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Oral history interview with Elisabeth
Wildenhain, 1995 August 22

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Contact Information

Reference Department
Archives of American Art
Smithsonian Institution
Washington, D.C. 20560
www.aaa.si.edu/askus

Transcript

Preface

The following oral history transcript is the result of a recorded interview with Elisabeth (Lili) Wildenhain on August 22, 1995. The interview took place in Pittsford, New York, and was conducted by Robert F. Brown for the Archives of American Art, Smithsonian Institution. This transcript has been lightly edited for readability by the Archives of American Art. The reader should bear in mind that they are reading a transcript of spoken, rather than written, prose.

Interview

ROBERT F. BROWN: —with Elisabeth Lili Wildenhain at her home in Pittsford, New York, and this is August 22, 1995. I thought we might just begin by—at the beginning. Maybe you can talk about your background. I believe you were born in—what—the Bohemia—

ELISABETH WILDENHAIN: Bohemia.

ROBERT F. BROWN: —area of what's now the Czech Republic.

ELISABETH WILDENHAIN: The Czech Republic. Which I can tell you is a wonderful country. And this came off already.

[Audio Break.]

ROBERT F. BROWN: And what are some of your earliest memories? What was your family background?

ELISABETH WILDENHAIN: My family background was my—my, uh, father—my mother came from a upper-class family in Bohemia that had a long tradition of—my grandfather had boats that went up to Hamburg. Mr. Brody [ph] was from Bohemia.

ROBERT F. BROWN: Oh, you mean up through the canal system?

ELISABETH WILDENHAIN: There is no canal.

ROBERT F. BROWN: The channel—

ELISABETH WILDENHAIN: The Elba River.

ROBERT F. BROWN: The Elba River.

ELISABETH WILDENHAIN: Elba River. And, uh—and they were tanners. They got hides from South America, and they were tanners. They had big, big things where the—where the hides were prepared into—

ROBERT F. BROWN: —into leather.

ELISABETH WILDENHAIN: —into leather, yes. And my grandmother—my mother lived always with my grandmother. Her husband died, and she was left with three children. And this was—they—he—my grandfather was very—looking ahead. And he went across to Dresden. He wanted to buy machinery there so that he could make shoes. And it was a big house that my grandfather had built for my grandmother. So it was—

ROBERT F. BROWN: This was—this was where, in Bohemia?

ELISABETH WILDENHAIN: In Aussig. Ústí nad Labem.

ROBERT F. BROWN: Aus—

ELISABETH WILDENHAIN: Aussig. A-U-S-S-I-G, under Elba.

ROBERT F. BROWN: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

ELISABETH WILDENHAIN: In Czech it's called Ústí nad Labem now. A town totally flattened out. [00:02:01] And the only thing they have there now is atomic energy, a big refinery for atomic energy. So it's very polluted. It was wonderful before. It had—the landscape had robber baron castles and fruits and peasants. They sprinkled the whole thing. I mean, you had wonderful, wonderful grapes, wonderful wines, apples, pears, and cherries. I mean, more—the whole thing was really a little paradise.

ROBERT F. BROWN: Hmm. And your grandfather then died, and your grandmother—you went to live with your grandmother?

ELISABETH WILDENHAIN: My mother—

ROBERT F. BROWN: Your mother went.

ELISABETH WILDENHAIN: —my mother went to live with my grandmother. And so—so we always lived together, as a big family together. And it was—it was natural that you belonged to a big family, you see. You never went outside this.

ROBERT F. BROWN: Mm-hmm [affirmative]. And you had, you mean, extended families, they call it.

ELISABETH WILDENHAIN: Extended families, yeah.

ROBERT F. BROWN: And what about your father's family?

ELISABETH WILDENHAIN: My father's family came out of the construction business, you see.

ROBERT F. BROWN: Yeah. And he was a Lutheran, whereas your mother's side were Catholic.

ELISABETH WILDENHAIN: Catholic, yes. And in the construction business. They had a big construction office in Germany.

ROBERT F. BROWN: In Germany.

ELISABETH WILDENHAIN: In Germany. And this became very prosperous—though my father stayed in Aussig and became an independent architect. And—so it was sort of a life between the rather business-thinking side of the family—

ROBERT F. BROWN: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

ELISABETH WILDENHAIN: —and my father had cousins. I think they were wonderful, one cousin particularly. He was a genius. He was the inventor of today's advertisement. But he made these big paper advertisements, and they were put on billboards. And they were marvelous. They were—and he—he was the inventor of the—Münchner Kindl. You know, this little child that you have in Munich? [00:04:01]

ROBERT F. BROWN: Right.

ELISABETH WILDENHAIN: He was wonderful. And he was really the one—when my father was at home, he came sometimes. He would sit down on the piano and play anything, so the whole house was suddenly alive, you see. Because my grandmother was very much, you know, do, do, do. That's not the right thing, you see.

ROBERT F. BROWN: But your father and his, uh—

ELISABETH WILDENHAIN: Oh—

ROBERT F. BROWN: —his family were—

ELISABETH WILDENHAIN: —very much.

ROBERT F. BROWN: Yeah.

ELISABETH WILDENHAIN: I mean, his family, it was—there's—the family was in Germany more in the construction business, you see. And here this was the pure business. I mean, construction business was business too, but it was never sort of, say—my father was a great collector of art. And whatever he built he—they got real art. They went to the auction houses. So the house was never furnished by a decorator. I mean, they designed furniture, and along with it you found pieces that had to be designed for living in it.

ROBERT F. BROWN: And do you recall, what were some of the things he collected?

ELISABETH WILDENHAIN: Well, he—

ROBERT F. BROWN: Your father.

ELISABETH WILDENHAIN: —he had—I mean, for instance, he had the Limoges collection, you know, these wonderful—the twelve apostles. They were gorgeous!

ROBERT F. BROWN: Limoges.

ELISABETH WILDENHAIN: Limoges.

ROBERT F. BROWN: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

ELISABETH WILDENHAIN: And this was in our dining room. And Dutch paintings. I can't tell you the name now, but, I mean, this was—we had about 20 of these Dutch landscape paintings. And water paintings.

ROBERT F. BROWN: Watercolor?

ELISABETH WILDENHAIN: I mean—not—not watercolor.

ROBERT F. BROWN: Water.

ELISABETH WILDENHAIN: Water.

ROBERT F. BROWN: Scenes of water.

ELISABETH WILDENHAIN: Scenes. Scenes.

ROBERT F. BROWN: Okay.

ELISABETH WILDENHAIN: And this was in our—we had a big dining room, you know. And there were on the ceilings these proverbs. You know, when my grandfather built this, you had to have proverbs to get wisdom, you know. So they were—they were making room there too. And then, for instance, we had a Trojan horse, a Chinese horse, one of these—these big things out of—a big one, like this.

ROBERT F. BROWN: Ceramic?

ELISABETH WILDENHAIN: Ceramics—

ROBERT F. BROWN: Yeah.

ELISABETH WILDENHAIN: —yes. And rugs. Rugs. We had about 200 rugs. [00:06:00] But excellent ones. You see, none of this— [Laughs.]

ROBERT F. BROWN: Yeah.

ELISABETH WILDENHAIN: I mean, it—he was a collector—and also, through these big—they were the wealthy people from Czechoslovakia who had—wanted villas. And he built the villas. And he got the interiors in—well, in various auction houses. They were all furnished.

ROBERT F. BROWN: And he designed these villas—I mean—

ELISABETH WILDENHAIN: Oh yes.

ROBERT F. BROWN: —he's the architect—

ELISABETH WILDENHAIN: Inside and outside.

ROBERT F. BROWN: Yeah. Complete.

ELISABETH WILDENHAIN: Complete. Complete.

ROBERT F. BROWN: Now, you were born in 1919.

ELISABETH WILDENHAIN: Yeah. Yeah.

ROBERT F. BROWN: And that's just a year after the war, the end of the war. Were things—but your parents were—continued to be quite prosperous through your early childhood?

ELISABETH WILDENHAIN: Oh—oh yes. Oh yes. Oh yes. My mother came from a wealthy background and, I mean, my—

ROBERT F. BROWN: And the inflation didn't affect them too bad.

ELISABETH WILDENHAIN: No. I mean, my mother lost lots of money, you see—

ROBERT F. BROWN: Yeah.

ELISABETH WILDENHAIN: —but my father became very successful as an architect.

ROBERT F. BROWN: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

ELISABETH WILDENHAIN: And—

ROBERT F. BROWN: What was his name, please?

ELISABETH WILDENHAIN: Paul.

ROBERT F. BROWN: Paul? And his last name?

ELISABETH WILDENHAIN: Paul Brockardt. B-R-O-C-K-A-R-D-T.

ROBERT F. BROWN: Mm-hmm [affirmative]. Brockardt.

ELISABETH WILDENHAIN: And my mother's name was Hönig. Marguerite [ph] Hönig. H-O—two dots—N-I-G.

ROBERT F. BROWN: Okay. And Marguerite.

ELISABETH WILDENHAIN: Marguerite, yeah.

ROBERT F. BROWN: Yeah. The—you remember the childhood—was—heavily, wait —

ELISABETH WILDENHAIN: Wait a minute. Could you pick—

[Audio Break.]

ROBERT F. BROWN: We're looking at photographs of your family now.

ELISABETH WILDENHAIN: Now, this is—this was a birthday celebration.

ROBERT F. BROWN: Mm-hmm. Mm-hmm [affirmative]. And where is this is?

ELISABETH WILDENHAIN: In Aussig. In Aussig. This is a house my father designed, you see?

ROBERT F. BROWN: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

ELISABETH WILDENHAIN: This—

ROBERT F. BROWN: That's quite a classical house.

ELISABETH WILDENHAIN: Oh yes, yes.

ROBERT F. BROWN: Yeah.

ELISABETH WILDENHAIN: Yes.

ROBERT F. BROWN: Very.

ELISABETH WILDENHAIN: And—and here—this is I am here—

ROBERT F. BROWN: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

ELISABETH WILDENHAIN: —and this is my father out here, out here, and up here is my mother.

ROBERT F. BROWN: On the balcony above the main—

ELISABETH WILDENHAIN: On the balcony.

ROBERT F. BROWN: —entrance—

ELISABETH WILDENHAIN: Yeah.

ROBERT F. BROWN: —yeah.

ELISABETH WILDENHAIN: But, I mean, the whole thing was, you can see, substantial.

ROBERT F. BROWN: Oh, yeah.

ELISABETH WILDENHAIN: It was not—[laughs.]

ROBERT F. BROWN: No, very large place.

ELISABETH WILDENHAIN: Yes. And the people were substantial.

ROBERT F. BROWN: Was this in the town itself? [00:07:59]

ELISABETH WILDENHAIN: In—no, it was—it was a little outside.

ROBERT F. BROWN: A little outside.

ELISABETH WILDENHAIN: A little outside. Now, this is the landscape here, you see, on the river, Elba River, here.

ROBERT F. BROWN: Mm-hmm. Mm-hmm [affirmative]. So it was a very lovely place—

ELISABETH WILDENHAIN: Oh, yes.

ROBERT F. BROWN: —at that time.

ELISABETH WILDENHAIN: Very romantic.

ROBERT F. BROWN: Yeah.

ELISABETH WILDENHAIN: Very romantic. And this is my mother, and this is my grandmother, who I lo—I mean, I loved these very much.

ROBERT F. BROWN: Uh-huh [affirmative].

ELISABETH WILDENHAIN: And here is where's my father.

ROBERT F. BROWN: Were they encouraging? Did you show an early interest in—

ELISABETH WILDENHAIN: Arch—

ROBERT F. BROWN: —being creative, or—art?

ELISABETH WILDENHAIN: My father sponsored all of this.

ROBERT F. BROWN: How did he do that?

ELISABETH WILDENHAIN: Well, he brought these beautiful fabrics, and whatever he brought, he enjoyed putting up. And he—he became so—I became a part of this, what he brought along, you know. My mother couldn't care less—[laughs]—about it.

ROBERT F. BROWN: But you were very—as an—as a young child—

ELISABETH WILDENHAIN: I was very open.

ROBERT F. BROWN: Very interested.

ELISABETH WILDENHAIN: Very open.

ROBERT F. BROWN: Very interested in these things.

ELISABETH WILDENHAIN: Very open. Very open.

ROBERT F. BROWN: Did you want to know how—how to use them or how to make them, even?

ELISABETH WILDENHAIN: Well, as a matter of fact, I—you know, I was in boarding school in England, and I didn't like this.

ROBERT F. BROWN: About how old were you when you were sent to boarding school?

ELISABETH WILDENHAIN: Well, how old was I? I was about 14. I first of all went to Isadora Duncan School in Salzburg because I wanted to be a dancer. And—but my grandmother's morale wouldn't allow this, you see.

ROBERT F. BROWN: Oh, is that right?

ELISABETH WILDENHAIN: Oh, she—

ROBERT F. BROWN: She was too strict, and she thought dancing was—

ELISABETH WILDENHAIN: —was immoral. I mean, this was, at the time, very strongly.

ROBERT F. BROWN: But you came to—you loved it, is that right?

ELISABETH WILDENHAIN: Oh, I loved it from the beginning. And I was very good in it.

ROBERT F. BROWN: And who—who taught there? Did—

ELISABETH WILDENHAIN: Well, the sister of Isadora.

ROBERT F. BROWN: Isadora.

ELISABETH WILDENHAIN: And it was a very different, a very creative atmosphere. Different as at home, you know. But it was in a wonderful old Baroque castle. The winter house and the summer house. And the park around it. It was absolutely a dream, this whole place. And they lived the way we lived today here. The food was all organically done, and it was—and then we had a joint—we slept on very hard boards, and just with a blanket. [00:10:03] None of this soft stuff, six pillows that you would sit in there, you see.

ROBERT F. BROWN: So you were—this was discipline.

ELISABETH WILDENHAIN: This was another discipline.

ROBERT F. BROWN: But you loved this.

ELISABETH WILDENHAIN: I loved this. And we had to make our own costumes. So we bought some fabric, and I had to stitch it up, and then we did it like this, and we had to keep this till I put it on, and then it was always wrinkled and fitted right.

ROBERT F. BROWN: And that was intentional. It was—

ELISABETH WILDENHAIN: Intentional, yes.

ROBERT F. BROWN: —meant to look—to be wrinkled and sort of natural.

ELISABETH WILDENHAIN: Natural. And—

ROBERT F. BROWN: And the dances themselves were rather improvisational, or—what—[inaudible]—

ELISABETH WILDENHAIN: Well, Isadora believed in barefoot dancing, you see. This—not—but the opposite of ballet dancing. The opposite. So whatever had to be done had to come out of the total. Total sense of you, you see. It was—it was not that you had to learn how to—I mean, we had certain basic steps. But the whole thing was so—that—it was based on the Greek figures, you know, like this. You marched. You didn't just learn everything like this, like this. You—you felt it. The feeling was the sense, yes. And, um, Max Reinhardt put—made the *Midsummer Night's Dream* and this out there, which was a big experience for all of us.

ROBERT F. BROWN: And you were—you were involved with that for—

ELISABETH WILDENHAIN: Yes! I mean, we were the little elves there that were dancing around, you know? And this was—of course, in Salzburg at the time, everything was happening, you see? This—this was the big, exciting period.

ROBERT F. BROWN: This would be in the late '20s, early '30s.

ELISABETH WILDENHAIN: Yes. Yes. This was what it was. Yeah.

ROBERT F. BROWN: And the school you mentioned earlier to me was—had a good endowment through a—some American benefactors.

ELISABETH WILDENHAIN: They did. They did. They did.

ROBERT F. BROWN: You know who those people were?

ELISABETH WILDENHAIN: But they were very much—she was very much in the upper echelon, you know? She had this Mr. Singer as a sponsor, you know, who was—who—who was the Singer sewing machine.

ROBERT F. BROWN: Oh, yes.

ELISABETH WILDENHAIN: But, I mean, he—he always helped with another million. [00:12:00] And—I mean, she mistreated him. But, I mean, it is really that I studied with the sister there, you see.

ROBERT F. BROWN: Now, who was she? What was her name?

ELISABETH WILDENHAIN: Her name was—what was her name? What was the sister's name? Pa-pa-pa-pa. Mm-hmm [affirmative].

ROBERT F. BROWN: Well, her—well, we'll come up with the name later. You also, I think, had told me that you studied music and drawing.

ELISABETH WILDENHAIN: Oh, this came there together too.

ROBERT F. BROWN: The same time?

ELISABETH WILDENHAIN: The music was a part of that, you see. And the drawing. And is—it was really an integrated program—that is how you educate people. Yeah.

ROBERT F. BROWN: Mm-hmm. Mm-hmm [affirmative].

ELISABETH WILDENHAIN: But then things got bad in the world, you know. And there was a whole thing—a whole thing that—Hitler came about already, in Czechoslovakia. Was terrible.

ROBERT F. BROWN: Even before the—

ELISABETH WILDENHAIN: Whoo!

ROBERT F. BROWN: —takeover. Even before the, uh—

ELISABETH WILDENHAIN: It was horrible. You had to sit on the luggage and run, you know. It was awful. Just terrible.

ROBERT F. BROWN: No, no.

ELISABETH WILDENHAIN: Excuse me one minute. I've—

[Audio Break.]

ROBERT F. BROWN: So—

ELISABETH WILDENHAIN: At—in this boarding school you were—there were no laws. You had—could do anything.

ROBERT F. BROWN: So it was a rather progressive—

ELISABETH WILDENHAIN: Progressive.

ROBERT F. BROWN: Whereas the—[inaudible]—

ELISABETH WILDENHAIN: And this was in Eastbourne.

ROBERT F. BROWN: Eastbourne.

ELISABETH WILDENHAIN: The Hoo.

ROBERT F. BROWN: What was the name of the place?

ELISABETH WILDENHAIN: Hoo. H-O-O. The Hoo.

ROBERT F. BROWN: The Hoo.

ELISABETH WILDENHAIN: The Hoo. And, well, I was supposed to learn English there. This was it.

ROBERT F. BROWN: And that's why you were—your family sent you there.

ELISABETH WILDENHAIN: Oh, yes. I had to learn languages: English, French, and Italian. Well, and it was really sort of—all this English-structured society looked down on people like me. And there was—oh, well, there were mainly Army people from these English people that were in India—

ROBERT F. BROWN: Yeah.

ELISABETH WILDENHAIN: —their children were there.

ROBERT F. BROWN: So they're very limited, uh—tolerance—

ELISABETH WILDENHAIN: Well, were—

ROBERT F. BROWN: —and—

ELISABETH WILDENHAIN: Well, they were just English, very prejudiced. Well, there was another girl from—from New Zealand. And she and I, we—we enjoyed each other. [00:14:00] So she said, "Lili, let's go to London, and we'll make our way in London." She was a horsewoman. And we found a place—

ROBERT F. BROWN: You weren't very old then—[laughs]—were you?

ELISABETH WILDENHAIN: No, no. I was about 15. And I went to a—to a sewing academy then, and learned—I became a dressmaker in London.

ROBERT F. BROWN: So you quit the school.

ELISABETH WILDENHAIN: I quit the school.

ROBERT F. BROWN: What did your family think of this?

ELISABETH WILDENHAIN: Well, I tell you, I was not a good correspondent, but, I mean, I quit the school. And I could say that I'm doing something. And I did—I did very well there. I had a big diploma that I have passed all of this. I could grade patterns. So I was established.

ROBERT F. BROWN: And you enjoyed it, didn't you?

ELISABETH WILDENHAIN: I enjoyed it, yes.

ROBERT F. BROWN: Even the rigor of it and the—

ELISABETH WILDENHAIN: Well, but, I mean, I could follow this, because dressmaking was a part of my interest.

ROBERT F. BROWN: Mm-hmm. Mm-hmm [affirmative].

ELISABETH WILDENHAIN: My father had challenged this also with a costume history, you see. He brought me beautiful books of costume history, you see. And so along with it I became very, very aware of what costume history is, you see. And then—and then after that I had to go back to Czechoslovakia because things got very bad there.

ROBERT F. BROWN: About when would you have gone back—[inaudible]?

ELISABETH WILDENHAIN: And my father became very sick.

ROBERT F. BROWN: About what year was that you went back?

ELISABETH WILDENHAIN: Well, I, uh—I went frequently back, you see. These were no big deals.

ROBERT F. BROWN: But you did return—

ELISABETH WILDENHAIN: Every—every so often. But my father became very sick. He had kidney stones, and they became infected, you see. And so he—he had to be—he had to be in the hospital in Prague. So, uh, I felt I had to go there. And this was really one of the deciding moments my life had changed. So far it was just a play. [00:15:58] And my mother—my mother never had much to do with this. My father made all the decisions. My mother was—wanted to be a singer, and she lost her hearing in her early teens. So it's—was suddenly in front—I mean, we are faced with reality that my mother couldn't handle, I didn't understand, and my brother was much too young to do this.

ROBERT F. BROWN: So there were two of you. You had a brother.

ELISABETH WILDENHAIN: Yeah.

ROBERT F. BROWN: And he was too young.

ELISABETH WILDENHAIN: And—and so we made—there was a brother of my father's who was a bad man. And he—there was this big construction office. It was doing very well.

ROBERT F. BROWN: And was that in—in Czechoslovakia?

ELISABETH WILDENHAIN: In—in Germany.

ROBERT F. BROWN: In Germany.

ELISABETH WILDENHAIN: And this did very well. But when my father was—he was dying—he came and had everything that belonged to him signed over to him, you see.

ROBERT F. BROWN: To your—to your uncle.

ELISABETH WILDENHAIN: Yeah. And this was very bad. And nobody realized this, you see. Or, at least, my mother didn't. My mother could only cry, you know, that's—

ROBERT F. BROWN: Yeah.

ELISABETH WILDENHAIN: —and nobody to support her. Though these people—there were lawyers there, they came immediately then when—when the thing had happened already, you see. It was bad. If only somebody should have been with her that knew something about all of that.

ROBERT F. BROWN: But it had already been done. And his—your uncle had the assets of the construction business.

ELISABETH WILDENHAIN: Yeah, yeah. Yeah.

ROBERT F. BROWN: But you then went to Prague to look after your father?

ELISABETH WILDENHAIN: No, no. It was simply he died.

ROBERT F. BROWN: He died.

ELISABETH WILDENHAIN: This was it. This was it. And this was on an Easter day. It was very sad, you see, what—Easter in these coun—in this Prague—is a very special thing, you see. I mean, the—the sun and all of this. It was really a—like a miracle, you know. And nobody on the streets. Nobody. Nobody on the streets, nobody want—would go to church. It was just fear, fear. I mean, the troops had marched in, and it was—everything was more or less confiscated, you see. [00:18:02] It was awful. Awful. And—and after that—

ROBERT F. BROWN: And you hadn't realized that until you went back—

ELISABETH WILDENHAIN: No.

ROBERT F. BROWN: —how serious it was.

ELISABETH WILDENHAIN: No. No. I mean, I—this was the first thing Hitler did, and he was so successful that he marched in one after the other, you know? And it was very bad, very bad, because all of a sudden we had nobody to direct the thinking, you see. My grandmother was very strong, but, I mean, she didn't understand this either. It was the men who made the decisions, you know.

ROBERT F. BROWN: Yeah. And your brother was too young. So did you and your mother go back to Aussig?

ELISABETH WILDENHAIN: Oh, yeah, yeah. We went back to Aussig. So—but, I mean, these things—you know, these—when somebody died, these after-messes, they are sort of—they go their own way, you know. But I wasn't—we were not advised properly, properly, this—it was bad. Bad.

ROBERT F. BROWN: But what happened then when the war came? I think you said at some point eventually your brother inherited the—some of the business.

ELISABETH WILDENHAIN: The whole—the whole thing, yes.

ROBERT F. BROWN: But that was somewhat later. He was still—

ELISABETH WILDENHAIN: Yes.

ROBERT F. BROWN: —very young.

ELISABETH WILDENHAIN: Yeah, yeah. Well, he—he was supposed to inherit the whole thing, yes.

ROBERT F. BROWN: Yeah. But what did—what happened then as war came? Do you—was this—

ELISABETH WILDENHAIN: Well, when the war came, I was in Geneva. I was involved in learning French.

ROBERT F. BROWN: Oh.

ELISABETH WILDENHAIN: And this was—this was good. And, um—yeah, this was—and there I went to the Jaques-Dalcroze Dance School. This was—he was a wonderful, big man.

ROBERT F. BROWN: Jaques—

ELISABETH WILDENHAIN: Jaques-Dalcroze. He—in the—in the dance world, he was very substantial. He was teaching music and rhythm with the construction of music, you see.

ROBERT F. BROWN: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

ELISABETH WILDENHAIN: So—and I started to draw there. [00:20:01] And I enjoyed the drawing there. I mean, Geneva was really a very sleepy town still, you see. It had the worldliness, but it was—it was very sleepy. And most of these people at the university that were—that were taking English, they were from wealthy parents—[laughs]—they were playboys, you see. In the winter you went skiing to the Mont Blancs, you know. This was the first [inaudible]. And in the summer, well, you had the summer sports there—[laughs]—you see. It was—nobody was serious—[laughs]—in doing something. I was more serious because I liked to dance, you know, and this was—this was the time when Jaques-Dalcroze was just wonderful. And—well, I stayed there. I was engaged to a fellow, which was sort of a sad affair, you see. But—and—

ROBERT F. BROWN: Someone you'd met there in Geneva?

ELISABETH WILDENHAIN: No. No, no, no. We went—I—not in Geneva. I—I—we went on a boat trip. But this has nothing to do with my art development. We went on a boat trip. And there was a handsome man in a uniform. He was the ship's doctor. We went on a big boat. And, well, he was a person that I had really nothing in common with besides he looked good. And he—he saw in me something that was—he was going to be a—you know, at the time, ra—you take X-rays of people, you see. And he—and he was rather progressive in that. So he had already figured out where he wanted to live and had an office, you know, where he would—and my father was—you see—I mean, he—my father wasn't there to make decisions! He—he didn't like this fellow. [Laughs.].

ROBERT F. BROWN: He had met him, had he?

ELISABETH WILDENHAIN: Yeah. He didn't like this fellow at all. And nor did I, but I didn't know how to handle him. I didn't know how to get out of it. [00:22:01]

ROBERT F. BROWN: So you—when you were in Geneva you were still engaged.

ELISABETH WILDENHAIN: I was engaged, yes, yes. But it—it never felt as if—[laughs]—I was engaged. It was—

ROBERT F. BROWN: How long were you in Geneva?

ELISABETH WILDENHAIN: Two and a half years. Yeah.

ROBERT F. BROWN: Into the 1940s, then?

ELISABETH WILDENHAIN: Yeah, yeah. But I did quite a bit of drawing there. Drawing and painting—actually paint—it was watercolors. Sort of commercial—commercially—commercial design at the Beaux-Arts.

ROBERT F. BROWN: So you took formal instruction.

ELISABETH WILDENHAIN: Yeah. Yeah. To fill up my time a little better than—these other people hung around—[laughs]—and—and they didn't do much. I mean, I felt I did much more. [Laughs.]

ROBERT F. BROWN: These were—you're speaking mostly of young people—

ELISABETH WILDENHAIN: Oh, yes.

ROBERT F. BROWN: —[inaudible]—known—

ELISABETH WILDENHAIN: Yeah.

ROBERT F. BROWN: —that were idle.

ELISABETH WILDENHAIN: Oh, they were idle. Oh, they had no—no direction. They were—how do you call these—these trust fund kids. [Laughs.]

ROBERT F. BROWN: What were the—because I'm curious, because this was during the wartime, horrible in most places.

ELISABETH WILDENHAIN: Yeah.

ROBERT F. BROWN: But there was a—a—isolated—

ELISABETH WILDENHAIN: —isolated place, yes.

ROBERT F. BROWN: —an island.

ELISABETH WILDENHAIN: Yeah.

ROBERT F. BROWN: And your family, the rest of your family, had—were back home.

ELISABETH WILDENHAIN: In Aussig, yes, yes. And my brother had to join the Army, you see.

ROBERT F. BROWN: Yeah.

ELISABETH WILDENHAIN: So—well, I went often back, you know, this—since money was no issue, I could travel with the train, you know. And—but—I mean, but still very easy traveling.

ROBERT F. BROWN: And no problem. Your—your nationality was such that—

ELISABETH WILDENHAIN: No. No.

ROBERT F. BROWN: —there was no problem.

ELISABETH WILDENHAIN: No. Not—not yet. [Laughs.] Not yet.

ROBERT F. BROWN: Yeah. Yeah.

ELISABETH WILDENHAIN: Not yet. Well, but I—I did enjoy doing this. And then towards the end of the war—I mean, this was—the war was getting bigger and bigger and bigger.

ROBERT F. BROWN: Yeah. Yeah. And you—you enjoyed the drawing and the painting you did there.

ELISABETH WILDENHAIN: Yeah. Yeah.

ROBERT F. BROWN: Was it a fairly strict curriculum or—

ELISABETH WILDENHAIN: No.

ROBERT F. BROWN: —in Geneva—

ELISABETH WILDENHAIN: It was very, very liberal. Very liberal. Very liberal. And it had this sense of, well, just enjoy what you do. Just enjoy it, you see. [00:24:00] Don't force yourself. But I did quite good things. And I got in the direction of illustrations, of poems and stories. This is—this is what—what I was interested in.

ROBERT F. BROWN: Being an illustrator, or—you were—or—poetry—

ELISABETH WILDENHAIN: Well, I did—I didn't know anything about these fields. I had no idea. I was supposed to find a rich man to marry, and this was it. I didn't know the other part at all, you know.

ROBERT F. BROWN: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

ELISABETH WILDENHAIN: And you—you were going to be the—how should I say it, the servant of the man. This was all I knew.

ROBERT F. BROWN: Mm-hmm. Mm-hmm [affirmative].

ELISABETH WILDENHAIN: Well, when the war got a little worse, I had to leave Geneva. And I moved to Vienna.

ROBERT F. BROWN: Yeah.

ELISABETH WILDENHAIN: And Vienna was really wonderful. I went there to the *Kunstgewerbeschule* and landed in the theater department. In the theater department I specialized in costumes. And my education in the theater and the opera, we were able to go to all the shows that were open during the—during the war, whether it was opera or whether it was *Schauspiel* or whether it was local thing. We had all the—all the openness. We just marched in and said—I mean, we belonged to the theater department. So I was there to the end of the war and had a real education in the theater there. And I became an apprentice at the Volksoper. So I helped sew—[laughs]—the costumes. Or—you know, you couldn't design, because this was strictly under the Nazi regime there. [00:26:00] And—but these various stars, including Richard Strauss, you see, he was—he was still alive, and the Salome—she was—she came from Romania. And this woman was voluptuous, you know, and she just was such a wonderful—what is—what is the name of this main character—Salome—Salome—that her costumes went to pieces—[laughs]—when she was throwing herself around. So, I mean, things like this, it was during the—everything was dark, you know? You had still no lights on the street.

ROBERT F. BROWN: Blackout.

ELISABETH WILDENHAIN: Blackout.

ROBERT F. BROWN: Yeah. During the war.

ELISABETH WILDENHAIN: And—and she was really—I mean, I was more or less there to sew her costume together—[laughs]—because there were three performances. Otherwise I was over in the costume department. I didn't have much to do then, in the—during the night. But it was—it was really an exciting period. Richard Strauss was the conductor, you see, with Salome. And all of these things were all connected with politics, you see. The theater had to go on and on and on. It was no question that money wasn't plenty running around there, floating around there. But it was also that I started to design clothes for—for people, because the costume was just a part-time occupation. And there were some people who were thinking of doing some mass-producing. And so I could do this because I knew how to grade patterns. So I was a busy girl, really. Enjoying it. The pay was not important. [00:28:01] [Laughs.]

ROBERT F. BROWN: So you were designing clothes.

ELISABETH WILDENHAIN: Clothes also. Yeah.

ROBERT F. BROWN: Clothes.

ELISABETH WILDENHAIN: Yeah.

ROBERT F. BROWN: Was it a—you loved Vienna. I mean, it was—

ELISABETH WILDENHAIN: Oh, I loved Vienna.

ROBERT F. BROWN: —not—it was not under threat yet, and, uh—

ELISABETH WILDENHAIN: No, no. No. It—and I stayed with an older lady. She was one of these typical Viennese, blonde hair, that just would have—would have loved to have been an aristocrat, but she was one of these ladies, these—[inaudible]—to show the clothes, you see. And she lived in this dream world of romantic with the—with all of this that the aristocracy had produced, you see. But we had already to get up in the night and go down to the basement often, you see. They—we had alarms, yes. But the food was very rare, very limited. So it was often necessary that I would go to Aussig and get some more food—[laughs]—since we had apples and fruits, you know, and all of that.

ROBERT F. BROWN: You—you were still close to the—

ELISABETH WILDENHAIN: To the—

ROBERT F. BROWN: —this plenty of the countryside.

ELISABETH WILDENHAIN: Oh, yes.

ROBERT F. BROWN: Yeah.

ELISABETH WILDENHAIN: Oh, yes. Oh, yes.

ROBERT F. BROWN: Did you find things in Aussig becoming more and more—harder and harder?

ELISABETH WILDENHAIN: Oh, yes. Because we—we're in this big house, and now—now the refugees, you see, where Hitler had marched in, and these people came, and—so it landed that my mother and my grandmother had just two rooms—that's all— in this big house, and it had 20 rooms. So they—everywhere there's some other refugee—[laughs]—living there, you see.

ROBERT F. BROWN: These would be what, Germans being—coming west?

ELISABETH WILDENHAIN: Yeah. Yeah, it was—it was bad. It was bad. And they had no coal—they had a little coal, but it was all very rationed, you see. You had to put the coal stove up in the dining room or in—in places where it was not very safe. But nothing really—it burned down later on, but, I mean, not during this period. [00:30:02] Well, I stayed there till the bitter end of the war.

ROBERT F. BROWN: In Aussig?

ELISABETH WILDENHAIN: No, in Vienna.

ROBERT F. BROWN: In Vienna.

ELISABETH WILDENHAIN: And the stories that the Russians were—were seducing the women came stronger and stronger and stronger. And especially the theater said, "You better get out of here, because we are in a very—a very dangerous situation here." So on one of my trips I stopped in Prague still, and I had a good friend in Prague. And she said too, "Lili, go—go home, and stay with your mother now. It's now at the end, you know." So I went home, and it was dreadful then. The bombs, they started to bomb everything, you know. The British—ugh. And the—and the Germans. It was terrible. It was really—the Americans too. They just dropped—and it was—I mean, I really thought at this point you were going crazy. Because we went into the country there, and we had a house in the country. And when these bombs dropped, the detonation was so that you thought you were gone, you know. You didn't know how to—how to come out of that.

ROBERT F. BROWN: And they were dropped even in the countryside.

ELISABETH WILDENHAIN: Oh, yes. Oh, yes. All over. Because, you see, there was a big—a big dam there, the Elba River. They wanted to destroy this, that everything would be flooded.

ROBERT F. BROWN: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

ELISABETH WILDENHAIN: And—and of course there was chemical industry, quite a bit that the Germans needed too. So these last days in Aussig were horrible, horrible. Because there were—day and night the bombs were falling. And so my mother and I had to decide what did we want to do? Did we—I mean, the end is coming; you felt something. So we decided to get—my grandmother took us to the train station, and the train was full. [00:32:01] Everybody wanted to get out of this, out, out, out. And we just took a little bag along, like your little bag, and we put in there some honey and some potatoes. And our outfit were ski clothes and heavy boots. And it was luckily in April, so we didn't have to contend with lots of weather, bad weather.

ROBERT F. BROWN: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

ELISABETH WILDENHAIN: And—well, you had to climb in through the windows, you see, and we had to stand. And we had no idea where the train was going, but all of a sudden the train stopped, and this was the end of the line. "Get out!" And this was close to Karlsbad. Karlovy Vary. And, uh, well, we took our little satchel and walked. But my mother had a bad heart already, you see. So this didn't work very well. The streets were just absolutely blocked with cars that couldn't drive anymore, and women with children. And it was just—confusion. But the whole thing was so that they just couldn't move. It was just congestion. And then out of all of this there came a voice: "Who knows English?" And so this is how I got involved with the American army. And so there is where I met my husband, this tall, handsome man. And so we got the hay together and food together and got to—got to schools so that people could sleep in there.

ROBERT F. BROWN: And so you worked—the American army were there, but—

ELISABETH WILDENHAIN: Mm-hmm. Mm-hmm [affirmative]. Yes. The army.

ROBERT F. BROWN: Hmm.

ELISABETH WILDENHAIN: So it was—this was really the—

ROBERT F. BROWN: So you acted as an interpreter and—

ELISABETH WILDENHAIN: Yeah.

ROBERT F. BROWN: —helper.

ELISABETH WILDENHAIN: Yeah. And Charles was the legal officer there. [00:34:00] And you knew the Russians were coming there, you see. There was no question, you see. They were already blowing up the bridges, you see, and—I mean, the Germans were coming back there; they were all confused—what was coming? And it was just confusion. The poor women with their children, the children got sick. And all the people—I mean, they just fell by the wayside, you see. It was—it was the end. And everybody knew it was the end. But then between the—these handsome Americans—you see, they smelled clean—and the Russians in their—they were mainly kids, you know? They were kids of about 28 when it came to that, you see. And they demanded, "Give me, give me, give me!"

ROBERT F. BROWN: So you were still there when the Russian troops came.

ELISABETH WILDENHAIN: Oh, yes, when they came in. And the main thing was, you see, I had beautiful big diamond earrings always. I mean, they—they are small now, but I had big ones. So they wanted—"Give me, give me!" But then through Charles, my—this man that I married here in America, we got into a jeep and went to Germany. He got us across the border. So we got out of this terrible—terrible, terrible—end, where many people were raped and—[sighs] horrible, horrible. And put to jail, and it was—there was no sense in anything. Well, and I landed for a short period with my mother. There was nothing—there was nothing available. There's no housing, nothing available.

ROBERT F. BROWN: Right. Did he take you—not to where you live, but into Germany?

ELISABETH WILDENHAIN: Into Germany, yeah. And I went—I had already sent stuff. You know, we had beautiful china—Meissen china for 32 people. [00:35:58] So I thought I would—I would send it to one of the mountain places in Austria. So this I—this I had done, and I wanted to go to this place and get some of this so we didn't have to pawned all our jewels for food, you see. I had a hunk of jewels hanging on my chest—[laughs]—and my mother too, you see. I mean, if you wanted to eat something, you had to exchange it for that. So, well, I went—I mean, there was no transportation, besides you've had to find a truck that went perhaps to Munich, and you got on the truck. No saying where you would land, you know. So I got the truck, and I got to Munich. And I wanted to go further; I wanted to go to Garmisch and across to the Austria—to Austria. Well, this I did. But in this whole—in this whole adventure there, I met Charles Rankin again, you see, the fella that I helped in Czechoslovakia.

ROBERT F. BROWN: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

ELISABETH WILDENHAIN: So, uh—and—well, and then I stayed on.

ROBERT F. BROWN: In Munich.

ELISABETH WILDENHAIN: No, this was in Garmisch.

ROBERT F. BROWN: Garmisch.

ELISABETH WILDENHAIN: Yeah. Well, this was again in the mountains. [Laughs.]

ROBERT F. BROWN: Yeah. Yeah.

ELISABETH WILDENHAIN: Mm-hmm [affirmative] .

ROBERT F. BROWN: But what about your place—the family place in Austria? Did somebody go on ahead?

ELISABETH WILDENHAIN: Well, this was—this was not in Au—this was—I just had put things there—

ROBERT F. BROWN: Oh.

ELISABETH WILDENHAIN: —to store there. We went there for Christmas, always, and these—these people stored the stuff for me, you know. We didn't have a place in Austria. No. No. It was simply for safekeeping there.

ROBERT F. BROWN: So this is going right through the end of the summer of 1945, I suppose.

ELISABETH WILDENHAIN: Yeah. Yeah. And then I started to work for the American army, or the military government, and I was in Fine Arts and Monuments. I don't know whether this means anything to you or not?

ROBERT F. BROWN: Yeah.

ELISABETH WILDENHAIN: And I had a long key. [Laughs.] [00:38:00] And the art was stored in a monastery there, mainly called Ettal. So, uh, whenever these American authorities came—[laughs]—I had to take them up there. Boy, these were just all Jewish boys, you see.

ROBERT F. BROWN: Yeah. This was in Ettal.

ELISABETH WILDENHAIN: In Ettal—well—I mean—yeah. But, I mean, all these Jewish boys. I mean, I shouldn't talk about this—[laughs]—I—but—it—they came, and they—and all these—all these—these paters [ph]. They were—they were public relations of the first class, you see. They knew how to handle these things. And they invited them immediately when big celebration was—"Of course you have—you are going to be our guest of honor there," and boy, whatever they wanted, they got—they got, you know? They really stayed wonderfully clear of everything.

ROBERT F. BROWN: Who's this, the Americans who—in the—in the Fine Arts and Monuments group, you mean?

ELISABETH WILDENHAIN: Well, the paters.

ROBERT F. BROWN: The paters.

ELISABETH WILDENHAIN: It was—it was a Franciscan order, you see.

ROBERT F. BROWN: Oh, I see.

ELISABETH WILDENHAIN: And they knew how to handle these—these sort of gauche Americans, you know?

ROBERT F. BROWN: I see. Yeah.

ELISABETH WILDENHAIN: "They—they want this? What is that? Oh, that's what it—oh, yes, I know my grandmother did this"—[laughs]—or something. They handled them superbly. Really, it was—and they made schnapps, too. Another schnapps—[laughs]—from the paters, you see. So—

ROBERT F. BROWN: So the fathers were able to keep them from taking—

ELISABETH WILDENHAIN: Yeah. Oh, yeah, yeah. They were ex—

ROBERT F. BROWN: Do you remember some of the Americans, what the names were of some of those who—

ELISABETH WILDENHAIN: No, they were—they were German Jews. They were, like—what were they? Greenfeld [ph] or something. They were just—

ROBERT F. BROWN: You were—you were involved, then, with the Fine Arts and Monuments Service for several months, then?

ELISABETH WILDENHAIN: Oh, I was there till I—till I came to America.

ROBERT F. BROWN: Which was—when did you—

ELISABETH WILDENHAIN: I came over here in '46—in '47, really, beginning in January '47.

ROBERT F. BROWN: And was most of that work around Ettal? [00:40:00]

ELISABETH WILDENHAIN: Yeah. I mean, this is what I knew where—

ROBERT F. BROWN: You were sort—you were sort of the guardian, or you had the key.

ELISABETH WILDENHAIN: Yeah. A guard—I had the key. And these—

ROBERT F. BROWN: They hadn't decided what they were going to do with this.

ELISABETH WILDENHAIN: No. No. This was the property of the Nazis, you see. The Nazis had stored that stuff in there. And, uh, Mr.—what were they called?—Pollack [ph]. Mr. Pollack, yeah? [Laughs.]

ROBERT F. BROWN: Pollard [ph].

ELISABETH WILDENHAIN: Pollack. Pollack.

ROBERT F. BROWN: Pollack.

ELISABETH WILDENHAIN: Pollack. [Laughs.] Mr. Pollack, he died since—I mean, he had a—he was—he was a German Jew who knew what art was, yes? But most of these governors, they had no idea. They were Hollywoods. [Laughs.] Hollywood artists. [They laugh.] Yeah. I mean, they—the main thing is that they had dancing girls with short skirts, you know? And they would have parties up on these various mountains and—and sort of say, "This is for us now." And, I mean, this is what their interest was. But, I mean, these German Jews knew much better, much better. There was a fellow called Munn [ph]. But he was not too interested in the arts. I mean, he—his—he was a relative of this Thomas Munn. But there were some people who knew something, but the majority had no idea, no idea what it was.

ROBERT F. BROWN: And what were they supposed to do with the art, wait till they could find the real owners? Or were they trying to—

ELISABETH WILDENHAIN: I don't know. I—

ROBERT F. BROWN: —inventory?

ELISABETH WILDENHAIN: —I don't know what they—what eventually happened with it because the things were from the major galleries in Germany. And the stolen ones from Russia. They were all hoarded there.

ROBERT F. BROWN: Yeah.

ELISABETH WILDENHAIN: But I don't know what the—what—what eventually becomes—in your—in your archives you could find out what happened to these things.

ROBERT F. BROWN: Beginning. But you, what was your job?

ELISABETH WILDENHAIN: Well, I just had the key, and there was—I was a charming young woman, you know. And we went in their vehicle up there to the paters. And the pater, they gave him immediately a schnapps—[laughs]—

ROBERT F. BROWN: Yeah. Made him feel good.

ELISABETH WILDENHAIN: Yeah. And invited him to our next big celebration. "You will, of course, come. [00:42:00] We have this Santa Margherita [ph]," yeah? "We have this—and, of course, we have an education. We educate boys here, you see?" So they got them off this, you see? They wanted to keep the art. And—[laughs]—they didn't want to let them loose with it. I mean, there were, of course, some American officers that hoarded that stuff, you see.

ROBERT F. BROWN: Yeah.

ELISABETH WILDENHAIN: Badly, badly, badly.

ROBERT F. BROWN: Yeah, we know of one case a few years ago in Texas. Yeah.

ELISABETH WILDENHAIN: Yeah, badly.

ROBERT F. BROWN: Yeah.

ELISABETH WILDENHAIN: Badly. And from the homes too. They were wealthy people living there, that—and they had very good art, you see? But they just took it. And they confiscated the house—"Oh, that's all mine now." [Laughs.] You see, this—they didn't know how to handle this.

ROBERT F. BROWN: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

ELISABETH WILDENHAIN: Yeah. But here I am telling you my war his—

ROBERT F. BROWN: You did that, and then, um, by the time you came over here, what prompted you to come to the United States?

ELISABETH WILDENHAIN: Well, I—Charles wanted to get married. But I had no idea where Kansas was. He was—he was in Kansas. [Laughs.] He was supposedly a lawyer. Yes, he was a lawyer. And—oh. We had, of course, no money. I was used to money! And I had to go to wor—I mean, I went to work, because I couldn't stay there. And it was totally everything that I—that I was not raised in. I mean, puritanical, isolationist—[laughs]—

ROBERT F. BROWN: Yeah. Yeah.

ELISABETH WILDENHAIN: —and Charles was a mama's boy. His father died when he was eight, you see. I—there

was a grandmother, a sister, and Charles. And they lived with everything that Victoria never collected—[laughs]—never disposed of. Oh, it was awful.

ROBERT F. BROWN: Awful—

ELISABETH WILDENHAIN: Awful. Awful, awful. Well—but there again I had to survive, so I—I went to Kansas City, and I designed clothes for Nellie Dunn. [00:44:01] And also—

ROBERT F. BROWN: Designed clothes for—

ELISABETH WILDENHAIN: Nellie Dunn. This was a woman, a very well-to-do woman, that did daytime clothing. And I was quite successful there. You know, if you had found a number that would fit, number 44—[laughs]—and—and 30, this would make the line. So I—it didn't take me long to do this. Because I knew how to grade, you know. I knew how to do that.

ROBERT F. BROWN: Grade, you mean sizing and—

ELISABETH WILDENHAIN: Yeah, sizing. Well, and the next thing was then that I did some theater costumes again. There were some—some theater outfits there, you see, these civic theaters. And Menninger was around there, you see—you know who Menninger was? That's a—

ROBERT F. BROWN: Yeah, the Menninger Clinic?

ELISABETH WILDENHAIN: Yeah.

ROBERT F. BROWN: Oh.

ELISABETH WILDENHAIN: And so there were some—some people who brought—who wrote plays. And there was one play, the Kriof [ph] players, and they gave me—I was supposed to make the costumes. And I could make the costumes for little cost or nothing. [Laughs.] So—so this is how I got into the theater—

ROBERT F. BROWN: And you didn't live far from Kansas—from Kansas City? This was—

ELISABETH WILDENHAIN: No, I—I commuted.

ROBERT F. BROWN: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

ELISABETH WILDENHAIN: But Kansas City was difficult for me to negotiate because it was just, you know, a big city. And we had to have—her factory was in the deep—ugh, in the deep mess—I mean, where things were really raw, in Kansas City.

ROBERT F. BROWN: Really raw.

ELISABETH WILDENHAIN: Raw. But in Kansas City, Kansas. I lived on the plaza, which was the other side, the Missouri side, which was better. But—you see, I was too inexperienced to have a life there. So I went there just during the week, and I came for the weekend home. But this was [sighs] an awful, awful thing. [00:46:00] But—

ROBERT F. BROWN: Hmm. So you really weren't able to—from time to time you were able to continue your art.

ELISABETH WILDENHAIN: Yeah. And, of course—

ROBERT F. BROWN: But only from time to time.

ELISABETH WILDENHAIN: —of course, what I—I could always design something. If you—if you had—if you could design this, they—then I had to have a seamstress that would sew something for me. But it was—it did something, yes. I was not totally away. And I, uh—I also was very interested in the history of costumes again, you see. And I started to paint.

ROBERT F. BROWN: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

ELISABETH WILDENHAIN: And I made—but my painting was really sort of—since Charles was in politics, I—I did rather humorous pictures of these various politicians. [Laughs.] And these Republican ladies—you know, I went there to Washington with them to see Ike there. But—so I made sunflowers for their chest, you see. It was—it all had to be—

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ROBERT F. BROWN: These were the—

ELISABETH WILDENHAIN: Caricatures, yes. I mean, from the beginning I came there, and we—I—we got married the second day I was there. I was married, you see. And—oh, I tell you, Rob, it was awful.

ROBERT F. BROWN: [Laughs.]

ELISABETH WILDENHAIN: It was—

ROBERT F. BROWN: And your husband, he was in, what, state politics, or—

ELISABETH WILDENHAIN: Well, yes—

ROBERT F. BROWN: —Republican Party?

ELISABETH WILDENHAIN: —he had sort of a menial job in the techs department, in Topeka, where the capital was. Oh, it was bad. Bad, bad, bad. [Laughs.]

ROBERT F. BROWN: And then you had a—a child, right?

ELISABETH WILDENHAIN: Yeah, six years later.

ROBERT F. BROWN: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

ELISABETH WILDENHAIN: Just settled the whole thing a bit. But I got very sick, you see. I really wanted to leave Kansas as soon as I got there, but I had no money. And nobody—nobody could help me to get there. But you had to get inside ready for that.

ROBERT F. BROWN: There, uh—your—well, your brother, now, back in Germany was getting involved in the—in some of the family business, wasn't he?

ELISABETH WILDENHAIN: Yeah. Yeah.

ROBERT F. BROWN: Could he have helped you out, or—

ELISABETH WILDENHAIN: He was not going to do this because he was on the other side. He was thinking very much the opposite. He hated America. All of this was just wrong! Wrong, wrong, wrong.

ROBERT F. BROWN: Yeah.

ELISABETH WILDENHAIN: Wrong. And, uh, so he wouldn't help me, no.

ROBERT F. BROWN: Had you seen him after the war?

ELISABETH WILDENHAIN: No. No.

ROBERT F. BROWN: You never did.

ELISABETH WILDENHAIN: No. No. And, uh, he was inspired by this brother of my father's, you see.

ROBERT F. BROWN: Yeah.

ELISABETH WILDENHAIN: And—

ROBERT F. BROWN: Who you said was bad—

ELISABETH WILDENHAIN: He was a bad man. He was a bad man. So, no, he never would've given me anything because the Americans are bad!

ROBERT F. BROWN: They are.

ELISABETH WILDENHAIN: Yeah. I mean, according to all of Hitler's theories—

ROBERT F. BROWN: Yeah.

ELISABETH WILDENHAIN: —you see, this—and he was—he was not a Nazi, but, I mean, he had these tendencies, you see. Do—this was—everything American was not good. So when I sat in Kansas, and he—he didn't think—he didn't know where Kansas was either—[laughs]—you see. Geography. [00:02:00] So I just had to—but I got very sick as soon as, I mean, I got over there. You see, my—this kidney stuff. My father died in kidney stone, and when I came to Kansas I developed kidney stones right away then. So I—but I couldn't deal with it,

emotionally. I did it inside with—you know, and so my kidneys didn't function. And so I had a bad kidney stone when I got pregnant and when I—when I—I hardly had the child and I had to be operated because it was all—all infected.

ROBERT F. BROWN: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

ELISABETH WILDENHAIN: And, um—and it was, uh—I had the child in Kansas—in Kansas City, you see, and they operated me there. [Sighs.] It was horrible, this—this hospital was awful. Green walls. And I was in the men's department. Ugh. Prostrate problems. Well, six weeks later this urologist said, "Well, we have to operate you again. The stone broke, and we have to go in there again." And I said, "No! I am not going to do this here. I am going to Europe back." Because my father had these kidney problems.

ROBERT F. BROWN: Yeah.

ELISABETH WILDENHAIN: But I had gotten in the meantime a commission for the World's Fair, for the Brussels World's Fair. So I was going over there to finish this. And I was like a thread then. Just thin, thin, thin. And what happened really that I found a good urologist where my mother lived. And he said, "Yes, we have to operate this, because there is already another growth in this—in this kidney."

ROBERT F. BROWN: Now, your mother—where did your mother live at this time?

ELISABETH WILDENHAIN: In Coburg. In Coburg. "So we have to do something about it; there's a growth in this kidney; we have to operate you immediately." [00:03:59] So I was able to finish this thing for Brussels. And I got — Etoile D'Or—for that too. I mean, it meant something [ph]—

ROBERT F. BROWN: Etoile D'Or

ELISABETH WILDENHAIN: Yeah.

ROBERT F. BROWN: What was this, a great weaving or—

ELISABETH WILDENHAIN: No. It—was theater curtains. I—I was quite a bit involved with theater, these theater curtains. So I made a big theater curtain. I mean, actually, a big—in the crafts—and there were some blown glass with it. So it was a sheer silk, and there some blown glass with it. It was very attractive. Well.

ROBERT F. BROWN: And then you were—you went to, uh—

ELISABETH WILDENHAIN: I had the operation. And I came together again. I was very, very thin and very—very distraught, you know. But I came back to America again.

ROBERT F. BROWN: Hmm.

ELISABETH WILDENHAIN: I mean, there was no other solution. I mean, Paul was here. I couldn't take him with me because—so—

ROBERT F. BROWN: He was too young, I guess.

ELISABETH WILDENHAIN: Yeah, he was too young.

ROBERT F. BROWN: When did you study, by the way, with, uh, Oskar Kokoschka?

ELISABETH WILDENHAIN: Oh, well, this was in Salzburg.

ROBERT F. BROWN: That was—

ELISABETH WILDENHAIN: When I went back—

ROBERT F. BROWN: —when you went back.

ELISABETH WILDENHAIN: —yes. And Os—I mean, he was won—

ROBERT F. BROWN: This was during this visit.

ELISABETH WILDENHAIN: Well, yes.

ROBERT F. BROWN: [Inaudible.]

ELISABETH WILDENHAIN: Before—in one of the visits. I went back to see my mother every year.

ROBERT F. BROWN: Ah.

ELISABETH WILDENHAIN: And I tell you, he was wonderful. He—he made me feel what it is the whole thing. It was not one—one front. You had to take—you had to see it from all sides. And, uh, there were all—he was—he was just a great man. When—when just present came, he was—I mean, he was—[knock at door] Yeah?

[Side conversation.]

[Audio break.]

ROBERT F. BROWN: So Kokoschka was a very, uh, remarkable teacher, was he?

ELISABETH WILDENHAIN: Oh. And he—and he was teaching on the Festung [Hohensalzburg], on the Festung in Salzburg. You know, this is this—

ROBERT F. BROWN: Yeah.

ELISABETH WILDENHAIN: —old, very magnificent medieval building there, you see. And he was teaching a—more or less a select group, that we were about 20. [00:05:58] And at the same time he did the designing for, uh—wait a minute—

ROBERT F. BROWN: The Mozart Festival?

ELISABETH WILDENHAIN: Yeah, for the Mozart Festival.

ROBERT F. BROWN: Yeah. Mm-hmm [affirmative].

ELISABETH WILDENHAIN: For—I think—I don't know what it was. It was—I mean, it—so he knew—understood the theater [laughs]. Again, you know. And it was so nice, you know, because so many of these people that were so involved in the festivals there came up as visitors there, you see. So it was—you were really—it was not the Duncan idea anymore. It was really through this theater, this—you know, you met people, and it was wonderful. It was really a world—the world—then.

ROBERT F. BROWN: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

ELISABETH WILDENHAIN: And, uh—

ROBERT F. BROWN: So did you get involved, um, in any designing while you were there?

ELISABETH WILDENHAIN: No, no, no.

ROBERT F. BROWN: But you—[inaudible]—

ELISABETH WILDENHAIN: I mean, I was simply a student there, and a student that—it was not demanding. You just—you just did—when he came in the morning. He came every two or three days to have a look—the look, and then mainly to explain his own pictures, you see, because he painted cities then. And so he explained this. And he took us to Munich there—where the rest of his paintings were. So he wanted—he—he specialized on special portraits in—of people—and cities, you see. And it was really enough.

ROBERT F. BROWN: What was he like as a personality?

ELISABETH WILDENHAIN: Oh, he was wonderful.

ROBERT F. BROWN: I mean—

ELISABETH WILDENHAIN: He was—

ROBERT F. BROWN: —very ebullient or—

ELISABETH WILDENHAIN: Well—

ROBERT F. BROWN: —quiet or—or not?

ELISABETH WILDENHAIN: —when you saw him you knew that there was something in him that other people didn't have, you see. And he—and he was from Czechoslovakia, on top of everything. You see, he had, uh—he was gray-haired already. But, I mean, he looked with eyes that went through you, you see, when he really looked. Or he passed you. He didn't see you.

ROBERT F. BROWN: Hmm. You mentioned at one time you thought he looked—at that time he looked a bit like a shriveled stone. [00:08:00]

ELISABETH WILDENHAIN: Yeah. Yeah. Well, he—he looked like a little like this. Yeah, yeah. But he—I shouldn't say this, because he was—he was an older man then already, you know. Yeah. Yeah. He was an interesting man.

ROBERT F. BROWN: So these—this would be in the summertime, you would go over—

ELISABETH WILDENHAIN: In the summertime.

ROBERT F. BROWN: —to your mother?

ELISABETH WILDENHAIN: Yes. In the summertime always, yes.

ROBERT F. BROWN: And then you would return to Kansas, where it was an utterly different life, yeah?

ELISABETH WILDENHAIN: [Laughs.] Yeah. Oh. Utterly. It was this or that. I never—I wanted to balance it, this whole life. And I had—I was—[sighs]—accumulating credits too, you see, at the—at the University of Kansas. And then when I finally came here then, you see, I wanted really—they said, "You have to have a degree." So eventually I had enough credits that I could finish a degree here, my MFA here then.

ROBERT F. BROWN: And you did, in 1970.

ELISABETH WILDENHAIN: Mm-hmm, mm-hmm [affirmative].

ROBERT F. BROWN: At the Rochester—

ELISABETH WILDENHAIN: Yeah.

ROBERT F. BROWN: —Institute of Technology.

ELISABETH WILDENHAIN: Yeah.

ROBERT F. BROWN: How did you get here?

ELISABETH WILDENHAIN: Well—now, look here, this is another thing. All right. I was stuck in Kansas, you see, this—and it had its problems. And, um—well, they had to send somebody to the World's Crafts Council to Peru. And this was a big travel, a big trip.

ROBERT F. BROWN: You mean somebody was—had to be sent there, or—

ELISABETH WILDENHAIN: Yeah, yeah. I mean—I mean, it was up for people to send people to the World's Craft Council. And so this is how I got to Peru. And the—

ROBERT F. BROWN: So you were sent to represent—

ELISABETH WILDENHAIN: Well, I was sent with some other people to go to Peru to the World's Craft Council.

ROBERT F. BROWN: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

ELISABETH WILDENHAIN: I had no idea what that was, you see.

ROBERT F. BROWN: Yeah. About when was this, in the 1960s?

ELISABETH WILDENHAIN: Yeah, yeah, in '68, '68, I think.

ROBERT F. BROWN: Okay.

ELISABETH WILDENHAIN: And it was—this is where I met Frans. This was a wonderful place, you see? [00:10:00] Mrs. Aileen Webb. She is my symbol of a lady. Did you still meet her?

ROBERT F. BROWN: Yeah, I knew—I certainly know who she is, yeah.

ELISABETH WILDENHAIN: She was—

ROBERT F. BROWN: Yeah.

ELISABETH WILDENHAIN: She is the grand lady that—and here, I met in America. Nobody came close—[laughs] —to her. Everybody—she was wonderful. She was giving this party, and—and she just did it. And Paul—Paul—

what was his—Paul Smith was sort of a little boy that had to work for—[laughs]—her.

ROBERT F. BROWN: Yeah. Yeah.

ELISABETH WILDENHAIN: But it was really—this was a wonderful thing.

ROBERT F. BROWN: That she gave a party, and—

ELISABETH WILDENHAIN: I mean, she sponsored this whole thing, you see. Not a party, it was—she sponsored the whole thing. And there were all nationalities in there. It was done through the United Nations, you see.

ROBERT F. BROWN: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

ELISABETH WILDENHAIN: And you could have an exhibition there, and—and strangely enough I had—I had some big pieces at the Crafts Museum in New York. And so I knew already some people, you see, from that department. I had this one there, and I had—you see—wait a minute—let me get my classes.

ROBERT F. BROWN: Sure.

ELISABETH WILDENHAIN: Where did I—

ROBERT F. BROWN: Oh, they're right there.

ELISABETH WILDENHAIN: Oh, here. Here.

ROBERT F. BROWN: Here.

ELISABETH WILDENHAIN: Here. These were the pieces. They knew—this—I had—

ROBERT F. BROWN: About this same time you had the—

ELISABETH WILDENHAIN: —a show—

ROBERT F. BROWN: —a show in New York.

ELISABETH WILDENHAIN: —at the Crafts Museum.

ROBERT F. BROWN: Same time you were going to Peru.

ELISABETH WILDENHAIN: Yeah, this was—this was called *Our Patron Church*.

ROBERT F. BROWN: *Our Patron*—

ELISABETH WILDENHAIN: *Our Patron Church*. This one here, you see, was in there. Yeah. So I be—I was quite well known then. This was in, and this one here was in.

ROBERT F. BROWN: These are weavings?

ELISABETH WILDENHAIN: No, they were appliqués.

ROBERT F. BROWN: Okay.

ELISABETH WILDENHAIN: Collages. Stitcheries, really. Stitcheries. Stitchery. And so in one of these evening dances, when—well, there were—there was polka being danced, you know. [00:12:01] And I'm—I'm—was a good dancer. [Laughs.] And this is how I met Frans down there.

ROBERT F. BROWN: Huh.

ELISABETH WILDENHAIN: Yeah. [Pause.] This was it, you know. And I—I knew—I went back to Kansas, but I knew I wasn't going to live there anymore. It was more—[laughs]—more or less—this was my way out.

ROBERT F. BROWN: Mmm.

ELISABETH WILDENHAIN: I shouldn't say this, but, you see, Frans had similar qualities that my father did, you see. Frans collected art, yeah?

ROBERT F. BROWN: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

ELISABETH WILDENHAIN: And—[clears throat]—and my father was an art—was that too, you see. So we had a

connection somehow there that was pretty strong from the beginning on. And—and—

ROBERT F. BROWN: He was a creative—

ELISABETH WILDENHAIN: He was a creative—

ROBERT F. BROWN: —force.

ELISABETH WILDENHAIN: —force. He was—

ROBERT F. BROWN: —force.

ELISABETH WILDENHAIN: —the creative force in my life, yes.

ROBERT F. BROWN: And your father had been—

ELISABETH WILDENHAIN: Yeah.

ROBERT F. BROWN: —was an architect.

ELISABETH WILDENHAIN: Yeah. Yeah.

ROBERT F. BROWN: Yeah. Yeah.

ELISABETH WILDENHAIN: Yeah. I mean, this was certainly a force in there, yeah. Yeah. It was—it was a very, uh —well, he—you know, his wife had died before, you know that, you know, two years before. So—but it was—it was so that this was—there was—this was really sort of love at first sight. It was not something that developed slowly, you know. It was—and, you see, I went to Japan then, you see, and—with my studies. And, uh, so he came to Japan and stayed over there then. But I was over there, so. [00:13:59] We got to know each other a little bit before—[laughs]—I came to live here. Yeah.

ROBERT F. BROWN: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

ELISABETH WILDENHAIN: Yeah. But, um—[pause]—here I'm still in this situation, you see, this—I think my—my time has almost run out here. I think so. Here. Here. I think it's—and though I don't want to give up this house—I love this house—and—I can't live here by myself. So I have always somebody back there that is not working out, you know. And it's very difficult. People take advantage of—of me, somehow, you know. Hmm?

ROBERT F. BROWN: Yeah. Hmm.

ELISABETH WILDENHAIN: But, um, you see, I learned to weave, the weave, and now these little things that I make, you know. You have seen my little weavings, yeah?

ROBERT F. BROWN: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

ELISABETH WILDENHAIN: And I'm—this is really—I'm—I was writing some poetry, and so I think I would like to write more poetry and then make the weavings for it. The little ones. And—but I need to be stimulated again, you know. And therefore I took up this water—water class, water—in—where is it—it's an elder hostel, you see—

ROBERT F. BROWN: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

ELISABETH WILDENHAIN: —somewhere. And I have had so much—[laughs]—so much problem always in my—that one has to resolve somehow. Frans's work will go to Alfred, did I tell you that?

ROBERT F. BROWN: Mm-mm [negative].

ELISABETH WILDENHAIN: Well, they are building a ceramic museum there. All of this is—I have it appraised now. This was a hunk of work to get this—

ROBERT F. BROWN: I know. Yeah. [00:16:00]

ELISABETH WILDENHAIN: —to get this all also that it could be appraised. So it's being done now, slowly. Slowly, the whole thing.

[END TRACK wilden95_1of1_cass_SideB_r.]

[END OF INTERVIEW.]