

INTERVIEWEE: FERNANDO SAENZ LEON
INTERVIEWER: MARY EMMA HARRIS
PARTICIPANT: ELEANOR SMITH LEON
LOCATION: Ann Arbor, Michigan
DATE: November 1, 2005
INTERVIEW NO.: 365
MEDIA: DV Cassette (1)
TRANSCRIPTION: Ellen Dissanayake, February 5, 2006. Corrected by MEH, May 2019.

NOTE: Leon was having difficulty hearing and also was suffering from dementia. When I repeated and rephrased questions, that has not been transcribed. His wife Eleanor Leon was helpful.

Leon did not use his mother's family name Saenz as his surname in the United States, as was the custom in Spain. His obituary lists his name as Fernando Saenz Leon.

[BEGINNING OF SIDE 1, TAPE 1]

MEH: [GIVES IDENTIFICATION] Fernando, how did you come to be at Black Mountain? How did you get to Black Mountain?

FL: I didn't walk. I didn't fly. I went by car. [LAUGHS] And I came from Spain to New York, and in New York—when I was in New York, I could speak Spanish, French, Italian, and some German but no English. So, in New York I had to learn English. And to do that, they asked me to go to Black Mountain College where some of the teachers were German or Spanish, you know. And so I learned the language in Black Mountain College. And from there, of course, after three or four years, I went to Columbia University in New York, where I learned all that one can learn about everything.

ESL: Engineering.

FL: And when I graduated, I was taken to the U.S. Navy, and I was in the U.S. Navy three years or four years, and they were very happy with me because—*habla*

Españole. [LAUGHS] I spoke Spanish and that took me a little way down, I think down to Florida. All the way down to the South, because I spoke Spanish quite well.

MEH: Of course, you did. That was native language.

FL: Of course, yes. In Spain.

MEH: With whom did you take classes at Black Mountain? Who were your teachers?

FL: Teachers, well I learned quite a bit by myself by talking with the girls and the boys there, and the teachers—I don't remember their names, but they were very nice. Who were they, Ellie?

ESL: Well, we had some very good friends—John Evarts—

FL: John Evarts, yeah.

ESL: I'm trying to think myself.

MEH: Did you take—Let me look here, just a second. I have a list of some classes I think that you took. You took math. Was that with Ted Dreier?

FL: Dreier. Ted Dreier.

MEH: And architecture, that would have been with Larry Kocher.

FL: Yes, yes.

MEH: And I see you took general courses and you took science. Was—who would have been teaching science then? Oh, oh, was Straus there then, Erwin Straus?

FL: No.

ESL: Yes.

MEH: Who was teaching science? That was before Hansgirg. Anyway, you took a general curriculum.

ESL: Bob Wunsch was teaching kind of an English writing course.

FL: They used me and abused me because I spoke Spanish and French and even Italian, and some German. The only thing I didn't learn in Europe was English, because in Europe England was a little island, you know, so as I grew up my family was never going to England.

MEH: So when you—At Black Mountain, you were there the year they built the Studies Building?

FL: The what building?

MEH: The Studies Building—the big, long building at Lake Eden?

FL: Oh, oh yes. I was working on that.

MEH: What do you remember about that? What did you do?

FL: Oh, the building on Black Mountain College? I remember the hammer and the nails and hitting my fingers, you know. I was not a great builder, but everybody, everybody worked, everybody learned and it was really nice. The people were very friendly, you know, which is something that I needed when I came from Europe to this country. Particularly the girls, the girls were very nice.

MEH: They tell me you were very handsome.

FL: What?

MEH: The girls tell me you were very handsome.

FL: Well, I would say, "I speak no English." [LAUGHS]

MEH: And they taught you.

FL: And they taught me, yeah.

MEH: Those good Black Mountain girls.

FL: Yeah. And, of course, I left there and went to New York.

MEH: We'll come back to New York in a minute. Let's go back to Spain a bit. Tell me about your family in Spain.

FL: In Spain?

MEH: Tell me about your family there.

FL: Well, my father was very high-up in the air force. He was a tremendous aeronautical engineer, and this is what he learned and this is what he was doing. And my mother's family were also very well-off, you know, and they were from the south of Spain. And I was—it was a really nice life. And then we used to go all over Europe, learning languages. I went to Italy, went to France, went to Germany, and I even went to Russia. And when I went to Russia, of course, I didn't know a word, but I went to the north because I was going to [SOUNDS LIKE: the university] and in Russia they said "Oh, Fernandito, palalito [PH]." And they didn't speak any Spanish either. But we would talk in German, more or less. But I was so impressed with Russia because in my trip I went to the north, part of it to the North Pole, where they took me all the way down through Russia to the south until they dropped me in the—[LAUGHS] I have forgot the name of the town. And when I went to the capital of Russia, they said "Oh, we're sorry, Fernando, but, you know, we have a problem in this capital so we have to go around." I guess [UNINTEL]. I loved the way they treated me in Russia. Gosh.

MEH: What were you doing there? You were very young.

FL: Oh no—Yes, I was there just learning languages. I was a Spaniard. I want to learn French, of course, German, and English and Italian. In Spain you only have to talk Spanish, you know.

MEH: Did all of your brothers do this?

FL: What?

MEH: Did any of your brothers do this?

FL: Oh, yes, of course. We all had to. We all had to. My—You know, in Spain we all spoke Spanish, and my mother spoke French and my father also spoke in other language in Europe to get together with people. And we learned languages also because we would go to spend two weeks in Germany or four weeks in Italy or something—to learn languages. It was—well, we had a very good family, teaching us. My father was—But I was born in Africa. Everybody I tell gets scared. “Africa, my God!”

MEH: Where in Africa?

FL: The north of Africa is part of Spain.

ESL: Morocco.

MEH: Morocco. Was your father stationed there then?

FL: No. No, but we owned that part of Morocco.

ESL: His mother was born in Morocco.

MEH: So, they had property there.

ESL: Yes.

MEH: Okay.

FL: Well, the north part of Africa was all Spanish and beautiful. Beautiful. Punta Negra. Wow, I still dream about Punta Negra. And south, south of Larache, which is the town we were, there was a tremendous—

ESL: Desert.

FL: Desert. Desert, just—without grass. Terrific. Just sand, sand, sand. Only desert. From Larache to south it was sand [UNINTEL WORD]. And the only way to go south was to go to the shoreline, which is what we did because, you know, there was—in Spain that tremendous civil war. They sent my father in the United States, and we went also because we were in Larache, and we went in a ship called the Exemelia [PH] and the Exemelia was a tremendous ship, bringing cork from Africa to New York. Cork. [LAUGHS] It was my mother and the four children. Five children. Five children.

MEH: But before that—But now I'm confused a little bit. You had a very privileged childhood in Europe. You had a very special childhood. Privileged. And so your mother came over, but was that before you were involved in the civil war?

FL: No, no, no.

MEH: That was after you were involved in the civil war?

FL: In the civil war of Spain? Well, no, we left.

MEH: Okay. Because I understood you and your brother fought in the civil war?

FL: My father was sent to the United States to buy equipment to fight in the civil war, and at the same time he said, "Okay, I'm going to spend here four, five, six months, and I want my family." So all the family was taken—my mother and all the children—

ESL: But that was during the civil war. [OVERTALK]

FL: Yeah, civil war, and I was at the time, I don't know, twelve, fourteen years old.

ESL: Seventeen, I think.

MEH: Because I had been told a story about—one of the Black Mountain myths, maybe, of which there are many—about you and Paco being in the civil war and your having been fighting and then meeting up in the same camp.

ESL: Oh, absolutely. The concentration camp.

MEH: The concentration camp.

ESL: In France.

MEH: That was in France.

ESL: Yes.

MEH: And that was because they were fighting?

ESL: Yes.

MEH: Okay, so they were fighting in the war.

ESL: They lost the war and had to leave.

MEH: Right. And they had to leave.

ESL: You know, walking to France.

MEH: Walking to France. So now is this a different trip than he went with his mother and his—

ESL: Yes.

MEH: Okay, that's what I was trying to put together.

ESL: This was later. This was the end of the civil war.

FL: They killed the three brothers of my father—the bastards who were there. And I went when I was an American, doing business in Europe, I went there and went to Sevilla to see the only sister of my father that was alive—was called Anjelita. And I went with her, and she told me that in Kanaf Leon [PH] was the other girl of my father's daughter. She said, "Don't look for her because she has lost her brains—she's crazy and she goes back and forth." She says, "I am all right because I am here in Sevilla, in the south, and [UNINTEL] but westward—and my husband comes from Portugal every night. He gets here at eight o'clock at night, and we go to bed and sleep and so forth, and at three o'clock in the morning he goes back to Portugal." Isn't it funny to remember those things, because I was—I must have really just grown up in the United States but seeing the horrible things of the civil war and the people that were killed and all—And this woman, this lady was wonderful. She was called Anjelita. Anjelita is a Spanish name—little angel.

MEH: So you went from this perfect childhood to fighting this war. This was an enormous change in your life. [BREAK IN RECORDING?] And then you came to New York and from New York to Black Mountain?

FL: Yes, yes. Yes, I grew up in Spain. I grew up in Spain, and I finished high school in Spain, and when I came to the United States, I was sixteen, seventeen, eighteen years old.

ESL: He went to a beautiful school in Spain.

MEH: I was going to ask him what his education.

ESL: You should ask him about that.

FL: About what?

ESL: Instituto Escuela—your school in Spain. Tell her a little bit about it.

MEH: I wondered how you were educated in Spain.

FL: The best schools in the world were in Spain. Period. I came to the United States, and I felt they were stupid. The Americans didn't know how to teach. Children, they didn't know anything. You know, the Spaniards discovered America anyway, years and years ago, and they started talking to the children and [OVERTALK]. It's true.

ESL: Tell her about the school.

MEH: Wait just a second. I'll keep him on track Ellie. Okay, so tell me about the school that you went to in Spain. Why was it so good?

FL: Because it was the best school in Spain, the best school in Europe, and the best school in the world.

MEH: Can you tell me anything—?

FL: My father used his brains to do that, and actually, you know, Madrid is a very large city so [LAUGHS] when we were little, we were in one part of Madrid and going to school, da-da-da, and then when we were not, we went to the other part of Madrid because that's where the big studies were. And we finished not only high school, we came to the United States completely studied, you know. I didn't have to go to school here.

MEH: What do you remember about your school in Spain? Do you remember anything in particular?

FL: I remember that I played basketball all the time. [LAUGHTER] Because we had two hours of study in the morning with half-an-hour in between, and two hours for lunch, and then three hours in the afternoon with one hour for also playing basketball. And most of us liked to play basketball but we had the—right next was big, big place for playing football. The boys and girls who want football, they would go there, and the basketball was a much better game and that school was wonderful because besides the basketball and the football, we had a *fronton*. Do you know what that is? It's a big wall and you throw the ball, a small ball, back and forth and play *fronton*. Two or three people, the distance from—They all—That was a wonderful school, you know. And besides that, we had tennis. If you didn't want to play football or *fronton*, tennis—you'd go play tennis. I went to that school for six to eight years.

MEH: It doesn't sound like you had any studies. You just had sports.

FL: Oh, no, because we went to school from eight o'clock in the morning to eleven o'clock, two hours of school, and then three hours in the evening. Seven hours of classes and two hours to eat.

MEH: Was this a church school, a state school, a private school?

FL: No, it was a new school, but it was for everybody, even some black girls would come or black boys that had come from Africa. And sometimes some come from Portugal, certainly, and from France because the schools in France were not as good. But Spain, oooh!

MEH: Are there other questions that you want to ask him about the school that you think would trigger memories?

ESL: Well the thing is this school was separated from the church, completely.

MEH: So, it was a state school.

ESL: And Javal Francesco [PH], the man that lived in New York—

FL: Who, Ellie?

ESL: De Los Rios, Francesco de Los Rios, was very involved with that school.

MEH: Ohh! Because I think he was at Black Mountain in the summer of '43. In the summer of '43 they had a special institute for refugees, to help them adapt, you know, to American ways, and he was there. I don't know anything about him.

[MEH: He was not there.]

ESL: Well he was—I met him. That's all I can say.

MEH: He probably learned about it through the Leon family.

FL: What is this?

ESL: No. They told him about Black Mountain.

MEH: Right. That's what I mean. He probably got there through the—

ESL: He was living in New York. He had to leave Spain too, and told the Leon family about Black Mountain.

MEH: Oh, he told the Leon family about Black Mountain. Okay.

ESL: He was very aware of that.

MEH: What did your father do when he came to this country? What did he do?

FL: To come to this country?

MEH: Did he have a business here? How did he earn his living here?

FL: My father was an engineer and was a number one in manufacturing engineering things, and coming to here, everybody in New York wanted him to work there for them. My father was [UNINTEL] to anybody in the United States.

ESL: Bellanca.

FL: What?

ESL: Bellanca.

FL: No, Bellanca was another man but he was—

ESL: Well, he wanted *papi* to work with him. He was an airplane person in the United States, and they wouldn't let *papi* work with them because they said he was a—

FL: Because what?

ESL: —a something-something fascist.

FL: What?

ESL: Pre-something fascist. Anyway, the State Department wouldn't let him work with—

FL: Who? My father.

MEH: Because they said his father was a fascist.

ESL: They said he was a fascist.

MEH: They couldn't have been more wrong.

FL: When he came to the United States, I don't want to say this because I'm not—That happened just for a few, a few weeks, you know, until they finally realized that my father was even better than anybody in the United States in engineering and so forth. And although he was getting older, and he didn't want to work very much. But everybody in the United States thought that my father

was “number one.” “Number one” for anything to do with the *Aviación*—the Air Force [OVERTALK] And they called him to advise and so forth. What?

ESL: “Premature anti-fascist.” In other words, a Communist, kind of, person.

MEH: Okay. Oh, I see.

ESL: Because he was very much on the Republic in Spain. [DISCUSSION OF TERMS IS NOT TRANSCRIBED]

MEH: This is what they called him? Okay. So they thought he was more left-leaning. [OVERTALK]

ESL: Yes.

FL: Well that’s nothing, Ellie. That’s nothing.

ESL: That makes more sense. [OVERTALK]

MEH: Okay. So you and Francisco went to Black Mountain. Paco.

FL: I went to Black Mountain. Paco went later. Much later. Because he was younger, you know.

MEH: After you. Okay.

FL: I went to Black Mountain College for three or four years, and then I went to university in New York. [SINGS theme song of Black Mountain College “because we have a beautiful brain.”]

ESL: [SPEAKS] “I’m the glamor-girl of Black Mountain College because I have such a beautiful brain.”

FL: [SINGS THE ENTIRE LINE] I met my wife there.

MEH: How did you meet your wife? She was there after you.

FL: By chance. [LAUGHS] She picked me up.

MEH: You were visiting there?

ESL: Yes.

FL: I was visiting. I was in the navy already. I was in the navy and, you know, having not a good time. And the navy and the army and the air force, they—a Spaniard, you know, [SOUNDS LIKE: mulato], they didn't give me much of a chance—at the beginning. At the very end, they were begging for me to do things. And I met Ellie, I don't remember where. Ellie?

MEH: She'll tell—

ESL: In Ati Gropius Forberg and Charles Forberg [OVERTALK].

FL: In Black Mountain College. Yeah, I went to Black Mountain College.

MEH: That will be your story. Okay?

EL: Yes.

MEH: So, do you remember what you did at Black Mountain on the work program?

FL: Well in the first place, we were studying very well. We had good teachers, and they knew how to teach, which is very difficult to find in the world. And in the work program, it was that they needed people to do things—to work, to do that, and I was, I was not as fat as I am now but I was very, very strong. And so the strong people would just—the things of—

ESL: The coal?

MEH: The coal. Stone.

FL: No. What do you call it? This? [TAPS LEG]

MEH: Wood?

FL: Wood. We took wood from the mountains and built little things and so forth and whatever they teach us. We did a lot of work with wood.

MEH: I was thinking about the science teachers. Was Hansgirg at Black Mountain when you were there? Do you remember a Fritz Hansgirg was at Black Mountain when you were there?

FL: No. [TELEPHONE RINGS] The name is familiar but— [INTERRUPTION IN RECORDING]

MEH: I was going to ask you how did you—[OVERTALK]

FL: It was a very good school because there were Germans teaching there, there were Spaniards teaching there, there were English teaching there, and there were Italians teaching there. It was just wonderful.

MEH: So you could understand everyone.

FL: [LAUGHS] I could learn anyone.

MEH: Except the English speaking.

FL: Yeah, well I spoke England. My mother spoke English but in Spain, you know—In Spain, you didn't think much of England. England was a little island over there and a few people "booble" [PH], you know. But Spain was great. Italia was pretty good because the bishop was there, you know. And France was—ah, okay. But we don't like to go to—from France to, what is it? Germany. Because in Germany the girls were very nice, and they were very intelligent, and you learned a new language, you know. I went once. They took me once to Russia. I was going to the north of Europe, and they took me to Russia. And I didn't know what to do, but they treated me like if I were a god, and they took me all the way from the

North Pole to Russia, to the capital, and to the south because I told them, “No, I have to go to the south.” They took me all over to Russia. And the capital, we got to the capital of Russia—what was the name of it? I forget—but the capital of Russia, is it still there? And they said “Uh-oh, they’re fighting. No, we cannot go stop there.” [LAUGHS] You see, the things are fighting here so they took me and I went, I did not go to the capital of Russia but I went to the very end—I went to the North Pole, to practically where was India, you know.

MEH: Did you go alone on this trip?

FL: I went alone, but I went with these people that would [UNINTEL]. I wasn’t scared of them.

MEH: Of course not.

FL: I mean, I was—well let’s see, twenty-five, thirty years old, you know.

ESL: No! Younger. More like [DISCUSSION NOT TRANSCRIBED]. Fifteen or fourteen or twelve or something like that.

FL: Well anyway—

MEH: That’s okay. It doesn’t matter.

FL: But they treated me very well. [OVERTALK]

MEH: When you left Black Mountain, you studied engineering at Columbia.

FL: Yeah.

MEH: You were in service. You were in the navy?

ESL: That was before, yeah, before he was in the navy.

MEH: Okay. And then you went into the navy. And what did you do for a living? What was your business?

FL: When? Where?

MEH: How did you earn a living? Did you work as an engineer?

FL: Oh. [LAUGHS]

ESL: Well—

FL: I worked with my brains on my words, and I could teach them—the people here, what to do or what not to do—in the schools. And I could teach them when we were grown up because, you know, at the time, Europe was very high up and the United States and America was made up of poor people who didn't know how to read and write. That's what we thought. They couldn't read, they couldn't write because our ships—we get them from Spain to Cuba, and the Cubans—I remember the Cubans trying to speak Spanish. [LAUGHS] They learned, but they didn't speak Spanish. All the Europeans didn't speak Spanish. They came from the north, you know, from the north down to South America. Even the Chileans. When I went to Chile on business once, I was really surprised that still many of the Chileans talked like if they were from Russia, you know. Because they talk Spanish also. The Spanish language was all over the place.

MEH: Maybe I'll let Ellie talk more about business later. That's good. Do you have other memories—? Did you think Black Mountain was a good school? What did you think about the college?

FL: Well it is difficult to answer because Black Mountain went through various times. I happened to go there when Black Mountain was starting. The thing that happened then is that most faculty who was there, they needed money, they worked hard and so forth, but even a few years later—three, four, five, six, seven

years later—that I had to go to the navy, into the army, Black Mountain lost all the good teachers. They all had to go to war. And the people who stayed there were mostly women or mostly people who didn't—Black Mountain was wrecked by the war. Of course, many years later they built up again.

MEH: Did you take any art courses? Did you study with Josef Albers?

FL: I taught Albers. [LAUGHTER]

ESL: Okay, Fernand.

FL: I taught Albers to learn languages and how to treat people. I liked him. I liked him because, you know, he would listen. Albers was—didn't know how to treat people, children particularly. I wouldn't say, "I'll kick you," but sometimes I would kick him [LAUGHTER. "I'll push him" when he was walking. You'd go like that—POOM—and he'd go PLONK.

ESL: Nooo.

FL: [TO ELLIE] You were not there. You came later. [LAUGHS]

MEH: What about Jalowetz? Do you remember Jalowetz?

FL: Jalowetz, yes. [SINGS ta, ta, ta, ta] Jalowetz, I didn't have much to do with him, but he was a good teacher also. I didn't have much to do with—He was from, from where? Jalowetz came from Europe.

MEH: Czechoslovakia.

FL: Czechoslovakia, yeah.

MEH: And then Germany.

FL: Yeah, yeah. He was very nice to me all the time because I was from Spain. I was very lucky. I mean I was not very lucky but, you know, these people, they said

“Oh—Españole!” [LAUGHS] Because in Spain—there didn’t happen in Spain what happened in France and Italy and in Germany, which was a complete killing of people, you know. In Spain that did not happen, but the few people that were afraid could just go to Africa, and then a little later would come back, you know. And the same—This is why Spain discovered America, because the ships from Spain were able to go. And when they left Europe at that time, earlier, they—they left to the ocean, and they found a few islands, you know, but it took a long time to discover America. But it was from Spain, and it was with a Spanish ship. And after they discovered it, of course, the English immediately wanted to go, and the French.

MEH: So, when you were a child, the Spanish thought that England was a tiny little island? What did you think about America when you were a child? Do you remember?

FL: When I was six years old?

MEH: Yes.

FL: I was going to say a bad word. [LAUGHS]

MEH: Go ahead.

FL: I never have any interest. To shit with them. [LAUGHS] I had no idea of America. Good lord. You live in northern Morocco, in Larache with the sun beautifully day in and day out and in the southern part of Spain. Also, it’s beautiful. The only bad part of [UNINTEL] is this—what’s that—the Portuguese? They were stupid, you know, and they had jealousy to the Spaniards. But Spain was a wonderful country, and everybody who could—from Germany or from France or from Italy—

would come to live in Spain. But the civil war, and the war just changed things very much. When we came to the United States, I had to learn English.

MEH: So maybe what we'll do now is interview Ellie, and you can interrupt if there are things you think are interesting. I'm going to talk to Ellie now.

[END OF INTERVIEW. END OF TRANSCRIPT]