

**INTERVIEWEE:** ELEANOR SMITH LEON  
**INTERVIEWER:** MARY EMMA HARRIS  
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**[BEGINNING OF TRANSCRIPT. BEGINNING OF INTERVIEW.]**  
**[BEGINNING OF TAPE 1]**

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

**ESM:** My sister went there, quite – for a quite short period of time. I think like  
half-a-year.

**MEH:** What was her name?

**ELS:** Suzanne Smith

**MEH:** Smith Franz.

**ELS:** Suzanne Smith Franz.

**MEH:** Is she still living?

**ELS:** She died this summer.

**MEH:** Oh – because I had an address. Is it in Essexville?

**ELS:** Yes.

**MEH:** And I, I didn't realize it was her sister, and so I called and tried, because I was  
going to go up there. And I didn't get any reaction or response or whatever.

**ELS:** The phone wasn't answered?

**MEH:** I think there was an answering machine. Well, after we talk– I want you to tell me  
something about her, after we talk about you. Okay, I did try. I was going to drive

all the way up there if I could – but I didn't realize it was your sister. So she went first.

**ELS:** And she, I was kind of at loose ends –

**MEH:** Well, let's go back. How did she hear about Black Mountain?

**ELS:** She read about it.

**MEH:** Where did you live?

**ELS:** We lived in Bay City, Michigan. A small town. I don't know why she reacted so strongly to what she read, but – And somebody she knew that lived in Saginaw, nearby, did know about Black Mountain and talked to her a lot about it. And she was fascinated. And – But she – she had gone for three years to a college in California, and she felt like she really only had one year left to graduate, and so she left Black Mountain. But the time she spent there with Albers, and she did all art classes, I think.

**MEH:** We'll talk later about what she did. This is excellent. I'm sorry she's no longer living but she has her sister to talk about her. So you were younger?

**ESL:** I'm about five years younger.

**MEH:** Were there two children?

**ESL:** Four. I had two brothers.

**MEH:** Do you remember the first time you went to Black Mountain how you traveled physically?

**ESL:** I think I took a train. I'm not sure if it was a train or bus, though. I think it was train, down through Cincinnati to Asheville – and somehow it got to Asheville.

**MEH:** What had your sister told you that caused you to be interested and want to go to Black Mountain?

**ESL:** I was a very happy-go-lucky person, and I wasn't really – didn't know what I wanted to do, and she was saving my life by giving me an idea. She said, "Maybe you would like Black Mountain." And I just went with very little knowledge about it or feeling. But when I arrived there, I was – had an immediate wonderful reaction.

**MEH:** How was that?

**ESL:** I don't know. I just looked at the place. I talked to – Bob Wunsch took a group of us into his study and had us all talking together and, you know, like the first day, and it was so friendly and I loved the landscape and the sort of style of your life there, out in the country and in the mountains.

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

**ESL:** No. And Albers was given to me as my advisor because my sister was an art person. I was not. And when I – when he asked me about what I wanted, I said "History," just out of – because I didn't know what to say. And he – I think he said "Oh my God!" or something like that [LAUGHS]. And anyway, so he ended not being my advisor. And I just kind of took a lot of different things, a lot of different classes.

**MEH:** What– You had a study in the Studies Building?

**ESL:** Yes.

**MEH:** What do you think was the effect of having that space?

**ESL:** I loved it. It was wonderful. It was such a nice idea for a student to be able to just walk into this nice room – because you had such beautiful views and windows. They were tiny but it was a marvelous thing. And you were so comfortable.

**MEH:** What were other classes that you remember that you took. I can jog your memory a little bit here.

**ESL:** Well, the first year I was there, Alfred Kazin was teaching, and I took both of his classes. He was there only I think half of the year.

**MEH:** Only a quarter, actually.

**ESL:** A quarter?

**MEH:** You took his class in Melville and in Blake.

**ESL:** Right. Those two classes. And I absolutely loved it. I just was so impressed by that. That was a wonderful time. He was a marvelous person to study with.

**MEH:** Okay, so what was Kazin like as a teacher?

**ESL:** Wonderful, because – I thought. I can imagine people had different feelings about him but I loved it because, for instance Melville, we spent the whole semester reading Melville. But also then he would have us reading Hemingway and kind of connecting it or showing how different it was or something. And you kind of were getting literature from a lot of directions. I think we were read Emerson. Now how he sneaked it in there, I'm not quite sure but – But it was a marvelous – you know, it was exciting the way he did that. And then slowly read the Melville. All that semester.

**MEH:** Go ahead.

**ESL:** I'm trying to think, I don't know.

**MEH:** Other classes here. You took music?

**ESL:** I took music from Dr. Jalowetz.

**MEH:** It just says here “music.” What type of music?

**ESL:** Well, I didn’t take like – I took – I’m trying to think what the class was called, and I can’t think of it, I don’t think. But it was– He took the – [PAUSE] I’ve having a little trouble.

**MEH:** What was it like a performing class or a history class or a theory class? Do you remember?

**ESL:** It was more like a history class. We actually studied mainly one Schubert symphony. It was kind of like what Kazin did, and we just went through it and learned about that period of music through this one symphony. And Dr. Jalowetz was – It was a very small group of people, like five or six people. And I was very, I mean, I had taken piano lessons in my early life, but I wasn’t, you know – I didn’t know a lot about music at all. And he was amazingly kind about that, and it got me very very interested in music.

**MEH:** Did you have any sense at the time of the erudition of these refugees such as Jalowetz?

**ESL:** You mean a kind of respect for what they were?

**MEH:** Did you realize how important they had been in Europe?

**ESL:** Well, I certainly learned it little by little and, you know, I felt, you know, – I felt like how wonderful that I can be in a class with this man. Sure. And he was so delicate about that aspect of a student.

**MEH:** What do you think was the importance of the refugees to the college?

**ESL:** Tremendous.

**MEH:** But in what way?

**ESL:** Well, it was out of the – you were out of the strictly American stream of like a typical university or something. And I just thought that just broadened your feelings about people and about the world. And they were all, you know, they were all so interested in being there, I think. Although it must have been difficult also for them. But I mean they didn't – you didn't really think about that.

**MEH:** But you arrived in the fall of 1944, right after the big blow-up that summer.

**ESL:** Yes. Yes.

**MEH:** Was there still a residue of that in the college?

**ESL:** Absolutely. I never really understood what had happened. I mean, I don't think I – maybe I just didn't feel like getting involved. But yes. I mean there was a lot of feeling that a lot of good people left. That it had harmed the place. Now I think there were only about thirty students when I was there.

**MEH:** I think mostly women still.

**ESL:** I think mostly women, yeah. Because so many – the war was still happening.

**MEH:** What did you do on the work program?

**ESL:** Well, the first I did was– In the lodge where I lived, I fired the furnace. I had to get up like at five in the morning or something and go down in the basement of this place and shovel coal into a furnace and keep people warm. And boy, if you didn't do it [LAUGHS], people, you know – you had to do it. You had to be on time. I did that for a long time, and then I did the milk cooling job, which was a lot easier and kind of not so difficult.

**MEH:** Now was the milk – the milk cooling was done down by the kitchen?

**ESL:** Yeah. It was kind of in back of the kitchen.

**MEH:** That's right. Ruth Asawa took over after you.

**ESL:** Did she?

**MEH:** Yes. Yes.

**ESL:** I took over after Ati, I think. I think she maybe talked me into it.

**MEH:** Okay. Because I remember Ruth told me that she came the summer of '46, and she took over after you. There's a whole lineage there of milk cooling women.

The milk coolers, yes.

**ESL:** I liked doing it. I always liked doing it. And I liked all the physical work part of Black Mountain too. I thought that was great.

**MEH:** There was a question I had on my mind. Oh, I see you took literature. Was George Zabriskie there when you were there? Who did you take literature with?

**ESL:** I did take a course from him and, you know what, I don't remember a lot about that. It had a marvelous title.

**MEH:** "Psychodynamics of Creativity."

**ESL:** Right.

**MEH:** Whatever that is.

**ESL:** Maybe I never found out. But I mean he was a very good person. I can't remember getting that involved with that class.

**MEH:** Who were your friends at Black Mountain?

**ESL:** Ati was my roommate. Not when I first went there but my second year there. And Nancy Smith. I remember her quite a bit. I'm trying to think– It was a long time

ago. And we all – we were with Molly Gregory a lot. You know, we did things like go on hikes with her on weekends and went, you know, when we had time off and people liked to be in her apartment.

**MEH:** Where did Molly live?

**ESL:** Where did she live? In the Studies Building.

**MEH:** She had the apartment in the Studies Building on the end – the one on the end?

**ESL:** Well I thought the one on the end belonged to Bob Wunsch.

**MEH:** And then there was one on the side.

**ESL:** I think she was on the side, yeah.

**MEH:** Did you feel that you had too much freedom at Black Mountain?

**ESL:** I loved it. Come on! [LAUGHS] It was great.

**MEH:** Some students have said that, you know, they felt they needed more structure, more supervision, more – but not Ellie.

**ESL:** No, no, no, no. No, I just thought that was great. I – It didn't – However, I can say that I didn't quite know what I was doing there. I was just trying out things. But in a way that I had never done before at school.

**MEH:** I think that's interesting that – especially even more so now – there's so little freedom to really explore in our educational system, just to wander for a while.

**ESL:** Yeah. If that's true. I mean, I don't, I guess I don't know. But I think that was wonderful for me. It just– It has meant so much and, you know, for instance I bought all of Kazin's books. I didn't read them all, you know, just perfectly through or anything but I'd go back to them all the time. They had something to do with what I'm reading now or– I just thought that was –



**MEH:** Did you go into the surrounding area very much? You said you were on hikes with Molly. Did you go into Asheville or Black Mountain?

**ESL:** Not a lot. We used to go to the bar in Black Mountain and have a glass of beer or something and, you know, with a group. But not – It wasn't like something I thought about doing, really. It seemed very nice to be in the college. And it was fun to go to Asheville, you know, just for a change, but in – occasionally I went to one or two movies, but I didn't really think– And, you know, people didn't have cars and gasoline.

**MEH:** You met your husband at Black Mountain. What do you remember about that?

**ESL:** Well, we met in—Ati – I think I was a roommate of Ati then, and we met – I met him in her study with Chuck Forberg, and we had brought our Sunday evening sandwiches there, and that's when I met him.

**MEH:** Explain the Sunday evening sandwiches.

**ESL:** I forget how – if they were made or if we had to make them up or– I kind of forget how that happened. But we would take the food out of the dining room, hall and eat other places.

**MEH:** So essentially it gave the cook some time off.

**ESL:** Right. Right.

**MEH:** What do you remember about meals at the college?

**ESL:** Very interesting, because you were sitting with all these interesting people. I mean, including the faculty a lot of the time. And, you know, it was great fun. And the food didn't – it seemed better than most college food, you know the kind of food you get in institutions. It was good. And we worked in the kitchen.

**MEH:** Did you work on the farm?

**ESL:** I'm trying to think. I feel like I did a little bit, but not a lot.

**MEH:** Well, you did the milk.

**ESL:** I did the milk. First the furnace and then the milk.

**MEH:** Why did you leave the college? It says here that – You left in the summer I think of '46– you didn't complete your courses?

**ESL:** That's right.

**MEH:** You met Fernando.

**ESL:** I met Fernando. And that was strange. I, oh – I know I took a – where you took tests to go into the second division.

**MEH:** The senior division.

**ESL:** Senior division. And I did really badly on that. The whole thing was just a big flop for me. I don't know why I did it. I really shouldn't have. And I think it discouraged me a little bit. I kind of didn't – you know, I wasn't sure what I wanted to do and so I just – I don't know. It was one of the things that made me drop out.

**MEH:** And so – It's interesting. I've never heard anyone use the term "drop out," in terms of Black Mountain. But you did. Essentially you dropped out. You left.

**ESL:** I did. And, and I went – And Fernando and I were married shortly after that.

**MEH:** When you left Black Mountain, where did you – Did you come to New York?

**ESL:** Yes. Fernando's family was living outside of New York City in – near Riverdale, I think that's what it was called – in a house, and we lived there until we then got an apartment in New York.

**MEH:** What is your family background? What did your parents do?

**ESL:** My father was – I don't know how you'd – he went, actually went to M.I.T. It wasn't called M.I.T. It wasn't called Boston Tech or something. And– But he was trained as an engineer. But he went into his family's business in Bay City, which was like sort of an offshoot of the lumber business and plus they had a lot of things going there that they worked at – he and his brothers. There was a clan of our family in Bay City, and we all lived, you know, pretty wonderful lives and couldn't be more different than Black Mountain.

**MEH:** How was that?

**ESL:** Well, I mean it was such a more limited kind of growing up – excepting my– For instance, my mother and my sister and I and my aunt had a beautiful trip in Europe when I was just thirteen, so I had done more things than a lot of people. And I had been in New York with my mother, so it wasn't – I had been exposed to larger towns – London, Paris.

**MEH:** So you did have a more – for someone from Bay City, you had a much more cosmopolitan background.

**ESL:** Right. I did.

**MEH:** Did you go to public schools?

**ESL:** I went to public school till tenth grade and tenth grade I went to Milton Academy in Massachusetts. You know Milton?

**MEH:** I know – I've heard of it.

**ESL:** It was a very strongly academic place – girls and boys separated – and it was very difficult for me, coming from a public school to that school.

**MEH:** How did you choose that school? Had other family members –?

**ESL:** It was within our family because my – I had an aunt who had loved going there when she was a girl and kind of talked to my mother about it, and both my sister and I went there for the last three years of high school. So I did live in the east, also, and in Boston for those three years. Near Boston. And I liked that, a lot. But it was a struggle academically for me.

**MEH:** So, after you were married, what did you do? You had six kids.

**ESL:** Yeah. We lived in New York for a while but we moved outside of New York, and I guess I kind of talked Fernando into moving back to Bay City.

**MEH:** What was he doing?

**ESL:** In New York?

**MEH:** He'd been to school and then the Navy.

**ESL:** He was working in a company with his brothers and a man from Spain who had moved to New York, selling – it's not even heavy machinery. I mean, they used to sell like entire steel mills to foreign countries. It was a very good job. It was like kind of part of the aid that the United States was giving to Europe to bring their countries back. There was a lot of – I think there was, you know, they helped finance people who were able to do this. And so he and his brothers were doing that. They were traveling, and Fernando was traveling a lot during our early life. Like he would be gone even maybe six months out of twelve sometimes. Sometimes less.

**MEH:** So you really an at-home mother, taking care of the kids.

**ESL:** Yeah. And I had so many children by– You know, I had four while we lived in New York, and then I had two more after we moved. We did move to Bay City.

Fernando commuted from New York for a long time, coming home on weekends because you could fly easily then. Then, then he moved to Bay City, and he got – He had a very good job with a kind of a welding company that sold welding machinery. And he – he arranged with them to be, to sell this in Europe, while living in Bay City. So he was busy traveling again but a little differently.

**MEH:** Right. So at that point he wasn't working with his brothers.

**ESL:** He stopped working with his brothers.

**MEH:** There were four brothers – Paco –

**ESL:** Alex, Paco– Paco, I never knew because he died.

**MEH:** He died before you met –

**ESL:** Yeah. Paco, Fernando, Gonzalo, and Javier – four brothers.

**MEH:** Now tell me about your sister. No, I have a question. Someone had told me that when you moved to Ann Arbor, after your kids were grown and Fernando retired, essentially, you were going to study art history?

**ESL:** No, I went and studied art.

**MEH:** Art. Okay.

**ESL:** Now this is– You see, what happened to me was I – I sort of wanted to do art. My sister was quite, had a lot more, had a lot of training in it but I kind of felt “No, she's the artist,” you know, “in the family” and I didn't really do it. And then finally it dawned on me that that's really what I wanted to do. So in my fifties, I got into the Art School at the University of Michigan and went for about four years and got a degree in art.

**MEH:** Did you continue to paint or whatever?

**ESL:** I did, for a while and I don't know because I can't figure out how to get those hours that you need to paint. I can't paint sort of. I just can't do that. But I did keep it up for a while.

**MEH:** Now tell me about your sister, Suzanne.

**ESL:** But I'm trying to –

**MEH:** No, go ahead. Go back.

**ESL:** I want to go back just to say that the whole Albers relationship, you know, it just – I just loved hearing what he was doing and what they were all doing and I think it just had a lot to do with my getting interested.

**MEH:** I think that's – One thing about the Studies Building is you knew what everybody was doing.

**ESL:** Absolutely.

**MEH:** You know, if you went to Ati's study, you know, or Mary or whoever was there, you were constantly exposed to that.

**ESL:** Yeah, we were roommates for a year, almost a year, and, you know, I got – We chatted all the time. That was a great relationship.

**MEH:** What has your – What have your children done?

**ESL:** Music. But this was what they studied. Our oldest son got a doctorate in music composition at Harvard. He's an incredible musician. He works out in Hollywood on movies.

**MEH:** His name is –?

**ESL:** Well, he's called Garby Leon. And other sons got a master's in piano, one of them. And another one a master's in clarinet here at Michigan, and the fourth one

was very, very musical but chose between music and physics because he was also very smart, and dropped the music and became a physicist. Got a Ph.D. in physics.

**MEH:** And your daughter?

**ESL:** Our daughter did a lot of things – She studied at the School of Natural Resources here in Michigan, and then she went out west and did a lot of work – she joined the forestry service. Gave that up, decided she wanted to study art and went back to Rhode Island School of Design and got a degree there.

**MEH:** Okay. So, now tell me about your sister Suzanne. Did she continue to do art?

**ESL:** Yes, she did. And she – What she – She did some painting, but what she really ended up doing was photography in a very serious way, and she, you know, would have little shows, not a lot of them but I mean she did do locally, shows in Michigan and [OFFMIKE INTERRUPTION FROM DOG].

**MEH:** So she – What did her husband do?

**ESL:** He was an architect. He is an architect. And he really hasn't done a lot of architecture. His father was an architect so he inherited his father's business when his father died, but it didn't – It isn't something that he sort of prospered in. He kind of did other things – little business things. So there was – My brother was an architect. So there were sort of art people in our family.

**MEH:** Are there questions that you think I should have asked you about Black Mountain that I haven't, or memories, particular anecdotes or memories you have?

**ESL:** I don't think so. I don't know. I just, you know, it was hard to leave that place because it was such a nice life there and – But I think it was good I did leave

because I needed to sort of grow up and I wasn't— I remember that Ted Dreier took me out on a walk in the — kind of in woods in the surrounding country, said “You know, you really need to start focusing,” [LAUGHS] and, you know, he was so right because I was jumping around and just trying things and enjoying them like — tremendously. But I had to — I hadn't focused on anything. But it's all kind of nice.

**MEH:** Well, I think the difficult thing was if you weren't going to remain at Black Mountain and graduate, it was difficult to know just when it was time to leave, sometimes, I think — without the usual criteria to guide you.

**ESL:** Yeah, yeah, right. Well I know — I'm sort of glad I did it the way I did because —

**MEH:** Very few people graduated.

**ESL:** Really?

**MEH:** Only about maybe between sixty and seventy.

**ESL:** Oh, really. Well, it was — I would have loved to have done that but I wasn't ready, you know. I was just — something I hadn't developed. I don't think people told me that I should be doing that. I don't think like the grown-up people— that my parents or anything, were explaining that to me very well.

**MEH:** Okay. [INTERRUPTION] You were talking about Schawinsky. I'm going to train this on the painting. So how did you come by this painting? Okay, tell me about it.

**ESL:** He sold it to us.

**MEH:** That sounds like Xanti.

**ESL:** He was a good friend of a cousin of mine in New York. This is when I lived in New York. A cousin of mine was his assistant — a woman, Patricia Smith. And we



were with Xanti a lot. I didn't know him in Black Mountain, but we were with him in New York and one day in New York I went in with a friend of mine, and we met Xanti on the street, down kind of in Greenwich Village area. And he said, "I want to do a sketch of you" – to me. And we went up to his apartment, and he did just kind of a quick charcoal kind of sketch. And then he turned it into this painting.

**MEH:** So it's really a portrait of you.

**ESL:** Yeah. Kind of a double – I think it looks a lot like my cousin that he was sort of in love with and was his assistant. [LAUGHS] But anyway, I guess maybe I didn't look that different from my cousin, so – [INTERRUPTION FROM DOG]

**[END OF INTERVIEW]**

**[END OF TRANSCRIPT]**