

Interviewee: SANDRA AND LARRY KOCHER
Interviewer: MARY EMMA HARRIS
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[BEGINNING OF SIDE 1, TAPE 1]

MEH: [GIVES IDENTIFICATION]. How old were you, Larry, when your parents came to Black Mountain?

LK: I was four years old. They came in 1940 and I was born in '36. We were here for three years, till '43, and my recollections are a little bit tricky because, of course, first of all they're very much the child's recollections, and secondly, because Black Mountain was a very central event in the life of our family. Often you would hear things in later years, and it's kind of a blurry line between what you recall directly yourself and what you've heard, and this kind of becomes all integrated together. One of the things I think that certainly shaped me in Black Mountain was that the Sunday practice of picking up mixings for sandwiches and going out and very commonly going out for walks, and we as a family went walking a great deal in the woods. I love walking, I love the outdoors, and one of the most wonderful things with this weekend has just been able to walk around here. I think the fact that I walk in all the open space districts in the San Francisco area and so forth and so on, and go different places to walk, had its little beginnings in Black Mountain.

MEH: What was it like to be a child at the college?

LK: Well, it was really quite exciting, because there really was a sense of an extended family. There was no strong artificial barrier between you as a child and the students. There were a small number of people here and we were all working together. I may not have been doing much physical work but I'd sometimes be with the people who were doing the physical work and talking with them and they would take an interest in me. And so it was very inclusive. There were no barriers set up.

MEH: Do you remember other children who were playmates?

LK: Well, yes. My mother used to bemoan the fact that there weren't more boys my age or girls Sandra's age. However, I guess the one individual with whom I was the most – spent the most time was Eddie Dreier. He was a little younger than I was, and I sometimes wished he'd blow his nose more often than he did – it was always running. However, he was a wonderful person and we were good friends. The first of many friendships in my life, and he was a good friend. But, again, I thought there was confusion about age and I sometimes regarded the college students as my friends. Of course, they didn't quite reciprocate in the same way, but I'd talk about quote "girlfriends" – here's a five year old identifying with a pretty nineteen-year-old or something and calling her my girlfriend and she would sort of giggle about that. But it was sort of a very natural atmosphere. In the Dining Hall, little funny things that I would look forward to. You'd stack up cups and saucers, one on top of the other, and if somebody could bring out more than eight – eight was the magical cut-off point

– then there'd be automatic applause. Maybe it would happen once a week or something. Of course sometimes it ended up in disaster.

MEH: How frequent were the disasters?

LK: I don't recall disasters. I think it took a lot of courage to try that, and it didn't happen too often. When it did happen, generally they were successful.

[LAUGHS] I don't recall disasters. But it took a stout heart to attempt it. And so things like that. I remember Mrs. Straus had a lot of kittens – cats. She was a cat lady. So she gave us two kittens, Blackie, and Smoky was gray, and I accidentally – they had a board on a step, concrete step, and the board slipped and Smoky was underneath the board and Smoky died. I was totally just totally broken up over that. I didn't mean to kill the kitten. So one little disaster like that, it took a day or two to recover from. The rhododendrons outside the window – we lived in a stone house – were very helpful in the wintertime as a thermometer, because if they were really curled up tightly then it was a very cold day. We didn't have a thermometer, and my father always believed in Jefferson's example of taking the temperature every day. Well later on we had a thermometer, but at first we did not. But I think the community, the – relating to the outside and learning from the outside, these were some formative things that happened to me here.

MEH: You said it was a critical point in your family's life.

LK: Well, you know, in looking back on it, I think that my father was very happy here, my mother was very happy here, and so, you know, it was something that was so full of richness in recollection, we would tend to think back on it. Just

looking through well, your book to some extent, but Duberman's book, some of the footnotes would be "Letters, Dreier to Kocher," and it'd be letters a considerable amount of time after we'd left here in which like, for example, mostly Ted Dreier would be writing to my father just to sort of keep him abreast of what was developing. And so the fact that my father had left this place and was involved in other activities, but was still writing to people here. You know, you still felt like you were still here. One of the immigrants wrote on the wall in Angel Island "My villagers are with me." I mean, the sense that the people back home were with this immigrant. And the fact that we left Black Mountain physically, but somehow you didn't just walk away from Black Mountain. You still were interested. You – It was like old friends. You wanted to keep up with them, and so we would talk about Black Mountain, the people here. There was always a Black Mountain feeling. And furniture from Black Mountain, et cetera, photographs. I mean history is very uneven, and life stories are very uneven. There's sometimes a little more intensity, more things happen, more emotions – and Black Mountain was one of those periods, like the French Revolution, which was very intense over a period of years and things were really happening in Black Mountain at the time and a lot of things were really happening.

MEH: If you were four when you came, you were, what? seven when you left?

LK: Yes. About a month shy of my seventh birthday.

MEH: So you went to school?

LK; Yes. First grade I went in Black Mountain, and it was – I did not really learn to read until second grade. And the teacher was very anxious that I learn to read,

and I learned the trick. Children of course are very clever and I think I was clever, at least not the way I was supposed to be, but she would sit with me and she would mouth the words and I would simply learn to read her lips. I wouldn't waste the time reading the book. And so she was very proud how well I read, and my mother came and was horrified to see me very carefully watching the teacher's lips. I was not reading really, anyway. [LAUGHS] I mean that's one recollection of my first grade, which was there. Anyway, that's – The summer of '43 was a very happy summer because school was over on the 20th of April, and I've never forgotten that date. Very early. And then second grade was New York City public schools – didn't start until September, so, you know it was World War Two, so in Long Island from April to September we had a wonderful summer vacation.

MEH: Did you go back – When you left Black Mountain you went back to New York?

LK: Yes we did. We went back to New York. So '43-'44 school year was spent in New York City. At that point my father decided to go to Williamsburg, rather than stay in New York City, which was a happy decision in many ways. But I was feeling a little bit apprehensive about school in New York City, and missing Black Mountain. I recall one of the things to sort of bribe me into compliance with the new regime was I would be taken to a major league baseball game. So in September 1943, my first major league baseball game was Ebbets Field, New York City, and that was the result of my homesickness for Black Mountain. So Ebbets Field was the pay-off. [LAUGHS] And, again, in terms of educational philosophy and what Black Mountain was all about, I don't have a whole lot to

offer except Howard Dearstyne was a good family friend. Of course he was a legacy from Black Mountain. And hearing so much about Black Mountain, I certainly read as much as I could, and I've always talked to people, and I feel like Black Mountain is one of those areas that I'm always interested in.

[TECHNICAL INTERRUPTION]

MEH: Sandra, how old were you when you went to Black Mountain?

SK: Six.

MEH: So you were the older. Did you go to the first grade here?

SK: Yes. I entered the first grade – It's a long story. It's not worth talking about.

MEH: Go ahead.

SK: I started in the second grade but –

MEH: You started school in the second grade?

SK: I started in the first grade. Just tell them the history (?). I had half a year in a New York school when I came down here. They put me in the second grade, and because we had learned to read so well in New York but hadn't learned to write they said, "Oh, you can't write" and put me in the first grade.

MEH: Switched back and forth.

SK: Yes.

MEH: So you had started school in New York the year before.

SK: Yeah. In New York schools you could start mid-year, and the way my birthday fell I had a year and a half [UNINTELL]. I worked so hard. [OVERTALK]

MEH: I had a nephew who repeated kindergarten, and it was great for him. So you came to Black Mountain and – What do you remember about being a child at Black Mountain? Any particular memories?

SK: Yes. Enjoying both campus sites. You know, as a child, exploring them, getting to know the immediate terrain as well as the mountains beyond. It was my introduction to walking in mountains.

MEH: That's right. You were at both campuses.

SK: Yeah, we were first at Lee Hall for over a year, and Lake Eden, and it was a wonderful place to explore as a child. I don't know if Larry told you about collecting scrap for the war effort.

LK: No I didn't.

MEH: The article is in the exhibition, and I'd seen that photograph but I never knew what the photograph was about until I saw the article.

SK: Oh.

LK: Yeah, took that wagon around and picked up the scrap.

SK: All the faculty children my age were boys, and I thought that was too bad. I was looking for a girl.

MEH: Who were the other children who were your age?

SK: I had a great time with them.

MEH: That – Was Ted Dreier your age?

SK: He's older. Actually Mark Dreier, his brother, who was killed there, was closest. When I entered the second grade, first, Mark was sort of my guardian. He took

me around, and we would walk back from the school bus to Lee Hall together. I remember him. And Don, the Lindsley son, Don Lindsley.

LK: What did Lindsley, the father, teach?

SK: Chemistry.

MEH: Right.

SK: You know, I don't [INAUDIBLE]. I guess Boyd Madison's in the photograph. I don't remember him terribly well. It was mostly Don Lindsley and Mark Dreier and Larry [UNINTEL].

MEH: What did you think about eating in the common dining hall? Was that fun, or did you miss family meals?

LK: No. The Dining Hall was wonderful.

SK: That was a great part of it. I think that was really my – the beginning of my interest in community. And living right across the street from the Dining Hall, and the fallout of students coming over to the house, and we had our favorite students. [LAUGHS] The ones who would pay attention to us.

MEH: Who were some of the students who paid attention? Do you remember?

SK: [INAUDIBLE]

LK: I think that was actually very formative, because – It's very nice to be with a family, of course. However, the students were very friendly in most cases, and it certainly helped one to come out and to make, you know, talk and build, relate to people. I don't think either Sandra or I are terribly gregarious. However we can talk, and certainly not feeling the fear that some people really do fear, to meet people and so forth. This was a fairly natural situation where you would sit

down and talk to people and most of the people were so friendly, and glad to talk to us. I think very few patronized. They were just, you know, glad to talk to people.

SK: Talk with adults, and yet when someone like Dr. Straus came in and sat on the – a middle table, we were sort of taken aback because that was a table, not a seat, you know. [LAUGHS] We couldn't [UNINTEL] say something until after he left. Things, crazy memories like that stick in your mind. And Trudi Straus. The house was up, up there.

LK: I think, my recollection.

SK: But Trudi raised cats. Her front porch had something like twenty cats on it.

LK: I told her, before you came, about the two kittens we had, one was black, so Blackie, and one was gray, so Misty or Foggy or something.

SK: Smoky. And Blackout.

LK: Yeah. Okay. Thank you [LAUGHS].

MEH: Smoky got blacked out.

LK: Yeah, Smoky didn't make it.

SK: No, Smoky made it.

LK: It was Blackout that got cut, okay. Executed inadvertently.

MEH: You must remember Mark Dreier's death.

SK: Yes, I remember just knowing him as my playmate.

MEH: Yeah I should think it would have been, you know –

SK: It was a shock.

MEH: Memorable for a child.

SK: Whenever I think, whenever I hear the term "running board" I think of him.

LK: Yes. That's true. Running board on the truck, it pitched over on him. This dam was sort of taught to us as a little bit dangerous, it was taught to me "Be careful of that dam." The Duberman book talks about the student, too, that was – they were trying to open the sluice gate or something, I guess there was a bad storm, and there's two students died.

MEH: One died. One survived. Were you allowed pretty much to roam the campus, the kids?

SK: Yes.

LK: Yes. Nothing like the city situation today, where you're very fearful about your children. We just –

MEH: Kids just take off as a group and –

LK: It was safe.

SK: And going to school – we went to one of the first consolidated schools, I think, in the South, which meant the children were bussed in from great distances. In order to get there, or in order to meet the bus in the morning, we would have had to go out awfully, awfully early, so the faculty parents pooled and drove us to school. But then we rode the school bus home, and the bus stopped about a mile from here.

LK: [INAUDIBLE?]

SK: – over a stream, and the road was washed out. The road was more than just gravel. It was good sized rocks [UNINTEL] another truck that Mark was on, and toppled over on Mark. But every year the stream would rise up and wash over

its banks, and the State truck kept trying to rebuild the bridge – that goes down over the stream and it kept washing out so they just gave up. And there were two planks from one barge rock to another that we crossed over on the way home.

[OFFMIKE INTERRUPTION]

SK: In the spring, when the water was extra high, we would have to wear high boots because we used to wade through the stream. And then there was a famous snowstorm.

LK: Yes.

SK: The school closed early so we could get home in time, and when the snow got worse they thought – But it was so bad that our bus was able to get to our bus stop and that was the very last stop before it turned around and went back in the town of Black Mountain. But it was so late, and getting out here despite the early departure from Black Mountain. But mother set out to meet, looking for us, and she got quite a ways down the road before she met the bus, and she got on the bus and joined us, and we walked home. When we returned to New York, I remember writing a story about this adventure for the school paper, our little publication or booklet.

MEH: How did your parents feel about the schools here? Did they feel that – were they happy with your going to school, public school, here?

LK: I don't think, particularly that story about the reading. I think my mother was unhappy with that, and she was so mystified because I seemed to be giving forth with sometimes even polysyllabic words at a young age, but I couldn't

read. So I think she felt they had failed in that, to some extent. I don't know.

Sandra was there with experience. I was only there for one year.

SK: I had that –

LK: My parents were great supporters of public schools.

SK: I had a teacher who was a great promoter of prohibition. Teetotaler [LAUGHS], and she would use the rule on our hands. One time some of the girls were in the girls room and didn't get to class when the bell rang, and we had to go up and put our hands out. And I'm sure our parents weren't so excited about that. It wasn't fair.

MEH: Do you remember any other kids in particular?

SK: The ones I've mentioned, the Dreier children, Lindsley. One summer there was a chef hired who came with two, two boys, both of whom had –

LK: Long hair.

SK: What were called Dutch bobs, in those days. And I thought "Oh good, girls." Playmates. It didn't work out that way.

MEH: You really were the only girl, weren't you.

SK: One of them was named Pearl, and poor guy, called Pearl, Pearl Girl. But they were great swimmers. They were in the water constantly, and I think we said "Why can't we stay in so long?" you know.

LK: One of the things as a child, you're here, and it's a beautiful site, and I'm much more conscious of natural surroundings than I was as a child, which is of course not unusual. I mean I can – looking at the Studies Building, it looks so natural. I saw it so many times and sort of made a quick mental note of it, but I

never really noticed the mountains, the rims all around here. In other words, you have beauty around you but you just take it for granted when you're a kid.

SK: One of the mountains rose behind the lodges and behind the Lee Hall.

MEH: Looking at the Studies Building now, what do you think?

SK: Well, looking at it now, I think buildings of that period have had a rough time. They're not subjects for preservation the way older buildings have been. But we're coming to that, and even, you know. Le Corbusier's Villa Savoy now is a museum.

LK: Well, I look at it and the same thing that Sandra mentioned. On the other side, you see definite wear, very obvious wear. Then I can think about going to Cambridge, Massachusetts in September '93 and taking a careful look at Gropius Graduate Center there and seeing a lot of wear on that building. I mean, certainly it's still being very much used, where this one is not as much used. Also it's – I look at it, and I see it as so representative of the architecture, of a certain kind of architecture of that period. Representative.

SK: Educated view, looking back. But we accepted it as –

LK: Well, of course. I mean I didn't see it that way then. [OVERTALK]

SK: It's sort of painful to see it today. At the same time, at least it hasn't been torn down, as many buildings.

MEH: And it's interesting, it's still very functional, you know, for the camp. It's a very functional building.

SK: I look at the rooms, and see the band of windows and that gives me a good feeling on how that design is.

LK: Yes, I see those windows and I think of the place we had on Long Island, the same windows, very much, of course.

SK: Associations. I think the college –

LK: Architects going to work in an idiom. My father worked in an idiom.

MEH: You have to realize this building also was designed so that it could be built by students, unskilled labor, and that I'm sure affected – and no money – both affected decisions.

SK: Rudy Haase pointed that out very nicely. I think the various events at the college, and special events like the – talking about the building, they had a roof raising ceremony in which we put up a tree, evergreens there, or when the barn was completed there was a square dance, and I remember, I think there were murals we drew for the walls. Not the children necessarily, but the community. The events in the dining room. Saturday night being able to watch people dancing, and I remember John Evarts playing the piano. The fire, there was a fire, forest fire in the mountains right above the town of Black Mountain. We could see it. We would just step out at night and look up in the mountain, there was a fire, red flame, and the college had a fire system. They had fire stations, and I remember Larry and I were just looking at the old fire car, actually, we called it, the hose. They had drills of sorts. But the young men who were still around at that time, took off to join the various fire fighting forces, to fight the forest fire. The women were not allowed to go, and they were very upset. That's some indication of –

LK: I remember some came back here to recuperate, the men, and in the dining hall, and some were just, you know, stretched out on the grass in front of the dining hall. They were just totally exhausted, just, you know, [OVERTALK]

SK: You know whereas they left going off to an adventure.

MEH: Do you remember particular faculty? Like do you remember Jalowetz?

SK: Oh yes. And Albers, and Anni, and being in their apartment in the Lodge, the weavings on the wall. And in front of the house was a small vegetable garden he had.

MEH: I imagine children were [UNINTEL]

SK: Exactly, there was a fence around it and everything was very precise. In fact, one of my strongest memories of Albers was his garden.

MEH: Were children allowed in the garden?

SK: I don't think so. The fence was partly for children and natural smaller creatures, for keeping them out, that is. Sure, we remember many of them. Anatole Kopp and his Swedish wife and little daughter.

MEH: Were you really aware of the War? Was the War a real presence for you at that time?

LK: It was a presence. I mean, you know, this is not Stalingrad – we were not swept up in it like some countries were. But, oh I remember somebody, went into somebody's home, and they had the maps on the wall with the pins, the way Churchill and Franklin Roosevelt had their war rooms, and there were sort of minor examples of that.

SK: I remember the Pearl Harbor incident. We gathered around our radio. That's my image, around the radio, and then having to paint black on your car win- -- upper part of the car windows, I mean car lights, excuse me.

LK: We occasionally drove back and forth to New York and back here, and when we were approaching New York City, we were stopped by a policeman because we did not have black on the upper part of our lights. My father very cleverly went to the back of the car and got out some black shoe polish and put that on the top of the lights, and we were allowed to proceed [LAUGHS]. I remember you put a sticker in your back window, I guess it was a back window or side window, it was an A or B or C for your, the kind of gasoline rations you could have.

SK: We drove Don Page into Asheville the first time he went in for a physical. He was rejected the first time. He had flat feet. But then the Army later changed it to accepted.

LK: You know, a child's recollection is distorted because of different perspective. This lake seemed much larger when I was a kid. Now it looks kind of small compared to what I – I remember just like from here to the dam was a great distance and, you know, it's a simple little walk. The lake is much larger than it was, of course, when we were here. They've widened it and lengthened it.

SK: I think we spoke this morning of the custom of on Sunday having the lunch fixings put out for us to make sandwiches and so that promoted many a Sunday trip into the mountains, like over to Chimney Rock or – [OVERTALK]

MEH: Were your parents real hikers? Real outdoor people?

LK: I think so. I mean "real" – they weren't in the modern sense of spending all their time hiking and everything, but they certainly were believers in getting outdoors with the family and then hiking and were always proud, I think, when people would comment that we were walking with them. You know, "It's amazing, your making those kids do that. That's great!" or something. "Of course they walk."

SK: Well, dad had hiked a lot in the Sierras as a boy, you know, or young man. In fact he hiked through –

LK: Yellowstone.

SK: Yellowstone before it was formally a park.

LK: Black Mountain, I mean, again, childhood memories, but it was such a positive association in everybody's mind that you'd hear about it or references to it and you'd sort of perk up. I mean, I'd be walking through the John Hay Library at Brown and I'd see the Black Mountain Review on a carrel, you know, and I said, "Gee, it's here in the John Hay Library" kind of thing. That was the fifties. Wonder what was going on, sort of, you know, vaguely, and then again, my father was writing letters, as I mentioned, and trying to find out what was going on, keeping up.

MEH: So you went on to become a schoolteacher.

LK: I certainly did.

MEH: And you've now retired? This is hard to believe.

LK: Yes. I find it a little hard to understand people who worry about retirement and what you're going to do with yourself, but –

MEH: Me too. [LAUGHTER]

LK: It's very wonderful, and it's nice that you don't have to do every day what you are going to get tired of doing, and have interests and do a lot of different things.

MEH: And are you still teaching, Sandra?

SK: Not regularly, no. I took early retirement three years ago, and I've taught summer school on occasion.

MEH: You're an architectural historian, right?

SK: Yes, and basic design courses. We have a small art department, because we service only [UNITELLI] and the students are studying fine arts to fulfill a requirement in the arts.

MEH: Your bio sounded like you're also an avid gardener. Serious gardener.

SK: Yes, I [UNINTEL] do a lot of growing of herbs and vegetables and edibles.

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

SK: – in denial when I garden. I call my garden the Denial Garden [LAUGHS].
[INAUDIBLE] restrained.

MEH: Do you remember, I mean, any of your parents' – just from later years their reflections on the college? I mean how did they remember the college?

SK: Constantly referring to it.

MEH: As Larry said, the furniture he made here was always a presence in your house.

SK: Yeah. I think these were thought of as very – very positive years. My mother loved it. She didn't have to cook. [LAUGHS] And she could audit classes. I remember her taking a course, a class in music right in the Round House here.

Many positive things, and of course carrying over with the friendships with the Black Mountain people. And that's part of our understanding of Black Mountain, you know, comes through having, continued to maintain contact with family friends and then some became special friends of ours. Howard Dearstyne, who taught here, was – and then later worked in Williamsburg where we were, so we continued relations there. I always tell my friends if I get started talking about Black Mountain College, you know [LAUGHS], I go on and on. Be careful.

LK: Well, you know, there are certain assumptions that were just sort of in the air at Black Mountain in terms of the value of liberal arts, in terms of certain principles of design and so forth, and modern art. And, you know, as a child you grow up with these assumptions and, you know, you obviously are influenced by your parents, and maybe later on you meet people who question some of these assumptions. You're almost at a little bit of a loss to argue with them, because like, you know, "Why are you taking a liberal arts course?" "Why are you majoring in history? What good's that going to do you?" I wasn't maybe that prepared to deal with that question, because that was just, you know, just logical that you would take that or, you know, even many years later in India and seeing Chandigarh and Le Corbusier, and somebody saying, "Why don't they paint that? That's so ugly, you know." How do you deal with a person– try and explain what he's doing. He would look at that and say "Oh it's so ugly. Why hasn't it been painted? Why isn't it wood?" [LAUGHS] How do you start – Where do you deal with that?

SK: Howard Dearstyne gave the family a Kandinsky print, which we had on the wall of the various places we lived over many years. And we just grew up with it and accepted it and people would come in and say "What's that all about?"

LK: Or the plumber comes in and looks at it and looks at it, "Oh, my kid does a better job than that!" [LAUGHS]

SK: So we got – I, in a way, had to go back – I didn't have to go back, but I had to learn to appreciate some of the earlier periods in American art.

MEH: But you had other influences in Williamsburg, so –

SK: Yes. Well I mean even in Williamsburg, I thought eighteenth century, seventeenth and eighteenth century portraits were boring. [LAUGHS]

[INAUDIBLE]

MEH: That was a real switch for your father.

SK: Not really, because he'd been a history major in college before he went to MIT in architecture, and he – while teaching at Penn State he also started a master's in architectural history at NYU.

LK: He worked with Fiske Kimball, and he was certainly one of the great architectural historians of American architecture.

SK: [AFFIRMATIVE] And then when he was at University of Virginia teaching, I think it was at that time, he became part of – he joined the Advisory Board of Architects for Colonial Williamsburg.

MEH: I think I describe him in my book as a man of catholic taste, which I think maybe I quoted someone on. Catholic in the broadest sense.

LK: Yes, your section on my father I thought was very generous, and it did capture both the preservation and the modern architecture. I appreciated that.

MEH: Do you all want to go have some tea?

[END OF INTERVIEW]

[END OF TRANSCRIPT]