one or the other. I also always knew that it was going

to be away from the Bentley crowd because they were less familiar to me. But if you had asked me for a real good reason, I didn't have one. I did ultimately act on a curious kind of instinct, I trusted something about Molly, Juppi, the Dreier, more than I trusted Clark Forman and some of the Eric Bentley group. I knew Eric Bentley was [LAUGHS] fascinating, but I knew he wasn't a real sound man. You know, he could bend any old way in the community. There wasn't any real integrity there. I finally asked myself who do I have the most respect for? And it ended up there.

MEH: Well, I think for a sixteen, seventeen-year-old, you were pretty insightful.

AGJ: Not enough, not enough. But it was the beginning. It certainly made me have to start thinking more.

MEH: Were things B before the blow-up in the summer of '44, camps were pretty clearly formed?

AGJ: Well, as I say, I didn't think they were. It must have been in the spring that I was going back and forth between supper at the Bentleys' and coffee at the Dreiers'. Even when the conflict sharpened, I never felt it in any personal connection with other students. It never got to the place that I saw animosity between us because we were in different camps. Though at the student meetings there were endless and heated discussions, in the dormitories I can't remember any unpleasantness.

MEH: Did the sort of conflict within the college, the sense of competitiveness or divisions, affect your learning experience?

AGJ: You mean the whole split? Because I'm not sure that I would call it competitive, although I'm sure that that entered into it too. But in retrospect and from having read Mary Harris's book, I think there were issues there. It was not only different personalities, but different issues with people feeling the college had different meaning for some people than for others and they weren't going to mix. Yes, I think this had a tremendous effect on me, and, I believe, on all of us, in its resulting division of the college. It pulled us right up into being adults – or having to think as adults. About responsibilities and consequences. Serious consequences. I remember vividly one afternoon, out on the work program, realizing “What I have inside my head matters! Really matters! Whether I give a vote or not matters!” I felt about the split that everyone’s thinking really mattered and was going to affect the college. It was going to affect our own lives permanently. That is a tremendously sobering experience, and I think stays with you for life. Also I got a glimpse of what politics are like, even on a small scale, and that lasted me for a lifetime as well. I’ve never wanted to go near it again. By politics I mean their effect on personal behaviors such as the distortions and exaggerations of points of view, the polemics leading to irresponsible positions, the de-personalizing and finally untruthfulness of political behavior. It seemed to me to be the opposite of what we learned about relationships and conduct in a community. It made me very, very apprehensive.

MEH: Education at Black Mountain wasn't just book learning.

AGJ: No. I'd say that was the least of it.

MEH: What do you think was the effect of being in a community where you were eating with the faculty, you were working on the farm, you were digging ditches with other faculty members?

AGJ: And raising money to try and keep it going.

MEH: You were exposed to real conflict between adults. What do you think the effect of that was? Do you think Black Mountain worked as a college?

AGJ: Well I think it's what made it extraordinary, and I think that the word "college" is not correct for it anymore. I mean the normal word "college" has a very different meaning, I think. What Black Mountain in some catalogue or other said, they "wanted to educate the whole person." Well, that comes closer to it, I think, because it wasn't the education of just the mind. It was the education of the person. I think at that they did a terrific job. Whether you suffered or not didn't matter. The fact was that you were involved; you were put to the test; you were made to see that what you did or didn't do in a community context. What you understood or didn't understand, that it all mattered. I think that's quite a lesson.

MEH: You came to this country, but essentially you were getting a European education.

AGJ: I believe I was. I hadn't realized that until much, much later, much later. I mean twenty or forty years later, I realized that at the time I was there, the people who most affected me B with the exception of the Dreiers B were all Europeans. That's true. But the Dreiers and Molly are not to be discounted. Yet I would say it's true. Because it seemed so much like home to me [LAUGHS], therefore I

could say that it probably was very European. [LAUGHS] You know. Because I've never felt at home in America. Really, I haven't. Mind you, I like it. I've been perfectly happy here. But feeling really at home? No. But at Black Mountain I felt at home. I could understand some invisible language, which wasn't being spoken but which was somehow implied in the lifestyle.

MEH: How old were you when you left Germany?

AGJ: I was nine, almost ten, when I went to England.

MEH: For three years?

AGJ: I came over when I was twelve I think. Yeah.

MEH: Going back to Black Mountain B [INTERRUPTION]

[END OF DV CASSETTE 1; BEGINNING OF DV CASSETTE 2]

MEH: How aware were you of the war that was going on?

AGJ: Well, of course, it had started already, you know, before I came to college, and my parents at home were terribly concerned with the war and always listened to every broadcast about it. So, much so that I was rather turned off. At Black Mountain there wasn't that much talk about it. For one thing, all the people had been drafted [LAUGHS]. There was nobody there, and the girls weren't going to talk ad infinitum about different aspects of the war. Charles Forberg, who became my companion, was a conscientious objector. It was very well-known that there were conscientious objectors there their position on the war understood. There was, at least in my mind, strong Quaker influence in Black Mountain. That was never talked about. In fact, I don't think the word "Quaker"

was spoken. The thing that most distinctly registered on my very young mind was "War is not the way to solve a conflict. Killing people is not the way you deal with problems." In retrospect, thinking about World War II, it was possibly the only war in which that was a possible solution. Nevertheless the lesson was there that machine guns were not the way to make the world any better. So, there wasn't a great enthusiasm about the war at B.M.C. The only men that were that were there were conscientious objectors and the rest were girls B does that answer it?

MEH: It's hard to look back with all that we know now, but were you really that aware of the plight of Jews in Europe at the time?

AGJ: Not fully at that time. That is to say, even in Germany when I was a child, I knew what was going on. I knew that the Jews were persecuted. I knew that through personal experiences. I knew people who had fled or been executed. But not until much later, until all of America got to see pictures of the extermination camps, did I know about these. But we certainly knew that there were concentration camps. We knew that the Jews were being treated horribly. We felt horrible about people who couldn't get out. I mean, close friends of my family and all of that. So, yeah.

MEH: You were saying that there was a spiritual aspect of Black Mountain that you feel is very important.

AGJ: Well, it was probably in connection with this sense of what I call the Quaker atmosphere. It wasn't religious. Jalowetz, Dehn, Albers – none of these people

belonged to any church. And yet they all conveyed a sense of values. Except for the Quiet House, there was no “religious” building at B.M.C., but I thought spirituality was palpable in all the buildings and living quarters of the faculty. It wasn’t just that the walls were painted white, all the interiors sparse and pure, even a little monastic. But in the whole lifestyle I sensed an anti-materialism and ethic that had a spiritual origin. You might say that it was related to Daoism. As artists the Albers, of course, expressed this in their work. Albers always said that the values to be learned through art, such as the focus on relationships, the equality of parts, were the values of life. Some of the questions on the senior exam in my time pointed rather clearly towards Zen Buddhism. Others called for an understanding of the spiritual meaning of T.S. Eliot’s Four Quartets. And then there was also a deep moral sense in the community that, I would say, lay at its very foundation. It had to do with your behavior in the community, your obligations, responsibilities, work contribution, sense of fair play and courtesy to others. Molly said, “You must never use the word “they” as though “they” were different from you. Nor talk behind a person’s back in a way that you wouldn’t to their face.” Boy, that stuck! There was a real moral wallop in Albers’ teaching, in Anni’s, in Molly’s. It came across all the time. How do you borrow a tool? How return it? Leave a work table? Word a sign? These were all ethical considerations. Coming to B.M.C. was just a little like joining a company of saints, I felt. They weren’t going to be hard on you, but it was certainly going to show up if you goofed off or just went after your own concerns.

MEH: So they really made you re-think your sort of private girls school, gossipy sort of mentality.

AGJ: Yeah, exactly. The idea that you were somehow free to do whatever you pleased and get away with it. No, that wasn't it. I think if you had joined a Quaker community, you would have had the same understanding. You were not just an individual. You were a community member and very responsible to others. I remember learning that lesson quite painfully when on one occasion I broke into the little library to get a textbook I needed. I hadn't even thought I was doing anything very wrong. But in subsequent days, from the reaction of the faculty, I learned to see it in a very different light. They didn't quite expel me, but I felt as badly as if they had.

MEH: Had you been reared with a particular religious outlook of any kind, or association?

AGJ: [NEGATIVE] Oh, no. Not at all, because my parents, like all of that generation of the twenties, they had left the church under protest.

MEH: There was a concern at the Bauhaus with "the spiritual" which runs through the writings of Albers, through Klee and Kandinsky and – who was the first teacher of the basic course?

AGJ: Itten.

MEH: Itten, obviously very strongly.

AGJ: Yes, yeah. But again these were deeply spiritual leanings, but away from organized religion.

MEH: Not necessarily ethical, whereas I think at Black Mountain you were getting the sense of the spiritual and the ethical.

AGJ: Yes. Yeah. Yes, I think that's very true. I think that might have been one of the big differences, between the school and other colleges, but I don't know.

MEH: Was Charles Forberg already at Black Mountain when you came?

AGJ: No. He came in the fall, I think. He had been there before at Lee Hall, and then had been drafted, and then went into hospital work and was actually a conscientious objector, and then came back after he had done some – a year or two, I don't know – hospital work, and then came back as sort of part-time student. Part-time he helped build, you know. He was sort of part-faculty there.

MEH: They started the B Then we aren't going to have time. We may have to continue this at some point. You later married Charles Forberg.

AGJ: Yes.

MEH: After you, the things you did after you did Black Mountain we don't have time to deal with today.

AGJ: Oh, I hope not. [LAUGHS]

MEH: We will get to that. The summer sessions were started while you were there, the special summer sessions in the arts. How would you compare those to the regular college year, and do you think they had a particular effect on the college?

AGJ: Well, now I'm going to come at this from a terribly bigoted point of view, because those of us who were there for the regular college year and who

stayed through the summers working our fool heads off looked upon the summer sessions as something almost entertainment. We thought of the students that came from other colleges, specializing in some one field or other, as lacking in "real education," i.e., B.M.C. community education. Thus there were really "inferior." Not to be taken seriously. The music faculty, however, was always marvelous in their performances. As for the art faculty, we suspected that Juppi got those in primarily to show off what a good teacher he was and how bad they were [LAUGHS]. I mean, we really did suspect that that was the intention. I mean, we took these art courses, but there never was a teacher who as a teacher even began to cut the mustard like Albers. Was it meant to give us a picture of the outside world? Some of them were very poor. I thought they were just plain poor, both as artists and as teachers. They were perfectly dear people, but, you know, they were not competition for Albers. But there were special ones B de Creeft and Varda, two wonderful madmen who contributed a spirit that was, you know, that ravished us all, and that was wonderful. But generally speaking I don't feel that the summer sessions were anything but moneymakers, but hopefully they did that. I understood that that was their purpose, rather than some real extension of B.M.C. education. They were supposed to keep us going, and so, you know, we sort of suffered through them, with their poor faculty and those "poor students." Some of their people would say later, "I went to Black Mountain College," and I'd ask, "When?" "Oh, well I was there for a month in the summer," and I would just turn away.

[LAUGHS] To me the winter people and the summer people were divided like sheep from goats. That's just to show you how bigoted I was then. Maybe nobody was as snobbish as me, but I think a little bit of what I felt was felt by others as well.

[END OF INTERVIEW]

[END OF TRANSCRIPT]