

Interviewee: LEO LIONNI
Interviewer: MARY EMMA HARRIS
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[BEGINNING OF SIDE 1, TAPE 1]

MEH: Mr. Lionni, you were mentioning the ball that you had at Black Mountain.

LL: Oh, yes. Well, that was organized by Varda, as I think. It was a Greek ball, and everybody made costumes and sets and things. It was rather nice. It was a fun ball. And I did something which [LAUGHS], which was, which I think Varda resented a little bit. I went dressed as Varda. I stole his belt, and I learned to walk just like him and I – He had white hair at the time. It was combed from, you know, towards the front. I combed my hair. I put talcum powder on it. And apparently I looked exactly like him. And I built a little car, which was a small replica of his car with those painted [UNINTEL WORD]. I dragged that along as I walked, swaying my hips. It was very funny. That was kind of wild, because every- – When these things happened, the atmosphere would get quite wild.

MEH: Do you remember other costumes from that party?

LL: No. But I do remember that later when I was at Fortune, and ex-students of Black Mountain College would come and show their samples, I remember that there were, that in some of the portfolios there were like pieces of decor of Black Mountain College, from the ball or something like

that, and I'd become very angry, you know, "Can't you do anything gratuitous?" And, as a matter of fact, that was a very important discovery for me, this – the fact that everything became, everything they did seemed so important, much too important, as far as I'm concerned. But I remember when I made a – was engaged in schools, I always made it a point that exercises should be thrown away after you've done them. You don't consider them – You don't confuse them with art work, you know. Yeah, I guess as far as work, there was – I remember it as an over-serious atmosphere, among the kids. I don't know whether you've had this impression from others.

MEH: Well, you get two impressions. Some people say that everybody was so serious about their work, and other people say "Well, nobody was really working there. Everybody was just having a good time."

LL: Really? Well I don't think – They may have been having a good time, but not anything that we could see. Do you remember – Have you interviewed, or is she around, a girl by the name of Florsheim, from Chicago?

MEH: Yes. I talked to her very briefly.

LL: What happened to her? (OVERTALK) I remember her as one of my students.

MEH: She does strange weaving constructions.

LL: Oh, she works?

MEH: [AFFIRMATIVE]. Yeah. And also do you, did you have John Urbain as a student?

LL: Sure. John Urbain. I also had him as an assistant later on.

MEH: I see. I knew that he –

LL: He was at N.W. Ayer.

MEH: That's right. You were still there.

LL: Yes.

MEH: And now he's with Philip Morris?

LL: Yes. Sure. He worked for me. I think he's remarried? Was his first wife also at Black Mountain College?

MEH: [Positive]

LL: Sure? (OVERTALK) I think they met in Black Mountain College.

MEH: They're only recently separated and divorced. I don't think he's remarried.

LL: Not so recently.

MEH: Two or three years.

LL: Yeah, something like that. I saw – John came to my show, I think, last year. I still see him once in a while.

MEH: You were talking about another episode that you wanted to –

LL: Oh no, we were talking about the food. One other episode that I remember. I mean, these are all very – you know, they really have nothing to do with Black Mountain College. They could happen anywhere, and so it's not very interesting. But those are the things one remembers. I remember a party at the Alberses, and I remember little clusters of people

talking about recipes. We were so frustrated that everybody was talking about recipes all the time. "And then you pour this in, and you pour that in, and then you put it in the oven," and so on. There was this enormous enthusiasm talking about recipes because we were all so terribly frustrated. The food was really awful. I remember very little of that whole –

MEH: Like what did you have for food? Canned peaches and cottage cheese, or –?

LL: Oh I don't remember, I really don't remember.

MEH: I was reading a letter last night when Beaumont Newhall was writing to Winslow Ames, and Winslow Ames had been asked in the Summer of '48, and there is a paragraph in which they discuss the food.

LL: Oh, really?

MEH: And the fact that you had to go to South Carolina to get alcoholic beverages or good wine.

LL: That's right.

MEH: The other incident you had mentioned was the party at the Alberses?

LL: Well, that's the – that's the food, where I suddenly realized that all around the room people were talking about food. [LAUGHTER] Very violently.

MEH: Was that the party where, where Albers stuffed a student in a drawer, or something to that effect?

LL: No, I don't remember about that.

MEH: You don't remember about that.

LL: No, I remember a female student throwing the ink bottle at Varda at a party – at a party at Varda's house. It was very violent.

MEH: Do you remember other faculty, in particular, from that summer?

LL: No. No, I remember Lionni (?) and Varda and Jake Lawrence. This was sort of our little group. We were together a lot, because I knew Jake.
What's he doing?

MEH: Painting. Teaching.

LL: Did you talk to him?

MEH: Only briefly. He didn't have a great deal to say. I've written him recently about something that he might have done specifically that summer.

LL: Who else was there that summer? Oh, well, the people in that photograph.

MEH: Here. That's the regular faculty. The guests.

LL: Who was talking about Olson yesterday.

MEH: Yesterday about Olson?

LL: Yes, somebody talked to me about –

MEH: Where did I put my –?

LL: – does Olson have a–?

MEH: Here. Were there other children there that summer besides your children?

LL: I don't remember it. I don't believe so. Oh, yes, Franzisca was weaving.

MEH: Was Balcomb Greene there when you were there?

LL: No, I don't think so. Painter? No. Oh, he must have been, if it was – Oh no, July 16-29. But no. Because Beaumont Newhall was there, but I don't

remember him from that time. Well, that's about it. Now is Charles Lewis Forberg, does he have anything to do with Forberg who married Ati?

MEH: [AFFIRMATIVE]

LL: His father?

MEH: That's he.

LL: That's he!

MEH: He had been a student and then he had been to Harvard and he'd come back as sort of a –

LL: Oh really, he was that much older than Ati? Charles?

MEH: No, not that much older. He had been a student in the early –

LL: Well Ati must have been around eighteen then.

MEH: She was young. He was maybe five or six years older, but not twenty.

LL: Isn't that funny. I don't remember him in that – I knew him somewhat later, that sort of – Yeah, I remember Rondthaler. I know very little. (OVERTALK)
I guess most people remember very little who have been there for only a short while. Those were the students? Yeah, the other Dreier I remember. Florsheim, there she is – Claire. Ati. Johnson (INAUDIBLE). Hmm. Susan Moore.

MEH: She's a North Carolina artist now.

LL: Oh, really. Leonard Schwartz. What became of him?

MEH: Actually I just met somebody on this trip who's a relative of his, and I hope to find out soon.

LL: Oh, really? John Urbain. I'm afraid I really can't give you much, you know.

Sort of silly things, but that's the way it is. Snakes and butter.

MEH: Right. There were lots of snakes at Black Mountain?

LL: You don't know about that?

MEH: Well people say that they were all around, but I grew up in North Carolina, so –

LL: Well it was so bad that I remember – I don't know who it was, but one person – one couple who was teaching there left from one day to the other because the wife had become totally hysterical. We found copperheads in the kitchen. Two copperheads. I remember two copperheads in the kitchen, under the refrigerator, and I got into a fight with a big rattlesnake walking from my studio to the restaurant. Oh, boy, it was terrible.

MEH: This is the first time you'd had that type of contact with snakes. Personal contact.

LL: Yes. Most people had. I was scared.

MEH: Everybody talks about – I really wonder why the snakes were so bad at Black Mountain then.

LL: Well, I guess because it was very wild. It wasn't kept well, you know. I think it was neglect in the garden. I mean, there was no garden. It was just sort of wild.

MEH: Yeah, it was overgrown.

LL: Yes, yes.

[BREAK IN RECORDING]

MEH: It was helpful. You made your serious comments downstairs, when we were talking.

LL: Oh, I did.

MEH: Yes. Have you ever worked in another situation similar to Black Mountain?

LL: No, I don't think so. No, because all the other teaching situations were in colleges and universities. More organization, more you know – less of this kind of freedom. At that time, I think the kind of freedom that there was was rather – is now very common in colleges, but at that time it was rather exceptional.

MEH: It was through this contact that John Urbain came to you.

LL: Yes. Yes.

MEH: When you were working for Ayer.

LL: Yes.

[END OF RECORDING ON SIDE 1, TAPE 1; NO RECORDING ON SIDE 2]

[END OF INTERVIEW]

[END OF TRANSCRIPT]