

NATIONAL LIFE STORIES

ARTISTS' LIVES

Willi Soukop

Interviewed by Andrew Lambirth

C466/29

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**The British Library**

**National Life Stories**

**Interview Summary Sheet**

**Title Page**

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**Interviewee's forename:** Willi

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**Occupation:** Artist

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F4620 Side A

*[Andrew Lambirth interviewing Willi Soukop on the 2nd of November.]*

Willi.

Yes.

*Can you remember back to when you were born in Vienna, 1907, what sort of family did you come from?*

Well, a very poor family. My father was a shoemaker, and my mother was washing, cleaning for people. So it was a pretty tough life for them. We were three children, I had a brother two years older and a sister two years younger, I was the middle one. Our life was pretty tough.

*What sort of house did you live in?*

Oh, it was a flat, you know, a two-room flat or something, in a house, nothing special.

*Which area?*

That was in the 16th District.

*And that was a poor area?*

It's...yes, a fairly poor area, yes, yes.

*But it wasn't like a slum dwelling that you lived in?*

It wasn't a slum dwelling, no. And we had the flat on the third floor, and my father was going to the 8th District; we lived in the 16th District and he went to the 8th District to work, as a shoemaker, so we didn't see much of him because when he got

back we were already in bed again you see. So this was quite tough. And then of course later on, the person he worked for, I don't know if he died or if he retired, so my father bought that workshop you see, to which a flat was attached in the back of that building, ground floor, very poor, very miserable, damp and everything else. So we had to shift over there, which we didn't like but, what can you do? So we were there all three of us with Mother, and Father was working in the shop you see, as a shoemaker. So it was a tough life, and I had to change school of course because in the 16th District, and then we moved to the 8th District, so there, we changed school. But all that wasn't too bad. If I think of it after, now, I think, well, there was no reason to complain you see, just was tough, and a change for a young child is never really welcome you see.

*So it wasn't exactly an artistic upbringing that you had?*

Not really, no. It was very much a craftsman sort of, you know, my father was working, my mother was helping other people with washing, with cleaning. She was a dressmaker you see. So we had a tough life really.

*Do you remember any pictures on the walls?*

Not really, not really, no, nothing of that.

*So when did you first become interested in art?*

I think at school. I think at school where, you know, you had drawing lessons, and I realised whatever I drew was always very much fussed about you see, so it encouraged me to go on drawing. And that I did for some time until I moved to a higher school and the person who taught drawing, he was very very friendly and kind, he invited me to his studio, and that's where drawing has become more interesting for me you see. And he treated me nicely, he gave me food and so on, and so that was welcome. And then there was another colleague of mine at school called Wotruba, he became quite a well-known sculptor but he died. And so with this other friend, and the teacher and me, it was boosting an interest in art you see.

*You must have shown early signs of talent then.*

I think that's probably what was encouraging you see for the teacher too you see, that chap can do it you see.

*But was being an artist considered to be something like a proper trade for a young man?*

Well, it wasn't so much being an artist as, you like doing it you see. And the enjoyment of doing it, and doing it well, was interesting enough you see.

*But I was wondering if your parents would have encouraged you to be a painter.*

No, no, they wouldn't.

*Or told you, 'Go out and earn your living'?*

No, nothing like that happened. They looked at them and said, 'Oh that's nice,' and that was enough encouragement you see. But it wasn't a great deal of hope to be an artist or anything of that sort you see. I just liked to do it you see. I never was really much in sport, except bicycling you see, bicycling, that was...because it got me about you see.

*Did you go out on cycling trips into the countryside?*

Yes, that's right, yes, from Vienna you know, you sort of, into the Viennese Woods and so on, you could cycle, and it doesn't cost you so much either you see. So there was one teacher who accumulated boys around him, and he gave me a bicycle, well, so we had bicycle tours, otherwise I couldn't have afforded buying one you see, because we were living on a shoestring really. So this sort of acquaintance, having a bicycle, and the teacher had a number of other boys who cycled, and that was sufficient of financial support you see.

*Now your father I believe was Czech was he not?*

He was Czech, that's right, from Moravia, yes.

*Was that usual for Czech people...?*

Very much usual to Austrian-Hungarian Empire, a lot of Czech people moved to Vienna. Because my father's family were farmers. Well, he was a shoemaker, so there was no particular urgency, so he came to Vienna to be apprenticed, and then became a shoemaker, and eventually he bought that little place you see, which became his shop you see.

*So he did quite well really?*

In the end he did quite well, he had three children and they all more or less were supported, so obviously he did quite well. Until, I don't quite know what, what...it was too soon really, one evening he asked my brother who was two years older than I was, he said, 'Come with me for a walk,' but my brother said, 'I have violin lessons, I can't'. And just as well, because my father intended to kill himself and take one child with him.

*Why?*

I think he was mentally unhappy, unbalanced. The war, the inflation, whatever saving he had the inflation completely squashed it, so there was no money, nothing.

*When was this?*

That was 1912, '14, 1915 perhaps.

*The war was 1914 to '18 wasn't it, the First World War.*

That's right, that's right, the First World War. And he was in the war, he came back, and I think he, either he was injured...

*Was he wounded in the war?*

Yes. And I think he was more mentally wounded than anything else, and one evening he went and drowned himself in the Danube.

*Oh, God.*

And I think he wanted to take my brother with him so that he leaves only two children at home.

*It's a bit savage.*

That's a bit savage, but that was the man you see. I don't think there was any great care you see, he just sort of wanted to do what he felt like, and killing himself was part of the programme.

*So how did that affect you, the family?*

Well, it was a bit upsetting, because my mother, we had no money of course you see, the inflation has, whatever saving there was has completely gone, and so she earned the money with washing, cleaning for people, mending clothes, and that's how we lived you see.

*And did you have to go out to work?*

Well, at that time I was a boy at school you see, so I couldn't go out to work, because nobody would have employed me as a boy you see.

*So what age did you leave school?*



I think I, 15 or 16 or something like that.

*And then you were expected to go to work?*

And I became an apprentice you see, in the ivory carving and engraving, that sort of thing, which didn't bring much money but it was a three-year sort of course you see, which I did as good as I could. And after that I carved ivory and sold it here and there a bit, and eventually, I never was rich of course but I could somehow support myself.

*Am I right in thinking at one point you were carving umbrella handles?*

You are absolutely right, that was the big job at this firm, to carve the umbrella handles you see.

*What were they made of?*

Bakelite.

*Bakelite.*

Bakelite. And later on some people liked it and, well I can make you one out of ivory, you see. So that was an individual sort of branch.

*And how many of those do you think you made, handles?*

I've no idea, no idea. I think the ivory handles, not many, because carving, buying the ivory was expensive, and then people, when they go to a boy they don't want to pay an awful lot of money for it. So I did this, and somehow helped towards living.

*Do you remember how long you had to do that?*

Oh, at least two or three years.

*And how long would it take you to actually carve one handle, if it was Bakelite?*

Oh, it would take me a morning at home.

*So you worked at home?*

I worked, I had this dentist's drill at home, yes, yes.

*That was your main instrument was it?*

That was my main instrument, yes, a dentist's drill.

*Was it foot operated or was it hand operated?*

No, it was a little motor, a little motor you switch on and you have your dentist's drill doing it.

*Yes, because some of them, they can use...*

They can use by kicking it, yes.

*Yes, pedal.*

No, I had a motor one, yes. Oh it was tough, these years were very tough really.

*And what about official art training?*

Ah, well, I felt I wanted to develop it you see, and so I went, at that time I went to Chelsea School of Art, as a student there.

*Now you weren't in England yet. While you were still in Vienna I'm talking about.*

Ah, in Vienna. Well, I don't think Vienna I went to a school of art.

*But I thought you went to the Academy.*

Ah, yes that's right, yes.

*Didn't you go...*

Yes, that's true, yes.

*Evening classes in drawing?*

I think a bit of life classes, yes, some life classes I went. You know more than I do really about it. Yes, I went to some evening life classes, that's right, at the Arts and Crafts School, and then at the Academy later on you see, and then I joined the Academy as a student you see.

*What kind of teaching did they offer, very traditional?*

Very traditional, yes. Well, there was a model and you were sitting around and drew, and then the professor went from person to person and criticised a bit and that's it, that was teaching.

*Were the models nude or clothed?*

Nude, except men all had a little bathing trunk, a tiny bathing trunk. The girls were nude.

*Were they?*

Yes.

*Do you remember who the teachers were?*

I don't remember that, no, that's too long ago.

*And you wouldn't be painting at that point, you were just drawing?*

Only drawing, life drawing, yes, yes. Yes.

*Do you think it was good teaching?*

I think it let you exercise your freedom. There wasn't very much teaching. Slight corrections you see, 'Oh look here, you've made this a bit too long, and that's not good enough,' something like that, but that was all.

*You didn't have to study things like anatomy and...?*

Later on when I went to the Academy in Vienna, there was anatomy lessons there.

*So you began to get a kind of idea?*

Oh yes, yes. And then it was a little bit more academic, and I was, I don't know how long I went there, four years or five years or something.

*But did you, I mean, if... you were at that point presumably studying to be a professional artist?*

Well, I simply did what I liked to do, I didn't bother, pieces, professional or not professional, if I could afford it, to do that, I did it.

*I was just wondering if you thought you could make a living, that was the thing.*

Well I hoped, I hoped I could make a living, but, it was a little income, yes, but not a lot you see, not a lot. And the worst thing is that the man who employed me from time to time, he could never pay, so he said, 'Oh write it down, write it down'. So I had a long list of money to come to me which I never got.

*Was this the ivory carving?*

That's right, yes. Oh no, I had a lot of money I earned but never received it you see, and, I was a silly boy really as well, and I couldn't give up the job because, what else can I do?

*A difficult situation.*

A very difficult situation, yes indeed.

*And what other ivory objects would you have been carving? Boxes, or...?*

Umbrella handles, cigarette holders, a bit of jewellery like rings, bracelets, that sort of, decorative things you see.

*So in a sense you'd already had a practical apprenticeship as an engraver.*

Yes.

*And as a carver.*

That's right, yes.

*So, when did you start actually studying sculpture then, that was at the Academy was it?*

That was at the Academy, yes, in Vienna, in the Academy. And that was life modelling, and carving stones and so on, yes.

*You were carving in stone?*

Oh yes, yes.

*What about clay modelling?*

Oh yes, clay modelling, that was from life you see, life model and you clay model. But for yourself you carved in wood or stone, whatever you felt like, and exhibited, and of course you hoped to sell something.

*Were you...I mean where did you exhibit, at the school or...?*

Well the school had...at the Royal Academy - no, the Academy in Vienna, there were lovely exhibition halls, and so you exhibited there. But you also had the Sezession, which was a gallery, the schools sometimes had exhibitions there, and so I sent things there.

*This was the tradition...Sezessionists, yes?*

That's right, yes.

*The Vienna Sezession.*

Vienna Sezession, Sezessionist group, yes.

*Who were the famous artists of the Sezession? I've forgotten.*

Oh my goodness. No, that's a long time...

*Are we talking about people like Klimt?*

Klimt has already been dead you see. But there were a number of people who obviously were well known at the time, but the name has come out of my head you see.

*No, I wondered if you could remember who might have, you know, been teaching at that time, but...*

I don't know. I don't think I had anybody like Klimt teaching you see.

*No. So, as a student you'd be using, you'd be making...would you be making a sketch, a clay sketch before you were allowed to model in...I mean carve stone?*

No. I might have made a, not clay so much as Plasticine you see, which you can do at home and easy, you can put it aside without fearing to dry up and break. So Plasticine was sometimes used. But mainly sketching you see, drawing, or if I had some ivory task I drew the ivory task to shape and then drew into it and made a composition in that ivory task shape and then carved it. That's when I started using dentists' drills you see to carve the ivory.

*It seems a bit gruesome to use a dentist's drill I think.*

Well it's a very practical tool you know.

*I mean was that the thing that you, enabled you to do what you did, your sense of being practical, do you think?*

I think so, I think so yes. The dentist's drill prepared things you see, and then you came with the engraver's tools to develop it a bit better you see, add more surface on it. The dentist's drill was simply a quick way of removing things.

*You wouldn't draw on the ivory?*

Oh yes you draw on the ivory, just rough sketches, and then you grind it away with the dentist's drill. Oh yes you did, you did draw. Or you measured the task on paper and then you doodled into the paper sketch you see, so it was the same size.

*That was your practice later.*

Yes.

*Making a sort of...*

Making a maquette, yes. Oh yes.

*In paper.*

That's right.

*Like a template or something.*

In a way, yes, a template is a good name for it, yes.

*And then, I mean I've seen things when you've made a scale model of a big sculpture first.*

Yes, but that is already when I knew I'm going to carve that in wood or stone, so I wanted to make sure what I am doing goes into that stone or into that wood, so that, I measured the wood and made a scale model, carved it out of a bit of wood perhaps, or plaster, and once you do that you know exactly, you can make it six foot high you see.

*I think a lot of sculpture students today would think that was a very laborious way of going about it.*

I'm sure that it's what, it sounds old-fashioned you see, oh yes, but that was our system of education you see. Oh yes. But certainly it's not modern you see.

*Did you use a pointing machine?*

I used it sometimes, but I hated it because it's so laborious, tedious you see. Yes I did use a pointing machine, especially on stone you see.



*Can you explain how it works?*

Well, you have your model in plaster or whatever it was, and the pointing machine is on a cross piece of wood and there is a needle there which you can insert into the depth or height, and then you take the whole machine, put it all onto your material, and you chip away until that needle touches the point which you have taken. Oh it's a tedious job, but it's one way of how many many sculptors worked you see.

*That was a traditional method?*

Very much so. And what's more, if you were a busy man you could employ somebody who wasn't much of a sculptor, but he could use the pointing machine, prepare it for you, and so you only had then to go over the surface you see, the rough work was done by this chap you see.

*Did many sculptors have assistants in that way?*

Not many could afford it of course. You had to pay that chap you see, and that wasn't very often the case you see, unless you have a commission that you know is well paid and they want it to a certain time, so you realise you have to employ somebody to give you help you see.

*And was that something that you may have anticipated becoming yourself, an assistant to a successful sculptor?*

No, no I did not, no, I wanted to do the thing as I felt like it you see, and if you sold it or not, that was my problem you see. Oh no.

*Was it typical practice of the time that when you were a senior student you would begin to give lessons yourself?*

Not really, no. No. Sometimes a school would say, 'Can you come and teach?' you see, so, well, I don't know if I can teach but I can try, you see. And so you did a bit of modelling, a bit of drawing. But it never was a very fat income you see. It helped a bit you see, but it wasn't well paid either you see. But it was an experience for me to have to explain somebody who could do less than me, how to get on with it.

*I'm just trying to imagine what your days would have been like you see as a student.*

Oh...

*Some hours doing anatomy.*

When I was a student, the school was at day time you see, and I worked there from about 10 till midday, and then from 2 till 5, and then of course, that didn't bring any money so then I went to a workshop and carved umbrella handles till midnight or more to get some money. And that of course was my student years, where there was a lot, many many hours of not sleeping but working in order to get my living.

*Can you survive on little sleep?*

That was the case. I don't see how, at that time I never slept more than three, four hours, less than that. And when I went by tram from one place to another, I invariably fell asleep you see, because it was sitting still and a chance to sleep half an hour anyway.

*But you had the stamina to do it, you didn't become ill?*

I had the stamina to do it, that's exactly right, yes. Yes I could do it, and of course what's more it gave me the chance to do things I liked to do you see. Because from home I could not ask my mother, because my father wasn't alive any more; inflation had completely wiped out whatever saving there was, so I had to work day and night in order to get a living you see. And in fact, my sister was younger than me, my

brother was older, but I was the one who managed somehow to get a bit of income through selling you see.

*Were there many other people like you in Vienna at the time do you think?*

I think so, I think it was very much the student sort of habitual way of an income. Some students I envied who got grants and scholarships you see, and I got something, I got a scholarship later on for a little bit anyway, but it wasn't always easy to get support you see, because the State itself was poor you see. No, when I think back of these years, it was very very tough.

End of F4620 Side A

F4620 Side B

*Willi, how did you arrive in London?*

Now that's a difficult question really, I don't quite know how that originally happened you see.

*Well you didn't come to London straight away; didn't you go to Dartington?*

No.

*To Dartington?*

To Dartington, yes. I think...

*And could you explain what Dartington was?*

Well, something like the secretary to the Elmhirsts, she came to, I don't know how she knew my name, or somebody must have told her about it, she came to...

*Vienna.*

To Vienna, and said, 'I invite you to Dartington to work there as a sculptor, perhaps teach,' you see. And I was a little bit uneasy about it; first of all I didn't speak English, and then, it's an unknown place you see to go, and go to England from Vienna you see. But anyway, I went. And it was a very thrilling place really.

*Can you explain what it was though. Is it a kind of a foundation or something, Dartington?*

At that time it's, the Elmhirsts were there, Mr and Mrs Elmhirst. And, you see what happened at that time, the Nazis came just into Germany, and a number of, like the Jooss Ballet, they all escaped, and somehow Dartington offered them a place you see.

*Refuge.*

Refuge, yes, that's right. And so they were there, I came there, there were some American painters, Mark Tobey, Hein Heckroth was a German painter, he escaped from Germany you see. And so there was quite a colony of people who made their home at Dartington you see; there were all other countries but the countries either threw them out or it was not liveable or whatever it is, or no income. So when Dartington offered me, I said, well, yes, why not, try. I couldn't speak English yet, so it was quite a job really.

*Did you have English lessons?*

I had English lessons, yes, yes. In Vienna already I had some English lessons but I didn't get very far, until...

*Were you taught English at school?*

Not really. I went to some private, I mean some courses or something like that. But I couldn't say 'how do you do' in English you see, until you live there and then you talk you see. But talking wasn't that important; working with people was important you see. They gave me a little sort of room, and there in return for the room I taught sculpture to a few other people; there was never any money really but a bit of wood carving and so on, and that established me gradually at Dartington.

*But was it like a community, I mean did you all eat together and that kind of thing?*

That's right, we had a dining-room where we ate you see, and, well you met a number of people. And of course as there were so many German-speaking, we could talk you see. And there was the dance school so of course that was interesting. I never saw dancing before you see. And of course there was my wife.

*Is that where you met her?*

That's where I met her.

*At Dartington?*

At Dartington, yes. Yes.

*And was that very, I mean soon after you arrived there?*

Oh no, that took a while you see, it took quite a while there. And then of course she didn't talk much English, French, I didn't talk French, so...

*She was French?*

She was French, yes, from Paris, yes. And so our communication was very little you see. But she lived next door to me nearly, and she was a lovely young girl, and I didn't say no. [LAUGHS] And that's how it is you see. I think her parents probably didn't approve of me, because I wasn't a millionaire, I didn't have any money; being a sculptor isn't exactly a recommendation you see. So, and he was in a bank, so obviously money business was in his mind, and for his daughter he obviously would have liked to have some, a bit more financial security, which I couldn't offer you see. But they somehow accepted it, or at least couldn't do anything else you see.

*Was this during the war then?*

That was...I think that was the beginning of the war, yes.

*Well you presumably came out of Vienna...*

I came out of Vienna I think 19...I forget really a bit the times.

*Possibly in the early 1930s.*

Something like that. '34 I came to Dartington, yes. Yes.

*And did you marry Simone before the war or after the war?*

Oh we got...you see at least five years went by before we could marry, because her father went to America, and I think he called her to America, and for many years we were separated, and I nearly thought, well that's the end of that, but no, she came back again.

*After the war?*

After the war, and we got married.

*But then you must have moved from Dartington to London by then perhaps?*

I moved then from Dartington, well not quite, I moved to, I was teaching at Bryanston School, at Blundell's School, a number of places like that where I lived then too.

*Is there a place called Downe House or something like that, a school?*

Downe House. I can't recall it myself but... Blundell's School, yes, that I remember.

*And you'd live on site, you'd live...?*

I lived in the college, they gave me a room, and I was teaching youngsters, yes.

*Did you enjoy that?*

In a way, yes, I did, because, first of all there was no headache about where to sleep, what to eat, all that was taken care of, and I still had a sort of small salary, so, and there were holidays which I then could go to London and look around London. And during that time Simone was in America with her parents you see.

*Ah this was before you got married then?*

Before we got married, yes indeed, yes. Yes.

*So when she came back and you got married, what were you going to plan to do?*

*You were going to teach, carry on teaching but not in Blundell's or Bryanston?*

Well no, I then got a job in Chelsea School of Art you see, that's where I was teaching then for some time you see. And Simone was teaching dancing you see.

*Where did she do that?*

At what's called the Laban Centre.

*Is that a French foundation?*

No, it's a German foundation. Yes, she was teaching there and I was teaching at Blundell's School and so on, and London. Then I went to Chelsea School of Art you see, I had quite a few years there. So we were both teaching, she was teaching dancing, I was teaching sculpture.

*They very often say that those who can't do, teach.*

I know. [LAUGHS] Yes.

*What do you think of that?*

Well, it was a living income, that's really what it was.

*But it does allow you enough free time I suppose to do your own work.*

If there was any little time left you see.



*Well you've done a lot of work Willi, I don't know when you did it if you didn't...*

Yes. Yes I did some work, yes.

*But presumably you weren't teaching five days a week, you were teaching what, two or three or something?*

Well, certainly three, three to four you see, I was quite, quite a bit of teaching, yes.

*Do you think you ever learnt anything much from your students?*

In a way it provided the idea of variety, you know, you didn't have...from the R.A. teaching, from the Academy teaching, you have a sort of model sculpture, but children, youngsters, want to do this, want to do that, animal, this and that, and so variety came into it, and if you want to be helpful you've got to go with that variety. That's what I think is partly responsible for my studio looking as it does. In fact I had sometime, years ago, people come and said, he came in, said nothing; after a while he said, 'Which is your work?' I said, 'They are all mine.' 'Ah,' and he left. He couldn't see there is a stamp running through you see. And I can see somebody who isn't informed about that kind of variety would come to the idea, 'Which is yours?' you see, because it's abstract, realistic, decorative things, wood, stone, plaster, so the variety of course to that man, this was not a help you see. He was...he had a gallery but he obviously didn't take anything of mine you see.

*But do you think that versatility is a strength then?*

For me it was helpful, because it helped me to teach you see, because students don't all go on one pattern you see, and if I want to be useful to them, I must change around you see. So I think that kind of variety was useful for teaching, and be useful to youngsters.

*Did you always teach sculpture rather than drawing or painting?*

Oh drawing was linked up with it, life drawing and so on was very much linked. Painting, never much you see, but drawing yes, because sculpture you draw you see, you draw the life drawing and so on, and if you...it's for information as well you see.

*How much painting have you done?*

Not a great deal, not a great deal. I tried occasionally, but painting hasn't... I can show you one or two things in the studio which I tried painting, but never really got to grips with painting. I don't know if I'm colour...some people, and I sometimes thought I am colour blind to certain things you see, and it may be so.

*Obviously you're more interested in form.*

Yes, exactly that, yes. Yes.

*But would you say you were more interested in carving or more interested in modelling?*

You're absolutely right, and you know why? The carving has something of the craft in it, chipping; modelling is something, it's nearer to painting. So it is carving really, yes. And then of course I used to carve in ivory quite a lot you see, so that goes together again.

*It goes right back to then?*

Yes, it goes back to then, yes.

*When you got to England, do you remember thinking, that's the kind of work I'd like to do? Were you influenced by anyone as another artist?*

Not really much, no. No.

*Because there was a whole sort of modern movement of contemporary sculptors going on.*

Yes, there were. And many of them came from abroad you see. But it's very difficult to know which was the biggest influence you see. I think a very big influence to me, I am still aware of it, was Barlach.. Barlach in his carving and so on, wood carving particularly, was very much my, I held on to it, you see.

*And his work is quite, expressionist?*

Quite expressionist, yes, yes. And decorative too you see, when you think some of his figures are so decorative things, they have not got much to do with naturalism.

*People often use the word decorative as an insult rather than as a...*

Well, I wouldn't use it as an insult, no.

*You don't think it is an insulting term?*

It certainly is not insulting, no, no.

*You mean art should be decorative?*

I think so, I think so. The transformation from the... You see otherwise, if you take it too naturalistic, you come to life modelling. Because if you have a piece of wood, the wood has something to say you see, some of the shapes that...oh, that's a climbing figure, you see. So realism doesn't come into it, or naturalism.

*But what, I mean what is it that forms the way you interpret something?*

This is difficult to answer really. I think it's a sort of instinct, you somehow feel, all you want is climbing up you see, so you just do that, and that could be any size. And of course my ivory carving which I did before has something to do with it as well.

*Do you think humour is important?*

No, not humour, no. Understanding of the human figure, and liking to express something you see. I don't think humour is necessary at all, not to my mind. I don't think I have made humorous things you know.

*One or two.*

One or two. But obviously, almost instinctive, not thought about.

*I think I once said to you that a friend of mine, the artist Eileen Agar, had said that it was very much to do with a sense of play.*

I think a sense of play, that's true. Yes you're right, a sense of play comes into it. Now is this humour, or a sense of play is variety, you see. Because the variety is important to me. I hardly ever make two or three things alike you see.

*That's why it's difficult for people to decide what a Soukop is.*

I know, yes, and why this man who came, he said, 'Which is yours?' you see.

*So what do you think of a sculptor like Henry Moore?*

Oh., he's...he's brought up by the old realism, old... I don't know really what to think of him.

*Do you like his work?*

I do like his work, yes, yes I do like his work. And I like the variety too you see. And the decorativeness of it you see. Oh no, this is something which for a time I nearly sort of copied it you see, because I thought, well, this has something which I would like to do you see.

*Well he must have been coming up in the Thirties when you were...*

Yes, he was indeed, yes, yes.

*So he could have been quite influential.*

Yes, very much so, yes very much so. Yes.

*Was there anyone else teaching at Chelsea that you exchanged ideas with about art?  
You said you knew Gertrude Hermes?*

No, no she wouldn't appeal in any way. She was more interested in painting and so on really, I don't think she did so much sculpture here. I don't remember anybody in Chelsea who I sort of came into the same sort of direction.

*And if there were...who were the other sculptors working then? What about Barbara Hepworth?*

Barbara Hepworth was quite interesting to me you see, I liked the abstract quality of it. Yes, Barbara Hepworth I much rather looked at you see, and I liked the simplicity of it too.

*Would you have preferred that to the Henry Moore?*

In some ways, yes, yes, yes. In Barbara Hepworth, the angularity sometimes of her composition is what appealed to me. Moore had the sort of smooth, clay-like continuity which I couldn't quite get to grips with you see, but Barbara Hepworth I could feel, almost smell the wood carving.

*In a sense she's rougher or tougher intellectually.*

Yes, you are right, yes. Yes.

*What about a sculptor like Frank Dobson?*

Frank Dobson quite appealed to me, but it was so...so preconceived, or, not preconceived so much as, the sameness you see. The same as went through all his work you see, and I like the variety, that's why Barbara Hepworths are so, variety there. Henry Moore had sometimes variety, and Dobson hardly ever variety.

*But you didn't like those sort of big flowing, sensuous nudes of his?*

Well, I liked them but it would have never appealed to me to try it as well. No, certain things, if you like to do it yourself you must be swamped by it somehow you know, absorbed by it, otherwise, I didn't want to aim at that you see. I looked at them, I thought, this is interesting, but in the end I didn't do it. And of course having been at the Academy, life modelling, life drawing was very much more on the basis of it you see.

*You went to teach at the Academy after Chelsea?*

I went to teach at the Academy after Chelsea, yes.

*Were you talking about the Royal Academy or were you talking about the Vienna Academy then?*

Well I was about the Royal Academy, yes.

*Because it can be confusing, we just called them both the Academy.*

Yes. Well the Academy in Vienna was much more traditional. I mean that was the first time I came in contact with life modelling and so on.

*Well it was obviously a very important experience for you.*

It was an important experience for me, yes, yes. And it was cheap, I didn't have to pay much for it, and all that was a help you see.

[BREAK IN RECORDING]

Well he was a realistic sculptor really.

*Who are we talking about?*

Kolbe. I think, was it John or...it's Kolbe, yes.

*Jan?*

Jan Kolbe, could be, I don't know I'm afraid. But very much, I liked very much, I liked his work, yes, yes.

*What sort of sculptures did he make?*

Realistic with a certain dramatic angle it has you see, and that's what...figurative mainly.

*But not portraits?*

He made some portraits, yes.

[BREAK IN RECORDING]

*I was going to ask you if you ever went back to Vienna.*

I haven't been for many years back in Vienna, I have not been, no.

*You didn't want to go back?*

Not really, not from the artistic point of view, but my sister lives there in Vienna.

*Now?*

Yes. Yes.

*When did you last see her?*

Oh, that's a long time ago. She is what, 65, and I am 67 - no no, 85, and I am 87, yes. So I haven't seen her for a long time.

*What, like 40 years or something?*

Yes, yes.

*Well you can't be that close Willi.*

No. But it's...she has her life. In fact she came, when I was still living in Vienna she came and said, 'Oh my friend let me down'. I said, 'Don't worry, I have some sculptor friend, I will introduce you.' And they got married you see. So I was instrumental of her having a family with that sculptor friend, who was at the Academy with me as well, Piele[ph]. That's about all we have shared really.

*It's not very fraternal.*

No, no, it's not really, no.

*And what about your brother?*

Well, I was instrumental to my family. My brother came and said, 'Oh, I lost a job,' or 'I lost a girlfriend'. I said, 'Don't worry, I've got some people in Australia, they can employ you.' So I wrote and I said, 'You go to Australia,' I gave him the address, and he got married there to this... So, and then he died in Australia. So, I was instrumental to my sister for her life, instrumental to my brother for his life you see.



*Yes, but then you lost contact with them.*

I lost contact with them, yes, but what is important? Their life is important, not my contact.

*So you didn't mind coming to England and being an exile because you didn't really have anything to stay for.*

No, you're quite right. I quite enjoyed it really. Coming to Dartington was a bit of an experience you see. I mean my goodness, first of all there were a lot of German-speaking, Dutch people, so it wasn't such a strange country for me, because they all spoke my language. And the Elmhirsts were very broad-minded, and they gave me a work place, a studio, so it was all very generous. And income-wise, it was not easy but, I was by myself you see. No, England was for me almost I would say life-saving,

because if I hadn't come to England I would have had to join the Army, and who knows if I am still here or not.

End of F4620 Side B

End of Interview

F4647 Side A

*[22nd of February 1995. Ailian Dai, or Dai Ailian, talking to Andrew Lambirth about Willi Soukop.]*

*Ailian, when did you first meet Willi?*

Well I met him in the late spring of 1939 in Dartington Hall, when I was given a scholarship to the Jooss-Leeder summer school, and later on I was a regular student. In those days at Dartington it was a very very interesting period. So I used to go around and look around, and there was Bernard Leach, his pottery, and there was Willi Soukop's studio, and Hein Heckroth's studio, you know, I used to go around. And the farms, they had farms also, and lots of activities going on, furniture making and things like that. And I was very impressed with Willi Soukop's sculptures.

*What sort of things did you see?*

Well of course there was the donkey in the garden and also the swans, and also lots of little things, and a huge statue of, in pink concrete at one time, and it took up the whole place of his studio. And his studio was all, he worked a lot, he had lots of things in there, small and big, but the space wasn't big, it was a small sort of shed, you know. But it's after he was in the, he was at one time in what you call the summer house in the gardens of Dartington, and that was even smaller, but the shed was bigger, where he worked. He didn't live there but he worked there.

*What were these swans like?*

Oh, I have a photograph of them.

*Were they in the garden?*

The fountain, it's up, it's in the, in Dartington Hall there is the open-air theatre, and, it used to be a jostling in the old days, in the 14th, 15th century, it used to be a jostling, you know, the horse game.

*Jousting.*

Jousting, that's the word, jousting. But then the Elmhursts made it into an open-air theatre. And then, going up to the steps facing the stage, there is a fountain, and he made these two beautiful swans with their heads very close to each other, and just by the fountain, and it's still there.

*Is it in marble, or...?*

No, it's in granite, it's in granite. It's very very beautiful. And, so I admired his work very much. At that time I didn't know him as a person but as a wonderful artist. And, so, but you know, this place, everybody knew each other, but not...some you knew closer and some not so close, so, but I didn't know him closely then.

*How big was the community altogether?*

Well I heard the whole of Dartington, including the farms and the workshops, you know what I mean, the furniture and the gardens, I heard there were 7,000 people.

*A sizeable community.*

Yes. And, well I heard before Dartington was not professional, it did everything for the community, but it's only because of the Second World War when all the immigrants from Europe came over, then they were all famous artists from all over the world, I mean from all Europe.

*But that wasn't the reason why you were there?*

Oh no, I got scholarships, because I wanted, as a dancer I wanted to, I admired the Ballets Jooss very much, and I wanted to be a dancer in the Ballets Jooss.

*And that's where they were, at Dartington?*

Yes, they were at Dartington, and they had a school called the Jooss-Leeder School, and that's where I met Simone, she was in my class, a class together. And they had also, they had so many, from almost all over Europe there were students there too, you know, of course Simone was French, and there were Germans, there were Dutch and, lots of Dutch people were there, and Rumania, and...yes, lots of places they came from, it was very international. And then, what happened you see, that when Jooss, Kurt Jooss gave me the scholarship, because my father went bankrupt so I couldn't afford to pay my fare, so he gave me a scholarship, so I said, 'Well, I want to join your company,' because if you wanted to join the company you had to go through the school, so I wanted to be a regular student, so I can enter the company. So but, two weeks from the summer school to the beginning of the term, it was holiday for two weeks, and the school wouldn't look after me so I had to earn my living. And then Hein Heckroth the painter, he said he would like to paint me, so good, I said, so I will have a place to live, and I would be able to live for those two weeks. And then the war was declared, 1939, December the 3rd, September the 3rd. And then he approached me and said, 'I'm sorry, I have no...' because he is Jewish, 'I have no heart to work, so please find something else to do.' So I was sitting in the dining-room. Willi always had his meals in the dancers' dining-room, at the White Hart it was called, and he said, 'You know, I envy Hein Heckroth because he can afford to paint you.' So I said, 'Well, he doesn't want, he doesn't...he's out of sorts, and he doesn't want to work, so I'm out of a job,' and I said, 'I don't want money for it, I just want to be able to survive for two weeks.' So I asked him, 'How much do you pay for your meals here?' So he told me, and it was quite a lot, and, I said, 'Well, if you give me a place to live, to sleep;' he said, 'Well in my studio I have a mattress, and so, if you don't mind,' because he was very poor. And also that, I said, 'If you give me the money you pay for your food here, I'll cook for you, and I guarantee that you will have enough to eat, and I have sufficient to eat'. So, we made this deal. And

then, at one time, so he began to, you know, to draw me and also to begin to make my portrait, and...

*Was he modelling that in...?*

In Clay.

*In clay.*

Yes. And he did some drawings also.

*Did he do any drawings of you dancing?*

He did something in the nude, because, I didn't remember these because it was so long ago, but in Michel's home there are two pictures, and, well it looks, well it has a dance feeling in it, yes.

*Because there were a number of ink and brush drawings he did of dancers, I assume at this period, at Dartington, and I wondered if it had been you.*

Well it had dance feeling in it, you know, yes. And then, I got to know him by just sitting, you know, when he was doing my head. I found him a very open sort of person, and also that when I saw him working, polishing his concrete, this big Madonna in pink concrete, how he was polishing, I thought, my gosh, this man has got character. He's got patience, he's got concentration, you know, that he impressed me very much. And then I found that he was a very open person. He was very worried because Simone couldn't come to England, she was in France when the war started, because France fell or something like that, you know, she couldn't come, so he was worried that she couldn't come.

*Were they engaged by then?*

Oh yes, yes. When I met them they were both engaged. And so I had, I comforted him, I said, 'Well you know, war never...everything comes to an end. The war will not last forever,' you see. So you can see that, how you know, he...it makes him feel a bit better. And then he was worried again. 'My mama used to come from Vienna every, once in two years, to mend my clothes, and she can't come now,' because Vienna was, Hitler was in Austria. So I said, 'Well don't worry about that, I'll mend your clothes for you.' It was lucky, because where I was in high school, when I was in school in Trinidad, where I was born, we learnt how to mend shoes and socks, and darn socks and mend clothes, and embroidery, so I know how to do needlework. So then I mended his clothes also. And, so it was a little bit domesticated, you know, cooking for him, and also, what else did I do for him? I cannot think now. Oh yes, one thing is this, because Dartington is a very beautiful place, and it's on the tourists'...and when he starts to work he is just getting into the mood of working and then the tourists come, it's open you know, visitors come and they visit. And it interrupts his work. So I said, 'I have an idea.' I said, 'You will start to work at day-break, so when it is still dark I make breakfast and we have breakfast with the light on, and as soon as the light is, when it becomes bright, I finish up with my washing.' As soon as it becomes bright, he began to work. And then when the tourists and visitors come, he feels all right, he can rest. So every morning, he used to live in the Barton, his rooms, his room was in the Barton, I would go and throw a little stone up to the window and if I see the light come on I know he is awake, so, he comes back. So that...

*Sorry, what is the Barton?*

Well in the courtyard, there's the great hall; when you enter the entrance the Barton is the name of that, the quarters, and there is the Dartington Hall Trust people, you know, where the Elmhirsts used to live, that side is called the Barton. And this side was the dancers' flat, that's where Simone lived, I lived, and the other... And a place also, where our teachers lived, they had to, it was what you called the dancers' flat. And his studio was just near to the dancers' flat, out that way. So every morning I just crossed the courtyard and tell him it's time for breakfast. So, he was very, he got very creative and he worked very slowly. So, well, he was a fine artist, he has a nice

character, very open, and as you know, Willi, a charming man, and of course I fell in love with him; who wouldn't fall in love with such a man? But he was engaged to Simone, and Simone was good. I was poor, my father went bankrupt, and he was poor, and Simone was just right for him. So we always said that Simone was the best thing that could happen to Willi. But I've loved him all my life, who can not? I mean a lot of people love him, I know that. He's very much loved, he's admired, he's respected, and since living with him here since April, I have known a lot of people, like you, that are all fond of him, really fond of him, and some people say, 'Oh he has always been my spiritual father, and he was like a father to me'. Not only old people but younger generation, his students and so on, they all admire him so much. And he's so modest, and I didn't know how people, how other people felt for him, but I know now, yes. So, then...then I had to leave the school, because the school had to stop.

*Because of the war?*

Yes, because of the war. Our school had to shut up because, so the scholarships were the first to leave. There was another boy and myself who were the first, so far as I know there were only two scholarships, we both came back to London. Then I decided, well, what can I do here, in England, during the war, how can I live? My father had asked me to return to Trinidad but I didn't want to return there because it's a small place, I wanted to...I wanted...it was too small a place and I always wanted to go to China because being Chinese, I was born abroad.

*How come you were born in Trinidad?*

My great-grandparents went there, and it was... You see, it's an island, a British colony, and they had black people to go there as slaves, and then they had the Chinese people to go as labourers under contract, and if they wanted to stay, they can stay; if they wanted to go back, they send them back to China. So there are quite a few Chinese who had stayed behind. So I'm really the third or fourth generation in Trinidad, right? So, being a dancer, and being Chinese, I wanted to know Chinese dancing; I didn't, I couldn't see any Chinese dancing, I wanted to discover, you know,



to find it, be a dancer. I was training in classical ballet, from small I was trained in classical ballet. I am still concerned with the Central Ballet, my position at present is still with the Central Ballet in Beijing, yes, but my hobby is the Chinese dance. So I went there but we have always been in touch with, I have always been in touch with Simone and Willi.

*Did you write to each other?*

Oh yes. We only couldn't get no communications till the Cultural Revolution, for ten years, 1966 to 1976, no communications, because of the Chinese Cultural Revolution. But besides that we are always in touch. So, his son Michel is now 48, his elder son, his only son, is 48, but when he was only one year and something I saw photographs of him, and the granddaughter, you know, they have sent me photographs, and always... So I had not met them before, but I knew all about them because of the letters, and they knew about me too because you know, they used to collect postage stamps and they have a friend in China, yes. So, I didn't meet them until after forty years when Simone invited me to come, because it was going to be the hundredth birthday meeting in the Laban Centre, for Laban, he was one hundred years, the meeting, international meeting at the Laban Centre.

*Can you explain who Laban was?*

Oh yes, Rudolf Laban, or Rudolf Von Laban, he is known as the father of dance theory, and not only theory, he is the, he made the Laban Notation. In England and America it's called Laban Notation. In Europe it is called Kintographie Laban. But when we studied this in the school, in the Jooss-Leeder School, it was called Dance Script. And now we have a Laban Notation Society in China, I am chairman of it, I introduced it to China, and I use his theories in my rehearsing and my choreography. Oh yes, in Dartington the school was a wonderful school. It's a pity that not much of it is being taught now. A lot of people teach but, I have met up with some of my old school mates, very famous now in America, and I always ask them how people teach Laban's theories now, which do you prefer, and they always say, 'Oh, the way we learnt it is clearer'. Yes. So, then after, so it was Simone who started the ball rolling.

*In what way?*

That then I come back to England, after forty years. I hadn't been in the West, well I wasn't in America for more than thirty years, I was later in, after the Japanese war I was in America, but to the West; I mean I've been to Eastern Europe but not to the West in those forty years. So then, my old contacts, some of my old classmates in the ballet, like Alicia Markova, Maude Lloyd[ph], Mrs Gosselin[ph], they're still alive, now more than 80, they were my old classmates. And, then I made new contacts, Margot Fonteyn gave me the green light so I met the present generation. And so, then I've been getting invited every year since 1979 when Simone invited me here. And I now belong to the International Laban Notation, the Council, International Council of Laban Notation, which has meetings twice a year, so it means at least twice a year I have to attend these meetings, if I can make it you know. And then it opened up and then, now I am with the, coming out again now, I am vice-president of the International Dance Council at U.N.E.S.C.O in Paris, so, it's just opened, up, and everything led to another.

*When did they come to China?*

I think it is 19...in the article it was written down. I think it was 1982 I think, '82, or '83.

*So Simone came over to work?*

Yes, to teach. I used to be the director of a dance school in Beijing, and I thought it might be a good idea, because, we have many choreographers in China but not any good choreographers, so I thought if Simone could come, and you know, open up something, a new approach to choreography, it would be a great help to our young choreographers. So I invited her to Beijing, and I said, you know, if Willi could come too, because we have an arts school there, and artists, you know, the visual arts are very popular in China. So I made the arrangements through the artists' association, China's artists' association, to get an invitation. And since Simone was put up in a

hotel, you see there's no extra pay for the hotel, and only need to pay for his food. And they said, well, Simone's classes, they were taking money for the school and then could cover his expenses. But they didn't do that. I paid. They didn't know that, but, it doesn't worry me, because in China, comparatively I get a high salary, and it didn't make any difference. And then after her classes finished, I said we should go to the biggest art gallery in the world, that is the caves in north-west China, Dunhuang caves. Very ancient Tang Dynasty, even before that, the Wei Dynasty and so on. And there are many many caves there. And I've never been there. I had chances to go but I've never had the time, but I thought, well, here is Willi, an artist, he must see this. But then when we got half-way we had to change planes, Simone got ill. So we are stuck in the airport for four days, and since it is a mountainous place, the aerodrome, the airport, airport, is three hours away from the city of Lanzhou, because there's no flat land, so since Simone was ill in bed, she couldn't move, I took Willi to the museums in the city, and they have a very nice museum there. And then after four days Simone got better and the time was running out, so we couldn't go there any more, so we went to Xian instead, where the Army, Terracotta Army is, and they were very happy there. Willi was so happy, in the foyer, you know, in the hotel, he picked me up and waltzed me around in front of everybody. He enjoyed Xian very much. And also, when we went to the museum there to see the Terracotta, usually it's not allowed, but because I told them that he is one of the most famous sculptors in England, known internationally, they let us go to the place where they reconstruct, you know, little pictures of the terracotta to stick on, to see how it was fired, you know, to look at, and even to touch it. It's 3,000 years, something.

*Can you describe the Terracotta Army, what is it?*

It is made out of clay, and they had some weapons out of iron, so a lot are holding, or how they are holding weapons, but there are no more weapons in there, I think they must have shrunk or slipped away, but you can see through the holes. And...

*What size?*

Oh, life-size, they are all life-size. The horses are all life-size. And afterwards they excavated even the carriage, which is life-size, and, it's not all, they're still digging it up. They had stopped digging it because they were afraid of, they didn't have the technique, afraid of destroying it, but now I heard now they've continued to dig again.

*And how many figures are there?*

Oh I don't know, it's an army.

*Hundreds, thousands?*

I think so, yes. It's an army, right.

*But whose idea was it to make it, or...?*

Well, you see according to the emperors in those days, they always believed that they have a life somewhere else, so they had to take what they had in their life, take it with them. So even in the old days, even the maids or concubines would be buried with the emperor, buried alive. And then they have all these statues you see, all these statuettes with musicians and dancers, the small things are the dancers and the musicians, to play for him, that was the idea. And even, we saw in the Ming tombs, that's more than 500 years ago, you will find big jars of sesame oil, and grain, for them. And it's interesting, after so many years the grain is still there, and the sesame oil is still there. It's incredible because it's, you know, it's covered, you know, it's...

*Sealed.*

Sealed.

*But what else was Willi interested in when he was in China? I mean, did you used to take him round the galleries when Simone was working?*

Yes, mhm.

*And he was interested in what he saw?*

Oh yes, he wanted...I took him around the schools, and he was...what amazed him most was, to me I think he is the best Chinese, young Chinese sculptor. He is also, his style is also very flowing, you know, his style is very flowing, and modern. Well, there's a feeling of some modern in it, but, well they're very beautiful things. Well this man, he was, you know, in China during the Cultural Revolution a lot of the artists.....

End of F4647 Side A

F4647 Side B

I think that Willi was quite impressed in a few ways in China. One was a young artist who to me is one of the best sculptors in China, because he had a very flowing style, and fresh, you know, when I say fresh I mean for today.

*Was it a naturalistic or an abstract?*

No, abstract, but not so abstract that you cannot see what he is trying to express. And so, and Willi also liked his work. But he was living under very hard conditions, because during the Cultural Revolution artists and intellectuals had a very hard time, and living space in Beijing, in cities all over China, it's always very close. So if he was living only in a two-room apartment, well, in the courtyard, and under his bed, under the tables, everywhere there were sculptures, and even his...

*What...?*

Wood. And then, outside his house, outside in the courtyard he had kept his wood; no place to put it in their house. And I think that Willi liked...and I think he had given Willi something as a souvenir. That was one thing I think Willi enjoyed. Another thing was the Terracotta Army when we went to Xian, he was very interested to see how it was fired, it was hollow you see, and things like that. And up till now we do not know where these things were fired, because it was so long ago. This he was very interested, because they are all life-size, the horses and the horsemen and... And also he was impressed by the museums. I took him around everywhere in Beijing, in Lanzhou, and in Xian, we went to the museums, and there they have very primitive, you know, ancient sculptures. Because you know, China invented iron and bronze, and in Yunnan I went to, we didn't go but I went to the museum in Kunming, and at that time, before it was a city you see, it wasn't a city before, in the primitive times, and they had no written language, but through sculptures you could see the life of the people in the museum. And the quality, the artistic quality, it is quite amazing, to know that primitive people had such a fine aesthetic sense of art. Even today when you see something, you don't have to look to see if it's new or something like that,

you see if it's good; not that it's new, it's good, but you see something good. And it amazes me too to see that in primitive times that there was such a high standard of artistic quality. Right.

*When you saw Willi again after forty years or whatever, did you think he had changed much, was he the same man?*

Yes, he never changes, Willi was always the same, always so open. I was a very good friend of Willi's, you know, we had no secrets. You know he, they knew I was always in love with Willi, they accepted it. [LAUGHS] But Simone is a wonderful person. I never tried to...I saw them you see, they were in love, so I knew that there was no hope for me, so I accepted that.

*Did it make it difficult for you?*

At the beginning I was terribly jealous, but afterwards, no, I thought... You know, I think there's something about Chinese people that they are very realistic, what is good, if you...what is good for them. Simone was very good for him, she was the right person.

*And she wasn't jealous of you or resentful of your devotion?*

Well Willi told me once that, 'You now, Simone is jealous of you.' I said, 'How is it possible? She has everything. She has got you, she has got the children, it's impossible for her to be jealous.' He said, well, she knows that I am in love with him, but she doesn't know how...if he loves me or not, this she didn't know. But he didn't love me, he liked me. No, it was one-sided, it was one-sided. I saw that, so I never expected anything from him. I didn't expect any of that sort of love, so I was just a friend, a very old friend, a faithful friend of them both. Yes, of course at the beginning, young, I was very jealous, oh I was deeply jealous, I wanted to get away as far as possible and never, tried to forget him.

*You went to China of course.*

I went to China, yes. And I got married twice, divorced twice, yes. So, but so, and you know, the family, they are very grateful to me for his last days.

*Well you nursed him.*

But, to me it is something very gratifying for me, to be able to do something for him. Yes. And I am glad to say that, you know, he was getting on quite well. If he didn't have that reset, you know, set-back, when he was in hospital with the bleeding, he would have, the doctor said physically he would be all right, but of course his memory and things like that, he used to get very confused. But many times he was also very clear, yes. The thing was to get him back to work, this is his life, it mattered to him more than anything else.

*I think that was the problem after Simone died.*

Yes. Oh yes. He has not been the same. I mean when I was in hospital you know with Simone, you know, when he came into the hospital, oh, he was absolutely a lost man. So I was very worried about him. So I always asked what happens... When I was in America, you know, last time, Simone had died already, 1992, I was in America, November, I telephoned to Anita to find out how...because she is in America, I asked her, 'How is your papa?' And, no answer, always answering telephone. So, then I telephoned directly and he said, 'Oh I'm all right,' when I telephoned from America. And, I said, 'Well I shall be coming sometime here,' and I came, in April, yes. Because you see my work takes me around a lot. And I came here on a three-months visa, and I stayed on to look after him. I got an extension, Michel helped me to get an extension, and also the Great Britain-China Cultural Centre, which is sponsored by the British Foreign Office, so a compassionate, to look after Willi. Yes. Yes, but you know, the spirit never dies, because, there are beautiful memories, which is, I am very fortunate to know him and his family. I feel very fortunate.



*When you started coming back to Western Europe, did you come to London and stay...you didn't stay here I suppose?*

Well since, the first time as I said that Simone started the ball rolling, 1979, and since then I've been coming every year. I've been invited here by some old connections and new connections, in many things. I was first, after that I was invited by ITV, they made a film of us in China, a film called 'China', it was about our Central Ballet Company after the Cultural Revolution, what happened to us during the Cultural Revolution. And then I got invited by the Royal Academy of Dancing. There's a replica of my portrait in the Royal Academy of Dancing in concrete, the same thing here.

*The one that Willi did?*

Yes. There's another one in the Dance Museum in Stockholm.

*Who would have done those, Willi himself?*

Willi, of course, yes, Willi, yes, all from Willi. The one in the Royal Academy was bought by someone called Patricia Wilson, and she thought, well, it should be seen by a lot of people; what use is it in my sitting-room if only I see it? And so, she asked Ivor Guest, who is the number one ballet historian, 'Have you any idea what I should do with it?' He said, 'Oh, I'll see where I can put it,' and he put it in the Royal Academy. And then, she has lent it on a long lease, it still belongs to her, and she wrote something that, if anything happens to her, she gives it to the Royal Academy of Dancing, so it will be theirs eventually, yes. It's in the foyer, and the foyer now is changed but it used to have this sculpture there. Willi had found a place for it, he went there to see where to place it, and there was a ceremony also afterwards for placing it. And there was Taglioni, the Italian dancer of the 18th century, 19th century dancer, and one of the founders of the Royal Academy, the Danish dancer Adelangeni[ph], there, on this wall. I thought, well I'm in really good company. But I didn't feel that I'm deserving such honour; I thought it should be Margot Fonteyn, because she was president of the, at that time she was president of the Royal

Academy of Dancing. But now it's changed, the foyer has changed for security reasons, so it's different now, but my bust is still there, and now Taglioni, though it's glass, coloured glass, beautiful, and Adelangeni[ph], and only my head is there now. But it's not so prominent now because they have some glass, you can see through the glass, it's not so prominent as it used to be. I don't know what they're going to do with it.

*Did you see Willi much when you came over on your annual visits after...?*

Oh yes, every year, we always meet. We always meet, mhm, every year.

*And did he talk much about his work, what he was doing?*

No, I think like most artists, they don't like to talk about their work. Me myself, when I'm doing choreography, I never talk about it, because all of a sudden [INAUDIBLE], there's nothing, the spirit has gone already, you've spent your energy already. But when you...you see his things, then he will talk about it, but not what...you know. He had to do six pieces, but he wouldn't talk about, every year, mhm.

*For the Royal Academy Summer Exhibition.*

The Royal Academy, yes.

*Yes.*

Did you see the Peter Brinson article, because he was influenced by dancing too, because of Simone, and other dancers in the... Because you know he danced at one time.

*Willi did?*

Yes, in Dartington in the early days. You see there was a person who was in charge before the Ballet Jooss went there, a person called Margaret Barr, and they were short of dancers, at that time Willi was a young man, and he took part in the dancing.

*Was he any good?*

Well I didn't see it, that's before I left, he told me about it. And so you can see in these old photographs, 'You know Willi, this could have been you,' you know.

[LAUGHS] Yes, yes.

*Was he doing any teaching at that point when you knew him?*

Oh yes, he used to teach. He used to go around to Blundell's, you know, around, in different parts of the, that side, west part of England, Blundell's I think it is, Bryanstons and so on.

*Bryanston.*

Bryanston, he used to go around there.

*Would that be...?*

And then later on he would be teaching at the summer schools in Dartington, every year there were summer schools, he would be teaching, yes.

*But he wasn't living at Blundell's, he...*

Living in Dartington.

*Living in Dartington, going to...*

But if he goes there, he would stay there for a few days and come back.

*So he wouldn't be going every week, he'd be going occasionally?*

Occasionally, yes, mhm.

*Do you think he was a good teacher?*

Yes. He often talked about his teaching to me. He said, as you know he has...he hasn't got a stamp, as you know that, and he works in all different kinds of materials, so he believes in the individuality of his students, to let them find their own way, which is best for them, what they feel is right for them. He never forced anything on to his students. And so, I think it is a good way. Once he said to me, so funny, he said once at the Academy I think it was, somebody came to see him, a woman, said, 'How can I learn quickly?' And he said, 'You know how I answered her? I said, "If you want to become famous quickly it's very very easy. I suggest you go to Piccadilly Circus and take all your clothes off and you will be famous overnight".'

[LAUGHING] That's very typical of him, yes. He knows everything comes from hard work. You see when I got to know him in Dartington, from the very beginning I saw that, how he worked, he's a worker, he's a hard worker. And he's got good concentration and he is creative. You know, it's wonderful. I admire people like that. No, not gamblers or some other people who do things, so Willi had got good character, he's a very good character man, yes. To be admired.

[BREAK IN RECORDING]

I repeat.. Willi was not only a wonderful artist, he was also a wonderful man, as a person. I thought he had all these qualities that, to make an admirable person. Hardworking, honest, sincere. Of course I mean that, perhaps I am biased, you know, he has...sometimes he comes out, suddenly a burst of temper or something like that, but you know, if you are fond of a person you forgive them anything.

*Did he have a bad temper?*

No, not really, but you see he has such high, he's so disciplined himself that if he sees something that he wouldn't do himself and he sees somebody else does it, then he will...he will blow up. It happened here, once Simone asked me to stay here because

you know, at the beginning I always come here for a short visit so I usually stay with friends here and there, and I never like to stay long enough, otherwise they won't be friends any more. So at one time Simone asked me to stay here. And I'd forgotten how to open where you hang your clothes up, the cupboard, so I looked and I saw there was a bookshelf, and it was, my clothes was very light, I put the coathanger on to this. And Willi saw it, and he blew up. 'How can you be so selfish, you will destroy other people's books?' He blew up suddenly, yes. Of course I felt very bad. I didn't ruin his books but I was... So I found out you had to push this to open the door, it was one of those things you pushed and it opens by itself automatically. So, yes, he blew up this time. And even here, when he was not well, sitting in this place like this, and he got up and he began to wobble. So I went to, I didn't want him to fall down so I went to support him. 'Let me go, let me go,' in quite a temper, you know. So, he's very independent you see. And he used to fall down a lot in the street, you know that. He used to fall down a lot, when he couldn't see properly, at one time.

*Before he had the operations?*

Before the operation of his eyes. Now he uses a stick, and it's much better that he...he feels better when he has a stick after that. But he always used to fall down, even from ladders he used to fall down.

*I heard that he fell off a ladder and then he had the operation after that.*

Well, not so long ago, you see the wall outside the entrance how high it is, you know, that ivy that goes so high up. I went to the station, Kilburn station to meet some people who had never been here before, I went there to meet them, and coming back, and there was Willi up in the skies on that tall ladder. I said, 'Willi, I told you, if you have to climb a ladder, let me know, let me know'. Because I cannot say don't climb, it's no use, you know, so I say, 'Let me know, I'll be there. At least if you fall down I'll be there to help you, to pick you up, that's all'. But no, he just, you know, he climbs up to the fruit tree, to cut the fruit trees. It's frightening. And even the neighbours who were passing, they looked up and saw, you know, the neighbours here, they lived here for more than forty years, and they still see him. Well he says,

‘You know, I’m very careful now.’ It’s true he’s careful, but you never know. And they see this, I came back and there were the neighbours. ‘Look at Willi up there. We can help you, you don’t have to do that yourself.’ And Willi came down afterwards, he said, ‘You know, they need money, I don’t want to pay them to do this when I can do it myself.’ Yes, also he is very economical also.

*To the point of being mean, or to the point of being just careful?*

Well you see, that, as you know, a lot of people when they get old, they don’t have an immediate memory but they remember the past very well. During the First World War, and at a certain time during the Second World War, he had a very hard time, especially in the First World War. So he knows exactly how difficult it is to survive. So, the telephone was so old that he wouldn’t have a new one, he wouldn’t have, he didn’t think it was necessary to have security. And if now, he said, ‘Oh I can do the lawn by myself, I don’t have to pay for it.’ So he’s not mean but it’s a habit of having those difficult times. And he’s not...he wasn’t a fussy man eating, he would eat anything, but I just, when I cooked for him I just did, well what is healthy food, you know, not...nothing special or anything but healthy food. But he’s very...and he would eat, he never likes to leave anything on his plate. I was brought up that way too, my mother always said, ‘Finish everything on your plate,’ you know. He was quite easily looked after really.

*Simple tastes.*

Simple tastes, yes.

*I don’t suppose he ever spent much on clothes or anything like that.*

Well he’s got quite a wardrobe really. I suppose because of the Royal Academy, you know, he has to be...look smart. He’s got some nice things, nice clothes. But he doesn’t dress up much, he always is working clothes, yes. And because his work is quite dusty, all his work is dusty. Though when he dresses up he looks very smart, yes. He’s got also, you know, formal evening ties and stiff... I’ve seen it here.

*Dicky-bird they call it don't they.*

Dicky-birds, yes. I don't think he's got long tails, but..

*Dinner jacket.*

Dinner jackets, yes. In Dartington he had once, you know, something that looks rather Viennese really, leather, he used to have a leather waistcoat, and also a Viennese felt hat with a feather in it. But very occasionally he would wear the hat, I only saw him wear that once.

*What was the occasion?*

Oh I saw him go out with Simone that way. Very smart.

*Where do you think, what, would they have been going out for a walk, or for a drink, or for...?*

This I didn't know, yes, mm. Since last year, April, I've been looking after Willi, and this time I have met many of his friends and old students, and they all say that they admire him and respect him so much, because he has helped them so much. There is this Sri Lanka artist called Tisha[ph], said that Willi was like his own father, helped him a lot. And there is Elizabeth Lamont, who said that Willi was like a spiritual father. Yes, well she is a young, a young woman, and her husband is very nice, Richard, but when she used to come here, every time, she lives in Sussex or Surrey, Sussex I think it is, she commutes, so she can only come sometimes after work, but she would come quite often, and bring flowers and something like that to him. And when he was in hospital she came quite often, even when there was the rail strike, you know, it was difficult. So she told me that Willi was like a spiritual father to her. And quite a few said that Willi, like, I told you, Alexander, Hazel Alexander, her daughter, said Willi had helped her a lot. He's always helping people, always.

*Kormis or whatever his name is?*

Oh yes, well, I only, Willi took me to his studio once but he was not alive any more, because only recently I heard that Willi was his executive, you know, person to look after this things.

*Artistic executor.*

Yes, executive, that's what I heard. And, some people say, you know, Willi did so much for him but he never got anything, but I know that he has little pieces of, a lot of it, of Kormis, was given to him. He just lived around the corner. Now they begin to look after his studio; it was going to be fallen to pieces. Only two days ago now I see workers there now beginning to fix it up.

*So what was, he was a sculptor.*

Yes.

*From where?*

I'm not quite sure, because, I think, he was maybe a German Jew I think, I think so. I do not know but, well you know, his works reminds me a bit of Rodin, because they have this intensity. You know Rodin, the intensity of his expressions, Kormis had that. This suffering and also of the Jewish people, what they went through, things like that. So, but, I remember that when he was alive, that Willi would always say, 'Oh I have to go and look after my friend Kormis around the corner,' or, 'I have got to go and help him.' So for his last days Willi was always going somehow to look after him.

*Can you think of anyone else?*

Well, you know, he had such a big heart that not only people like him, he also likes people, he's very fond of people, even when he was ill you know, people came to see



him and he always enjoys people. In China when Simone was teaching in the dance academy we used to go there, and a young Chinese man working there was very fond of Simone and Willi and they always remembered him, and always asked me after him, and then he got married, and I met his wife, and, always very concerned. Only met once. And it was a very nice instance once when we were in Lanzhou when Simone was in hospital - not in hospital, I mean she couldn't, she was in bed at this airport. So I used to take him out for walks around the airport, you know, in the mountains, they have Loess mountains, and caves, and, I found a horseshoe, an old horseshoe, I said, 'Willi, I give it to you'. He said, 'No no, you found it, it's good luck, you keep it.' I said, 'Well I have enough good luck, I give it to you.' And now it's still in the studio, hanging up there. And, once there was a very old Chinese woman, a native of that place, you know, a country woman, and there she saw this white old man, and he saw this old Chinese woman, and this old Chinese woman, she came up to him and talking to him, you know, talking to him, of course she was talking in her dialect, I couldn't understand. And there was Willi talking to her, and she couldn't understand, but kept on with their hands, you know, holding hands and talking to each other. Oh I thought that was a beautiful occasion. Gentle and so nice. Oh he loves people; when he sees people, he loves people. That is why a lot of his sculptures is always about people.

*But I wonder whether, you know, how active a social life he had, because I get the impression he was often working more than anything else. He wouldn't be sort of going out to parties or out to pubs or...*

No, no. Like me, I never go to pubs and things like that. I work. But it is very seldom he went to, even to Simone's classes. Simone had her work. He told me, 'Why we get on so well, I do my work, she does her work.' Of course you know, he's not very much of a family man, so holidays, I heard he wouldn't even go on holidays with them. Yes. So, he always said, 'I'm not a family man. My work is my life.' And, I think Simone perhaps was a little bit, wished that he would be more, be more of a family man. But Simone was the family woman, she always missed her children. Willi would always say, 'Oh I go up to Scotland, two days is enough.' He misses his work, yes, he misses his work. He wants to do something. And even when he wasn't

well, he was in the garden working all day and he comes back and says, 'I haven't done anything today.' I said, 'You were working the garden all.....'

End of F4647 Side B

End of Interview