

Interviewee: SUE SPAYTH WOLPERT RILEY
Interviewer: MARY EMMA HARRIS
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[BEGINNING OF SIDE 1, TAPE 1]

MEH: [GIVES IDENTIFICATION] Sue, how did you first hear about Black Mountain College?

SSR: I just knew that was going to be your first question. [LAUGHS]

MEH: I just knew this was going to be your house.

SSR: I guess I heard about it in several ways. I think the Louis Adamic article that was excerpted and printed in The Atlantic [Harpers], I guess it was, about Black Mountain College, was very impressive. Many of my friends, my parents' friends, read this and said "That's the place for Sue." It appealed to me because I had, I was a product of a progressive elementary school and I wanted to go to some college that was more like that.

MEH: Where did you live?

SSR: New Jersey.

MEH: And what school did you go to?

SSR: It was called the Modern School, in Stelton, New Jersey, in the Ferrer Colony. It was a community built around a progressive school.

MEH: Did you live in the community?

SSR: We lived in the community, and I was very happy in that school there. My father was a newspaperman, and we had left that community and come to a more

conventional community where I went to a conventional high school. I was very keen to get back into a school that would give me more decision-making opportunities and freedom.

MEH: Why had your parents been interested in this community that you went to when you were much younger? What had been the attraction? Do you remember?

SSR: Well, several things. Both my parents were very liberal thinking people who were involved in things that weren't too particularly, weren't especially usual at that point. My father was a political cartoonist and he lived in Reading, Pennsylvania, which was a socialist town. We became acquainted with a number of people there who were Unitarians and socialists [LAUGHS]. My father lost his job at the beginning of the Depression, and the recommendation was that we move to this community where we could live very, very cheaply, because he did not have a job, and he had a syndicated cartoon which brought him fifty dollars a month. They said "Oh, you can live there, and also there is a marvelous school there." So that was why we went there. It was a good answer. It was out in the country and we had a garden, and we didn't have very much of material stuff at all, but it was a wonderful school, a wonderful place to live.

MEH: Were you an only child?

SSR: I had a brother, younger brother, four years younger than I was.

MEH: And so did – do you remember the application process to Black Mountain?

SSR: Oh I do. I entered very – I remember very clearly. I applied and of course I applied for some financial – financial help. I went to New York and I was interviewed by John Andrew Rice [LAUGHS], met him in the lobby of a hotel in

New York. I don't remember much about the interview, but I remember feeling very warmly toward him. I was also interviewed locally in Plainfield, New Jersey, I think it was, by Dan Middlesworth –

MEH: Neil.

SSR: Neil, yeah, and I don't remember much about that interview either.

[TECHNICAL INTERRUPTION]

MEH: Do you remember how you first traveled to the college? Physically.

SSR: Greyhound bus. [LAUGHS] Greyhound bus. It was a long, long, long, long trip, but I was really quite young, and it was my first time going off by myself for that length of time. I remember being very uncomfortable because I needed to go to the bathroom and they didn't stop, and telling my mother about this later. She said, "Well Sue, you just should have told the driver that you had to go to the bathroom!" [LAUGHS] "Gosh, Mom, you couldn't do that!" So I remember that and I also remember the shock going through some of these cities at night and seeing the restrooms – Colored and White. That was such a shock.

MEH: Had you been in the South before?

SSR: No. I'd been in Virginia. I mean, around the Washington area, because I had family there, but not down into North Carolina.

MEH: So the bus would have been segregated too, once it passed –

SSR: I'm sure it was.

MEH: Do you remember your first impression of the college?

SSR: [AFFIRMATIVE]. Unfortunately I didn't come in September with a lot of other new people. I came in January, and everybody was pretty well grouped with their friends and so on. It was a Sunday afternoon, and it seemed – Lee Hall

seemed so empty. The heat came on about 4, I remember that. It always did.

You could hear the radiators clanging and sort of echoing through the building. I was very homesick and I was very lonely, and I just, I just felt just lost. Just lost. And very tired.

MEH: From the Greyhound ride.

SSR: Yeah, from the trip. [LAUGHS]

MEH: This was what year?

SSR: Oh, '38. '38 or '39. I was there for three years, and I came in January.

MEH: It was 1937 that you went.

SSR: That's right, because I was seventeen in June. I don't know that that's right. But anyway, it's close enough, isn't it?

MEH: It was the Depression and it was the thirties and you were at Lee Hall, not Lake Eden.

SSR: Right, at Lee Hall. [AFFIRMATIVE] The only other person that came in January was a flaky young woman who I kind of made friends with because she and I were both new and we had a lot in common. But she was kind of bizarre [LAUGHS]. I don't think she stayed very long.

MEH: Who was that?

SSR: I don't remember her – Frances Somebody? Mary? I don't remember what her name was.

MEH: And you were immediately assigned a room – a study? A student study?

SSR: I have no recollection of the study. I'm sure I was given a study. The first study I don't remember. I know I was given a room.

MEH: Did you have any idea what you wanted to study?

SSR: Oh, I was taken with the theatre and the dance. That's what I wanted to study, and I was disappointed that there wasn't anybody to teach dance. But as time went on, I got a group together, and I taught them what I knew about dancing. But I got involved immediately in the drama with Bob Wunsch and – I took a variety of courses, you know.

MEH: There's a group of photographs and I think you are a part of those, with people sort of in an Isadora Duncan style, leaping off of the porch [LAUGHS]. Do you remember those photos?

SSR: Oh yes, I remember that. Oh, yeah.

MEH: But you were free to sort of organize your own activities or your own –

SSR: [AFFIRMATIVE]. I did.

MEH: What courses did you take?

SSR: Well, according to my transcript, I took some courses that I can't even remember what they were. I took some German and I took Psychology and I took – It's hard for me to remember what I took at first. I remember, as the years went on I know I took a Shakespeare course, I took Restoration Drama. I took a lot of writing. A lot of drama.

MEH: Did you take John Rice's writing class?

SSR: Oh, yes. Now that I'll never forget.

MEH: Well, tell me what you remember about it.

SSR: Oh, I was taken with John Rice. He meant a great deal to me. He was a very understanding, very empathetic man, and he and I got along very well. I remember things he said about writing. I remember people coming in – Marian Teeter was a dear friend of mine and still is. He would have us read what we

wrote and then we'd be discussed. He was very perceptive. I mean I can remember his saying to Marian that she needed – she needed to write this, and that was good that she was doing that. Sort of working through some problems in her own life. I always looked forward to that – the writing class.

MEH: How was it conducted? Can you recall? What was his style of running the class?

SSR: Well, it was sort of discussion, actually. It was very open. I'm sure that he would – he would pinpoint something, and he would pinpoint an idea or an angle or a perception that he had of some writing and then generalize it, which really is what I do right now in my own teaching. You get things from different individuals and then you pick up on it. Instead of lecturing about it, you pick up on it and make that a discussion. I think that's the way he did it.

MEH: How do you remember him just as an individual, as a person?

SSR: I remember him as a very warm, congenial, fatherly sort of figure, sort of jolly, kind of almost Santa Claus like. He had a big belly. His pipe and a twinkle in his eye. That's the way I remember him, which is different than other people remember him.

MEH: But you took the writing – But if you took drama, Bob Wunsch must have been a major teacher for you.

SSR: Bob Wunsch was – took a lot with Bob Wunsch, [AFFIRMATIVE]. But I never felt – I never felt as close to Bob Wunsch as I did to John Rice. There was a barrier there. I don't think Bob Wunsch particularly liked me.

MEH: What were some of the plays that you were in?

SSR: Oh, gosh. I should rehearse – I should research this because I was – I guess the most important one I was in was Macbeth. That was very important, but that came later. But I know I was in Waiting for Lefty and – But I think *Macbeth* was my most significant experience. And directing, I directed a one-act play, a Chekhov – I think it was *Turgenev*, a one-act play, or was it Chekhov. I'm not quite sure which. But that – I really enjoyed doing that. I really enjoyed doing that and I think I did a better job directing than I did at acting anything. I really wasn't very good.

MEH: Xanti Schawinsky was there the second year, the first year you were there.

SSR: I remember him.

MEH: Did you take part in – I'm trying to remember. They did a Dance of Death.

SSR: I remember seeing that and being very impressed, but I don't think I was a part of it. [NEGATIVE]

MEH: Do you remember how Bob directed his classes?

SSR: [LAUGHS] It was quite different than Rice's approach. It was more pedagogical, more academic. Also his directing of a play was very, very dictatorial. You might ask John Stix about this, because when I saw John last time we both laughed about it. He – Oh, *John Gabriel Borkmann*, the Ibsen play, *John Gabriel Borkmann*, I was in that with John Stix, and there was a sentence that I was to say, "I am always cold." Bob had a particular way that he wanted me to say this, and for some reason it didn't seem natural to me. It didn't come out of the part – but I tried, but I didn't do very well. When John and I discussed this later, he felt the same way about Bob Wunsch. It made me feel better in later years to find out that John had the same problem that I did. "I am always cold. I am

always cold. I am always cold!" I mean it was a special way that he wanted me to say this, which I did not grasp. [LAUGHS]

MEH: Let's try to remember some other people, and then I'll come back to some more general questions. You took courses in literature. Would that have been with Ken Kurtz?

SSR: I took the Shakespeare course with Ken Kurtz, [AFFIRMATIVE].

MEH: Did you take any art classes?

SSR: No, I didn't. I never did. I never did. I took – did a lot of music with Jalowetz, and took some piano lessons with Trude – it's Trude Jalowetz, yeah – Johanna. Johanna Jalowetz. But I took no art courses.

MEH: How do you remember Jalowetz, Dr. Jalowetz?

SSR: I loved him. Oh, he was a real, a real sweetheart.

MEH: Were these group classes, or were they private piano classes, or –

SSR: No, group classes. Singing chorales – Bach. Bach. We did a Bach cantata once that was just a very significant experience for me, to be a part of that with this wonderful director who just, just felt this music. He was so sweet.

MEH: Did you take classes with John Evarts also?

SSR: John Evarts? No, I don't think I ever took a course with John Evarts. I enjoyed his playing after supper and the dancing and so on, but I don't ever think I took a course with him – not that I remember.

MEH: What do you think – and this is partially hypothetical, but you've been to other schools, too – would have been the difference – Did it make a difference going to Black Mountain and studying with these people? Do you think if you had gone to a conventional school and studied with the same people, taking the

same courses – Do you think there was a difference, and if so, what might that difference have been. Tell me if I'm not speaking up enough.

SSR: You're not speaking up enough. I understand your question. In other words, was it the people or was it the institution? Hmm, that's an interesting question. I suppose if Jalowitz – Jalowitz had been in any other institution, he probably would have meant the same to me, would have been beautiful. But John Rice, I don't think he could have functioned the same way in another institution. There would have been a difference. This is a hypothetical question. That's my answer. But the people were very, very important. But the fact that this, this institution, the structure of Black Mountain, allowed these teachers, these instructors, these professors – gave them freedom to do this – is important.

MEH: Also, what do you think the difference was in the fact that you knew these people not just in class but in a community setting?

SSR: That's – Yes. That's very important, very important, because you could sit at the table and eat with them at night, or have breakfast with them, or meet them in the halls, or go a community meeting, go to a concert and have them there, Saturday night social things. That's a very important –

MEH: How do you remember community life? What do you think – I mean obviously community life was important, but what difference do you think it made?

SSR: Oh, golly, I think it made a tremendous difference. People were closer together. I mean, it's the difference between community and isolation. It's like living in a small town, with all the advantages and disadvantages, and living in New York City where you're in an apartment and don't even know the name of your

next-door neighbor. I mean it's – It's very important. I mean it's sort of obvious.

[LAUGHS]

MEH: Yes. Obviously it was important. The question – even in the city, you break down into neighborhoods and to small groups, just because as human beings we function that way. Well, then, not so much the importance, how would you describe community life? How would you describe community life in terms of how you function daily?

SSR: Well, you were with these people and you couldn't get away from them. I mean you were – they were there all the time, and you would see them in the halls or you would see them at the table, and you observed them and you were aware of – you were aware of relationships, you were aware of who was friends with who. Well, I'm getting sort of bogged down. You had to communicate with these people. You couldn't get away from it. If you felt as though you were getting along well and you had a nice group of friends, then you felt good, but if you felt that you were not – as I did at first. I felt – it was very hard for me at first. I was sort of shy and it was very hard to begin to feel a part of this community. It took a while. It took a while.

MEH: Did you take part – Obviously you did. What did you do on the Work Program?

SSR: Well, I did a variety of things, but I think that I did the most was the cement mixer.

MEH: That's when you were building that first semester at Lake Eden.

SSR: Right. Right. [AFFIRMATIVE]

MEH: They let a girl do the cement mixing?

SSR: Oh yeah! It was – it was a hand cement mixing. It straightened out my periods beautifully. I remember that. I was sort of irregular, but when I started doing the cement mixer, I just – knocked 'em out with regularity.

MEH: That's interesting.

SSR: That was fun. The Work Program was a lot of fun. It was a great deal of fun because you got on a truck and you drove over to Lake Eden, and it was a whole different level of experience than sitting in a class, discussing something.

MEH: But before Lake Eden, the college had a farm – the first couple of years you were there, before they started to work at Lake Eden. Did you work on the farm?

SSR: I don't ever remember having anything to do with the farm. Maybe I just don't remember it, or maybe I didn't participate. I have no idea. The Work Program at Lake Eden is what I remember. Where was the farm? (UNINTEL)

MEH: Well, in the early years there was a farm near Lee Hall that was part of that property. Then once they purchased the Lake Eden property, they started farming over there.

SSR: Well, I don't – have had no experience that I remember with that farm. Where was the farm? Where was the farm? Near Lee Hall?

MEH: I'm not sure exactly where it was. It was on the property. Actually I think they leased some nearby property when you were at Lee Hall. Then they, once they were at Lake Eden then they started preparing ground there, for farming. What do you remember about mealtimes?

SSR: Oh, mealtimes. Oh, they were fun. You had to decide where you were going to sit, and if you came in with some friends you just sat together, and if you

[LAUGHS] – if you came in by yourself, you looked around and decided where you wanted to sit. If you got there early, you went and you got the food and brought it in. If you didn't bring the food in, why you helped clear it off.

Everybody – it was a very cooperative endeavor, and of course there was a lots of comments by a number of people on "Ick," you know. This Francie Goldman always had comments about the food. I enjoyed the food, frankly. I had come from a real Depression background, and I thought the food was delicious. So I didn't really have any negative comments about it. But the people who – I noticed that the people who came from wealthier backgrounds, they were the ones that criticized the food. [LAUGHS] Those of us commoners, we enjoyed it. I learned to drink coffee. I had never drunk coffee, but I decided that would be the grownup thing to do.

MEH: What about entertainment at the college? I mean, you were really pretty isolated.

SSR: Oh yeah. We had wonderful concerts and dances and plays and then later on there was always something Saturday night, some kind of community thing Saturday night. Later on, I became aware of it – I mean, maybe it was that some of the faculty would have sort of cocktail parties, and invite their students. I don't know how they decided who they were inviting, but I remember going to those. I don't remember who the faculty were, but I remember I became acquainted with sherry at some of these parties. I enjoyed that.

MEH: Did you get to know the Dreiers?

SSR: Yeah. I knew them. I mean, I was not particularly close to them, but yes, I did know them. I think they were the ones that had sort of parties, these little cocktail parties.

MEH: Was there any real supervision of student life, in terms of your private life or activities?

SSR: I don't think so. I never felt that anybody was supervising me. I felt that – I felt that – The assumption was that we were responsible people, and we would handle ourselves in a responsible way. As a matter of fact, Fred Mangold was in charge of the – What was the program that you could do some work in the office and get a certain amount of money from the government? NYA, or something –

MEH: I think it was the National Youth Administration.

SSR: Right. Right. I applied for that, and I got it, and I did a certain amount of work in the office and it was very helpful, very helpful to me, because my family was absolutely – They were starting a newspaper, and they were very close to the wire. I reapplied – This is an interesting story because I think it's significant. I reapplied for the NYA help the next year and Fred gave me a thing to fill out. I filled it out, and I was to send it home for my parents to sign. Well, I neglected to do that in time, but I assumed that there was no reason that they would not do this. So I did not send it. I turned it – I signed my mother's name and turned it in to Fred, and he was terribly upset with me. He took me in his office and he gave me this long lecture about "Do you know if you forge somebody's signature, you could go to jail!" So, I was horrified, because I wasn't trying to be dishonest. I assumed that we were all honorable people there and trusted one

another, but he didn't. He didn't assume that. Of course, I didn't get my –
Because of this I didn't get my NYA thing for the next semester or quarter. But
that was a very shocking experience to me that he would feel it necessary to
give me this lecture about forgery.

MEH: Do you think he was trying to get you to understand the serious implications of
forgery? Or do you think it was just sort of a need to lecture? [LAUGHS]

SSR: He didn't trust me. He didn't trust me. I mean it was as though "You'd better be
careful, Sue, because you miss over here you're really going to be in trouble."
That's what I felt, and it wasn't, it wasn't that I was going to go out and become
a forger. I knew – I don't know.

MEH: You weren't trying to be dishonest. You were simplifying the process.

SSR: No, I was just simplifying the process, and since I had neglected to do that – If I
had been in Fred Mangold's shoes, what I would have done was to simply point
out that they couldn't do this since it was, it wasn't really my mother's signature.
I would have said "The natural consequences of this are that you don't get your
money for the next three months," and let it be a natural consequence thing
rather than this terrible assumption that I was an incipient criminal. I mean that
was – that was really rough. That was really rough.

MEH: What do you think was the effect of not having grades?

SSR: I think it was a good effect, because you weren't working, you weren't working
for the grades. You were working because you wanted to do a good job. I wish
they would eliminate grades in all schools. I think there'd be better[UNINTEL]. I
mean I'm sure there were many people who took advantage of it and just

goofed off, but I was always a very conscientious person. I mean I find it – I found it good not to have grades.

MEH: Some students have had the experience that they found disconcerting of feeling that the teacher was – of course grades were recorded for transfer purposes – of having the impression from the teacher that they were doing really good work, but then once they got a copy of their transcript later, finding out that they were given a very mediocre grade. They felt this was sort of deceptive. That if grades were going to be recorded, then they should – the students should know. But it started with the ideal situation of no grades, and then they realized that students had to have transfer – So it was another situation of "What would I have done in that situation?" or "Could it have been done in a better way."

SSR: Well, that's interesting. Now I've heard that from people, that some people were disconcerted. Now when I found – when I needed a transcript and I found out that there were grades, I was a little surprised. But I understood that this was necessary. But I wasn't disappointed in the grades that I got, but I did, I was surprised that I'd taken this course that I couldn't even remember taking [LAUGHS]. I thought oh, my God!

MEH: I'm asking you to remember things that happened more than sixty years ago, or sixty years ago, so sometimes I just sort of probe because I find that ideas float.

SSR: Oh, yes. Once you start asking questions, then things do come up.

MEH: Right. You say you really think grades are not good. It would be good to do away with them. What do you think was the difference between having grades and not having grades, in terms of the learning experience?

SSR: Well, in my experience, I don't think it really mattered. I really don't, because I came from a family and a background that didn't raise me with rewards and punishment, and this is a subject that I'm very much interested in with little children. I think we do too much of training these children with rewards and punishment. It's stickers in school and grades in school and parents give children money for getting A's. I mean we have too much of that. There's too much competition. My family background was such that I didn't – I was not influenced by this. So for me, I just – If I was interested in something and I wanted to do it, I did it. I did my best without the grades hanging over me. But I don't know – you've interviewed a lot of people, and I'm sure that maybe somebody who's been raised in the rewards-punishment complex, felt that they were missing something. But I don't know. So for myself I can't say.

MEH: Did you ever leave the college to go into the surrounding area?

SSR: [AFFIRMATIVE]. We went with Wunsch a lot. We went to give plays at different places. Of course, very few people had cars, so we didn't do a lot of traipsing around. But I remember getting a ride and going to the village to go to the drugstore. I remember going to a sort of a gospel something-or-other with some other kids. This woman, this woman was a – Well, what would you call her? I mean she was very fundamentalist – screaming and speaking in tongues and – what do you call those people? Well, anyway, I was very, very impressed by this. She threw herself on the floor and she – Ohh! I thought "Well that's an aspect of life that I have never seen before" – that kind of religion.

MEH: Were you with any religious background?

SSR: Very, very liberal religious. My mother had been a Unitarian, on and off, and my father didn't have anything to do with churches. He said later in life, he said, "If, if I had had to go to a church, I would have gone to the Unitarian Church." That's what he said. So I had no formal religious training, at all. I also remember going into Asheville – and this is quite an experience for me – with Frances Goldman and several other people who had a car. Going in to find a bootlegger. Now this was a – I came from a very innocent background [LAUGHS]. A lot of this was so – To buy this moonshine. I could see going into a neighborhood and going up to a house and knocking on a door. I didn't knock on the door. I sat in the car. They did this knock on the door and there was some negotiation, and they came back – So I tasted this stuff, and it was just awful [LAUGHS]. So our trips afield were not frequent.

MEH: Did you go to Roy's? Do you remember Roy's?

SSR: Oh, yes, oh, yes. In my later years, yes I did go to Roy's. You could walk to Roy's.

MEH: What was Roy's like?

SSR: Oh, they had a jukebox, and a lot of college kids, a lot of – it was fun. It was different. Dancing and there was something that you drank called "A Lake Eden Wangaroo." Has anybody told you about the Lake Eden Wangaroo? Well, the Lake Eden Wangaroo, as I recollect, was served in a sort of like a soda. Oh, like ice cream soda glass. You had a scoop of ice cream in the bottom. Then you had some beer, and I guess it was 3.2 beer. Then something called Porter. You couldn't get Porter then. It was dry. But anyway it was ice cream and beer

mixed together with something else, and you drank it with a straw. That was a Lake Eden Wangaroo.

MEH: Yeah, people did go down to South Carolina to get alcohol, and bring it back from New York, so there probably was – There were options.

SSR: Right, right. [LAUGHTER]

MEH: Another question I was going to ask you. What do you think – We talked a little bit about community, but obviously Black Mountain was not a utopia, and there were a lot of community conflicts going on. Were you aware of these community conflicts?

SSR: I was just such an innocent person. I was not aware of the conflict about Rice, and I was right there. It was right under my nose. I was not aware of that. Later on I became much more aware of what was going on – my last year. Very much more aware of that. That was after Jerry and I became friends, and he was very involved with that so I became more aware of it. But if you asked me right now what the conflict was, I couldn't tell you. (OVERTALK) more aware of it.

MEH: That was generally the conflict surrounding Rice, that you're referring to?

SSR: No, this was after Rice had left. But the Rice conflict, I just was – I was not aware of it. I was not aware of it at all.

MEH: Do you have other particular memories? Anecdotes of things that happened that you remember?

SSR: Oh, I'm sure. In connection with what?

MEH: Well, just life in general. Daily life. Food. Theatre. Particular individuals.

SSR: Well, ask me another question. Things will probably come up.

MEH: There were a lot of European refugees at the college when you were there. Were you really aware of the plight of Jews and intellectuals in Europe? The reasons that they were there?

SSR: I think I was, but not terribly. I mean, I realized – I was just an amazingly innocent person. I look back and I think "How could I have been so stupid?" [LAUGHS] I really wasn't – I know that a number of my friends, Phyllis Thomas, Phyllis Josephs, she was so much more aware of things in the world and what was happening. Later on she said, "Do you remember when Einstein was there?" I didn't know Einstein was there. I just, I just – it just went right over my head for some reason. I remember – I mean there were other things that I sort of latched onto more. I remember there was a person there whose name I don't remember, but he was some kind of well-known professor of music, and he came and he gave a talk on Mozart. Now I remember that. I remember some of the things he said, even, about Mozart. That I remember. But politically, I didn't have much of an awareness.

MEH: Are there particular visitors that you remember – to the college?

SSR: I remember – Not too many. I remember Claude Steinau's – Claude Monteux's mother. Now there again, it was music. I was very attuned to music. She was a visitor, and she played the piano just beautifully. I also remember being invited to her house in New York City during one holiday and being served by a waiter or a woman, a maid or somebody, where they brought the plate around to your left and served you some. Now that was a new experience for me. Also we had tongue, which I'd never tasted before, and I thought it was delicious. The winter holidays were interesting because many of the students came from the New

York area, and we always got together. You'd think we'd take a vacation from one another, but we always got together in New York and had New Year's Eve parties, and it was fun. That was very, very happy, a very happy time. But I really – I don't have too much memory of visitors.

MEH: A couple of names that we sort of didn't run through – Was Thornton Wilder there when you were there?

SSR: Not that I remember. He probably was.

MEH: Clifford Odets?

SSR: I think I remember Clifford Odets. Yes, yes.

MEH: What about May Sarton?

SSR: Don't remember her.

MEH: Okay, what do you think was the effect on the community of having the refugee teachers there? What difference did it make, if any?

SSR: I think they added a tremendous amount. They added a great deal of knowledge of their culture and their ideas, and first-hand experience of people who had had to leave, leave a country. I think it was good. It was good, because there certainly wasn't any other kind of diversity. I mean when I compare the diversity that we're facing today, of Mexicans and Arabians – I mean Charlotte is an amazingly diverse community right now. But Black Mountain was pretty generally sort of WASPy, except for the refugees.

MEH: Did you have any contact with the black community in the area?

SSR: I guess our only contact was Rubye and Jack in the kitchen. We all just loved them. They were just – But that was, you know, they were there and we were here.

MEH: How do you remember them? Why did you love them? What were they like?

SSR: Oh, they were very friendly, they were very jolly, they were very helpful, they were very open, direct – very genuine. Authentic.

MEH: Why did you leave the college? You didn't graduate.

SSR: Oh, I didn't graduate.

MEH: Well, going back a little bit, to interrupt you, your train of thought. Did you take the Senior Division exam?

SSR: Oh, I did. I took it and I passed with flying colors. My only problem was that they felt I didn't spell very well, and, of course, they were absolutely correct. I mean my progressive education was catching up with me [LAUGHS]. So they put me in the Senior Division provisionally, if I took a special spelling tutorial, and I suggested that Mary Barnes would be the one. She – I'm sure you're heard this from other people you've interviewed. She was an absolutely marvelous person. She was not well, but I would go there twice a week or three times a week to her apartment, and we had a list of spelling words and I would come back and be tested on those spelling words. But we had these wonderful conversations about everything under the sun. She was a very, very important person to me.

MEH: It's interesting – I find this repeatedly, that there were people – and maybe it had to do partially with both the character of people and the small community – but very few college students can look back on their experience and have this sort of personal relationship with anyone in the college community other than other students. She's one person who comes up frequently as a person who people really loved.

SSR: Yeah, she was. There was something about her. After I left, I guess it was a year later or something. I knew where she lived in New York and I went to the – she and her husband lived in an apartment house or something, I guess – I can't remember. I don't remember what it was, but I remember going in the lobby and inquiring for her and they said she died. I just could have cried.

MEH: So why did you leave the college? I'm going to interrupt you again. Back to the Senior Division exam. What do you remember about the Senior Division exam, the whole process?

SSR: I don't remember much about it. [LAUGHS] I know it took a long time. It was a lot of writing and questions and then there were oral questions. But I guess I did it. I'm surprised, but anyway I did it and they put me in the senior division, and then I made the plan of what I was going to study and what I was going to do, and so on. I guess I went through a year. Then I came to the realization that it was a bad plan. It wasn't what I wanted to do. Really. It wasn't what I was capable – I mean I had this idea that I was going to be an actress. Well, I realized that I just didn't have it. I just didn't have it at all. I enjoyed the directing and – But I realized that I was going – climbing the wrong tree, and if I stayed I would have to – To be honest to myself, I would have to change my course. The financial situation was very bad. I mean I just, my parents – I mean the college needed money and they were raising – I did have student aid, but they would have to raise it even more. My family couldn't do it, and Kate Edelman, who was – this family that had first helped – influenced me to go to Black Mountain, she was just wonderful. She said "We'll loan you the money. We'll loan you the money because you really should finish." But it would have been a

fair amount of money, because I would have had to stay longer. So all things considered, I decided to leave. So – which was not a good decision, but – It was not a good decision at all, because it took me years, to get back, to go back to school and get my degrees. But that's the way it worked.

MEH: What did you do when you left?

SSR: I went to New York and lived with some friends in New York and joined a dance group and pieced together a living of some sort. Did some typing for – I was a very good typist. I couldn't spell [LAUGHS], but I was a good typist. For the – Columbia University has a typing service. You could get assignments and get paid, per page and so on. Sundry things.

MEH: Were you in touch with other Black Mountain people in New York at that time?

SSR: Yeah, I was.

MEH: Who was there then?

SSR: Hmm. I don't remember specifically.

MEH: So you did that for a while, but sort of just run through –

SSR: I did that for a year, and then the War – Pearl Harbor came, and then Jerry left. He had graduated. He was one of their really top-notch students. He graduated. We were married in June of that –

MEH: And then did you work? You had children?

SSR: Okay.

MEH: What was he doing? What was Jerry Wolpert doing?

SSR: Well, he went in the army in September. We were married in June.

MEH: Was that '42?

SSR: He had graduated – Yeah, I guess so. He worked temporarily as a cashier at Plaza Hotel, and then in September went into the army. We lived, oh we lived with some friends. We sublet an apartment or lived in an apartment up near the university for that summer, and then he went into the army, and then I moved into a rooming house – not a rooming house, but a room with kitchen privileges, up near the university. Oh, and I remember now who was in New York. Morris Simon was in New York, and living in a house on Morton Street. I lived in a room on Morton Street at some point. So that was before the War, beginning of the War.

MEH: And so then Jerry was in service during the War.

SSR: He was in service, and he was in Kansas. When he got stationed someplace that was relatively permanent, I went out there and worked for a newspaper in Hayes, Kansas. I think we were there for two years, and we were in Texas for a little while, and then in Nebraska. Finally the War ended – He had a medical discharge, toward the end of the War. Then we came back to New York and he went to Columbia, got his Master's on the GI Bill –

MEH: In?

SSR: And we lived on Charles Street.

MEH: What field – Was he in political – What field was he in?

SSR: Philosophy, Political Science. He got his degree in Sociology and then went to – got a job at the University of Buffalo. Then we had – I got pregnant after a while and had a child, and [LAUGHS] You know, it's funny [WEEPING] Oh, I'm sorry.

MEH: It's a good time to change the tape.

[END OF RECORDING ON TAPE 1; TAPE 2 BEGINS]

MEH: So you went to Buffalo.

SSR: We went to Buffalo and had a child, who was here. I don't think you saw Tom, who married Joan. Then I got pregnant again, and he contracted polio – bulbar polio – when I was still pregnant with the second child. So that was the end of that era in my life. But it was interesting –

MEH: What year was –

SSR: I really was so fascinated by children, children and you know, just having children and realizing – and we lived out in Clarence – that what I really was interested in was education and the combination of – I also came from a newspaper family and had done some work reporting. The combination of education and writing was really a good field for me, but it – I mean those years were very difficult because I was seven years a single parent, with these two children, but the families were marvelous. Jerry's family and my family were very supportive and very helpful.

MEH: Did you stay in Buffalo then?

SSR: No, I left Buffalo. I left Buffalo. I came back to New Jersey because both the families were there.

MEH: What year was that?

SSR: Had absolutely no money, no insurance, no nothing.

MEH: What year was that?

SSR: '49.

MEH: And you came back, and you had a small child and one on the way.

SSR: [AFFIRMATIVE] Right. Right.

MEH: And so you continued to work –

SSR: I worked on the newspaper.

MEH: Tell me a little – I've just done a biographical sketch on Emil Willimetz, because
–

SSR: He worked at one time (OVERTALK) I think he worked for my father. Also Dave
Way I think worked for my father at one time.

MEH: All the guys in printing. So your father had started his own newspaper at that
point?

SSR: Right, right. He had started it. In the midst of the Depression he had started it.
He and my mother. He and my mother.

MEH: This was in Dunellen, New Jersey?

SSR: [AFFIRMATIVE].

MEH: What was the newspaper?

SSR: It was a – Four weeklies. The Weekly Call, Piscataway Chronicle, Middlesex
Mirror. Three, I guess.

MEH: So you went back and worked for your father for a while.

SSR: I did writing and reporting, [AFFIRMATIVE]. That was fun. Then I remarried
after seven years. Then we came to North Carolina because my husband
worked for Celanese, and so in a couple years we came back to North Carolina
and here I've been ever since. Full cycle.

MEH: At some point you went back to school to get a degree.

SSR: Yes. Yes. After, after we were here I went back to school. I went to Goddard,
and –

MEH: You went all the way back to Vermont. Did you do that long distance, or – ?

SSR: It was an ABP (?) Program. I got my teaching certificate, and then I got my Master's here.

MEH: Do you remember? Did they accept your Black Mountain credits?

SSR: Yeah, they did. They did. When I first came here I thought "Well, why don't I go to UNCC. That's convenient." When I first came here, when did we come here – '61? Oh my gosh. Oh, of course, they wouldn't dream of accepting the Black Mountain credits. You have to start all over again. So I gave that up. In fact, you couldn't say to anybody that you'd been to Black Mountain College because you were suspect. It's quite different now. You've been to Black Mountain? "Ohhhhhh, tell me about it!" [LAUGHS]

MEH: Even when I started my research in 1970, it was very – considered – you don't want to be associated, a nice girl like you, this is not what you want to do. So – But it's interesting that the private schools, and the Ivy League schools, these experimental schools, were much less bound by state regulations and whatever. They were much more ready to accept Black Mountain credits than the state systems.

SSR: Right. The state system is – Yes.

MEH: The more exclusive the school, the more accepting it was. [LAUGHTER] So you came in, and your field then was Early Childhood Education?

SSR: That's what I warmed to. [AFFIRMATIVE]

MEH: And you taught?

SSR: [AFFIRMATIVE] I started – I started a school, and I taught for a number of years, and I've done workshops. Now I'm teaching at the community college. Part-time, just part time. Consulting. I always planned to do more writing than

I've done, but I have a lot of things sort of half underway and maybe I'll finish them and maybe I won't.

MEH: You've written one book, or more?

SSR: One book. [OVERTALK] It's still in print.

MEH: What is the name of the book.

SSR: *How to Generate Values in Young Children.*

MEH: Were the Steinaus at Black Mountain when you were there? Morton and Barbara Steinau, were they there?

SSR: [AFFIRMATIVE]. That's right, they were there. Right. Right. I have Barbara's book, and I need to write her. I think it's very good. It's very good, and I have a little bit more to read in it, and I want to write her. Yeah, we met each other, oh, a couple of years ago I guess. She and Mort came up to our mountain place. In fact, I've met Mort a number of times since Black Mountain because he was working – He was connected with *Time*, wasn't he, for a long time? Anyway, I used to, when I was in New Jersey doing reporting, I went to a lot of – with a press card, I went to a lot of these gatherings, and I used to see Mort.

MEH: Looking back, do you think that your studying at Black Mountain really had any impact on your ideas about early childhood education?

SSR: [AFFIRMATIVE]. Yes, I think so. I think so. But it supported – I think I said this in something I wrote for something at these Black Mountain things – that it was a kind of a continuum, because I had my family and this progressive school I went to, and then Black Mountain was the same educational philosophy in a way, and so sort of the going into Early Childhood was kind of a continuum of something that already had started. But I keep elaborating on it, and learning,

and thinking more about it. So yes, Black Mountain definitely was a part of that.

[AFFIRMATIVE]

MEH: It seems that you – your own early education and – of which Black Mountain was a continuum, and even Goddard, probably –

SSR: Right.

MEH: Created just certain patterns of thinking about things. Certain ways of approaching things.

SSR: [AFFIRMATIVE]. Right. Right. Yeah.

MEH: Looking back at Black Mountain, what do you think about the college really worked educationally and what do you think did not work?

SSR: Well, I think in my experience, which has just been at Blue Ridge, I think what worked best was if the philosophy, the very good educational philosophy, was in the hands of a person who was a good teacher and who understood it, then it worked. If it was in the hands – I mean, there were, there were at Black Mountain a number of people who came because they kind of liked the idea of it, but they really didn't understand what they were doing, and they really didn't like young people. It was like Fred Mangold. He was ready to distrust me. I mean, they were professors from – the "university sort", in quotes, the "university professors" – and they really didn't get it. You didn't feel that they got it when you were there. You didn't feel any connection with them, you just didn't feel that. But I really think there were some just absolutely top notch excellent ideas about education at Black Mountain College, and it didn't have to do – I mean I'm distressed. I'm distressed by the Black Mountain developing this reputation as an arts college. That really distresses me. Yes, they did a lot with

the arts, and after the War it was the emphasis was on arts, but I think the thing about art was – and this is exactly what I believe in Early Childhood – the use of the art, use of art, creativ- – . I write much better than I talk sometimes. But I think it's the discipline – it's the discipline of the art that creates the value of the art – not that you're going to be "an artist." It's the experience, the process, the process of the art, the discipline of the materials and so on. The original idea was that art was not supposed to be a superfluous sort of extracurricular activity for the students, but that it should be a basic part of your basic academic education.

MEH: Somebody corrected me when – I tried in my book to try to create – You know, I said explicitly, "This is about the arts at the college." I still tried to create a broader context for it.

SSR: I think you do.

MEH: But I said in the book that the arts were the center of education. I think it was Emil who said, "You know, that's not really what it was about. The arts were really an integrated part of the experience, not an isolated center," which I thought was a valid correction. An improvement in thinking. It seems to me that, and I'm just sort of throwing this out for you to agree or disagree or elaborate on – I may not be speaking loudly. In a sense, in terms of the original founders' ideas, the college really actually succeeded throughout its history in that the arts became an integral part of community life – whether it was drama productions or music concerts or Saturday night dancing – that it really was just as much a part of life as eating and sleeping and working on the farm instead of something set aside.

SSR: Right. Yeah, absolutely. Absolutely. I'm very grateful for the discipline that I had in the music, the drama, the participation in these forms, and what it required. What I learned from it was great. The music I accepted. I knew I was not going to be a musician. I thought I was going to be an actress. [LAUGHS] But it's, it should be an integral part of education. More and more they're realizing this in early, in elementary education. In Charlotte we have a number of magnet schools that emphasize the arts as being a part of academic learning. Yeah.

MEH: Any other thoughts about the college? Who are people – students – you remember particularly?

SSR: Oh, golly. I keep up with a number of them in a peripheral sort of way. I haven't heard anything from Emil for a long time. Is he publishing his memoirs? Many, many – Marian and Emil and most recently Morris Simon, who was very very dear to me, died. He died.

MEH: Because I had lost touch, and I assumed – I interviewed – Do you have his – I was saying that Black Mountain people, even in their eighties, are very active still. Teaching –

SSR: Maybe this had something to do with the whole approach toward life of Black Mountain. I don't know. I don't know.

MEH: I think it does. But I think one thing somebody pointed out to me early on is that – which I think is true – even though the people who went to Black Mountain have done extraordinary and very interesting things with their lives generally, that Black Mountain didn't attract the ordinary person just looking for a pattern in life. So, I think this was an influence of Black Mountain in that it reinforced

certain things in people, but the fact that you arrived there meant that somehow you were setting yourself apart from the ordinary course of life.

SSR: Right. Right. I think so. I think so. Yeah.

MEH: I think both worked. Yeah. Any other particular memories of people? Let's see, who else was there? Kenneth Kurtz. Fred Mangold. Did you take psychology with Moellenhoff or was Straus there?

SSR: I took a psychology course with Dr. Straus, which I have no recollection of at all.

MEH: That's the one you don't remember.

SSR: I don't remember that. [LAUGHS] I don't remember that at all.

MEH: How did you dress at the college?

SSR: I heard you. I'm trying to remember. I dressed with whatever I could find, because it was the Depression. But we did wear pants. I remember I got my first pair of pants, sort of, they were green corduroy pants, and I was so tickled with them but that was after I had been at Black Mountain a couple of years because women just didn't wear pants in those days. Those pants – we had to pack everything up in the spring – up in the attic of Lee Hall – and I packed those pants up and they never showed up and I was very disappointed.

[LAUGHS] So I don't remember particularly what we dressed in.

MEH: What do you remember about the – You were there the first semester they were building the Studies Building. What do you remember about that, besides running the cement mixer.

SSR: I remember sort of the excitement of going in there, over there, and building something and realizing that I wasn't going to be there, which was sort of sad in

a way. But I was, I was excited about going to New York and trying to find my way.

MEH: Any other memories? [LAUGHTER] Things float. I'm very patient on tape.

SSR: Well they do float. Golly, now – What – Well – I guess my mind is sort of dry right now.

MEH: Okay.

[END OF INTERVIEW]

[END OF TRANSCRIPT]