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ART HISTORIAN

Otto von Simson

Interviewed by Richard Cándida Smith

Art History Oral Documentation Project

Completed under the auspices
of the
Oral History Program
University of California
Los Angeles
and the
Getty Center for the History of
Art and the Humanities

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Photograph courtesy of M. A. zu Salm-Reifferscheidt-Dyck von Simson.

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BIOGRAPHICAL SUMMARY

PERSONAL HISTORY:

Born: July 17, 1912, Berlin.

Education: Ph.D., University of Munich, 1936.

Spouse: Louise von Schönburg-Hartenstein, 1936, 2 children; M. A. zu Salm-Reifferscheidt-Dyck, 1978.

CAREER HISTORY:

Professor, art history, University of Chicago, 1945-57.

Professor, Kunsthistorisches Institut, Free University of Berlin, 1964-78.

AFFILIATIONS:

American Academy of Arts and Sciences, foreign honorary member.

Guardini Foundation, president.

Legion of Honor, officer.

United Nations Educational, Scientific, and Cultural Organization (UNESCO), permanent delegate, Federal Republic of Germany, 1959-64; member, executive board, 1960-64; president, German national committee, 1975-86.

Verein Freunde Preussischer Schlösser, president.

SELECTED PUBLICATIONS:

Sacred Fortress: Byzantine Art and Statecraft in Ravenna. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1948.

The Gothic Cathedral: Origins of Gothic Architecture and the Medieval Concept of Order. New York: Pantheon Books, 1956.

Rubens: Il ciclo di Maria de' Medici. Geneva: Mailand, 1968.

Das Mittelalter II: Das hohe Mittelalter. Berlin: Propyläen Kunstgeschichte, 1972.

Neue Beiträge zur Rembrandt-Forschung. Edited with Jan Kelch. Berlin: Gebrüder Mann, 1973.

Der Blick nach Innen: Vier Beiträge zur deutschen Malerei des 19. Jahrhundert. Berlin: Hentrich, 1986.

INTERVIEW HISTORY

INTERVIEWER:

Richard Cándida Smith, Associate Director/Principal Editor, UCLA Oral History Program. B.A., Theater Arts, UCLA; M.A., Ph.D., United States History, UCLA.

TIME AND SETTING OF INTERVIEW:

Place: von Simson's home in Berlin.

Dates, length of sessions: November 7, 1991 (120 minutes); November 8, 1991 (113).

Total number of recorded hours: 4.0

Persons present during interview: von Simson and Smith.

CONDUCT OF INTERVIEW:

This is one in a series of interviews intended to examine the development of art history as a professional discipline and conducted under the joint auspices of the Getty Center for the History of Art and the Humanities and the UCLA Oral History Program.

The interview is organized chronologically, beginning with von Simson's childhood and family background and continuing on through his education, his departure from Germany for the United States, and his teaching career. Major topics discussed include life in Nazi Germany, differences between students in the United States and Germany, and von Simson's teaching and writing in the field of art history.

EDITING:

Alex Cline, editor, edited the interview. He checked the verbatim transcript of the interview against the original tape recordings, edited for punctuation, paragraphing, and spelling, and verified proper names. Words and phrases inserted by the editor have been bracketed.

Von Simson died before he was able to review the transcript. His wife, M. A. zu Salm-Reifferscheidt-Dyck reviewed the transcript instead. She verified proper names and made minor corrections and additions.

Teresa Barnett, principal editor, prepared the table of contents. Rebecca Stone, editorial assistant, compiled the biographical summary, interview history, and the index.

SUPPORTING DOCUMENTS:

The original tape recordings of the interview are in the university archives and are available under the regulations governing the use of permanent noncurrent records of the university. Records relating to the interview are located in the office of the UCLA Oral History Program.

TAPE NUMBER: I, SIDE ONE

NOVEMBER 7, 1991

SMITH: The first question we ask is usually very simple, which is when and where you were born.

VON SIMSON: I was born in July 1912 in Berlin, in fact right here. If you saw that little tempietto, that little gazebo in front, my mother [Martha Enole von Simson] always said I was really born there, because I arrived in summer as number five. We were all born at home. The house of my parents was blown up by the Russians in 1945, so it isn't there any longer. But this is one plot out of six. When I was invited to come to take over the chair in Berlin, it turned out very handy. We built this sort of--

SMITH: Yes, this house is a modern house.

VON SIMSON: It's a modern house.

SMITH: Could you tell me a little bit about your father [Ernst Eduard von Simson] and mother, what they did? Well, what your father did professionally.

VON SIMSON: My father was in the German foreign office. He was undersecretary of state, as you would call it, Staatssekretär, and later joined the famous dye trust, I think you call it, the I. G. Farben, of which my maternal grandfather, Franz Oppenheim, was one of the founders.

SMITH: Well, I take it from your name that your family is

part of the Prussian nobility?

VON SIMSON: Yes and no. [laughter] My great-grandfather [Martin Eduard] became a von Simson. He was of Jewish origin and a very devout Evangelical Christian, but very proud and very conscious of his Jewish ancestors. He had a tiff once with Bismarck. My great-grandfather was probably president all his life. He was president of the famous Frankfurt national assembly. Then he was in the Reichstag. You see the two different pictures there, which show his unsuccessful attempt to offer the imperial crown to the king, Frederick William IV of Prussia--unsuccessful because the king wanted to accept the crown only if offered by his peers, by the German princes.

SMITH: This was in 1848?

VON SIMSON: That was in 1849. Then later my great-grandfather was president of the Erfurt parliament. Well, it has nothing to do with it. Bismarck, who was a few years younger than he-- He was president and Bismark was the secretary-general. Bismarck wanted to duel with someone. My great-grandfather forbade it. Bismarck, very stung I think, said, "Well, only a nobleman could understand what this is about." So my great-grandfather said, "I come from a family of Jewish priests. We are the oldest aristocracy in the world." So much for my great-grandfather. Very Jewish. He became the first president

of the German Reichstag and finally first president of the supreme court, so a very presidential career.

On my mother's side I am a descendant of Moses Mendelssohn and, of course, of Felix Mendelssohn-Bartholdy. Oddly enough, I'm also a descendent of Ludvig Jonas, who was the pastor of one of our great Gothic churches in the city, the Nikolai Church. I think he also sat in the Prussian parliament--you could do these two things at the same time. He married a Countess Schwerin from the family of the field marshal of Frederick the Great and was, I think, a very liberal theologian, a pupil of--I don't know how much you are in on this--[Friedrich Daniel Ernst] Schleiermacher, the famous theologian.

SMITH: Were you raised in the Jewish faith or the Christian faith?

VON SIMSON: No, no. We have been Christians for five generations on both sides of the family.

SMITH: But the family was proud of its Jewish--

VON SIMSON: Well, it was Jewish. It's part of the Mendelssohns. That's an interesting question you are raising. One ought to be proud of one's family, but I think the tradition-- We were perhaps always aware of being shaped by a rather unusual tradition, if you may say, also with this curious mixture of very ancient Prussian stock. You will see an engraving of the old

Field Marshal Schwerin training, the greatest of Frederick the Great's military leaders in the battle of Prague. So that, of course, also had a certain impact.

SMITH: So in that sense you were connected with what we would call the Junker aristocracy?

VON SIMSON: You might call it Junker. It's a very good question you are raising when you ask if we were proud. No, we were aware, of course, of a family tradition, but proud, no, I don't think so.

SMITH: What about the cultural tastes, the cultural interests of your family, particularly of your immediate family that you were raised in?

VON SIMSON: Neither of my parents played an instrument or painted or wrote, but there was a very distinct interest, if you look at this literary part of my library. It's a very beautiful and very old library. Yes, I should perhaps add that my great-grandfather was also--among his many other presidencies--the first president of the Goethe Society and was a great lover of Goethe ever since he visited him. He was eighteen years old, and it so happened that he was in Weimar on Goethe's eightieth birthday. That left a very strong impression, like it left on everyone who saw the old man. He was very friendly.

The other ancestor, Felix Mendelssohn-Bartholdy, as a

young boy, played for Goethe, as you probably know, and Goethe said to him, "You be David to my Saul. Play." I think Felix was fifteen, and introduced him to Beethoven. But that's too far away for me now.

SMITH: But these are family traditions, I take it.

VON SIMSON: I don't know whether anything more comes out of this.

SMITH: Were your family patrons of modern art, modern music, modern literature?

VON SIMSON: No, not modern art, but, of course, very much interested in our museums. I visited the museums with my father. My father was a very musical man even though he did not exercise any of it himself. Yes, he used to sing, and now I remember he must have played the violin, too, but I never heard him play. He was too busy a man then when I was old enough to follow that.

I went to a very-- I suppose what's called conservative, but also a very liberal Prussian school, with a very strong tendency towards literature, history. But I think probably the influence of my home was stronger. I started reading at a relatively early age--I mean reading for pleasure, reading the classics for pleasure. I also started being interested in art very early. I remember I wrote an essay on Dürer's self-portraits when I was fifteen or sixteen.

During my final examinations--it was a little bit of a fraud--the governments, the ministries, men in charge of the institutions of higher learning, came, and one was always chosen to give a big speech. I gave a lecture. I think it was supposed to be, or to seem, extemporaneous. Anyway, I remember that I compared, on that occasion, two very famous paintings: one by Raphael, the Sistine Madonna, and one by Holbein, the famous Madonna of the Meyerbal. So it shows that I must have developed this rather early.

SMITH: How old were you? Fifteen, sixteen at this time?

VON SIMSON: No, when I graduated I was seventeen. Then my parents sent me to England to learn English, which has stood me in good stead. When I started studying, I started in Freiburg. I was not at all certain whether it would be literature or the history of art. But I was quite certain that it would be something in that area. I remember my father was a very liberal man even in that regard. Taking a walk with me one day he said, "I think it is an excellent thing that any young gentleman, any young man, is supposed to be educated, but you could be more useful to me in the foreign office." I hadn't even considered the idea of joining the diplomatic service, and I said, "No, not at all." A funny thing is that I did join the diplomatic service, but that was a great deal

later in 1957. Then, very soon, from Freiburg I went to Munich in '32, after one term here in Berlin, and then I was quite fixed on the history of art. I took one course in literature, but, I mean, it became the history of art already. And now we are approaching Wilhelm Pinder.

SMITH: Right. Did you study with [Hans] Jantzen first at Freiburg?

VON SIMSON: I studied with Jantzen, I studied with [Kurt] Bauch, who was also a very well known man, and I studied with old--he was not very old then, but he became so when I saw him again; I think he continued teaching until he was well into his nineties--Walter Friedlaender.

SMITH: Oh, of course. Yes.

VON SIMSON: Do you know of him? But I must confess I didn't study very much when I was in Freiburg, because it's a wonderful skiing surrounding, [laughter] so I didn't take that thing very seriously.

SMITH: Did you take any classes from Heidegger or Husserl?

VON SIMSON: No. I heard one lecture of his, which I didn't understand at all, and that was it. Too bad. I would have liked to. I wonder what impression he would have made on me had I attended his class, but I didn't.

SMITH: How well grounded were you in philosophical training before you made the choice to--?

VON SIMSON: I'm not at all philosophical. No.

SMITH: But you had read the Greek philosophers, Plato and--

VON SIMSON: Well, we had read Plato in school. But I always regret that instead of just using this occasion, "Please tell us something about Plato's philosophy," we read it purely to learn Greek or to show that we knew Greek. So I got away without any knowledge of that at all.

SMITH: Aristotle the same?

VON SIMSON: No.

SMITH: No Aristotle?

VON SIMSON: No, I really am not a philosopher. Perhaps I wouldn't have studied the history of art. I mean, to some extent I'm into aesthetics, and I know the aesthetic writings of Hegel. Nietzsche always interested me. Kant again, yes, of course I read the third critique, which is the [Critique of Judgment]. But, no, you won't get much knowledge of philosophy out of me.

SMITH: So, for instance, when you came to Sacred Fortress: [Byzantine Art and Statecraft in Ravenna (1948)], were you familiar with Augustine and Boethius?

VON SIMSON: Well, now that's something else. Yes. Now we are going a little bit ahead in time.

SMITH: I'm trying to get a sense of how you built your

broader sense of knowledge beyond art history. And then, of course, with your work on the Gothic cathedral, you had to study the Scholastics.

VON SIMSON: It would be much easier for me if you allow me pedantically to follow a chronological sequence. Is that all right?

SMITH: That's fine. We'll come back to it, then.

VON SIMSON: We're in Munich now.

SMITH: Right. So let's go to Munich and to Wilhelm Pinder.

VON SIMSON: Presently you'll see why I'm opposing this. Or would it be more interesting or more purposeful for you? You are the one with the experience.

SMITH: Well, if I don't feel you've answered the question when we get to those two books, I'll re-ask it. So you came to Munich, and you decided to study with Wilhelm Pinder.

VON SIMSON: Well, there was no alternative. There was only one "chairman," as you call him, the Ordinarius. You saw relatively little of him. There were younger teachers, not full professors, who undertook art historical excursions with you and whose classes you attended. The most influential on me was a man called [Hans Gerhard] Evers, a Rubens scholar, who had something to do with my writing my dissertation on Rubens ["Zur

Genealogie der weltlichen Apotheose im Barock, besonders zur Medicigalerie des P. P. Rubens"], in fact, an artist on whom I am writing a big book right now. Rubens has pursued me, or accompanied me, all my life.

Now, about Pinder. Pinder was a brilliant speaker, very unevenly brilliant. If he prepared his courses, they were flawless, but it very often happened that he did not prepare them, and then it was anything but brilliant. I think you know how one often says in our profession that one is either a writer or a speaker. I think he belongs to the second category. His books were not unimportant. I always thought that his great achievement, his lasting achievement, was these two volumes on German fourteenth- and fifteenth- and sixteenth-century sculpture [Die deutsche Plastik vom ausgehenden Mittelalter bis zum Ende der Renaissance], because there he really was a trailblazer. I mean, this region, especially fifteenth century, was almost unknown, and I think to my mind his contributions are still valued today. Now, you mentioned his political involvements. The fact is he was certainly a nationalist, and that penetrated his art history to some extent. A great French art historian, Emile Mâle, during the First World War had written a book on French art and German art [L'art allemand et l'art français du moyen âge] where he sought to prove that anything that was good in

German art was merely derived from French. Pinder, who had been gravely wounded in the First World War, then wrote a book on the achievements in German art or something like that, which to my mind was quite uninteresting. As far as his style, he was very much of an expressionist. He wrote and spoke very captivatingly. Much of it, I think, is very difficult to appreciate today. All other things are still good; he was otherwise not a nationalist in his art history. Less known than the things I mentioned are smaller works, for instance on German baroque architecture, where he insisted emphatically how much German baroque owed to the Latin countries, that it was part of a great European movement.

Now, 1933 dawned, and I must confess I was very young then, and none of us in Munich took it terribly seriously. The Nazis came into power relatively gently. I did not realize that this was a historical landmark, I think, especially since they came into power embraced by the conservatives, especially by Herr [Franz] von Papen, who thought he would "embrace him and kill him," to use Monsieur [François] Mitterand's words on his relation to the communists, when it was, of course, the other way around. So, in the beginning, one didn't realize that, I think. At least I didn't. I mustn't have, because my father didn't realize it either. He knew Papen very well

and belonged to a circle of conservative liberal politicians and diplomats who felt the same way.

SMITH: You did not take his anti-Semitic platform seriously?

VON SIMSON: You know, I'd never read a sentence-- No one had ever read Mein Kampf. His speeches were so ridiculous, such awful German, that you just laughed at it, you know. There were, I think, very few--there were some, but very few--who realized from the beginning what this man was about.

So with Pinder, very soon of course the realities appeared. His only two assistants were both Jewish, Ernst Michalski and Ernst Strauss, both very brilliant men. Well, he just dropped them like hot potatoes. They weren't allowed to stay on. His second wife, who really was a rabid Nazi, then forbade them to see him, and it was very sad. I had very little to do with Pinder. The sponsor for my dissertation on Rubens was this young assistant, Professor Evers. I had one talk with Pinder. He invited me to tea, the Herr Geheimrat. He had no idea what I was doing. He asked me if I knew about the official status of the mistresses of Louis XIV or Louis XV. Since this was not my period at all, I very gayly said I had no idea. I did not tell him that this question was bunk, that it had nothing to do with my subject. It

just showed how little he knew about it.

When I got my degree he was extremely kind. Realizing probably that I was very nervous, he went on and on about how good my dissertation was. In the end, he said to me, "You know, one thing came to my mind in reading your dissertation. You deal there with political symbolism, or with the use, the function, of art as political propaganda." And he added, "Well, you can't really know what I want to ask you about, but have you any idea how this political influence, this influence of the monarchy upon the arts, exerted itself in the time of the Emperor Justinian?" I again said very lightheartedly that I hadn't the foggiest notion. No one taught Byzantine art. It is rather odd, perhaps only for me, that twelve years later I wrote my book precisely on the Justinian mosaics. I mean, I only realized later that there were certainly two occasions when I was confronted with them: one was Pinder's examination, the other was when I really began the study of Ravenna.

Now, if you want to know more about Pinder, I don't think it's quite my thing. I mean, there is enough reason to say he did terrible things. He wrote things he ought not to have written. On the other hand, he was not at all liked by the Nazis, not trusted by the Nazis, not because of his liberal past, but because of the things he said and

did. He repeated ever and again that Aryans and Germans were not the same thing. He tried to tackle it from that end. When he was called to the most prestigious chair here in Berlin, the Nazis didn't like that at all. There's no question about it, that he was not invited to Berlin on the command of the Nazi minister, but rather against it. So that is very strange.

He himself was a member of the academy here and was befriended by an old friend of mine whom I only met after the war, a very distinguished scholar in medieval German literature, Friedrich Simmel, who was a great opponent of the Nazis. But they became friends. Friedrich once told me, "We didn't go into the political thing at all except accidentally." But he was going home with Pinder once, and Pinder suddenly burst out at him saying, "You know, it's not at all the old way. I am just finished. Nothing is going to come out of me intellectually." So there was a man who was completely finished, whether for ideological reasons, whether realizing what he had done, I cannot tell you, because I never saw him anymore. He was seized by the British occupation here, but it turned out it was a mistake. They were looking for a man called Binder, not Pinder. He was released. And then someone launched a ferocious attack on him in the Neue Zeitung, which was a very good paper edited by the Americans. Then he was so

much afraid that the Russians at that time would get hold of him--this is a story that I was told--that he died of a heart attack.

SMITH: He would have been under a teaching ban after the war.

VON SIMSON: I don't think he ever taught anymore, no, no.

SMITH: Right, as part of the de-Nazification.

VON SIMSON: Were you told that? Because I don't think there was ever any occasion for him to, because just after the war he was immediately taken by the British and then [inaudible]. But, I mean, it's so long now and I have so few of my generation left. There will be some who will certainly say he was a Nazi and others who will be a little more reluctant to say it in those terms. He certain was not a résistant. On the other hand, he belonged to a circle called the Mittwoch Kreis where very, very prominent members of the resistance against Hitler [inaudible]. Lectures were given by various members, actually, in their respective homes. And after the fated attempt on Hitler's life, they were absolved. I don't think they would have admitted him if they had considered him a Nazi.

SMITH: I see.

VON SIMSON: He was a very eminent scholar, considered as such. And I think he was. Anyway, that was that.

Now, an event happened that perhaps I shouldn't pass over entirely. You don't want me only to tell about my scholarly life, do you?

SMITH: No. Please.

VON SIMSON: I had been, as I told you, brought up a Protestant and always was, in a way, involved in religion. I married an Austrian, my first wife [Louise von Schönburg-Hartenstein]. My first wife, who died, was of course Catholic. But only a year later, in 1937--so not because of my marriage--I decided to become a Catholic. This is, if you will, part of German history, because-- I had been on very close terms with the Protestant minister who had confirmed me. That man had made himself very unpopular with the Nazis. Still, he was among those who tried to find some kind of modus vivendi with the regime. Having been on such close terms with him, I decided I ought to tell him about my decision. I went to visit him in the palace-like building where that dreadful bishop--he called himself--of the German Christians, a Nazi, had governed and ruled. He was out by then, and my old friend Eger was the minister, who had confirmed me. You know, I had hardly entered when he said to me, "Otto, I know exactly why you are here, and I heartily approve of it. All I can tell you is that, at my age"--he must have been about sixty then--"I stand by an open grave. I do not

believe that the Evangelical Church, the Protestant church, will be able to survive this regime. Maybe the Catholic Church will have a better chance."

That was a very common notion in those days. We belonged here to the Dahlem community, which always had very good ministers, one of them being [Martin] Niemöller, who you must have heard of. Niemöller one day told my father's brother, who was the church warden, that he intended to lead the entire community over to the Catholic Church. My dear uncle, who was not a theologian, said that was a matter for the individual to decide, not be decided for him. Well, anyway.

SMITH: Your conversion, or your moving into the Catholic Church, was for spiritual reasons, I take it, not for political reasons.

VON SIMSON: No, no. But, I mean, it's interesting this feeling on my old friend's part. It had also, I think, something to do with my interests, and especially with my interest in the liturgy of the church, which is a most fascinating thing. If you have looked into my Sacred Fortress, as it's called--a dreadful title for which I am not responsible, but for which the charming editor of the Chicago University Press is--you will see that it [deals] with liturgy, and in fact I describe the mosaics in Ravenna as, you might say, reflections of the liturgy.

It's very close to the liturgy. The book was lately republished with a charming essay by Weitzmann--you know, the distinguished Byzantinist. He's now very old.

SMITH: Oh, Kurt Weitzmann.

VON SIMSON: Princeton [University], yes. Who also mentioned in his essay that knowledge of the liturgy was necessary for the understanding of Byzantine art.

All right. Now back. We lived in Munich until 1939, with one exception. We spent one winter, I think in 1937, in Berlin. Then we went back to Munich. We had a charming little house there, and then soon of course, very soon, the question arose about my leaving this country. I had been to America in 1937 in the fall, I think. I caught meningitis and had to get back home rather soon. Then, in 1938, important things happened in Europe, not only in Nazi Germany. I was drafted into the army just at the time of the Czech crisis. This was uninteresting. Mainly I remember being treated extremely well by the two nice daughters of the innkeeper where we were quartered. You might be interested if I tell you that we had the most modern equipment and not a single piece of ammunition. If the French had only known, they could have marched into Germany. But this time, the army had a very good result, because you're allowed to go abroad, depending not so much on your having a valid passport, but much more on your

having a so-called Wehrpass, a military passport. The army was very decent, especially for someone who had just served his stint. They said, "Of course, go if you want to."

You know what was very funny? My parents-in-law first lived in Vienna, but they also had property in Czechoslovakia. Well, Vienna was taken by the Nazis, so then I said, "I want to visit my parents-in-law in Czechoslovakia." Then Czechoslovakia disappeared. This was when I said, "I've got to think up something new." I said, "I'm an art historian. I want to visit the museums in the United States." We parked our little son [Ernest von Simson] with my sister [Else von Arnim] here in the country and left, pretending that we were only on a visit. In the summer of 1939, my wife said, "I'm certain there's going to be a war. I'm going to go back and get Erni," and back she went.

Then a number of very extraordinary things happened. During my first visit, I had been visiting Johns Hopkins University, where I gave a lousy lecture, a lousy lecture. But even so, they seemed interested in me. In fact, they were interested in me. It would have been a lovely place. I was only twenty-six then, I think. And me being in America and my wife being in Munich, I didn't know what was happening, nor did she know what was happening. First

I tried to get her out via Sweden, where I had relatives. Then I heard about the British blockade. I said, "You are not going to Sweden, you are going to Italy."

SMITH: So the war had started already?

VON SIMSON: The war had started. Her letters became strangely vague, until I suddenly got a cable from Switzerland from someone I'd never heard of saying, "Your wife will only be allowed to join you if you can simply prove that you cannot go back." Now, that was rather difficult, but I went to the consul general in New York, who saw me with a big swastika. I said to him, "Herr Generalkonsul, I would like your advice. I can't go back--it's a sea trip, and I get seasick whenever I take a sailboat or something. I have been offered a job in a Catholic college"--I'll tell you about that in a minute--"would you advise me to take it?" He immediately said, "Yes. I think this is an excellent thing. You know, the Catholic colleges are mainly inhabited by the Irish, and the Irish being very friendly toward Hitler, you will do a lot of good there." The table was swamped with propaganda material. Then my second question was, "Herr Generalkonsul, would you advise me to let out my son and to let my wife leave Germany?" He said, "Well, that's entirely up to you. It depends on whether you make enough money." I said, "Yes," and then came across the only

question that had taken me to the consul general, which was, "Would you then be kind enough to give me a statement that I cannot go back?" He said, "Certainly." So he gave me that statement. I have never had a conversation when I was so certain that both partners, he as well as I, knew perfectly well that the other one was not saying what he really meant. That man must have been fairly decent. He never made a great career, but I think he ended as ambassador to Dublin or something like that.

Then I sent this registered, and my wife came over. I had been promised by Johns Hopkins to get this job, and I got very worried after the declaration of war, because I wanted my wife out. I had also been offered a job at a Catholic girls college called Marymount [College] in Tarrytown, upstate New York, so I grabbed it. The first day of the term-- The president of Johns Hopkins, who was I think a Scot, was somewhere in Scotland. He said, "Please hold it, because we cannot officiate without a signature." Then, of course, I desperately wanted to get out of my commitment to Marymount College, but the president, a nun, said, "No, I'm willing to meet the salary," which was poor enough, anyway. So I stayed there.

TAPE NUMBER: I, SIDE TWO

NOVEMBER 7, 1991

SMITH: The next question relates to your decision to leave Germany: Was that a political decision? Did you feel you were in danger personally?

VON SIMSON: No. Oddly enough, I didn't feel I was in danger. Being in Munich, surrounded by a large family and many friends, I mean, people who counted-- Well, anyway, the political situation one of course found appalling. That I didn't disregard or think of as unimportant. I just enjoyed life. I was very happily married, and we traveled. The difficult thing was that my father-in-law [Johannes von Schönburg-Hartenstein]--my wife was his favorite daughter--dreaded our leaving to America. He tried first to get me a job in Austria. When that failed, he tried to get me a job with the Vatican, which fortunately also failed. So, I mean, you can see from that that this thing was always on our minds, obviously.

SMITH: So it was more you felt that you needed to get out of Europe because of the general danger of war.

VON SIMSON: At that time, of course, we were denying or didn't know for certain that there would be war. I must say that there were many people, we now know, who realized there would be a war. But I cannot say that. I mean, up

to '39 perhaps.

SMITH: What happened to your father? Did he stay?

VON SIMSON: No. They both left to England, to Oxford.

SMITH: Was he purged from the foreign ministry?

VON SIMSON: No, he wasn't, but only for the reason that he was already retired. They went to Oxford. He didn't live very long.

SMITH: Let me ask you also-- This goes back to your dissertation. You chose the baroque.

VON SIMSON: Yes.

SMITH: From my reading in this period, between '25 and '32 there seems to be tremendous interest in Germany in the baroque. Pinder, of course.

VON SIMSON: I would say an interest in Rubens. I must confess to you--let's be honest--I was less interested in the baroque than I was in the strange interplay between politics and art. Something that, in a way, has always interested me very much--less as I grow older, perhaps. But the Ravenna book is very much on that theme. In fact, its subtitle is Byzantine Art and Statecraft in Ravenna. So, I mean, that was very much what prompted-- [tape recorder off]

SMITH: We're working again.

VON SIMSON: You asked me about my living-- That posed no problem for the family. We had the house and everything a

young family needed. I ought perhaps to say something about one's hatred of the regime. It was not only the hatred of the Nazi regime. I remember before Hitler came to power I went to Italy. I mean, the Mussolini variety was never as bad as Hitler's, but I found it just as repugnant. That's one thing. The other thing, the decision to leave, is quite another. You know, I now live in a country where part of it has experienced something very similar. We find many people saying, "How could you have stayed?" and identifying everybody who stayed as a communist. I didn't feel it then and I don't feel it now. To leave one's country is a very difficult thing. [tape recorder off]

This murderous arithmetic of the Nazis did not hit me directly, you know. I was considered a mongrel, a mixture. I don't know. Anyway, nothing happened to me. Years later, I visited Israel. Going to the airport, I was told that there was a little community of Jewish people from Berlin in Tel Aviv who would so much like to see me. I said, "Well, I must do that." You know, they were all people who, to this day, continued, probably in much humbler circumstances. A middle-aged man said to me, "You know, when this happened it hit us over the head like any other trouble." And that, in a sense, is I think quite true. Berlin was a very liberal, very open-minded

city. You know, there was no anti-Semitism whatsoever, I really think. Or, anyway, those who were anti-Semites belonged to some strange kind of thing that never appeared, that no one encountered. So, I mean, those people could have stayed like any other Germans. I don't know.

SMITH: Did your becoming a Catholic help give you another identity besides your German identity so that you could separate yourself psychologically?

VON SIMSON: No. I don't think so. In fact, when I had my first interview with a very distinguished and also very brave anti-Nazi Catholic, a Jesuit, I said to him, "I feel that the entry from the one [Protestant] to the other [Catholic] is a relatively simple thing. We have so very many things in common." And he said, "They have nothing in common." So I said good-bye. [laughter] I decided that was not for me. No. I consider one's religious convictions have become such private things, it's very difficult to deal with them conversationally. I think the Catholic Church is perhaps wider. Anyway, the two are approaching one another today.

SMITH: Nonetheless, you, for various reasons, felt that you had to leave Germany, and you came to be a foreigner in the United States. Was that your first teaching job, at this school?

VON SIMSON: I was only twenty-six, you know.

SMITH: How did the academic environment compare to Germany?

VON SIMSON: Well, I mean, that wasn't--

SMITH: Perhaps that's unfair, because it's--

VON SIMSON: No. Why is it unfair?

SMITH: Well, because a Catholic women's college is not necessarily a typical American school.

VON SIMSON: Well, I was scared to death at first with all these many girls, but it was quite pleasant. My wife also got a teaching job that she hugely enjoyed, so it was nice. It was not a real challenge, I must say. Even so, you know, I was considered an enemy alien. I was hated. In California they were treating enemies in a very different way, as you already know. I couldn't travel, and all this was very difficult. And then the so-called lay faculty was very outnumbered by the religious. One day the lay faculty decided they would write a very polite letter to the president humbly requesting a raise in salary. The lay faculty was fired. All. It so happened that the dean took postgraduate courses with an Augustinian monk who said, "Are you crazy to let these men go?" So we were told we could stay, and thereupon I said, "No thank you, I've had enough. I'm going to the Midwest." I had an offer at Saint Mary's [College] in

Notre Dame [Indiana]. In Tarrytown, I was teaching art history but also European history, which did a great deal for the increase of my knowledge, but otherwise kept me from doing more interesting things.

SMITH: Were you able to concentrate on a particular period of time?

VON SIMSON: None, I should say. [laughter]

SMITH: Everything.

VON SIMSON: In European--

SMITH: Well, in art history.

VON SIMSON: Not medieval, oddly enough. I don't know. I remember mainly since the Reformation, since 1500 or so. I don't think I got to do anything medieval, although that always interested me. At Saint Mary's I only had to teach art history, four times the same course. I always felt that by the third time I was best; by the fourth time I couldn't stand it anymore. But that lasted very briefly, less than a year, because then I got invited to the University of Chicago. That had a number of reasons, one, oddly enough, being-- Do you know who Robert [M.] Hutchins was?

SMITH: Oh, of course. Yes.

VON SIMSON: You know, you asked me what I was doing while in Munich. For one thing, I wrote for a splendid liberal Catholic monthly called Hochland, which, to its great

pride, managed not to mention Hitler by name a single time. [laughter] They just ignored him. Hutchins had published his first book, called No Friendly Voice, and they asked me to review it. I reviewed it in such a way as to--as much as one could dare to, clandestinely, but yet wrote it understandably--compare what liberal education could mean with the dreadful decadence of education in Nazi Germany. I think I probably sent it to Hutchins, who I didn't know at all then. In 1937, during my visit, I had attended the College Art Association [of America] conference held in Chicago, but he was so busy then. Then there was a very interesting man--long dead, otherwise you would have to interview him--Edgar Wind. I had met him in England. I was in England in 1936, I think. The summer. He liked me and liked the stuff I was doing. And then there was an interesting, curious man called John [U.] Nef.

SMITH: I was going to ask you about him.

VON SIMSON: Did you know about him? How come?

SMITH: Just partly because you speak so highly of him in the beginning of Sacred Fortress.

VON SIMSON: Oh, yes, of course. Well, I meant it, and I still mean it. He was an extraordinary man. He was really, I think, the founder, along with Hutchins and an equally extraordinary man called Robert Redfield, whom you

probably don't know--wonderful man and a very distinguished anthropologist--of something called the Committee on Social Thought. The term was devised precisely so as to mean nothing. The idea was an interdisciplinary unit within the university with a great deal of freedom left to scholars. We were supposed to give one course, I think, and have some tutorials. The difficulty that created was that the art department, as a result of this, rather reluctantly took me in. I said immediately, "I will not come unless I also work with the art department." But, I mean, the art department belonged to the humanities. Our committee belonged to the social sciences. The dean of humanities was a very gifted man, [Richard] McKeon. There were very different types. There was E. C. Moore, who was a pupil of a Frenchman, [François] Maritain, a neo-Thomist. There was [Friedrich] von Hayek, who wrote The Road to Serfdom. There was a wonderful Irishman called David Greene, classical studies, with whom my wife learned very, very good Greek. She read it to the end of her life with great enjoyment. There was a Baltic friend of mine, Peter von Blanckenhagen, who died only last year. He never went back to Europe. Hutchins said to me, "Do you know, I would like to get someone quite exceptional out of Germany if you've got one." And this man, who loathed the Nazis, had never gotten a good

position, was a brilliant classical scholar who finally was at the art institute in New York [Institute of Fine Arts, New York University]. And, lo and behold--it took a long time to find him--we finally did find him. He became an enthusiastic American. Blanckenhagen.

SMITH: Was [Antonio] Borgese still there?

VON SIMSON: Borgese was there, but not on the committee. I knew him quite well, as well as Elisabeth [Mann Borgese]. We were on very good terms. Elisabeth is still alive. You know he was the son-in-law of Thomas Mann. But he was not on the committee. Nef, who was a very wealthy man, got all sorts of very interesting people over. [Richard Henry] Tawney, T. S. Eliot. Then a number of distinguished French scholars. I mean, it was a very interesting group. Chicago was a very cosmopolitan university. Hutchins always bragged of the fact that 20 percent of the faculty were non-Americans.

I don't think you want to know much from me about Hutchins. I think he was a splendid, magnificent man, a great educator. But, you know, with his extraordinary thing of public relations, he antagonized all the public schools in the Chicago area. They had no more students in the end. The decisive trustees, such as [Otto] Paepcke or Vail stood by him to the end, but he really had his troubles. A very beautiful but awful wife. You had an

interview with him and she suddenly came in, very like a threatening [inaudible] of beauty, and he rather embarrassedly said, "Well, I suppose we have finished." And that was that. Finally he did divorce her and married a charming wife, a former secretary. I think they're still living in California. Well, then you know of his history really. I never saw him then, to my great regret.

SMITH: So you had no connection with the Center for the Study of Democratic Institutions?

VON SIMSON: No. None. Neither with that nor with the other one-- What was it called?

SMITH: Well, there was the World Federalist Organization that he helped organize, probably at the time that you were at Chicago and while he was still in Chicago.

VON SIMSON: No, that I don't know. They also felt he was too much to the left, I don't know what. Then he went to the Center for the Study of Democratic Institutions. [tape recorder off].

SMITH: What was your relationship with Ulrich Middeldorf?

VON SIMSON: Well, friendly, quite friendly, but I mean the entire art department was German, which, in a sense, was nice. Middeldorf was German, Blanckenhagen was German. There was a marvelous Bavarian called [Ludwig] Bachhofer. His specialty was Far Eastern art. No, I mean, Middeldorf was a very nice man, but our interests

were very different indeed, you know. Middeldorf was very much of a specialist, of an expert. His pockets always bulging, with notes falling out. Charming with his students, equally charming when he became director of the Florentine Institute [Kunsthistorisches Institut Florenz]. Did you meet him?

SMITH: No, I haven't met him, but I know that he was in the study of coins, metal objects.

VON SIMSON: Everything. He studied everything.

SMITH: Ivories. It seems not at all intellectual history.

VON SIMSON: He wrote practically nothing. He had come over before '33 I think. I don't know when.

SMITH: Since much of your work has been on religion in art, did you have any dealings with Mircea Eliade?

VON SIMSON: Oh, yes, I knew him. Yes. He was with the committee, too. My wife knew him better than I because I came rather late, and by that time I was already a good time in Europe. I was working on my [The] Gothic Cathedral: [Origins of Gothic Architecture and the Medieval Concept of Order (1956)], and I taught twice as a guest resident of the University of Frankfurt just after the war, I think in '48-'49, in 1950 maybe.

SMITH: Did you feel there was a difference between American students and German students?

VON SIMSON: Well, personally, yes, a very great difference. I'll tell you one thing. I was dean of students here during the worst [University of California] Berkeley-sponsored--

SMITH: You mean here in the Free University [of Berlin].

VON SIMSON: Yeah. And it was really very, very unpleasant. My lectures were boycotted for I don't know how long. What made it worse was that there were pickets in front of my lecture hall, and the students at that time, with this idiotic attempt at a university forum, sat on every commission, including those that decided on scholarships. So, I mean, for every student attending my lectures it was a risk. So it was very unpleasant. But, anyway, I mention this because, very soon after, I was invited to Harvard [University]. I was so amazed both at the total indifference to ideology at the university and also the warmth and friendliness. People called across the street, "Oh, it was a wonderful lecture you gave today." Here, professors always-- Either you tried to annihilate him or you--

SMITH: What about Chicago in the 1940s?

VON SIMSON: Well, you see, that was very friendly, because at that time I was still very young--relatively young, in my thirties--and some of the students were not very much younger, because they were veterans and studied

on this veteran thing [the G.I. Bill]. So we were on very, very close terms with them, my wife and I. My wife immensely enjoyed Chicago. The Nefs would always invite us--I mean, they would invite the students and everybody from the committee--and we had a good time there. No, that I remember as very pleasant indeed. You mentioned art and religion is one of my interests, but perhaps more to the point is my interest in this art and politics thing. Or both, if you will. Yes, I think both; I do both.

SMITH: Do you recall any of the classes at the University of Chicago that you taught that you were particularly pleased with? [tape recorder off]

VON SIMSON: I don't know whether there were any that I was proud of. Neither my Sacred Fortress nor my Gothic Cathedral would exist without these classes--seminars, if you will. The Gothic Cathedral was particularly enriched by the presence of a wonderful man I had never known of before. He was a musician, a composer called Ernst Levi. Jewish and Swiss. I think you may have seen his name mentioned in my--

SMITH: And you have the diagrams in the--

VON SIMSON: He was a Pythagorean, if you know what that was. Full of this kind of interplay between music and architecture, which he did not know then, I think, is

extremely important for medieval architecture. You asked me at the beginning about Augustine, Boethius. They all speak and think of architecture and music as sisters. So that was a wonderful experience. Both my Ravenna and my cathedral seminars were very lively. I have never had a seminar like that in Germany. Never. There is, again, this relationship between professor and student. I mean, in Chicago the students called me by my first name and vice versa, but now I call my Harvard students and my German students all by their first names because I cannot remember last names anymore. First names yes, but not last names. Well, then it was very exceptional here, unusual here. That was the case.

Also, you mustn't think that my relation to my German students was all vitiated by this political nonsense. In fact, my relationships have been very good indeed. I remember I took an excursion with my students here to France, to the cathedrals of course, as you would imagine. I remember it ended in Rheims. We ate together, and one of the students said, "You know, we all like you very much, but if you become dean, that's all over." I smiled and said, "I don't think I'll become a very much different person if I'm dean or if I'm not dean." Then we went and drank enormous amounts of champagne. It was three o'clock in the morning, no one on the moonlit

streets of Rheims except us, and suddenly they all surrounded me as though they wanted to kidnap me, and they said, "We will not let you become dean. You must stay with us." It's very funny. Then there was this unpleasant thing, which then afterwards--it was in '68, '70-- Then it became perfectly normal again. At that time, it was not bad.

SMITH: In the United States, unless you're studying twentieth-century architecture, you don't really have much opportunity for those kinds of excursions.

VON SIMSON: No. You're quite right. I think that was one reason why I always felt I ought to go back. I once talked to the famous physician [Karl-Friedrich von] Weizsäcker, brother of Richard von Weizsäcker. He said to me, "You ought to come back from America. I can somewhat understand if you are a scientist or if you are a theologian--it doesn't matter where you are. But in your field, you have to have immediate contact with the monuments." Perhaps one flaw of these books was I hadn't seen the monuments, at least not closely. Now, when I am writing this book on Rubens, I hate having to travel all over the place all the time, but I can do it. They are not so terribly far away.

Those years were immensely important. My wife always said, "If you had never been to America, you would have

become an ordinary dull scholar." And she kindly thought I had become a bit more than that. [laughter] I think the experience of having to live in an entirely different country, at once extremely friendly and warmhearted and open and obviously very different, is the sort of thing that must leave a very deep impact on one. I was very lucky. I really think the University of Chicago must have been the most exciting university in America at that time.

SMITH: Many people seem to feel that.

VON SIMSON: We always had this sense, literally, of mission. It was very exciting and interesting and novel.

SMITH: The Institute of Fine Arts at New York University, many people consider that the most exciting place, specifically for art history.

VON SIMSON: Yes. It's excellent, perhaps much better. I'm sure it's much better. But my main foot I had in the Committee on Social Thought, and that was immensely interesting. We did all sorts of things that were impossible in a German university. There was a table in the social science building from this wall to that seating at least sixty people. There we did seminars on Shakespeare. My friend David Greene, this Irishman, was a great Shakespearean enthusiast. I remember having the most heated--we almost became enemies--discussions on King Lear. That sort of thing I'm picking out because it gives

you something of the sense. It was always packed with students.

SMITH: Can you remember any of your graduate students that you were particularly close to?

VON SIMSON: Yes, I remember many of them, but I'm out of touch, unfortunately. One of them I have seen perhaps two years ago when he was in England. He's now at Emory University, I think. Two are retired by now. They were not very much younger than I was then. We took no excursions, but we did these exciting seminars. Yes, for instance, I read Dante with them. I mean, there was a group of them at our home. We loved it. At our home in Chicago, and we loved it. We discussed it and we spent time on it. I've never had anything like-- Although I liked many students--

I'm retired, as you know. I'm an emeritus, which means, in Germany, that you retain all your privileges and lose all your duties. So I've been lecturing on and off, but now I'm busy with my book. There are still some students who want to take their exams with me.

SMITH: How did the Committee on Social Thought relate to the Great Books [of Western Civilization] program?

VON SIMSON: A very good question. Yes, at one time dear Mortimer Adler even tried to rope me in, but I said I couldn't. Well, I mean, Hutchins was highly interested in

both. He thought very little of specialized scholarship, but I think he was definitely wrong. I think you cannot achieve anything unless you take a great deal of papers, footnotes, if you know what I mean. He always thought that learning had to have a political and social impact. I remember the last year before I left Chicago, I had planned a seminar called "The City" together with a friend, [Robert] McCormick--you know, one of the Chicago McCormicks--who had nothing to do with the university but a great deal of interest in the city. And I remember doing one of these things one doesn't forget. He got a splendid man, a black labor union leader. It was very difficult then--it was before '54--to get him into a restaurant, but, thanks to Bob McCormick, we got him in. So he was to be there. It was not only academics who would join in. We thought we ought to try and use an academic place, the Committee on Social Thought, to invite enlightened citizens of all walks of life--not politicians, not city politicians I think--to interest themselves in what the city was and what it might become. Any of this would be unheard of, impossible today. I mean, now that I'm retired, I'm involved in far too many things, but--

SMITH: You could do something very similar. Don't things similar to that happen here in Germany?

VON SIMSON: Not in the university.

SMITH: Oh, not in the university.

VON SIMSON: As far as I can tell, no. Universities are places for scholarly education and not for that sort of thing. But it was quite natural that we planned it. Hutchins loved the idea, and I found it extremely stimulating to give these preparatory talks we had.

SMITH: Did you have much interaction with, well, let's say the NYU [New York University] people, with [Erwin] Panofsky or Friedlaender?

VON SIMSON: Friedlaender I saw only very rarely, but he was very much beloved, a very old man. You know, he was way past ninety. And then Panofsky, yes. We were too different in our scholarly outlook. But I remember, after I had taught my first term here, I felt I ought to write to him, for the simple reason that no scholar of the Pinder generation counted anything with my students except he. And this I wrote to him, and he would immediately answer his letters, same day or same night. Charming letters. Not only charming, but with his usual modesty. He couldn't understand it. He had only tried to interest students in certain things that interested him. I think this iconology-- He never even used the term; it appeared only in the translation. But they call it "iconological studies." Here he always said, "I'm a philologist. I know nothing about the aesthetic quality of a work of

art." Certainly he exaggerated. But, I mean, that was both the great achievement and the weakness of his books. I remember [Otto] Pächt, a distinguished scholar, an Austrian, he wrote a sizzling critique of this, saying "Take the Arnolfini wedding [Arnolfini and His Wife]," this famous painting by van Eyck. "If this is everything, I'm kind of puzzled. What about the composition? What about the colors? What about the quality which we all enjoy without knowing anything about the iconology, exciting, dramatic as it is?" But this is not to give an unfair and unprepared appraisal of Panofsky, but only to explain my attitude toward him. [tape recorder off]

SMITH: We were going to talk about Sacred Fortress. I think the book stands for itself, so we don't need to rehash what's in the book.

VON SIMSON: No.

SMITH: But I'm wondering, at the time that you decided to write it, what lead you to feel that this subject needed to be written at that time?

VON SIMSON: Well, you don't want me to get into depth psychology, my memories of it. I mean, I'm very much consciously aware of that. I just laughed at it afterwards. Well, I became very much interested in this interrelation between the liturgy, the early liturgy, and the fine arts. Here, as Weitzmann's statement seems to

prove, that this is how one should approach it-- I always thought it was an entirely novel approach to the art of Ravenna, for instance. Nothing had really been attempted.

SMITH: What Kurt Weitzmann had done?

VON SIMSON: Well, Weitzmann had done it in quite another realm, another field.

SMITH: How did you plan to position your book in relationship to other literature on the field?

VON SIMSON: Well, I put it in a very critical way. I think if I had not focused solely on that particular aspect, a more fulsome treatment would have to take in the entire development of the art of the sixth century since the transformation of late antique art to Byzantine art, and that was not my subject.

SMITH: It struck me in reading it how important the political message was, the sort of overt political message. Was that as important to you at the beginning of the project?

VON SIMSON: Very much so. Very much so. I mean, I saw then, and perhaps see it now-- It's so distant from me now though. It has been republished by Princeton [University Press] last year, but I said I wouldn't touch it. It would be impossible. I would have to rewrite it. But, as I recall it, it's very-- When was it? In '48? I don't think it relates to anything else. Whether it's good or

bad, I cannot tell you. I didn't go about it purposely to see things in a new light. I went about it because I was interested in it, because I thought that really the way in which Justinian used ecclesiastical and liturgical means to reconquer Italy was fascinating. I mean, it just fascinated me at that moment. In its relation to Rome on the one hand, to Constantinople on the other, to the Aryan Goths. Its relation to three different religions.

SMITH: What I found fascinating from reading some of the reviews--many of the reviewers at the time picked up on it--was your concept of the Greek concept of the polis continuing through the Roman view of religion.

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SMITH: I was thinking, in particular, about the section where you talk about Bishop Agnellus's reconstruction of Sant' Apollinare Nuovo and the image of the polis of the saints and the importance of the consensus of the people as the basis for not only secular government but spiritual government.

VON SIMSON: Well, yes. To use the term "democratic" has so many different connotations. Of course you can say that at that time--you only have to read Gibbon--religious elements, liturgical elements, spiritual elements, mystical elements played such an enormous role in creating consensus. This is probably what you mean. I think it's very different indeed from-- It's only propaganda, you know.

SMITH: But in the book you contrast two forms of propaganda, which are also two forms of viewing the relationship of humans and the divine, the Justinian or Maximian view of prostration before forces which are so large and so ineffable versus a much more human-oriented, community-oriented form of religion.

VON SIMSON: I'm not trying to convince you of anything. I wonder whether that sort of very transcendentally

oriented form of persuasion, if you want to call it so, has anything to do with what today we would call democracy, what in the Anglo-Saxon tradition is called democracy. It seems to me very different indeed, if you ask me.

SMITH: Okay. That's one of the answers I was wondering if we would get, because, as you know, in some of the reviews of your work, people have criticized you for a sort of, shall we say, neo-Platonism.

VON SIMSON: I don't know. I haven't even noticed.

SMITH: But your answer goes in a different direction. I was wondering how you viewed yourself on the question of timeless eternals. Are there timeless eternals working within historical societies?

VON SIMSON: Say that question again. I didn't get you.

SMITH: Are there eternal verities, or are there Platonic ideals that exist outside of history, outside of time? Do you view Platonic ideals that exist outside of history and outside of time as working within history and within society? And is one of the functions of the historian to identify those ideals?

VON SIMSON: No. I think the entire-- Idea, you say?

SMITH: Ideals.

VON SIMSON: Ideals? With an "l"?

SMITH: With an "l," yes.

VON SIMSON: What do you mean by that in reference to Plato? When Plato speaks of ideals, he means something rather specific. All right, you can say ideals. Well, I think, as an historian, you deal with the ideals held in that particular epoch, regardless of what you yourself may consider or may not consider to be the determining value.

SMITH: I read one review in particular which accused you of the neo-Platonic idealism that might be found in Timaeus. That your Gothic--

VON SIMSON: Oh, that's with [The] Gothic Cathedral: [Origins of Gothic Architecture and the Medieval Concept of Order (1956)].

SMITH: Yes. This was specifically a review of The Gothic Cathedral. It said you shared the neo-Platonic idealism of the Scholastics, and--

VON SIMSON: Ah, now, wait a minute. Yes. It didn't really say that. I deal of course with the school of Chartres, which was neo-Platonist in the sense that they knew one-half of the Timaeus and tried to reconcile that one-half of the Timaeus with the book of Genesis. But I hope the reviewer didn't-- [tape recorder off]

SMITH: Another thing that interested me with both the Sacred Fortress: [Byzantine Art and Statecraft in Ravenna (1948)] and The Gothic Cathedral are their relationship to the Cambridge [University] school of history that

developed in the fifties around Quentin Skinner and J. G. A. Pocock and the attempt to define the evolution of specific discourse universes, so that one could define the mental structures, the intellectual structures of a time, in historical terms, not in universal terms. I was wondering if through Chicago, there was that kind of discussion.

VON SIMSON: No, nor do I think that I really ever work deductively, but inductively. I mean, from the sources, so I feel. So I'm convinced. I'm very purely an historian, I think. I'm not particularly influenced by some philosophical context in which one lives. I'm not aware of that. I was just studying the sources and trying to see whether they applied or did not apply on that subject. That was not a very satisfactory answer, but I don't know whether I could answer it in different terms.

SMITH: No. That's a fine answer. The Cambridge school of history was very much influenced by [Willard] Quine and developments in linguistic philosophy. Part of my question is to what degree those kinds of developments may have been a factor at the University of Chicago in particular.

VON SIMSON: I'm not aware of it, I have to admit. That's very terrible.

SMITH: No. That may be a more important answer than you

realize in the sense that one of the things that intellectual historians often do is connect things on their formal attributes. It also suggests an aspect about the general intellectual climate of the postwar period, perhaps, a groping of scholars in different directions to try to understand values.

VON SIMSON: It's a very interesting point you make. It's interesting to me because, for one thing, it's sufficiently in a mode for me now to see it in that perspective. On the other hand, of course, I'm so obviously a prisoner. One is always caught in the peculiar context both of one's background and upbringing and character and the period in which one lives. So, from that extent, this book is certainly hated. I mean, you can--

SMITH: Again, your studies of Augustine and Boethius and Scholastic philosophy and Aristotle date from the-- They were part of your research to write these books.

VON SIMSON: Yes. Absolutely. Definitely. Although I think that Great Books [of the Western World program] came in. One of the good things about Chicago was that it induced you to do very broad reading, not just the things you happened to like or things you needed for your scholarly pursuits. There was really an urge to read some of the great books, not because one had an obligation, but

they belonged to the context of discussions one had.

SMITH: Perhaps, again with The Gothic Cathedral, if you could define-- We don't need to discuss the specific arguments, because they're there, but if you could define what you felt the gap was in the literature on the Gothic cathedral and why you felt that you had something different to contribute.

VON SIMSON: There again I must confess that I didn't go about it with any very clear notion either as to what I thought was missing or any new contribution I could make. I just became aware of certain gaps, perhaps, between my view of the cathedral and the view of others, of everyone else. A little bit the book was written--a little bit, not more--as a contrast of a very dreadful but a very famous book on Gothic cathedrals [Die Entstehung der Kathedrale] by a man called [Hans] Sedlmayr, who, incidentally, was an out-and-out Nazi, and then from brown turned black. And then, being out of a job, he applied to the illustrious chair in Munich with the help of two books. One was called Verlust der Mitte: [Die bildende Kunst des 19. und 20. Jahrhunderts als Symptom und Symbol der Zeit], which showed that all modern art was of the devil, and the other one was the Gothic cathedral book. The Frankfurter Allgemeiner Zeitung ran a series not very long ago.

In the 1950s, art history, and more specifically the history of architecture, medieval architecture, had fallen into two very distinct groups. The one was--this is being said in a very positive sense, a very positivistic one--analysis of styles, which had brought out very, very significant results. The other was the so-called iconological approach. Mr. Sedlmayr, being the man he was, of course, would borrow the stuff from [Erwin] Panofsky at the time. I probably did try to bridge these two or to make a synthesis out of the two. So in that sense it is not very interesting, because the actual title of the paper was "Simson about Simson."

One wonders, you know, since you asked me about the cathedral-- I will say it as briefly as I can. If you take perhaps the greatest student of Gothic architecture of the nineteenth century, Viollet-le-Duc, for him, Gothic architecture is nothing but the triumph of what he called rationalism, what we would call functionalism today. Now, it's really an utterly absurd idea that-- The only architecture that in a revolutionary way breaks or interrupts the classical tradition that runs from classical times through Romanesque and then again Renaissance and so forth, classicism, is Gothic. [It is absurd] that there should be nothing but this triumph of rationalism. Obviously, I was then trying to feel my way, to grope my

way into the thinking of those who made it, the architects. This is mainly Suger, Abbot Suger of Saint-Denis, and then the great Fulbert, the creator of Chartres cathedral.

SMITH: In both of your books, actually, there's a triad between religion, politics, and the art. How important is the religious view within that triad?

VON SIMSON: The architects were not particularly pious men--or perhaps they were, but I know nothing of it, nor do I think that piety makes you into a good architect--but of course they were rooted in the thinking of the time, in the musical, architectural thinking of the time, in the mysticism they got in a famous German book which came along before my time, which was called Lichtmetaphysik, "The Metaphysics of Light." And this is certainly to my mind-- I was entirely shocked when I saw it in [inaudible]. It's a very strange thought that without the strong thoughts of a fifth-century Syrian mystic, Gothic architecture would not have come into existence. Ultimately, I think that it is this kind of duck hunting, an idea appearing and disappearing and coming up again and you're finding its way, that is the fascinating business of an historian of ideas. Art history is just that, also.

SMITH: In terms of your research for those two books, how

much of your research for Sacred Fortress was done in Ravenna looking at the buildings?

VON SIMSON: None. None. The book appeared in '48, and I had no chance to go over. I mean, it was written at the end of the war.

SMITH: And The Gothic Cathedral?

VON SIMSON: Yes, The Gothic Cathedral very much so. Gothic Cathedral very much so. In fact, I think the similar experience of my visit to Chartres just after the war-- At that time, it was rather interesting-- The cathedral of Chartres had all its stained-glass windows taken out to save them, you know. And you saw the light purer, so to speak. It was very, very strange. And yet, even though the architects-- This is the quintessence of Gothic architecture: it's like a skeleton for the windows.

SMITH: What about the use of illustrations? Both in the book, but perhaps also as a teacher with slides or taking the option of going into more detail, perhaps. How to look and to connect visual perception with intellectual conceptualization?

VON SIMSON: I think as a teacher you have to keep them distinct. I remember conducting seminars, so-called proseminars for beginners, in the museums, obviously. And I remember one term when we spent the entire time in front of the paintings by the great Dutch landscapist Ruisdael.

That was my assistant who has now become a very distinguished professor at Brown [University]. At the end of it he said to me, "You know, it was such a splendid thing. I had such a wonderful time, and I think most importantly, I learned about his ideas." I said, "Don't think, just look." And without any preconceived notions as to his relationship with time. There was a sociological factor, a very important factor, that would have accounted for a section of his work, for his commissions. But I just wanted the students to be patient and let the paintings sink in. [tape recorder off]

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SMITH: Did you take any classes from Adolph Goldschmidt?

VON SIMSON: No. I knew him, but he was already retired when I met him.

SMITH: You had mentioned that under the Nazi classification you were considered "mixed." I thought that one of the things that the Nazis were concerned about was people not being mixed, so--

VON SIMSON: It would have been much better if I had been pure Aryan blood, yeah. [tape recorder off] What they would have done with the mongrels, as I was called, after the war is quite another question, if they had won the war.

SMITH: In terms of intellectual life, social life in Germany during the Nazi period, were you able to keep abreast of what was developing outside of Germany? Were you able to--?

VON SIMSON: Papers you mean?

SMITH: Papers, books. Were you able to keep aware of--?

VON SIMSON: You know, I was abroad a good deal of the time. I spent the summer of '36 in England, in '37 I was in the United States. Yes. I don't think there was-- There certainly was censorship as far as the German press

was concerned, but I don't think-- It was so long ago. I think you could buy foreign papers.

SMITH: When people gathered--and I suppose I mean privately, but, still, people from different areas--was there self-censorship? Were people concerned about what they said?

VON SIMSON: I remember there was a little park or garden in Munich and a cafe there, a very famous one. There were only people who were of one mind, who went there to have coffee together. Now, if someone else had slipped into it, I don't know how we would have known. But one could be absolutely certain of who people were. I mean, I suppose later on, during the war, this would have become much worse. Thank God this nightmare only lasted twelve years, you know. You mustn't forget that. I mean, the Holocaust and all that was frightful enough, but heaven knows what would have happened if it had lasted longer or if they had won the war. You know, I was very young then. I never had the slightest notion that-- The right Germany was on my side. I never developed any sort of inferiority complex or feelings of belief. It may have been different in Munich. Munich is, as you know, a Catholic city, and this whatever you call it, society, they all detested it. Those who did not we knew and kept away from. I do not remember any kind of unpleasant encounters of any kind.

SMITH: As you were growing up as a young man, both in your last years in the Gymnasium and in the university, what were your personal literary and artistic tastes? Were you interested in contemporary literature at the time or did you follow contemporary art?

VON SIMSON: This is quite interesting. I was very much interested by the poet Stefan George. [Richard] Gundolph, you know, the literary historian, if he had lived, I might have become-- I was more or less set on going to Heidelberg just to hear him. I didn't really know any of them, but I was very much influenced by George. You know the history. George hated the Nazis, but his very harsh critique of contemporary civilization or contemporary literature was something that then later was utilized by the Nazis. Goebbels tried everything he could to rope him in. But George went to Italy and died there and never went back, never answered the university to which the government sent him. But he is now very much-- He has a swastika as his logo. Do you say logo? As his signet in his publications.

SMITH: But the traditional swastika. Not the Hakenkreuz.

VON SIMSON: Well, it is the Hakenkreuz. Wait, I'll show you-- All his publications had it long before there was any notion of Hitler.

SMITH: Well, it was a Sanskrit original-- It's a Hindu

symbol.

VON SIMSON: It's also in China. I don't know where the origin might be. Is it Sanskrit?

SMITH: It's Sanskrit. It's a Hindu symbol for the universe.

VON SIMSON: That's where he might have had it from. I was an admirer of Rilke. But they were all the generation just before mine. They were all born in the-- I think George was born in '68, Rilke in the seventies. So was Hofmannsthal. They were all strong influences. As to the arts-- I'm searching now. No, I don't think I knew much or was much interested in--

This is interesting. Another thing to bear in mind: Hitler and Goebbels made into an avalanche, you might say, what was certainly an ingredient of the criticism of contemporary culture, of which Stefan George was not the only one, but he was the spokesman. All this business about "degenerate art," you know. Not that the term was ever used, but sometimes if one reads through-- They published a journal. In fact, two, Beitrag für die Kunst and [Beitrag] für die Geistesbewegung. There are probably things in there sometimes, trite and shallow. For instance, there was a very distinguished writer not belonging to the circle called Rudolph Borchert--a very tragic fate, because he was of Jewish origin and barely

escaped the Nazis, I think. Anyway, he published a wonderful anthology of German poetry. And of this poetry, since-- He liked George; he thought that Heine was nothing but a journalist. He [Borchert] did something that was really barbarous. Among his poets, he picked three or four lines; for the others he left dots. "That was not pure poetry." There's no trace of anti-Semitism or anything of that ideology. But he did think they had no sense for the-- This wonderful sense of humor and of criticism of Heine, you know. This is also the kind of soil on which-- I mean, I don't think Hitler ever read any of these or had any knowledge of it, but Goebbels had started out studying with Gundolph. Gundolph always used to say-- When people said to him, "Goebbels studied with you," he would reply, "No, Goebbels hat zur meinen Füssen gesessen" "Goebbels sat at my feet", as you say over there. He added, "But he never got any further than my feet." [laughter] But, I mean, it was not--what I'm trying to get at--a sudden transition from an essentially liberal situation to this kind of monstrosity under Hitler. There were trends that nourished the soil, you might say.

SMITH: Did a Nazi culture establish itself?

VON SIMSON: No. But perhaps I'm not the right person to answer that. The interesting thing is, not a single

distinguished artist-- All of them got out or were sentenced to silence. They were not allowed to paint. All the distinguished architects of that time, they all left Germany: [Walter] Gropius, [Marcel] Breuer, [Ludwig] Mies van der Rohe, every single one of them. The same with musicians.

SMITH: So you would not accept the argument that [Albert] Speer was a decent architect.

VON SIMSON: He was dreadful. I have never belonged to the admirers of Herr Speer, whom I slightly knew. I think one virtue he thought he had, that's courage, consisted of the fact that he dared publish in his memoirs pictures, photos, of these dreadful things he built and even more dreadful things that he planned. Frightful. If it's not outright frightful, it's just the sad, discount version of classicism. But then, one must not forget there too, if you look horizontally, not vertically-- I mean, the Palais Chaillot in Paris, for instance, is very similar. Or what the Italians call the barocco di Pio XI, or the barocco of Pope Pius XI, that's also not much different. But is there any serious discussion about the aesthetic merits of Nazi--Speer--architecture? I never heard it. The same with painting. That's our great problem in Germany, what to do with it. Do you ignore it? That's not honest. It's frightful. Somewhere there was an exhibition.

Awful. I mean, it has no merit whatsoever. And, in a sense, in many cases it was very tragic. The great painter [Emil] Nolde from the north of Germany was rather inclined to throw in his lot with the Nazis, but he was immediately felt "degenerate," and out he was. [Max] Beckmann was thrown into exile. There was nothing left. Merely mediocrity. I really could not mention any artist of any merit on any subject. But take a man like [Arno] Brecker. Well, he died just a few months ago. But he had many friends, especially in France, until his end. And perhaps he was gifted, probably was gifted. He then tried to justify himself by saying that he had done the death mask of [Max] Liebermann, which, in fact, he did. He discovered the greener fields of the Nazis later on. But awful. Perhaps someone could write a book on the ideological influences even on genuine artists.

SMITH: Since we're on the subject, what did you feel about the Ernst Jünger case?

VON SIMSON: Well, there I feel the following: He's a great stylist, an important and significant writer. I think ultimately the splendor of his style expresses something that is less significant than the forms. A very odd case. Perhaps it's significant that his most important books are his diaries, which are very interesting. He wrote one or two novels which are no

good. He wrote two very famous books. One is The Marble Cliffs, taken as a critique of the Nazis. He said he was not a Nazi. The book was forbidden, only too late, when it was already circulating. Perhaps his most important book is called Der Arbeiter, The Worker, which appeared in 1930--I think that's the first edition. It's very hard to explain. In many respects, it anticipates the total state. You know, making man into a machine of efficiency, of obedience. Not the racist, he certainly was never a racist. So that was very important. I think it is not quite his first book. The very first book--I don't think it's worth reading anymore--is a book of reminiscences of the First World War, where he was decorated for bravery. But he is certainly a significant writer, there's no doubt about it.

There's a famous story: This friend whose book I am presenting today was a great friend of his son [Ernst], who later was killed in the war. But he was taken prisoner, jailed for resistance. The story is Jünger, the father, trying to see his son, putting on his uniform with his very high decoration like, for instance, your Congressional Medal of Honor, saying, "These are strange times when you can visit your son in jail only in this kind of outfit." Very sad. There was no doubt that he was very closely allied with the resistance and knew about

it and so on. Why did you ask me that question? Is he known in America?

SMITH: Ernst Jünger? Yes.

VON SIMSON: Really? Not well known. He's immensely well known in France, you know. Very well known indeed. Visited practically every distinguished man from Picasso to Cocteau under the occupation.

SMITH: When you were in the United States during the war, did the American government ask your advice at any point about monuments or--?

VON SIMSON: No. Never. Never. Luckily, I was not drafted into the army--if that's luck, I don't know. I had said at one point I could not fight against my own people. So it went that far. That seemed all right to them. They thought I would fight in Japan. They didn't quite know what I was saying, you know. I was asked, then, from very high up, would I be willing to act as adviser after the war. I was asked if I had relatives in Germany; I said yes, I had relatives in Germany. That was the end of it. I think it was a mistake on their part. I mean, I don't know whether I would have been a good adviser, but I think to take only people who had severed all ties with Germany was perhaps not the best way of putting it out.

SMITH: After the war and the, quote, "redemocratization,"

unquote, took place, did people in, let's say, the Allied military government or the American military government come to you to try to involve you?

VON SIMSON: Never.

SMITH: Ask your advice or--?

VON SIMSON: No. Now it's all over and it doesn't matter, but I think it's rather bad. I mean, certain errors might have been avoided, possibly. You know, I went to Vienna after the war. I had interesting experiences in Frankfurt because some of my students were-- They had been soldiers just before the end of the war.

SMITH: Now, what year was this? You went to teach at Frankfurt in--

VON SIMSON: I went in '48, '49, and '50. Well, I won't say difficult, but certainly our opinions clashed. They said Goebbels and others were all very awful, but they would not let anyone criticize the Führer at first. Yes. So perhaps I made a certain dent there when I told them what I thought of what had happened. Otherwise we were on the best of terms, I must say, and very pleasant.

You asked me, if I may--if it's a digression I will stop--about the comparison of American and German students. I thought, since we talked last night, of something that I think is very typical. A few years ago I taught at the University of Texas in Austin, and since

they wanted me to teach another course on the Gothic cathedral, I did. We had a seminar. The seminar was most pleasant. We went into one of the great minds of the twelfth century, always overlooked, Hugues de Saint-Victor. Then the thing was over, and before going home, the students invited me, thinking that I would love it, into a German beer garden, run even by a former German. So it was very jolly. It was a very hot day, I remember. Texas is very hot, as you know. There was one boy who was late. He came in full of excitement and said, "I'm sorry I'm late. I've just been to the library"--Texas has an excellent library--"and I discovered a passage"--or a chapter or I don't know what--"of Hugues de Saint-Victor which is very pertinent." I couldn't help thinking, "Here I am in Texas sitting in a German beer garden, and there comes an American student full of passion, full of excitement, because he has found a passage of Hugues de Saint-Victor."

You asked me about [Erwin] Panofsky. He said, "You know, what is so wonderful in this country, America, is that scholarship, research"--er hat's auf Deutsch gesagt--"ist etwas dass man aus Leidenschaft heraus interessiert ist." In Germany, people are much more blasé, I think.

I still remember when I was at Harvard [University], during my years at the graduate school there, which I

always regretted, but there was a course which they asked if I would have a part in which the students called "Darkness at Noon." It was given at twelve, and it was dark, for obvious reasons. It was a slide lecture. It was one of these big surveys. One colleague took antiquity; I was doing the Middle Ages; and someone else modern. I had very good slides of the Ghent altarpiece by van Eyck. You know, I've never encountered this kind of wonderment, this excitement. They came to me saying, "I have never seen anything so beautiful." Or on another occasion I taught a course at Brown University, medieval art. And you probably don't know, there's a place called Naumburg cathedral with perhaps the most beautiful sculpture created in the thirteenth century, comparable only to the great sculpture in France and the great sculpture of Giovanni Pisani in Italy. I still remember, they'd never heard of it. You would have heard a needle drop. It was not that I spoke so eloquently, but that these photos were indeed breathtakingly beautiful. It was a very exhilarating experience, as you can imagine.

This ignorance stemmed partly from the fact, I think, that there were two wars where your country was on one side, my country was on the other. In America you know English art, you know French art, you know Italian art. And German art is a blank. As a matter of fact, one term

when I was at Harvard they asked me would I mind teaching a course in German nineteenth-century history. I said of course I would, because it interested me. And it did. I created a book out of that [Der Blick nach Innen: Vier Beiträge zur deutschen Malerei des 19. Jahrhundert (1986)]. But they had the feeling that this was terra incognita. But I didn't only teach German art when I was over there.

SMITH: From the accounts that people give of the two systems, it sounds like in the German system the distance between the professor and the students is much greater.

VON SIMSON: Yes. We hinted at that last night, you remember. Yes, they are.

SMITH: But when you came to the United States and you come into a situation where it's much closer, and then you come back home, do you try to bridge the distance?

VON SIMSON: Awful. I remember as they stood, they shook hands with me, but bowed almost to the ground, you know, that sort of thing. Well, that is perhaps one of the few good things about the student revolt. That has become much more relaxed now and has remained so. My relations to my students, even to this day, are really excellent. Perhaps this is my American attitude. You know, my late wife [Louise von Schönburg-Hartenstein], who had such a wonderful time in America and took part in almost

everything I did, when she came back here when she was the Frau Professor, I think she very much missed this-- Although the students liked her, too. In fact, I remember my son, my younger son, the one who was in Berlin-- I had a little hobby room. There were dances there, and they had a good time. She always said--I think I told you yesterday--"If you had not come to America, you would have become a very ordinary, dull scholar." Whether I'm a good scholar, it's not for me to judge, but I think I did become something else, and that's certainly owing to America.

SMITH: Well, part of the dark side of life in America-- What about the McCarthy period at the University of Chicago? How was that experience there?

VON SIMSON: Well, Chicago is a very liberal school, and [Robert Maynard] Hutchins would have none of it. He was still there, I think. I remember-- I will only tell you two things. One was that [Ernst] Kantorowicz refused the oath of allegiance demanded at [the University of] California. So I told [John U.] Nef, and we immediately cabled to him an invitation to Chicago. He then chose to go to Princeton [University], I think. He was at the Institute [for Advanced Study], I think. The other was a friend or a colleague. I can't say that I liked him terribly much, but he has become a very distinguished

man since then, a very famous man even. But he had told on colleagues who were far to the left. And I must say, no one had ever quite forgiven him that. Although there was pressure exerted--not the kind of pressure the communists or the Nazis exerted--we felt he ought not to have done that. Of other cases, I don't know. No. I mean, the outstanding people at the University of Chicago were dead set against that. I couldn't name a single exception.

SMITH: You had mentioned last night off tape--I think we were having dinner--about the university and Hutchins developing a sense of being a citizen, the civic responsibility.

VON SIMSON: Yeah. Absolutely.

SMITH: Now, that was something that was different from the German university tradition?

VON SIMSON: The German university has always remained a kind of ivory tower, I think. I don't think it's quite unfair to say that. I'm just trying to think if I'm unfair now. But, I mean, the sort of things that I told you about what I did-- I'll tell you one thing, and please don't get this wrong. I think I would have reacted even if we had been talking about France and not about Germany. I don't know why. My first experience at the University of Chicago was on May 8, 1945. The

announcement was in Rockefeller Chapel, which was the university chapel, and Hutchins would make an armistice speech. That was that absolutely splendid speech where he said, "This is a day of thanksgiving and of prayer. Thanksgiving because we have been victorious in the greatest and bloodiest war, and of prayer that we may not have inherited the various things that we have been fighting against." That was the underlying trend of the entire speech, and no one objected to it. I don't know whether people said afterwards that it was wrong. There was no particular sense of triumph or self-satisfaction.

SMITH: What about your perceptions of American art historians of the older generation, perhaps medievalists in particular, since you were focused--?

VON SIMSON: No. Dear Richard, you are breaking off now.

SMITH: Okay.

VON SIMSON: I think, if you don't mind, I would like to dwell on this a bit longer, because otherwise I think it gets a-- What you really asked me was this sense of civic responsibility. Perhaps Hutchins was at one time an America firster, if you know what that means, a complete isolationist. The tragedy was that he was compelled to have installed under the football stadium the first lab that developed atomic fission. But, I mean, that just had to be done and certainly is not the sort of thing he would

have wanted, still less had he known what would become of it. No, I'm thinking of other things quite independent of the war. Two things. One, that you have to stand up and be counted, that you shouldn't dodge important issues, which I must really say I've carried through to the present day. As a perfectly natural part of the civic responsibility, it would be perfectly obvious to you, whereas here-- I don't know what would have become of me had I stayed and survived. Of course, the success of Hitler, the success of the communists was possible only because the Germans are so used to bowing their heads in front of authorities. This blind belief in authority, you know, which you don't have in your country at all, do you?

SMITH: I think we do to a degree.

VON SIMSON: Do you?

SMITH: Conformity is perhaps the way it expresses itself, the authority of the mass.

VON SIMSON: In your country?

SMITH: Yes.

VON SIMSON: Well, probably in our country, too. But that's not-- Yes, that is the thing. I know what you mean, and it's not a desirable thing, but it's still something else. It's not only hard but impossible to imagine some kind of Hitler fascism, or lately this communism, taking over in the United States. I can't

imagine it.

SMITH: No, neither can I, but--

VON SIMSON: Really? No, I think the Germans are more authority-minded. I do think so. Apparently, you don't agree with that. The other is for you to take initiative. I mean, when a perfectly dotty plan was under way--I think we have more or less killed it now--not to restore the Museumsinsel, I wrote a furious big article, which made me very unpopular with several people, against that. So, I mean, public expression is a civic duty. I don't know, I'm a very pigheaded person; perhaps I would have to give it up the same way.

I'll tell you another thing in this context, if I may. One day in Munich, a young professor, [Walther] Rehm, came in a brown shirt, brown trousers, in the uniform of the N.S. [National Socialist] Dozentenbund and said, "We want you to join the National Socialist Volkswohlfahrt," which was more or less a social thing. I said, "I can't because I'm not a pure Aryan." He said, "No, no, you can." So then I thought it was rather convenient to have this plaque on my door, and I joined. This man--he died much too early--accepted a professorship in Freiburg and wrote one of the most splendid books, Experimentum Medietatis: [Studien zur Geistes- und Literaturgeschichte des 19. Jahrhunderts], which is an

Augustinian term. If you will, it's one of the great-- Ultimately also an attack against the Nazi regime. Rehm his name was, I remember. So he donned this garb. I joined this very harmless organization, but, even so, I did. This is coming back a little to what I told you yesterday. Nothing would be, I won't say more unfair, but further removed from reality than this kind of thinking in terms of black and white. There weren't any nuances of transition. Had I stayed and had I been of pure Aryan blood, I hope I would never have committed any atrocity. I am fairly certain that I wouldn't have, even at the risk of death. But all the in-between, that was just a matter of pressure. You know? Well, I don't know how that sounds to you. You've always lived in a free society.

We have the same experience now with our brethren here from the east who don't understand it, who find it terribly unfair that we said, "How could you have borne this without standing up against the regime or without getting out, quitting?" I mean, my greatest respect is to those who stood up and got killed or jailed or I don't know what. How does that sound to you, Richard Smith?

SMITH: Well, it's very hard to expect people to stand up when there are no alternatives, when there seems no possibility of achieving anything.

VON SIMSON: Yes. Right. But, you see, my great good luck was that during the worst time I was in America. And I came back a man convinced of the significance of the rule of law and the significance of free and democratic institutions, despite having written that book on Byzantium.

SMITH: Despite?

VON SIMSON: I was only kidding. [tape recorder off]

SMITH: I did want to ask you again about your evaluation of American art historians of the older generation, people like Arthur Kingsley Porter. Did you have contact with them?

VON SIMSON: No. He was right before my time. I think he was even dead before I came to the United States.

SMITH: That's right.

VON SIMSON: But, of course, he was a great man. Many things wrong with his work, but still a tremendous undertaking.

SMITH: Or Charles Rufus Morey at Princeton [University]?

VON SIMSON: Morey I did know. A very good scholar, not a great one. A very kindly man, incidentally, also. And sounds very strange, his great achievement being this Princeton Index [of Christian Art], where you indexed everything, which you now would do by computer and much more complete. Anyway, that was the thing to do then, and

there were, I think, three copies: one in Princeton, one in Utrecht, and one--

SMITH: We have one at UCLA.

VON SIMSON: I don't think anyone uses it anymore. I don't know. Because it's so much easier now to get at what you want on another-- Morey you think of, Kingsley Porter you think of.

SMITH: What about Sumner Crosby or Charles Seymour [Jr.]?

VON SIMSON: Well, Sumner Crosby, we were great friends in Paris, and then we suddenly became enemies because he tore my [The Gothic] Cathedral: [Origins of Gothic Architecture and the Medieval Concept of Order (1956)] to pieces. And I replied in the Art Bulletin and tore him to pieces in turn. A very interesting thing. The editor wrote to me or called me, I don't know which. I was here at this time. He said, "Do you really want to do that? He is a very influential man." I said, "I don't care whether he's influential at all. I'm just writing what I want to write." So they accepted it. Unfortunately, we never became friends again. The unfortunate thing that had happened was that the London Times Literary Supplement in its first--very important first--review published a rave review. Sumner probably felt that, first, it wasn't that good and, secondly, one ought to sort of do something to restore the balance. But he was not fair. It was not a

fair review, I think. What distressed me was that it came from him. He was a very nice man. But, of course, he had his difficulties. He never did anything but Saint-Denis, you know. Never. His whole life was devoted to-- He did beautiful work on Saint-Denis, the great incunabula of Gothic architecture. A little narrow-minded, I think, but a thoroughly nice man.

Now, who else was there? Well, [Kurt] Weitzmann was from Germany, too. Weitzmann is still alive, as you know. That was what was really so nice about Morey. Weitzmann had published something that tore him to pieces, just contradicted him, you know. A reply came from Morey, "Why don't you come to Princeton?" Splendid, huh? But, you know, art history, for better or for worse--I'm not sure it's altogether for the good--is very much a German invention. What the French do they themselves call archéologie. It's not the same as what we call art history. It's something entirely different. It's classification. It's none of this kind of attempt that I and Panofsky and whoever maybe-- To indulge in interpreting the work of art. Or Mr. [Otto-Karl] Werckmeister--he does it in different ways. But, I mean, "Kunstgeschichte als Geistesgeschichte," you know, the great slogan coined by [Max] Dvořak, the Bohemian-Austrian art historian who died very young, in his twenties. But English art history is

very good because it's so solidly based on history. All the English art historians, I think almost to this day, were first of all historians. After all, art history is a historical discipline. Well, if I think of the people I knew-- There was wonderful Meyer Schapiro, who still lives. Full of ideas, but he has published relatively little. But a brilliant man. He was also not an American, in that sense. Did he come over, did his parents come over?

SMITH: Well, he was born in Russia, but he came here as a young child. He came to the United States as a young child.

VON SIMSON: As a young child. Wonderful. A great man. Then there was [Walter] Cook at-- I think Meyer Schapiro was at Columbia [University], and Cook was at NYU [New York University]. He was in Spanish art, I think. He was a good scholar, but he was a marvelous man so far as befriending refugees and trying to place them. Infinite kindness and so on. But I don't remember too many. I mean, if I exclude all the immigrants who came from Germany and Austria and so forth-- But tell me if I omit anyone of that older generation. Rensselaer Lee. [George A.] Kubler is a man of the older generation. I think he's still around. A very, very interesting man, full of ideas and very original.

TAPE NUMBER: III, SIDE TWO

NOVEMBER 8, 1991

SMITH: Harvard was the center for many years of museum training, and you had Paul [J.] Sachs there.

VON SIMSON: That's right. Sachs was there. I know him only very slightly. [Wilhelm] Koehler was there. He was a German, too.

SMITH: Some of the younger Americans--by that I mean people that are now in their sixties and seventies--would refer to the difference between-- Amongst themselves, amongst Americans, there would be the "gentlemen" and then there would be the "Germans," meaning those who had sat at the feet of the exiles and developed a scientific approach. Those who were not German-trained were not scientific. Would you say that?

VON SIMSON: And who would that be? Someone like [John] Coolidge?

SMITH: Coolidge, [James S.] Ackerman.

VON SIMSON: They're the "gentleman" variety. But they're all very good-- But they feel that way?

SMITH: They feel they're "Germans," and then there would be others who were--

VON SIMSON: Who were the "Germans"?

SMITH: Coolidge and Ackerman.

VON SIMSON: But who were the "gentlemen"? I thought you meant they were the-- If they were not the "gentlemen," give me some names as to the distinction. [tape recorder off]

You know, for a long time he [Craig Hugh Smyth] directed the [Villa] i Tatti, did a first-rate job. He was, if you mind, in those days a scholar-diplomat, a very good one. On both counts. The others would be more the connoisseurs? Couldn't I say that?

SMITH: Yes, that would be a distinction. One of the directions I would like to ask you is what makes German art history, quote, unquote, "scientific"?

VON SIMSON: My God, what a question. The distinction is yours, not mine. [laughter] I'll tell you one thing. I think it certainly is the knowledge of the sources and beyond that, more deeply than that, a broad, humanistic training, formation. I mean, Panofsky, whatever he would eventually appear to be as an art historian, would always be considered a distinguished humanist. Does that make sense? Well, beginning with a knowledge of the classical languages and with the ease to master the classical literature and know something about classical art. But that, as you might say, is a tradition of the Warburg Institute, of which Panofsky was never a member, but very close. He was a professor at [the University of] Hamburg,

and that's where the institute was.

SMITH: When you were writing The Gothic Cathedral and you had to deal with the question of the symbol so centrally, was that when you began to study for yourself what the various theories of the symbol--?

VON SIMSON: I'm so very untheoretical. I read the sources and tried to understand what they were about.

SMITH: So you did not read [Ernst] Cassirer, for example.

VON SIMSON: Yes, well, way back I read him--I don't think he had any important book--but I don't think it ever had any impact on my scholarship.

SMITH: Your decision to return to Germany-- You had said that you would go back to Germany to teach for a semester. I would gather that you would take a leave of absence and do research. How did you find Germany when you returned?

VON SIMSON: Well, I must tell you about the circumstances. Frankfurt was in shambles, and the university was blooming I think better than it had ever been before. The glory of all beginnings, you know. There was a very distinguished faculty there, older than I, but every one of them very distinguished, I think. That man [Julius] Schwietering I told you about yesterday, a friend of [Wilhelm] Pinder; the archaeologist Kraschnitz; the classical scholar Reinherz. [Hans-Georg] Gadamer was still there. A number of important jurors who

would become important politically. Hartstein, the first secretary of state. Boehm, the wonderful rector then and the one who mainly negotiated the settlement with Israel. So that was, to an extent, the interesting place. Things had not changed very much. Well, of course I hadn't been away for so terribly long. It was only five or six years, you know.

SMITH: Was there a sense amongst the German scholars at Frankfurt, let's say, that there had to be a greater effort or attention put on redefining the German national heritage so something like the Nazi deformation could not happen again?

VON SIMSON: No answer to your question, but it must be said that with a good many of them there was a great deal of resentment against the Americans, which found very little sympathy with me. One doesn't really quite know why. Of course, they were very poorly off; they needed to eat and so forth. But that definitely did exist. On the other hand, in a general sense, I never met anybody who did not feel an immense sense of relief that this nightmare of Nazism was over. These young soldiers were a different story. I mean, they had sworn their oath of allegiance to Hitler, which I myself had done--the only time I ever was quite aware of perjuring myself. Of course they would have immediately stood me against the

wall and shot me then. Way back, I told you about this.

SMITH: Right. But it sounds, with some of the students, the young soldiers, that there was still confusion in their minds as to what actually had happened.

VON SIMSON: Yes. They had thought Hitler was a wonderful man. There's no question about it. When that vanished, I cannot tell you. It certainly wouldn't be present much today. It's probably a small group of people, of unteachables, you know, but not many. In listening to me, you must not forget these things are way back, you know.

SMITH: Yes, I know.

VON SIMSON: A long time, more than forty-five years ago.

SMITH: Willibald Sauerländer wrote an essay for his journal in Munich on his thoughts about the development of art history in the postwar period, and he talks about a "would-be positivism." He felt that there was a shift towards empiricism and positivism in Munich, in particular, in the postwar period.

VON SIMSON: That may well be. That may well be. Sauerländer is a few years younger than I.

SMITH: Was there something similar at Frankfurt?

VON SIMSON: Well, I wasn't there long. I couldn't tell you. The man in charge was a man called Keller, who I didn't think was much of a theoretician; he was a man of vast knowledge. I couldn't say that. I don't know. I'm

not even certain that Sauerländer is altogether right, but I don't know the article you're talking about. Because you take perhaps the most distinguished art historian in the younger generation, Hans Belting, who at the same time was invited to Harvard and to Munich and had a terrible time. I remember seeing him in Washington [D.C.], where he was at Dumbarton Oaks [Research Library and Collections]. A very good man. No, I don't think you could call him a positivist. No. Well, what he is interested in is the function of the work of art before aesthetics, you might say, as a culture object. That's putting it in very simplified terms. That's ultimately a philosophical question more than anything else. No, I'm not so certain of that. No, I don't think it's true at all, because German art historians sometimes think-- I was the first to interest myself in the interrelation between art and politics. That has become very much favored, quite apart from Marxism. Now, that is the kind of sociological approach that has many adherents, I think, in Germany today. Well, perhaps not everyone. Rudolf Preimesberger was at the institute in Munich for quite some time. A great scholar of Bernini. But I think, incidentally, that there is a kind of convergence in that regard with American scholars of today and German scholars of today. Anyway, I think the distinction is being

narrowed down. Perhaps fewer gentlemen and more scholars, or "Germans," as you called them.

SMITH: As some of our other interviewees have called them. Americans who were "Germans," in quotes. So in 1957, I believe, you left full-time--

VON SIMSON: I left full-time and joined the foreign office, because I felt I'd sat the war out. And I also became victim of a very old friend who had already been an attaché and ADC [aide-de-camp] to my father and was sent as an ambassador to London and persuaded me that I should join the foreign office, which was, in a sense, a big mistake, because what I ought to have done is to involve myself in politics if I wanted--where I would have been no good. So I joined the foreign office.

But I didn't stay there for very long, because I was sent out to be the first German ambassador of UNESCO [United Nations Educational, Scientific, and Cultural Organization], which was essentially-- What should I call it? A cultural or nonpolitical job, if you can separate the two. Although, at that time, the cold war was not so very far off, and I remember very unpleasant encounters with the Russian ambassador at UNESCO in Paris. But what interested me in that job was that I thought that it was the time to show the world that Germany represented something other than what Hitler had come to represent,

and I think we did some useful things. Along with the Poles, with whom we had no diplomatic relations yet, I was able to arrange the first kind of scholarly exchange. We always used to say that UNESCO acted as an umbrella under the protection of which things were possible that were not yet possible with normal diplomacy.

Also, one of my great experiences was-- You know, at that time I was on the particular board of UNESCO which now numbers, I think, fifty-two members. At that time it numbered twenty-four. I remember opposite me, around 1960, when all the former colonies became independent states, the African colonies, sat a wonderful man, a black man from the Ivory Coast I think--I can't think of what his name was--who had been illiterate until age thirty, I think, and had then become apparently a distinguished writer. I remember he sat across from me and said, "The hand that receives will always be under the hand that gives, and we don't want that anymore. We want partnership, cooperation among equals." I caught on immediately. It wasn't very difficult. But fortunately, the head of the cultural affairs then was an old friend, a man whom I knew. He immediately understood it, too. So we were able to do something on those lines, which was developing concern. The other thing that interested me was trying to lessen, by very modest means, the tension

between east and west. That, I think, was useful to some extent.

Then I quit in '64 when I accepted the chair here [Kunsthistorisches Institut, Free University of Berlin]. In fact, you know, my wife and I no longer counted on my going back to art history. In one week I got one call to Berlin and one call to Oxford [University]. My late wife and I agonized about it. What finally settled the thing for Berlin was first that I'm a born Berliner and, second, that I thought I had spent many years dealing with American students, now to start again with students in a country that I didn't know too much but that I liked-- It created a scandal, because I didn't know anything about how to get positions. I was invited to a very polite dinner, drink and dinner. I went back. Didn't think, couldn't think, I had committed myself, and couldn't believe my eyes when the [London] Times published that I'd accepted the chair.

SMITH: At Oxford?

VON SIMSON: At Oxford. And of course Oxford, being very snooty, for some time they never forgave me for not having accepted. But I think it was right. Although I said to the students here in Berlin that that was only for a short period.

SMITH: Had you had connections with the Free University

before?

VON SIMSON: No. The Free University was founded only in '48. Until it was the Free University, it was upon the site of the old university of Berlin [Humboldt University], but under the communists, students as well as teachers emigrated to the western part of Berlin. That's why the word "free" was being used.

SMITH: So you come to the chair at Berlin at the Free University. From my reading of it, it sounds like the student revolt had already started in Germany.

VON SIMSON: No, it didn't quite start yet. I mean, things became gradually difficult. When did the students revolt in Berkeley?

SMITH: Berkeley starts in '64.

VON SIMSON: Ah, yeah. Well, then gradually, I think, it built up. But I didn't understand it. I was full-professor faculty, as I told you. And before the Ordinarien-Universität, the full-professor university, became an issue, I had already said it was nonsense that only the professors represented the entire faculty.

But the university then, Ordinarien-Universität-- For instance, something that does not exist in America, you had your assistants. That was very good. My predecessor, Hans Kaufmann, always said, "Well, the assistants have one thing to do: to prepare themselves for habilitieren." I

must say, I never called on any one of the assistants to do anything personal for me. You know, there were the most dreadful people. There were stories about how professors' wives had sent professors' assistants to, I don't know, get their laundry from the dry cleaners or something like that. Anyway, I immediately said, "If they don't want that anymore--"

Of course, the old system meant that you had the full backing of your professors. You were not made an assistant unless your professor was clearly certain that you would one day habilitieren yourself. There's no term for habilitieren. It's a strange thing. It's the ultimate examination, very much above the Ph.D. Now I think it is set back to what it used to be, but in between you could choose, become either the personal assistant or the assistant only of the institute, of the faculty, or something. But then, of course, the professor felt entirely noncommitted to you, because you were not selected by him. But, I mean, the paternalism is probably correct.

The other thing was every institute had only one director. I happily managed to have a very brilliant assistant, Professor Buddensieg, who is now at Bonn, who has been in America many times.

SMITH: Tillmann Buddensieg?

VON SIMSON: Tillmann Buddensieg, yeah. Who was promoted to the second chair. Well, I don't think in our time one man, who has only a limited view of things, no matter how much he may know, and, secondly, who has his own method, his own approach-- You shouldn't expose students to just one man, especially since, these days, students do not do what they used to do in former times, that is to travel, to go from one university to another. They are pretty fixed to the university they are studying in. So I think both these measures were entirely necessary.

The sad thing was that the so-called student revolt was entirely communist indoctrinated and, I think, directed. I think it is now known to be a fact that they received their orders and planned their methods of Maoism through the East Berlin, still Maoist, Chinese embassy. There were very strange comings and goings at that time. They tried to demolish the professors morally and even physically. They even threw one of my colleagues out of the window.

SMITH: Were any of your classes disrupted?

VON SIMSON: Well, I told you about the boycott. Well, mildly. I mean, I remember one time someone bursting in and I said, "Do what you want to do, but later on. I want to finish my classes." But, I mean, far worse things happened elsewhere.

SMITH: Now, some of the demonstrations or some of the protests were focused on specific issues--the Vietnam War, etc.--and then some of the protests had to do with university reform.

VON SIMSON: It's very difficult to determine now what these were, these specific issues. I remember my dean's office was in the same building where the Germanische Institut, the German language seminar, was, which was one of the most famous libraries at any university. One day I came in and my dear colleagues, never of very strong personal courage, came and said, "You must do something about it. The students are upstairs in the library, and they've promised to destroy the library." "Really? What for?" I said. "Well, because they do not want that Miss Schröbler"--a charming old spinster and a very good scholar. "They won't allow her to teach in this building anymore." "Well," I said, "this is only for Miss Schröbler to decide." Well, the poor thing, she sat next door, and I said, "Now, you heard this, and what do you think? I think it's for you to decide, but I feel you ought to continue here." So I said, "Well, that's what you will be doing."

So I went back and said that, and besides that, I said to my colleagues, all of them in not very distinguished positions, "I don't believe this story." I

went upstairs to where the students were. I must say to you quite frankly, lest you think I'm too weird, I really did not know that the police were coming up behind me. I went in and was, of course, greeted as you can imagine, and I said, "Look here, you are socialists. The library has been socialized; you're not going to destroy that library." The thing wasn't nearly as serious as these cowards downstairs had thought. The only thing they said was, "All right, we will do nothing to the library, but you must promise us one thing. You must protect us from the police." So I stood on the staircase with my arms outstretched, the police behind me, and the students went out single file and nothing happened to them.

I think if there had been a calmly more courageous, more determined body of colleagues, the thing wouldn't have taken on this-- I mean, there were fools who exploded at every moment. There were others who had a sad mixture of cowardice and opportunism and wanting to endear themselves to the students. So it was very, very sad, considering the fact that, after all, we were living under rule of law, in theory. Of course, this was a socialist government who tried to do well, but, on the other hand, tried not to antagonize the students. That was a different situation.

SMITH: When did you become dean of students?

VON SIMSON: I think in '67 or something like that.

SMITH: And why did you decide to take on that responsibility?

VON SIMSON: Why?

SMITH: Yeah.

VON SIMSON: Well, because I was elected. I think if you're elected you--

SMITH: Right. Obviously you were elected, but you could have declined or--

VON SIMSON: Yes, I could have declined, but then the man on the other side who was not even a leftist but was a pure opportunist-- He's now very in on everything.

SMITH: You had mentioned yesterday, again off tape, you had gone with a student tour to Rheims, and you had very good relationships with your students, but they warned you not to become dean of students. Could you repeat a little bit of that story? Why would they warn you about that?

VON SIMSON: Well, they felt that as long as I was a professor-- They realized I was essentially a very liberal person, and I think they liked me. They felt as soon as I became dean I would be part of the establishment. I would, by my office, be bound to resist all the students' demands. I don't quite know what they meant. I told you of my Harvard experience and of my amazement at finding that the students were not the least interested in taking

part in the government or the running of the university. [In Germany] that became an awful thing, you know. The students decided everything.

I still remember there was a Wissenschaftsassistenz, an assistant to be appointed, and there were two: one who was here already, a very good man, and the other who came from Rome, from our institute there, and who called himself a critical Marxist. People I knew and whose judgment I trusted told me, "Do opt for that man, because he is really absolutely first-rate." When the thing came up in the session of the institute, I voted for this man. And I happily said, "And please, I want this to be part of the minutes. My explanation is that this man is a critical Marxist. This is something that is not represented at the institute yet. This is my reason for opting for him, because I hear he's also first-rate." You cannot imagine, Richard, how often I've used it and what annoyance I've caused the real leftists, because I am the only man who probably is on record for having preferred a critical Marxist.

The result being that this man, having arrived here perhaps a couple of weeks before, when he habilitated himself--he's a first-rate man--the students set in on this and vented their wrath, or their annoyance, with him. I was allowed to sit down there, too, and at one time I

raised my hand. I said I only wanted to remind the students that to an art historian Caravaggio and Carracci were not the same. In effect, there were three Carracci and one, meaning four, whereas they were always dealing with them as one person. This friend of mine was so utterly shocked at the statement that the same day he called Rome and said no matter what the position, he would take it. The result being that to this day he has not risen much above it. Everyone respects him highly--he's a wonderful person and a very, very distinguished scholar. But that gives you an idea of the atmosphere then. Even though in art history things were far less bad than in political science or in--

A wonderful thing happened in psychology. In psychology was an out-and-out communist head of the institute. A very odd thing occurred. This communist professor had applied in a faculty session for funds, he said, for some psychological experiment. Another colleague, a very distinguished man, said, "I'm against that because I know what this man has in mind." At that time it was not the rule to oppose a recommendation of this kind if it came from a colleague, so I reprimanded this distinguished colleague, who, of course, was entirely hurt. Then I forgot about it.

One day I called a man in psychology who was not a

communist and said, "What has become of this venture for which we are paying so-and-so a lot of money?" "What has become of it? I think I have seen minutes of their faculty meeting for the psychologists." You cannot imagine. They had been establishing what was called a Kinderladen, a children's shop, a kind of kindergarten, you might say. And there they had seemingly exercised what was called anti-authoritarian education, which, in point of fact, was communist indoctrination. Since the students, the children, wouldn't catch on who were tempted by sex and by the imagining of it, then this nice group of teachers decided they would now use authoritarian ways to conduct it.

Well, I got this documented. I sent it to the practically communist president of the university simply saying, "Will you please take action on this?" And he shot right back--you can see how difficult our relations were--and said, "Where did you get it from?" I wrote back and said, "Herr Präsident, experience teaches me that it's not a very good idea to name my sources to you." He would never get the source. And since he didn't act, this went up to the minister, and the minister closed this so-called student's shop, children's shop.

There was a huge to-do on television, with one broadcast from my side, another against it. I mean,

incredible. Unbelievable. So this funny chap, who was very brave, kindly brought it about that a second psychological institute was founded. So they have now two institutes. At this point, I have lost track of it--it's not my field--but I think two institutes still exist. I mean, extraordinary. Very sad that what could have been an actual reform ended that way. And there are still some of these old hands, old communist hands. I don't know what they will do now when communism has collapsed both as an ideology and as an economic system.

SMITH: In art history, with the foundation of the Ulmer Verein in '66--

VON SIMSON: They nearly elected me president. Despite everything, I still am considered by many to be a liberal, because I am. I said no, I couldn't do it, I wouldn't do it. So my friend Buddensieg was proposed by me and took it on the condition that I would be vice president of the institution.

SMITH: But with the foundation of the Ulmer Verein, you have a split in the German art historical movement.

VON SIMSON: Yeah. Very much so.

SMITH: Did that affect the kinds of things that students were choosing to study, say, in--?

VON SIMSON: Yes. I think certain-- You know, Hamburg is very much the center of the Ulmer Verein, and the other

place is Marburg. That's where it's distinct. I mean, it's mixed. I shouldn't say it's distinct; it's mixed. There are some people here who tend to be more that way. But I think in Hamburg or in Marburg there's no one who does not really belong.

SMITH: But at your institute in Berlin, were students coming in who wanted to work on particular subjects from a left-wing point of view?

VON SIMSON: Yes.

SMITH: And were they working with you on these?

VON SIMSON: No. I don't think so. My colleague [Thomas W.] Gaehtgens told me another chap came in and wanted to work on homosexualism in art history. It's a very broad-based thing. People are working on feminism in art history. I saw a post written out, as we call it, announcing an opening at quite a good university just a few weeks ago, and that was to be someone with experience, knowledge, and was preferably a woman, on feminism in art history. I think you probably have something comparable, no?

SMITH: Yes. Yes, very much so. Women's history is a major topic in the United States now. But when did feminism begin to influence students within the Free University?

VON SIMSON: Much later. Only after I left, when I

retired. I don't know what role it has at the moment. There has been some comment here--I don't think we've even admitted to it--of women art historian feminists. I mean, mind you, as much as I always felt that women were sadly underrepresented in our universities-- Not only was that no good, but to some extent-- Not as well as the men, but there was definitely prejudice against them. So I thought that it was right their being more equal. But maybe there are unknown territories to be explored. I don't know what homosexual art history would be, but my eyes may be opened one day.

TAPE NUMBER: IV, SIDE ONE

NOVEMBER 8, 1991

SMITH: In 1967, the German SDS [Sozialistischer Deutscher Studentenbund] had a campaign against former Nazis who were teaching at the university.

VON SIMSON: Who did?

SMITH: The German SDS. Do you recall that? They wanted former Nazis who were in state service--

VON SIMSON: In Berlin?

SMITH: In Berlin, yes.

VON SIMSON: Well, I vaguely remember. I remember a very sad case, someone who had not been a Nazi, who took this--Perhaps his health had been bad before then, but he took it so he died after this. But there was one awful man who actually had been a Nazi who then in the faculty in my hearing--that was before this happened, I think--pretended that he had been a résistant. As proof he submitted the fact that he had put on his letters the postage stamps with Hitler's image upside down. That he said was a sign that he was anti-Nazi, when we knew him to be a Nazi. But he was retired by then. We all despised him. There was very little patience or tolerance within the faculty with such a man. I have forgotten it. I couldn't even tell you what forms it took except against individuals. And

all the more remarkable is that, if that was a major issue, how few they could find who had been Nazis.

SMITH: Then in '72 the Social Democrats put the Berufsverbot. Do you remember that?

VON SIMSON: Yes, of course. Well, the Berufsverbot was first done for Willi Brandt, who was the leader of the Social Democratic Party. You know, we require-- Of course, this is very distasteful to Americans, which I also understand. But since German professors are civil servants, we require an oath of allegiance, call it that way. People who were known to be antidemocrats therefore were not admissible, which was then called Berufsverbot. See? Which, after the experiences we had--we had the so-called Weimar Republic, with civil servants who had been anything but democrats, you know--was perhaps understandable. But then that thing was not understood in America. There were various people who said, "After all, this is an infringement upon academic freedom." I must say, I thought the Berufsverbot was right. It was then gradually watered down. I don't think it exists any longer. But then the events of history have done away with communism. I mean, any number of them are still there. Neither this chap in psychology nor another in philosophy were known to be communists. They lost their jobs.

SMITH: In your own research, then, your next big book was [Das Mittelalter II: Das hohe Mittelalter (1972)], which is a sequel or a continuation of The Gothic Cathedral: [Origins of Gothic Architecture and the Medieval Concept of Order (1956)]?

VON SIMSON: Yes, except it's much broader, of course.

SMITH: I wasn't able to read that one because we didn't have it at UCLA.

VON SIMSON: Well, it's volume six of a large-- A little bit like the Pelican history, which you undoubtedly have. It was a very good undertaking mostly because several authors contributed. I mean, I was the general editor, and I personally did Gothic architecture and I did German sculpture, French Gothic architecture and German sculpture. But there was an international body of distinguished authors. We did a very good thing, for instance, for which I'm not responsible. It was a question of these territories that used to be German and are now Polish. And on this chapter, they cooperated: one distinguished German art historian and one distinguished Polish art historian. So what there was to do, they divided it up, not in terms of German and Polish, but one did architecture done in stone and the other did architecture done in brick. It was no problem.

SMITH: So that book was part of a series that was

directed towards a general public, then?

VON SIMSON: Well, yes. In a way, yes.

SMITH: How did that affect the way you worked and wrote? I mean, is there a difference when you present art history for an educated public?

VON SIMSON: No. If it doesn't sound so arrogant, I would always try to write so that it would be understandable to not just art historians. That became, incidentally, a great success. Now there is a new edition. I think the whole edition costs as much as the single volume cost originally. I think it's like 300 marks or something. But it had beautiful pictures. People like to have something like that. They lavished all the resources. It was a very rich publisher.

SMITH: Then another activity of yours was the conference on Rembrandt which led to--

VON SIMSON: Yes, I was director of the institute [Kunsthistorisches Institut, Free University of Berlin] then. Yes. It was an international conference. Very interesting, I think. Strangely, the Russians had a very distinguished scholar on Rembrandt [Kot Kutzenov] and we invited him and got no answer. So we thought, "Well, he's not allowed to come out." Then suddenly I got a call from Sweden by a Dutch friend, and he said, "I have seen Kot Kutzenov. He says he cannot write to you, but he will be

there." The day before the thing started, someone from the East German embassy was here. I wasn't there. My assistant was in the institute. And he said, "Could I see the list of speakers?" He was shown the list. Everyone was there with any rank, any reputation. He seemed satisfied and went away. Kutzenov never showed up. But, I mean, there I was clearly a kind of titular editor, because I am not a Rembrandt specialist. I didn't even give a lecture. I think something similar probably happened in our big Brueghel exhibition. You may have seen that.

SMITH: Right. The most complete bibliography I found was in your festschrift.

VON SIMSON: That's rather old. I published a book as a result of my Harvard lectures on German nineteenth-century painters called Der Blick nach Innen: [Vier Beiträge zur deutschen Malerei des 19. Jahrhundert (1986)].

SMITH: Yes. I read that.

VON SIMSON: You've seen it?

SMITH: Yes. We have it at UCLA, so I was able to read that. I did want to ask you about that, how you got interested in the nineteenth century.

VON SIMSON: Well, it was this, if you will, accidental thing. At Harvard, very polite, they said, "You can lecture on anything you like, but we would very much

welcome it if you would offer a course [on nineteenth-century German painting]." Then I got more and more interested in it, and I gave another lecture course here, and this was the outcome of it, this little book.

SMITH: Your career has actually spanned a broad range of historical periods, and given the fact that you have a social-intellectual approach rather than a formalist approach, you have to look at the political, cultural, intellectual life of these different times. Could you talk about the reorientation that you have to engage in?

VON SIMSON: I think my early stuff was perhaps more intellectually and socially oriented. I think and wish and hope that I have become perhaps more-- You see, in the course of these lectures, what made me choose these four was that I discovered that at least two of them, Spitzweg and Caspar David Friedrich-- There was a kind of symbolic form, probably unbeknownst to them, the one that I call the [inaudible] which no one had seen-- Which I think is an important element there. So, in that sense, I'm now more interested perhaps-- Well, I don't know. Sometimes I think it's a question of age. When you've been at it as long as I have, one takes up different subjects. I mean, there are people like Sumner Crosby, who until his death only worked on Saint-Denis. But that I find I couldn't do. I mean, I have finished now. I don't think I will

ever write on Gothic architecture again no matter how long I live.

The same with this Ravenna book [The Sacred Fortress: Byzantine Art and Statecraft in Ravenna (1948)]. I got interested in a certain problem which then I tried to solve or elucidate or explore. You will learn a great deal in the course of solving the problem. No, I'm not-- For many years I considered myself a medievalist. I don't think I actually came to be one. In fact, now, if you want to quote [T. S.] Eliot, "My end is my beginning." I'm back to Rubens.

SMITH: I found with Der Blick nach Innen you're dealing with the question of interiority and how that gets reflected. That's such an important aspect of twentieth-century art, as well, and the symbolization of the self. And that to me is also a very intensely political theme.

VON SIMSON: Why do you say that?

SMITH: Because the tension between the public and private sphere is very important in modern society.

VON SIMSON: Yes. Quite. Absolutely.

SMITH: And how the self is defined is also an important topic.

VON SIMSON: Is that so? No, you're quite right. It's very odd, this tension. I think you're right. It's not just tension in part, one being in and the other being in

opposition, but it's this other element which is also very clear. I think we in Germany, we lose all sense of the common good and of what politics is really about, I mean to evaluate only in terms of personal interests or tastes or whatever.

SMITH: But don't you think the Rechtsstaat is based on a concept of the common good?

VON SIMSON: Rechtsstaat? Yes, I could certainly, but I don't think it would-- I understood you as saying that the subjective elements-- The tension of the subject and the state, the government, becoming very much stronger than it used to be. [The idea] that you have any obligation towards your government or towards your nation or towards your city or something in Germany is vanishing, I think. Compared with Poland, for instance, you might say they're over-nationalistic. They are perhaps. Or England. Even France. It's a long political tradition, a long, democratic, liberal tradition. So that's a very obvious deficiency here I think.

SMITH: In your relationship with your students--and perhaps this has to do with the nature of the educational system--how involved would you be in terms of helping them select their dissertation topics?

VON SIMSON: I'm not one of these professors who hands topics to the students and forces them to-- No, I try

whenever possible to make them choose their own topics. I think it's better in many ways. But, of course, I assist them in formulating it.

SMITH: And do you think the degree to which there would be a range of ideologies amongst your students, was that something that could work out comfortably? That you could work with students who had a different ideological perspective?

VON SIMSON: It's no longer an issue at all. I wouldn't know it by this time. Ideologically, politically, it doesn't concern me. I think that has very much vanished. As I told you, I haven't been lecturing for a few years. But I'm told by my colleagues-- I don't think it's an issue at all.

SMITH: I wanted to, in wrapping this up, discuss some of the broader developments that have taken place in German intellectual life and your reaction to them, possibly your participation. One of them would be, obviously, the Heidegger question and the symbolic role that Heidegger has come to play in German intellectual life.

VON SIMSON: I don't know exactly what you mean by symbolic. Heidegger is undoubtedly the great philosopher of the century, to my mind, for better or for worse. Just as Picasso was the great artist of the century for better or for worse, to my mind. As you know, he has played a

very unfortunate role in politics because his existentialism has a very critical aspect, namely a complete condemnation of contemporary civilization. Heidegger was never a racist. There's not a single word. He was very closely related to Hannah Arendt. Some even say they had a love affair. But, anyway, they were very, very close to one another. So that never played a role. But, as you know, for a very short period he allowed himself to be elected director of the University of Freiburg, but then resigned. He never was a résistant, but the Nazis didn't like him, probably didn't understand him. That, I don't think, was ever changed. He retained his one hundred percent criticism of contemporary civilization.

SMITH: Perhaps this also reflects my U.S. orientation, because you have so many students in the U.S. who are looking for a key, almost a password, a cognitive map that will allow them to interpret experience, and Marxism fills that to a certain degree.

VON SIMSON: Correct.

SMITH: Poststructuralism, deconstruction-- [Jürgen] Habermas can play that role.

VON SIMSON: Yes.

SMITH: Reception theory, which is another German development.

VON SIMSON: Quite. Yeah.

SMITH: Have you had that same kind of interaction with your students? That students are looking for--

VON SIMSON: I don't know to what extent. I had a seminar once in the history of art history. Habermas has not expressed himself on aesthetics, but [Theodor] Adorno, for instance, has. There was one paper, quite an interesting paper, on Adorno's aesthetic. So I just took it, because they didn't believe that I would immerse myself in that. So that was one reason I did it. It was a very good seminar, I think--students' papers being good.

SMITH: When you were teaching and working with students, what would you advise them on the role of philosophy?

VON SIMSON: Nothing, I'm afraid. I would advise them not to study art history, because it's not a lift up to an exalted position but rather down to unemployment. You know, the dreadful thing in this country is that every student has a constitutional right to study, which is absurd. I've always been saying university education, professional education, [is the same as] any other except the field of scholarship. But, no, it's still considered to be something elitist. That's why everyone wants to do it. And too many people want to do it. But then, since you have got to take them, I have to try out as soon as possible what they can really know. This is how, in

proseminars like the one I told you about in the museum, you get a pretty good idea of what people-- If they have eyes in their heads and can see and understand what the visual arts are about.

If anyone has an inclination in that direction, I would encourage them, of course. See, our students are terribly worried about concluding their studies and getting a job and so on, so we all try to make them choose their Nebenfächer, their minors, to relate to their main interests, their history or Romance languages or theology, maybe, or philosophy. But that varies, I think, very much. I believe that if a student is philosophically inclined, the pupil ought to get something out of a course in philosophy. I think that would show, and I would direct him to this or that teacher.

SMITH: About the question of employment, the art historians that you produce, that you train, how many of them can get university positions?

VON SIMSON: Well, university positions are rather scarce, but there are, fortunately, additional appointments they can get in a public museum. They can get employment in the conservation of monuments. And there, of course, Berlin is not only a very large city, but a city with innumerable opportunities, so that we are able to place a great many of them.

SMITH: In terms of museum employment, did you consider in your training program the practical questions of museums?

VON SIMSON: No. To our great regret, we have neither practical training for museums nor practical training for conservationists. It is too bad, because all of our people in conservation are art historians not familiar with the practical tasks that come your way when you are employed in that way. We tried it but got nowhere. We tried to establish it here in the Friedrich-Schinkel-Institut, Schinkel being the great Prussian architect. It failed, not because the senate or the ministers were not for it, but it failed because we couldn't find the right people. There's now one with that experience, but he wants to be an art historian and nothing but an art historian. So there we are.

SMITH: You do seem to have an active involvement in museum life.

VON SIMSON: Well, yes, I sit on the board of the Kaiser-Friedrich-Museum. I am chairman of something that's called Friends of the Prussian Castles and Parks. And there we do a good many things. We started out--this is how the association started--by saving for Berlin what I consider the greatest painting by Watteau, the great French eighteenth-century painter. And we succeeded. Then we decided we would stay in business. So long as

Germany was divided, we could only purchase things for our museum here. But now we have gone in a big way to Potsdam. We're very lucky in getting, so far, two very large donations which helped us to save two very beautiful and very interesting historical buildings from the time of Frederick the Great. That is the only thing that I'm active in. I was president of the German commission for UNESCO [United Nations Educational, Scientific, and Cultural Organization]. Thank God, I'm out. But now the foreign office immediately saddled me with the chairmanship of the German commission for what is called the "world decade for cultural development," declared this by the United Nations, mainly executed by UNESCO. It's there that my main interest is now centered, in the refounding--I think I told you about it yesterday--of the University of Erfurt. Our contribution is seemingly going very well.

SMITH: I had wanted to ask you about how reunification has affected German academic life, if it has.

VON SIMSON: Well, it's mainly a pain in the neck. It's a great problem, because it is certainly true that many professors in East German universities got their job only because of their party affiliation and are not very good. On the other hand, it's too easy to throw out entire faculties and entire institutes if there's only one or two

people who are really quite good. But it's very, very difficult to sift them out, the good ones. There are some good people. There are some good people who, because they were not party members, never got anywhere, so now we are trying to get them here. Or, in another case, you could not habilitieren yourself unless you were a party member. There was an excellent man who came to see me the other day, very huge, distinguished list of publications on French revolutionary history, so we are trying now to give him a chance to habilitieren himself. On the other hand, we are quite aware--anyone sensitive is quite aware--of the fact that in Eastern Germany, under this regime, a great deal was being done to preserve and to restore classical monuments. Museums keep as free as possible from ideological influences.

Lastly, I'm chairing something called the Guardini Foundation. Guardini was a very eminent classic priest here, a great résistant, who was not only politically remarkable but extremely broad in his outlook. And this is developing now very well, I think. It's a group of Catholic laymen very independent of the church and ecumenically minded, extending to Judaism and I hope one day to Islam. The more I see of Islam the more I despair of it being easy to find a ground for a constructive dialogue, but I hope I'm wrong. Erfurt University will

have not only the two Christian faculties, but it will have an institute, or at least a chair, in Judaism. That the prime minister promised. Some bigwig from Israel visited.

SMITH: Now, Erfurt, you said, was the oldest university in Germany.

VON SIMSON: Well, it's certainly one of the three oldest and possibly the oldest. We are not quite certain, because when they applied for a charter, at that time there was a schism in Europe. They applied to the schismatic pope in Avignon, got their charter promptly, but then it was no longer valid, so they had to apply a couple of years later to the pope in Rome. And that is the date, 1392, which is celebrated as the official birthday of the University of Erfurt.

SMITH: But then it was closed down--

VON SIMSON: In 1816 by the king of Prussia, probably because the king had just founded the great Berlin University [Humboldt University] in 1809.

SMITH: And your role in this Erfurt effort is what, precisely?

VON SIMSON: Well, my role is only what you might call that of an international adviser, because the external reason for that is that, as chairman of this committee for the world decade, we submitted it, and it was very, very

enthusiastically received as our German contribution. There's French, Italian, Polish, Czech support, so I hope this is going to be a very fruitful thing. We think we have only about half the student body German, the rest European, and half the teaching staff the same.

SMITH: Would that be the only university of that kind in Germany, then?

VON SIMSON: I think so. I know no other.

SMITH: So it would be experimental in that sense as an internationally funded--

VON SIMSON: Particularly important here. We conceived it when Germany was still divided, and we thought that it was very important as a means to bring the two parts together. Imagine--I mean, speaking as a historian--imagine a course entitled Germany's Relations with Its Eastern Frontiers, and then imagine this course being offered by a Polish professor and a German professor jointly and controversially. I mean, what student anywhere in the world could have a better understanding of all the problems involved in European history, you know? And this is just one possibility. Next year will also be the year of the European union, so there will be in law many problems of comparison, of adaptation, of law, and so forth. So I think it could be a good thing. I'm now fairly confident that it will be founded. I mean, that it

is really founded is a fact. I saw the prime minister of Erfurt two days ago, and I think they have agreed to this plan.

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