

BAUHAUS LEGACY – INTERVIEW #4

Interviewee Name: Wolf Burchard

Interviewer Name: Christopher Brown

Interview Date: 11/21/2025

Interview Location: Gropius House, 68 Baker Bridge Rd, Lincoln, MA 01773

Christopher Brown:

This is interview number 4 of the Bauhaus Legacy Project. It is Friday, November 21st, 2025, and we are here at the Walter Gropius house in Lincoln, Massachusetts at 68 Baker Bridge Road. So, let's begin with an introduction. What is your name?

Wolf Burchard:

My name is Wolf Burchard.

CB:

And what is your current profession?

WB:

I'm an art historian and museum curator.

CB:

And what museum do you work at?

WB:

I work at the Metropolitan Museum of Art.

CB:

Okay. And what is your specialty there?

WB:

I'm an early modernist, so I focus on the arts of Europe between 1515 and 1815.

CB:

And I happen to know that you are related directly to Walter Gropius. Can you describe what that relationship is?

WB:

Walter's sister, Manon Gropius, was my great-grandmother, my paternal great-grandmother.

CB:

So, you would be Walter Gropius's great-grandnephew?

WB

That is correct.

CB

Okay. And let's briefly get into your background. When were you born and where, and where were you raised?

WB:

I was born in 1985, so 102 years after Walter Gropius, and I was born and raised in France. My father worked in Paris for 25 years, so my sisters and I grew up in a little village outside Versailles.

CB:

When you say little, how small?

WB:

Quite a small village. A thousand people lived there - a small village called Chavenay, which is about 20 minutes from Versailles and about 45 minutes from Paris.

CB:

Okay. And how long did you live there?

WB:

I lived there for 20 years. I was born there and had my entire school education there before then moving to Germany, very briefly to Austria, and then England, and then I moved here.

CB:

Okay. And did you move to Germany for school?

WB:

Yes, for university.

CB:

Okay. What is your educational background?

WB:

I'm an art historian, so I studied history of art at three universities, mostly at the Courtauld Institute in London.

CB:

What drew you to that subject?

WB:

It's the only thing I can do is art history, so I was always interested in the arts and because I was never going to be a good artist myself, I wanted to focus on the study and the sharing of art with a broad audience.

CB:

Now, you clearly have your area of expertise at the museum where you work, but in general, are there any particular artists or styles, movements, that really had an impact on you?

WB:

Yes, so I am interested in that early modern period, so the Renaissance, the Baroque, the Rococo, Neo-Classicism, and really the 17th century is where I'm most at home. So, growing up 20 minutes from Versailles, I actually devoted a great deal of my time to the study of Versailles and how it may have influenced other European courts. So, that's really the period I'm most at home in.

CB:

You're clearly quite multicultural. Here you are living in the United States, you grew up in France, you are German via your heritage, and you've lived there as well. Do you have a cultural or a national identity? What are you most associated...?

WB:

Oh, yes. Yes, yes. I mean, I hold both a British and a German passport, and I was born and raised in France, but I feel entirely European, but with very, very strong German roots.

CB:

Do you consider yourself French? I mean, you spent your whole...

WB:

Funnily enough, I don't, but I feel very much at home in France and I work very closely with French colleagues. I work a lot on French art. I'm currently working on an exhibition that's going to be held in Paris, so I still entertain quite close relations with France and go there very regularly. But I've never considered myself French even though I was born there.

CB:

Now the period of expertise for you predates the Bauhaus, of course, but do you have an affinity for German art, really of any period?

WB:

Yes. No, I do. Well, there's the art I focus on professionally and then there's the art I like, and so I like German Modernism and I just don't know as much about it as I do about the things that I focus on professionally. So, there's a great deal of German art that I like. Yes.

CB:

As a curator, how would you describe the significance of the Bauhaus and the work, the design, the art that it produced?

WB:

Well, I mean, I should really emphasize that I'm obviously not an expert on the Bauhaus and there are so many people who are real experts on the Bauhaus. I always obviously had a fascination for it, given the family connection and the interest that my grandparents and my father and his siblings took in the Bauhaus by virtue of being related to someone who was very involved in it. But it is fascinating to me to see that there is a school of architecture and design that only existed for about 14 years and still very much resonates with people today. Living in New York City, I know many architects, I know many interior designers - the Bauhaus means something to all of them and it still means to them that it's something modern and different and cutting edge. And that's pretty remarkable, just the fact that it reverberated in such a way when it only existed for a very, very short period of time.

And personally, I'm very interested in workshop practices and I've worked on 17th-century artist studios where artists, like for instance, one person I've worked on a lot is a man called Charles Le Brun who worked for Louis XIV and who oversaw the royal workshops that produced furniture and tapestries and silver, and they were creating one visual language that became the King's brand, as it were. And in a way, they weren't that dissimilar from the Bauhaus where you had one workshop where all these different types of objects were produced, but in an idiom that they shared. There it wasn't a sort of branding exercise, this wasn't about creating objects that would promote the power of the state, but this notion that different artists working on different materials live together under the same roof and can feed off each other's creative energy, I think is totally fascinating and still something that's a worthwhile idea.

CB:

Okay. So, let's get into your family history a little bit. I know that your family goes back generations, I believe even back to the 18th century in Berlin. Can you talk a little bit about your lineage?

WB:

Yes, sure. So, there's two families coming together: Walter's sister, Manon Gropius, married a man called Max Burchard who was my great-grandfather, and he had a brother, Otto Burchard, who married a Gropius cousin. So, two Burchard brothers married two Gropius cousins. And the Gropiuses were in Berlin since the 18th century. They go back to the early 17th century, I think they're first mentioned in 1602 but established themselves in Berlin in the 18th century and a whole range of different professions - merchants, landowners, Protestant ministers, military men. Walter's great-grandfather fought in the Battle of Waterloo, for instance. And there was in the family a shirt which he salvaged, which was always said to be Napoleon's shirt and all the men in the family wore it when they did the A levels, the Abitur. But that shirt seems to be now lost, but I think Walter Gropius actually wore it when he finished school. And actually, by the end of the 19th century, they were a pretty established family in Berlin. Walter's mother, Manon Gropius - Manon Scharnweber - was the daughter and granddaughter of two fairly distinguished politicians in Berlin and also herself a pretty politically-minded person. Her husband was an architect, so Walter Gropius Sr. was an architect. And then there was Martin Gropius who was a neoclassical architect, a generation before, who was sort of a student of [Karl Friedrich] Schinkel. And Schinkel again had fought in the Battle of Waterloo. No, actually he hadn't fought in the Battle of

Waterloo, but he had shared a flat with Carl Gropius, Walter's great-grandfather, who had fought in the Battle of Waterloo. So, it was a pretty sort of intertwined mix of people.

CB:

And one of Walter Gropius's most famous early works is the Fagus factory in Germany, which was a pioneering use of the curtain glass wall concept, and very socially conscious, actually, in that case - bringing light and openness into this, what would otherwise be kind of a dingy factory environment. And my understanding is that one of your family members actually helped secure that commission, is that right?

WB:

Yes. So, Walter's brother-in-law, my great-grandfather, Max Burchard, was *Landrat* in Alfeld where the factory was built. So, he was a local civil servant, if you will, and he was sort of the most senior civil servant in the area, and he and Walter, they had a very close relationship, and so he introduced Walter to Carl Benscheidt who built the Fagus-Werk, who was a man who wanted to improve the working standards for his workforce. And so they teamed up with Walter to build, to start building that factory. So that, I think, was 1910 - 1911, and in 1912, the hope was that he would build a new hospital locally. And that, however, didn't materialize unfortunately, but he did produce designs, et cetera. And unfortunately, apparently, they were too modern for various people on the committee and so his designs were dismissed, which apparently really frustrated my great-grandfather.

CB:

And are these memories that have been passed down to you through generations?

WB:

So, I never met Walter, of course. I was born 14-15 years after he died, but I have spoken to my grandparents. My grandfather and Walter were very, very close. My grandmother knew him very well. And then my father and his siblings all knew him. So, the majority of the information that I have about him and what he was like as a person, I have from those family members - from my father, his siblings, and my grandparents. And of course there are many, many, many letters that were exchanged between Walter and his sister and his brother-in-law and their parents and those letters all survive. We have them at home. So, we have a pretty rich and quite three-dimensional record of Walter's family life at the beginning of the 20th century.

CB:

And when you were growing up, was he somebody that your family talked about a lot, being such an important person?

WB:

Well, we didn't talk a lot about him, but there was a certain presence. I mean, I remember so well the first time I ever heard about this man whom I never met, and this was at my grandmother's house, and I was staying with her in Germany, and I don't remember how old I was, I might've been eight, nine or ten, and we were having tea and she had this teapot that leaked, which was a very striking, sort of slightly flattened design. And so, I asked her, "Why are you using this teapot if it leaks?" She said, "Well, I really like Uncle Walter's design." And that's when I first, I said, "Who's Uncle Walter?" And then she told me about him. And so, then I started reading up about him, and then obviously I asked my various

family members who did know him various questions about him. And because I myself was someone who was very interested in the arts, that became more and more interesting. And so, my grandmother who died in 2008 and whose life spanned the whole 20th century, I asked her a lot about him. So, she knew him in the late 1920s and met him during the heydays of the Bauhaus, so that of course was totally fascinating. And then my aunt, my father's elder sister, came here to America to Lincoln in 1951 and spent a whole year here. And my father met him in Germany when he was visiting after the war, and then later in London as well. So, for instance, my father was interning as a lawyer or was interning in a law firm in London in 1969 when the Royal Academy was organizing its 50-year anniversary exhibition of the Bauhaus and so Walter took my father to the opening. So, talking to them gives you sort of a sense of what kind of person he was like.

CB:

And did your father and your aunt know him from childhood? Was he close to the family?

WB:

Well, they didn't... Well, they were both born, my aunt was born in the early 1930s. My father was born in '39, so by the time they were born, he had already left. So, he entertained a very, very close relationship to my grandparents. In fact, my grandmother paid for Walter's *Reichsfluchtsteuer*, which is a tax he had to pay, which also many Jews had to pay when wanting to leave the country. So, my grandmother paid for that. And then, so my father and his siblings all met him only after the war, but in the immediate aftermath of the war, they would send care packages all the time. And so Ise, for instance, according to my aunt, knew of the children only by the sizes of their clothes because she was trying to get clothes from neighbors, et cetera, which she could send to Germany. And so, she had an exact list of the five children and their sizes and tried to then gather the right clothes to send them to Germany after the war. So, he only met him when he visited. My father, for instance, met him when he visited in the, I guess probably either late '40s or early '50s when he first came. But then he came relatively regularly. And my father was born in '39 so my father was probably 10 when he first met him.

CB:

Okay. Did he ever share a memory of when he first met him?

WB:

Well, I don't think he remembers the exact first moment that he met him, but I think he does remember... well, I'll guess no, actually that probably is the first time he met him. My father does remember Walter coming to Hannover for the first time after the war, and my grandfather opening the door, and then they embraced and were both in tears after all the suffering of World War II and the fact that they didn't know whether they would ever see each other again. So, there were tears. And my grandfather and Walter, they were close in age because my father's mother was significantly, well not so, but she was a bit older than Walter, so they were only 20 years apart. So, they were very close, Walter and my grandfather. And...

CB:

So, this would've been Walter Gropius's nephew?

WB:

Exactly, yes, his nephew. But he was quite the sort of cool young uncle, as it were. And so, they had quite a close relationship. And also because they shared many similar interests. My grandfather was very, very interested in the arts and in the Bauhaus and in design and architecture. And so that, I suppose, might've been the first memory of my father seeing him when he arrived at my grandparents' house. And then he has many memories of his being... So, for instance, apparently Walter said to my father, my father as a German boy was wearing short lederhosen, all German boys were wearing lederhosen, and Walter really liked that because as in America, all the boys now wear jeans. And he had this very warm and soothing voice and really enjoyed listening to children and young people and hearing what their worries were, what their hopes for the future were, and so my father always said that [Walter] was much, much loved by all his nieces and nephews and great-nieces and nephews.

CB:

You're saying a lot of things here that are, first of all very interesting, but also reinforce impressions that I've had of him from my learnings, one of which is that he was very warm. I picture him as having a very grounded presence - the Bauhaus was a very chaotic environment as far as detractors and funding issues and political squabbles and egos within the school itself, and that he always had this sort of diplomatic, grounded, warm air about him.

WB:

Mm hmm.

CB:

I don't know if you could say more about that sense, but just that he had a charisma, but a very soft one - people would follow him.

WB:

Yes. Yeah, I'm sure that's true. I'm sure that's true. And certainly, based on the descriptions that I have from, well, both from first-hand accounts and also in the letters - I think his older sister, my great-grandmother, was much more, she was quite a nervous person, and I think maybe that sort of, they balanced each other out. So she was, I think, much more, she could get much more nervous about situations and irate, whereas he was probably sort of the calming, soothing force.

CB:

And I picture him as being very... you got to think he started a society-changing movement in many ways and led it even despite all the difficulties. He must have had a very persuasive manner about sharing his ideas and getting people to follow.

WB:

Yes, he must have done, he must have had, and it's, if you think about it, he was much younger than I am now when he founded the Bauhaus and he had already fought in World War I. You know, the kind of experience these people had was pretty extraordinary and the fact that then, you see the Nazis close the Bauhaus, you move to England, you don't know what life is going to be like. Incidentally, I was always, he arrived in England, he was staying in these, I always forget what they're called, what is now the Isokon building....

CB:

Lawn Road Flats.

WB:

Exactly. And when he arrived, he arrived with Ise, and they didn't know that he was going to bring his wife. So, they had actually assigned a much smaller flat for him. And he did arrive with his wife, and then they got, and they're very small flats anyway, but this sort of whole thing that you leave everything behind and then you move on, and then he comes here and they didn't know would they ever be able to return to Germany, would they ever be able to see their family? And his sister, she went to Berlin at the end of the war - Berlin, which was completely bombed out because one of her daughters, one of my grandfather's sisters, was in Berlin and didn't want to leave. So, she said, "Okay, I'll come and be with you". And the building in which they were was partly bombed out, so they only had one room left that wasn't open to the elements. And, of course, then the whole postal system broke down. So, for the better part of six or seven months, my grandfather and Walter, they didn't know whether my great-grandmother lived or not. So, one always thinks about war and how horrid those stories are, but I think when... one always needs to remember just how horrid it was and what it meant for people's actual lives. And so, no wonder they broke down in tears when they saw each other again, when he returned to Germany on his first visit.

CB:

Another thing you said that rings true to me, from my knowledge of Walter, is the support and the care for people that were stuck in Germany during the Nazi period and during the war. I know for example, here at the Gropius House in Lincoln, they invited a lot of friends and folks from the Bauhaus to come and stay here for sanctuary or to even help them if they would maybe try to get work here. And what you said about the family packages really rings true with that. It sounds like, again, the family in Germany really loved him and appreciated his care and connection during that time.

WB:

Yeah, no, absolutely. And there is a sort of maid's room here behind the kitchen, and that's where every day [Ise] was putting together those packages. So, they were unbelievably generous.

CB:

And you already alluded to this, but when was it that your German family came here to visit the house?

WB:

So, Walter and Ise I think arrived in 1930. And then my aunt, my father's eldest sister who's now 92, turning 93 I think, or she might be turning 92, she was 18. And in 1951 she came to America. She was sent to America to learn English, first spent two months in England and then took a boat to New York from South Hampton and came to stay here for one year. That is, she stayed here in Lincoln with Walter and Ise for a couple of weeks, and then she became an au pair. Although she said, I spoke to her yesterday and she said to me the term "au pair" didn't really exist at the time, but effectively that was what she was. She was sort of a live-in nanny, first with a family here in Lincoln and then later with a family in Boston, but she always spent the weekends here in the house. And this was in 1951-52. And for her, that was the most extraordinary experience. She was 18, born before the war, had lived through the whole war, had seen unbelievable destruction and experienced extraordinary poverty, and then arrives here, arrives in New York. Her boat was a little early, so Walter and Ise had wired her money to

take a taxi. She was to stay with I.M. Pei who was working with Walter. But she arrived at the beginning of the day, and so he asked one of his colleagues to take her around New York and to do some sightseeing, and so she spent the day there. But she said that she was unbelievably exhausted because they'd been partying on the boat all night and that by the time she was sitting at the dinner table at the Pei's, she was falling asleep. And anyway, stayed the night, and then the next day she took a train to Boston where Ise picked her up.

CB:

Did she share her recollection of her initial impression of coming into this house?

WB:

Yes. I mean, everything was modern. And my aunt is someone who's, she has a very matter-of-fact take on life and the world, but she certainly was, she and my other aunts, were all very much influenced by the Bauhaus style and the Modernist style. So, for me, walking into this house for the first time in 2016 was like entering an interior that felt like home because this is how my grandmother and my aunts live, or lived. And so, it clearly had an influence on her. But she remembered all kinds of details. I mean, it was all very modern, it was all very functional. The kitchen had a dishwasher, which she had never seen before in Germany. And then of course she remembered the dining table with a very special lamp and all those details. And obviously the fact that it was so open and the beautiful landscape, that nature is really sort of flooding into the house. And so, she had all kinds of memories about staying in the house and that it was a very warm and welcoming environment.

CB:

And it would've seemed probably pretty foreign being, and I know even for Walter and Ise, it is very rural here in Lincoln, and they were from urban areas. The family lived in Berlin, right?

WB:

That's true. But they would've also, they were just as accustomed to very rural areas in Germany. And I mean, one thing that I think is interesting also about Walter, and I mean talking about rural life, is that Walter's mother had a house on the coast in Timmendorf, which they had built in the 1880s by this architect Hans Grisebach, which was a sort of historicizing house with a big turret. And that was the house where they always spent the summer and many, many Bauhaus professors came and stayed, and this is how my grandparents met them all, and [Lyonel] Feininger stayed with his wife and [Wassily] Kandinsky stayed with his wife and my great-grandmother absolutely loved it, having all those artists around. But the environment was, I mean, there's a photograph of Walter with his mother in the big hall by the fireplace. And it couldn't look more different than this. I mean, it was a very, very, very different environment, obviously.

CB:

Very decorative, ornate...

WB:

Very, very decorative, very ornate - large sort of hall with oak beams. And of course, my aunt who came here in 1951 would not have experienced any of that. I mean, in the war so much was lost. And they were also, my grandparents and their five children, were all piled up on top of each other in one room, in a flat in Hannover, which my great-grandparents rented because Hannover was completely destroyed

so there was very, very little living space. So, for my aunt to come here into a real house as it were, where there's only three people living, that must've been rather wonderful.

CB:

And you mentioned your relatives getting to meet, at the seaside house, getting to meet the Bauhaus masters - Klee and Kandinsky. Do you have any recollections that were shared with you about their personalities?

WB:

Well, only, I mean, there are letters describing them having great fun because they were having all these parties, and I think they all sort of joined in. I don't think that there are particular descriptions about the individual artists. There might be. I know Feininger painted, I mean, sort of did a watercolor of my great-grandmother on the beach, and they all left watercolors in the guest book that was there. And I think it was just a really fun hub. No, what I do know, and this is not a description, it's just my great-great-grandmother complaining about all of them leaving and her being completely on her own in the big house and being sorry to see them all leave. So, I think it was a very joyful time. Yeah.

CB:

And you already answered one of my questions... Something I had been curious about, was Walter sort of an outlier among his family in his taste and his modernist leanings? But it sounds like, you mentioned that this house was familiar, for example, to your aunt and your father as far as the decor, the design. It sounds like they were all kind of in sync with that same aesthetic as a preference.

WB:

Well, I think families are big and there's many different actors, and they might all have different opinions. So, my father's father, Walter's nephew, was totally pro-Bauhaus and really leaned into that style. So, my grandparents had a flat in Berlin, which was very much furnished like a Bauhaus flat. Later on when they were married and my father and his siblings grew up, my grandmother introduced quite a lot of old furniture that she inherited from her side of the family. And so, they always lived in this sort of mix of modern and some sort of neoclassical pieces, which if you do it properly you can mix rather well. But on the whole, there was certainly... Walter wasn't at all on his own. Of course, he broke totally with the family tradition or the sort of environment in which he grew up. So, as I said, the house in Timmendorf was designed by this really historicizing architect, Hans Grisebach, who had also built a house for the Burchard family. So, those were these sort of really heavy houses with turrets, et cetera. But on the whole, I mean, my grandfather always then collected modernist art and lived like that, and so did my father's sisters. So, there was definitely a great influence there.

CB:

So, it sounds like he broke away from the family tradition of the older generations, but in a way, he almost influenced family traditions in...

WB:

Absolutely.

CB:

...the younger generations.

WB:

Yes, absolutely. Yes, yes, yes, yes. Well, and the thing is there that you could say, well, he might've influenced younger generations, but then everybody in the western world is now, the vast majority of society lives in a more modernist style than surrounded by antiques. And then there are recollections of my great-grandmother then visiting the Bauhaus in 1923, I think, and going to see an exhibition at the Bauhaus. And that's when there's actually quite a detailed description of how she met Ise for the first time. She obviously had known Walter's first wife [Alma Mahler], and I think Ise might've been a bit nervous to meet my great-grandmother, although she too died before I was born. So, I don't know how exacting or formidable she was, but probably always nerve wracking to meet your husband's sister if you haven't met before. And so she describes how this was in... I suppose that would've been in, I can't remember whether it would've been in Weimar or Dessau - anyway, 1923. And so, Walter opens the door and my great-grandmother comes in and they greet, but actually Ise stayed in the sitting room and was waiting, I think. Anyway, but then my grandmother has produced quite a detailed description of their first meeting and that she thought she was very attractive and was going to see whether that's going to work out.

CB:

And you mentioned Walter's first wife, which is Alma Mahler.

WB:

Yeah.

CB:

Did the family share any recollections about her?

WB:

Well, there too, there are obviously letters about her and they didn't spend... So she, for instance, I think she might've come to Timmendorf once. She didn't really like coming there, and I don't know how well she got on with Walter's mother. There are some descriptions of also my great-grandmother going, when I think Alma was staying at the Adlon and she was sort of holding court in her suite, so they went to see her there, but they weren't married all that long. But I don't think that Walter's mother and her then daughter-in-law got on that well. I don't think that there were any sort of real animosities, but they didn't spend much time together. And in fact, I think my great-great-grandmother was always rather sorry that her granddaughter, Walter's first daughter, didn't get to come to Berlin or to Timmendorf because Alma was holding quite a sort of tight grip around her, so she didn't get to see her. So, my great-great-grandmother didn't get to see her granddaughter as often as she would've liked to.

CB:

And this is the daughter of Alma and Walter?

WB:

Yeah, exactly. Manon, who was...

CB:

Who was named after your great-grandmother.

WB:

Who was named after my great-grandmother. But, Manon was a sort of family name. So, there was Manon, my great-great-grandmother, Walter's mother, then Walter's sister, also called Manon. And then Manon, the daughter who I think was known as "Mutzi" and who died very, very young. She caught polio. I think they went to Venice for a couple of weeks and that was already when Mussolini was in power. And there was a sort of polio epidemic, which the Italian authorities were sweeping under the carpet, and that's where she caught it. But Manon then continued to be a sort of family name. So, my grandfather gave that name to... one of my aunts is called Manon, a cousin of mine, my sister, so it remained a family name.

CB:

Your great-grandmother, Walter's sister... Do you know if she got particularly close with her granddaughter, her namesake? I know that Alma Mahler, they split up and then moved away.

WB:

No, but that's the thing... I think they really regretted that they didn't get to spend more time together. They didn't. I don't think that they really ever had an opportunity to sort of get to know each other as closely as the rest of the family. Because the rest of the family was pretty tightly knit, the different cousins, et cetera, and I think Alma didn't really, as you might say today, give them access to her in the way that they might have liked.

CB:

And let's go back a little bit. We're talking about Manon, your great-grandmother, who's Walter's sister. You said she was older...

WB:

Mm-hmm.

CB:

And Walter had two other siblings. So, what is the order of the children on that line?

WB:

So, there were four children altogether. The first - there was one daughter who died very young. I think she was born in '79 and died in '82. So, before Walter was born, he was born in '83. So, there was the first sister and then came my great-grandmother, who I think was probably born in around 1880 because I think she was 18 when she got married, which was 1898, so let's say around 1880. And then 1883, Walter is born. And then they had a younger brother, Georg Otto, who was known as Orda, and he died at the age of 17 after Christmas in 1904. And that was incredibly tough for the whole family. Because 17, that's...

CB:

How did he die, do you know?

WB:

I don't know exactly, but he was sick for several weeks and I can't remember what it was, but it was a long and painful death. I mean, it was heart wrenching for everybody involved. He was already quite ill over Christmas and then he died at the end of January, 1904. And my great-great-grandparents then went to Italy to, needed a change of scenery. But that was very tough and I think that... I wonder whether that might have then also brought the two siblings, Walter and his older sister, closer together. I mean, they seemed to have had a very close relationship. And of course my great-grandmother was married by then and had already two daughters. And then in 1904, my grandfather was born who was then also named Georg after - he was called Georg Joachim - so, after the brother who died, but was known as Joachim.

CB:

Are there any childhood memories passed down about Walter when he was young?

WB:

Yes. I mean, he was very quiet, apparently. My great-grandmother said that, what she said to my father, is that they called him *Der Dicke*, which means "fatty", [laughs] so he was a strong child, and that he didn't say very much. He was quite quiet. And then that's really the early childhood memories. Then I think they had a very, so... It seems to me, based on the descriptions, that they had quite rather loving parents. Walter's father, who was also called Walther Gropius, apparently was a very... the trouble is you are piecing together a personality just on some sort of bits and pieces of descriptions. But according to their letters, he was a very calm, noble, loving parent. And the way they put it when he died is that he was sort of too good for this world. And actually, that was the reason why he didn't really have much of a career because he was just too good and wasn't good with confrontations. Whereas his wife was... she I think had a much stronger personality.

And for instance, we have at home this wonderful photograph of her rather as the matriarch surrounded by Walter's mother at the center, next to her Walter's sister on the other side, the older Mrs. Gropius, so my great-great-great grandmother who's still alive [at that time], and then Manon's daughters. So, you've got four generations of Gropius women together. And in that photograph I find the matriarch really comes out and she was this very politically-minded person, a staunch defender of the Weimar Republic. She thought this was the way forward and whereas most people were either... the Weimar republic didn't receive that much support, people were either pulling further to the left or further to the right. And it's very interesting to read her letters because she really engages with the political situation of Germany in the 1920s and early 1930s. And she died at the beginning of 1933 and luckily then missed the arrival of the Nazis, which she, I mean, she saw it coming as it were, you could see, but she was pretty horrified by what was going on. But if you think about people, relatives, you didn't get to meet, you really would've liked to have met - I would've loved to have met her. I think she was an incredibly interesting person.

And also, there's this wonderful thing, pretty dramatic. So, she was something of an heiress and had inherited this estate in Berlin, but I don't think was ever taught how to look after money. She once lost her cool with Walter when he went to Madrid, I think, before World War I. And he went and bought pictures without consulting her and she was not best pleased that he just went and spent money that he didn't have. There are all these sort of nuggets of them traveling together to either Spain or Italy. Anyway, and so she herself, I think, struggled slightly with her finances. And so, they had this wonderful house by the beach where she loved to entertain Bauhaus professors, et cetera. But the money was

gradually dwindling away. And I think there's this one description where she ended up at my great-grandparents' house and said, she opened the door and said, "*Ich stehe vor einem nichts*", which means like, "I am standing in front of nothing", because the money was gone. So, when we talk about this now, this sounds a bit like, not like a soap opera, but like a sort of story, but actually those were real lives, and I think they had a pretty tough time in the 1920s.

CB:

Well, along those lines, I'm curious if any memories were passed down about Walter Gropius's military service during World War I?

WB:

Yes. Although nothing, I think in addition to what, I mean a lot about that has been published in Isaac's book, and so I can't really add anything to that. So, I think the information that we have about that is all in the book, so I'm not best placed to talk about that. But he fought in World War I and apparently was very able. What we do know though, that he was a Hussar and he was in the Husaren regiment, which normally was constituted only of nobleman. I mean, World War I, Germany was still a monarchy, so your social rank did play a role. So, I think he was the only bourgeois amongst otherwise only aristocrats. But he was a very good rider. He loved riding, and in fact, up until old age, and he was a very good rider. And unfortunately, he attracted the fury of the other Hussars because he was so good and so there was, I think, some bullying involved because he was not an aristocrat, and so they rather looked down on him. So, it was some of the experiences in the lead up to World War I.

CB:

So, would you consider Walter's family, his upbringing to be sort of middle class or was it a little more like, the upper middle class?

WB:

Yeah, that's what I...

CB:

Not aristocratic certainly, but... they had some money.

WB:

Yes, they had quite a few cousins who were, what you might describe as sort of landed gentry or lower aristocracy, but they were upper, I suppose you'd say, kind of high bourgeoisie.

CB:

I get the sense that Ise's family was similarly situated.

WB:

You know, I couldn't tell you that. I don't know, I'm afraid.

CB:

And Ati would be, I'm just trying to picture the family structure here, Ati would've been your father's aunt?

WB:

Yes, I guess, yes.

CB:

Right? She was Gropius's daughter.

WB:

Yes, exactly. So, she would've been... Exactly, she would've been my grandfather's cousin, but there was a big, big age difference because Ati was much closer in age to my father and his siblings than to my grandfather, because Ati I think was probably born in the late '20s and my grandfather was born in 1904, so...

CB:

Did your family get to know her very well, though? Did they share memories...

WB:

Well, so my aunt, obviously who came here, met her here, and then she came to Germany as well. And my aunts, they were all in awe of her because she was very worldly and very elegant and well put together. These were all girls who had grown up in post-war Germany, and there came this girl who was an only child growing up in America, and so she left quite an impression on them. And so, they got to know her when she visited Germany after the war.

She came and stayed with my parents in 2008 when she was in her late seventies. She wasn't quite 80 yet. And my parents, it's quite a fun description of her because... I sadly wasn't there and she spent a week, I think, with my parents, and my parents loved having her around, but they also said it was pretty exhausting [laughs] because she was quite eccentric, she was quite opinionated. My father said that when he saw her, picking up... so that's when my parents still lived in France, so they picked her up at Charles de Gaulle, and he said that it was like seeing a sort of 80-year-old teenager. She had this certain energy. And so, they took her around Paris, but she got into trouble with a salesperson at, they went to a market and there were oysters, and she just went and started picking the oysters she deemed appropriate. And so, the guy behind the counter said, "You can't just pick your oysters, I'm going to serve you", et cetera. And they went to Versailles together, and she was pretty horrified by the way nature had been tamed. And anyway, then I think she had some trip organized in North Africa, and as they drove her back to the airport, and they were almost at the airport, and then she suddenly realized she thought she had left her plane ticket in the bedside table, but she didn't. My parents said that they had a lovely week with her, but they were also, [laughs] they needed some rest after she left because she was an intense guest to have.

And then my father remained closely in touch with her until the end of her life and he said to me yesterday when I spoke to him that, and I'd forgotten about that, but my parents aren't very tech savvy. So, when they moved to Germany, it was the first time that they got a voicemail. So, they don't ever pick up their voicemail on their phone and so actually, I think four, five or six weeks after she died, my father was listening to voicemails and she had left them a voicemail. So, it really threw my father after she died, listening to her voice weeks after she had died. And for my father, because she was Walter's [daughter], that was yet another chapter that was closed, her death, and so that was very sad for them.

CB:

She would've been alive during your lifetime. Did you ever get to meet her?

WB:

I never met her, no, because... so she started traveling more to Europe after I had left Paris. So, she came and stayed in Paris with my parents in 2008 and somehow I missed that she was coming to stay because actually I would've gone and made sure that I was in Paris then too. But I don't know, I wasn't told. And then she came and saw them in Berlin a couple of times, but I didn't live in Berlin so I never saw her. But my younger sister, Bettina, met her and I don't know whether any of my other sisters met her, but my parents then saw her repeatedly.

CB:

So, we've talked a little bit about Walter's personality, and now we've talked a little bit about Ati. How about Ise? Did your family share recollections? You mentioned that she had a very elegant appearance...

WB:

Yes...

CB:

But, how was she personally?

WB:

Yes, so in the letters, my grandmother, where she describes her, I think that's after meeting her for the first time and I think she was being sort of the protective sister. So, she said she was very, very attractive. She says something along the lines... "She's not necessarily the wife that we would all hope for my brother", but she said something like, "the wife that I would like for my brother doesn't really exist", someone like that. And so, she herself, as she's writing, is editing herself and saying, "Actually this is wonderful that he found someone", but she doesn't go into much detail about her personality. I mean, these are just sort of first impressions. And then I think the person who got to know her best are my aunts who came and stayed here. So, my aunt Almut who came here in 1951, and then my other aunt Sibylle who came and stayed in 1969. They didn't say much about her personality other than they liked her. And my aunt actually was always quite, my aunt Almut, the one who came and stayed here in 1951, I think defended her often as well, because I think the fact that she was always attractive and well put together and so on might have led some people to describe her as superficial. And Almut always said that she found that extremely unfair to describe her as superficial.

CB:

Did they mention when they came to visit here, both in the '70s as you just mentioned, but also in the '50s when Walter was still alive, your aunt was here, did [Walter and Ise] speak German at home?

WB:

Yes, absolutely. So, they did speak German, and I checked that with my aunt yesterday as well, and she said actually they really made a point of speaking German because they didn't want to lose it. So, at home, they always spoke German with occasionally the odd English phrase or word as you do when you are an expat and living in another country and you are learning the other language. Inevitably,

sometimes those words are more readily available. But what my aunt said, and that was quite interesting, and I don't know what the answer is, she said she doesn't quite know when Walter actually learned English, because she wasn't entirely sure whether he learned it at school. I mean, by the end of his life, his English was excellent. And his German, I mean, he was a very articulate man. When you listen to interviews, he spoke very beautiful German. But when he learned his English, I don't know. And whether he had any difficulties first in England or America, I don't know, because it's likely, I mean, he definitely would've had Greek and Latin at school, but whether he had English, and probably French, but whether he had English, I don't know.

CB:

My understanding was always that Ise's English was substantially better than his, at least early on, because she had studied in England when she was younger and could handle some of his English correspondence and things like that.

WB:

Right, right, yeah.

CB:

But at the same time, Walter was teaching at Harvard, so...

WB:

Yes. He must have. Yes, he must have...

CB:

At some point he must have mastered that. [both laugh] Did your family share, I'm just curious, again, being in the house as we are right now, what their day-to-day life was like, some of the more mundane things? I'm wondering if you got a window into that. Like, what kind of food did they like, did they... we'll start with that.

WB:

Well so...

CB:

Did they eat German food at home? Do you know?

WB:

I think, yes. I think they continued to eat German food. You know, you eat what's available. When my parents lived in France, we didn't only eat German food, we didn't only eat French food. You eat a mix of what you want to eat or what you enjoy and what's available. And I think that was probably the same thing as well. I mean, my aunt Almut says that they did eat German food, but for instance, Ise made meatloaf and famously Walter, rather like my father, didn't like onions, but she said I can't make meatloaf without onions. So, she minced them, really into tiny, tiny, tiny pieces and then cooked it while he was away and then managed to sort of mix it in such a way that he wouldn't notice and actually then threw open the windows, washed her hair and everything to make sure that he didn't notice. And another thing, but that's less about food, just sort of tangentially, is that, as I said, my aunt was amazed

that they had a dishwasher. But she said the one thing that couldn't go into the dishwasher was (because this would've been a very modern, new invention) apparently egg yolk, so anything which had egg on it had to be removed manually beforehand. So, that's all I can think of. But yes, they did speak German. But I think culturally, I mean probably... there's a photograph of them all eating lobster on Christmas Day, so that's local cuisine.

CB:

So, we talked about food a little bit. Do you have any idea what kind of music, books, films they liked?

WB:

So, music... Walter's sister was definitely very musical. And so, she and her husband played a lot of music. Classical music was very, very important. They had concerts at home, et cetera. For Walter, I asked my aunt, and she said that they often were playing very loud Handel music here in the house - the "Concerti Grossi". That was one thing that she remembered, that they were listening to that a lot, a great deal. But otherwise, I can't tell whether he was a great connoisseur of classical music. He certainly would've grown up in an environment in which it played an important role in social life.

CB:

I was curious if he ever got into jazz because I associate that with '20s modernist, breaking away from the old traditions...

WB:

Yes, yes. He might have done, I just don't know. But certainly when my aunt came in the '50s, there was a lot of Handel being played in the house.

CB:

Was he a sports fan?

WB:

Well, that too I asked both my father and my aunt and they didn't know. The only thing that they both said is that he was a very keen horseback rider. He was a very keen rider. But whether he followed any sports, they didn't seem to know, which probably suggests that he didn't. But I don't know.

CB:

I would think he was a keen reader, given all of his books that are directly behind you.

WB:

Yes. Yeah, I think so. But what again, the sort of themes are, I mean that's probably...

CB:

A lot of Bauhaus books back there, art and... [both laugh] I was going to ask about pets. You mentioned the horse. My knowledge is they didn't have pets at home.

WB:

No, they didn't have any pets. No. My aunt said you had to watch out for raccoons. They always had to make sure that they didn't enter the house, but they didn't actually have pets.

CB:

Do you know if they were religious or spiritual at all?

WB:

So, I think he probably would've described himself as an atheist. I mean, I don't think he was... he wasn't religious and in a way, I think he sort of broke there also with tradition. As I said, in the family, there were even Protestant ministers. But there was a story by Jean Paul about the dying Christ, and that was one that apparently he read over and over again, over Christmas. And that was a story that clearly had a lasting impression on him. But otherwise, I don't think that he was particularly religious.

CB:

I'm curious if when Walter and Ise connected with your German side of the family, if they shared any impressions of the United States?

WB:

I asked my father and my aunt that, and I don't think they did. [laughs] So, I asked them whether they had any particular impression about the United States, and I don't think they did. So, all we've got is the impression that the family had that was visiting and staying here, so my grandmother, for instance, describing how, I think she had to drive Ise to the airport and then had to drive back to Lincoln in this enormous American car. There's sort of stereotypes that everything in America is so enormous and that was the impression they got as well.

CB:

And I should clarify too, for any viewers, that I posed a number of these questions in advance for you to speak with your father and your aunt, who are still living, about and get some of these direct, because you mentioned a few times that you asked them these questions. So, a wonderful opportunity to have that resource.

WB:

Yes, absolutely. I mean it is incredible they're all still alive, so it's great.

CB:

I'm curious about the 1920s. You already spoke a little bit about this, but the Weimar era, which was such a turbulent period - politically, socially. You had the hyperinflation, you had, later on, the Depression, revolutions breaking out, and your family was there for this. Did they share memories generally just about life during that time?

WB:

Well, it was very difficult. I think it was unbelievably difficult and you didn't know where things were headed, and so I think it was very difficult. I think it's also, that's the sort of time when my grandparents were teenagers, and so my grandfather and his sisters were starting to think about what they might do

in their lives. One of my great-aunts, one of my grandfather's sisters, thought about joining the Bauhaus as well. So, Walter was quite involved also in helping them try and find the right path in that changing and very unstable world. But what is interesting is that in the records and the sort of letters that they all exchanged, that all comes through quite clearly that these are turbulent and difficult times where one doesn't know where they're headed, and then they went into the worst possible direction.

CB:

Did you sense any kind of excitement within that as well, of the feeling of possibility? I think Gropius had that in founding the Bauhaus.

WB:

Yes. I mean I think they were very excited about the Bauhaus itself and the, yes, I think the changing times. I mean, I think Berlin in itself was quite an exciting place, and that's where my grandparents met. And as I said, they had this very, very modern flat, and my grandmother who came from an even more traditional background or much more traditional background than my grandfather, for her that was really breaking with tradition. And I think joining that whole world of the Bauhaus must have been extremely exciting for her.

CB:

Did they share any memories about the founding years of the school?

WB:

Not really. So that would've all been things that my grandparents would've, well, actually even the founding years in 1919, my grandparents wouldn't have been around. So, we have these letters and I think there's more in the exchanges between Walter's sister and her mother. Is he going to pull it off, because it's totally unclear whether this is going to be a success or not. So, I think it's not like, okay, he founds it and yes, hoorah, it's all tickety-boo. It all comes with certain worries, but they observe it and I think then they're thrilled that it seems to be working out. And my great-grandmother goes to the Bauhaus and looks at it all and is amazed and marvels at it all, so I think then comes a time when they're really thrilled with it. But it is, at the same time, that the political situation in Germany is extremely unstable.

CB:

And as you were saying, these family members of this generation were more inclined towards Modernism, or at least were interested and accepted these ideas, which many people did not - most prominently the Nazis who, as we've said, shut the school down. I know that life was particularly hard for Walter during that era because he was branded as a "culturally degenerate" person, being part of that movement, and couldn't get work very easily, had to leave for England. Did that affect your family at all, that you know of, being part of that circle or associated with him?

WB:

Yes. Well, that's...

CB:

...as far as getting work, or...

WB:

No, I don't think it did. Funnily enough, it did not because... That's such a good question. Because since none of them were directly working in the Bauhaus or artists at the Bauhaus... So, as I said, my father's sister wanted to join the Bauhaus, [she] eventually didn't, so they were professionally not tied to it. As I said, my grandmother paid the *Reichsfluchtsteuer*, the tax to leave, but they didn't make any sort of association where they said, "Okay, well because you're related to him, we won't give you any work". At least not that I know of. But that's a very, very good question.

CB:

You mentioned paying that tax. I know that going to England was one thing because the family maintained a residence in Germany, but then to come here was a real clean break.

WB:

Yeah, yeah.

CB:

And the Nazi government was not particularly fond of the idea.

WB:

No.

CB:

So, there was the tax, but did your family describe any other hindrances to leaving?

WB:

Yes, so there was this whole debate. So, I think the professor at Harvard whom Walter was replacing was a Frenchman and Walter was trying to argue with the Nazi government that it would be great for Germany to have a German professor teaching architecture at Harvard, but they didn't buy it at all. And so, they really pushed back and didn't want him to leave the country. And so, there was this mechanism where you could pay a high tax and then leave the country. And that's what he then did. Yeah.

CB:

Ironical that they wouldn't want someone to leave who they frowned upon completely. [laughs]

WB:

I mean, yeah, but try and understand the Nazis. I mean, it's very odd. Well, basically, I guess they didn't want him to spread his lies, as it were... I don't know.

CB:

So, we've talked about World War I, Weimar, and then the Nazis taking power. Did your family talk about post-World War II? I'm thinking, I guess it would be your grandmother, living in Berlin, seeing this arc of history, right? Seeing the Weimar years of all this vibrancy and excitement, and then the Nazi period where things are kind of shut down, and then the total destruction after the war. Were they living... you mentioned they were living in the one room that survived, that had standing walls and...

WB:

Yeah.

CB:

...it must've been a horribly difficult time.

WB:

Well, throughout the war years, they were in different places. So, the two main places were Berlin and Hannover. Those two cities are where the family was. But then of course, with the bombing of those cities, they tried to go to the country, at least my father's family, so my grandparents and their children. And so, they stayed with their cousins on an estate outside Hannover where the bombing wasn't as bad. And by the end of the war, my grandmother, because then everybody was drafted, including my grandfather, my grandmother was on her own with - aged I think, 32 - with five little children, and trying to figure out what happens next. And then Americans come, the Russians come, et cetera, and there you are. You don't know what is going to happen. My great-grandmother, Walter's sister, she was in Berlin. So, she'd gone to Berlin to stay with her daughter because she didn't want to leave Berlin. Berlin obviously was completely bombed out, and they were staying in that flat where one room, a bomb had come in, so that was open to the elements, so they had one room. And this is January '44, January '45, Berlin, absolutely freezing cold. And then the postal system collapses, and then for months and months Walter and my grandfather don't know whether Manon is still alive. Well, and then the rebuilding begins, but houses and places of requisition, so you are not in control of your property. So, other families move in, obviously allied forces move in, soldiers move in, et cetera, so they had an unbelievably difficult time. And so, all the more, was it wonderful that they had the uncle in America who started sending them support.

CB:

And sorry, if I'm remembering incorrectly, your father was born in '39?

WB:

'39. Yes.

CB:

So, he was a little kid during...

WB:

Yeah, my father remembers the end of the war. So, my father was five or six when the war came to an end.

CB:

So, after the war, your family remained in Berlin, is that right?

WB:

No, Hannover, they were in Hannover.

CB:

In Hanover. Okay. So, they did not live in East Germany, in the GDR?

WB:

No, they didn't. No. So, my grandmother was in Berlin, but then she left before.

CB:

Did your family retain Bauhaus objects - art, furniture, anything like that?

WB:

Some things, yes. Some things. So, we have these little tables or my...

CB:

The Marcel Breuer tables?

WB:

Yeah, and the tea pot and some things, here and there. But they weren't sort of decorated in a purist Bauhaus manner.

CB:

And we mentioned Walter going back to Germany after the war. I know we've already talked about it a little bit, but just to revisit that quickly, I just wonder how that would've felt to him to go home and to see that level of destruction.

WB:

Oh yeah, I'm sure it was very difficult. I'm sure it was very difficult.

CB:

His childhood home I'm thinking was probably destroyed.

WB:

Yeah, yeah. No, that was all gone. And I think Berlin... and you hear that from so many people who went back to Germany, who made their lives in America and went back to Germany and saw the destruction, but then I think who then also were resourceful and felt like, here's some support we can give in rebuilding. And he was certainly someone who also understood the importance of rebuilding and preserving historic architecture. He didn't feel that everything had to be modernist architecture, that there was a point in preserving historical architecture. So, for instance, he was totally opposed to the pulling down of the Berlin Schloss, which then the GDR government pulled down.

CB:

Let's talk briefly about the Gropius House, where we were sitting today. You've been here before?

WB:

I have, yes.

CB:

How many times have you visited here?

WB:

I've only been here twice before.

CB:

Twice.

WB:

Yeah.

CB:

And what was your impression of it when you first visited?

WB:

Well, it's wonderful and it's beautifully situated. It has a strong German quality to it. I remember so well visiting for the first time. The two times that I came, it was beautiful weather. I came in 2016 and 2019, I think both were in September, and so the grass was green and lush and looked wonderful. And what struck me, stepping into that... So, before I visited, I spoke to my aunt and asked her about her reminiscences of staying here and so on, because I thought it might be, and actually I rang both my aunts at the time and talked to them about it, just sort of asking them whether I should look out for certain things. And I remember so well, stepping into the house and thinking, I felt totally at home because, not because my aunts live in houses that look exactly the same, but that are furnished in the same way. So, the atmosphere felt totally like the sort of atmosphere I was accustomed to when staying with my aunts or my grandmother, and so that really sort of stuck with me. So, that was 2016, I came on my own, and then I came again in 2019 with my parents, and my father never visited it because my father came to, with work, came to Boston, I think probably in the '90s, but didn't drive out to Lincoln. Ise came, went out and had, well, it would have been, I can't remember when Ise died, but when she was still alive, whether it was in the '80s or 90s, might've been early '80s...

CB:

Early '80s.

WB:

Early 80's. All right. Anyway, so at some point before, when she was still alive, he came to Boston, and they had dinner together in Boston so he actually never came out here. So, that was his first visit and that was really rather wonderful, looking at photographs together and so on. But there's something very... it felt like a familiar atmosphere.

CB:

How does it feel to be related to somebody who is such a hugely influential figure?

WB:

[laughs]

CB:

Does it just feel like, well, he's just family and it feels familiar here? Is there...

WB:

That was one point that I wanted to make earlier, which I think is extremely, extremely, extremely important, is that, because you were saying, you asked me about when he built the Bauhaus and whether his sister or his mother took pride in the fact that they... and one thing that I think was very important, and also that comes out when I speak to my aunts and my father, that he was a very, very low-key person. And it was always very important to all of them that they didn't, it wasn't like, "Oh, we're related to this celebrity". And while I think they were, his sister and his mother were pleased with what he did, there was no hype. He was just a normal family member who was this very kind man. And this is also what comes out when they talk about him is that he was this nice, warm person and not this man with this massive ego who was a successful architect or a successful professor or successful founder of that school. And so, I think that was always very important in our family. That also, this sounds really odd now, but the sort of notion that one shouldn't show off with the fact that one's related - quite apart from the fact that you have nothing to show for just because you're related to someone who's been a successful architect, it's not your achievement, and it's the last thing that he would probably want. So, that is always something that had been quite important amongst my father and his siblings, that he was just a very nice man.

To me, what it means is that I take inspiration from him because I think he was, as I said at the very beginning of our conversation, is that there are some people who say - maybe he wasn't that great an architect, he was not a very good draftsman, maybe. I think what fascinates me most is that he brought together all these different media in the school, which is something that I am also interested in, is the fact that you have workshops for textiles, for ceramics, for furniture, for theater costumes, et cetera, and to bring all these artists under one umbrella and to have the vision to do that, and to clearly be someone that people wanted to follow. And you hear that also when they recreate the parties he had here for the Harvard community, is that clearly people liked him and liked being around him, and he was sort of a supportive person. And that, I think, to me, sounds really wonderful. And I've done some work on Walt Disney, on the Disney studios, and often they say that about Walt Disney too, that he couldn't really draw, actually, and he didn't animate anything. No, but he was someone who was able to identify talent and bring people together and get them enthusiastic about a project. And that's always what I think most about when I think of him, is that he was clearly someone who could get people enthusiastic and who really had a vision and against all odds, was able to see through his vision when there were many people who didn't want him to succeed.

CB:

It's interesting, you're talking about his being modest... My mind is kind of just musing on this idea of how much he wanted to break away from all the ostentatious, decorative styles of the past that were kind of in your face, almost like showing off, like, oh, look at all this wonderful ornate design we can do.

And he wanted to really simplify things. There's almost, to a degree, I think, a modesty in that. It's, bring it down to earth, right?

WB:

Yeah.

CB:

But within that, as you were just talking about, he had this charismatic energy that would get people to follow him, and very bold ideas. I think he's an interesting personality. And then he has this grounded, warm modesty, kind of a simplicity, and yet at the same time, has all this energy and all these vibrant ideas.

WB:

You know, there's an integrity to it. Because I mean, you look at this house and it's a very nice house, but it's, particularly by American standards, is a relatively small house - certainly the way some people live today, a fairly modest house. But it's a nice house and it's furnished in a way that he imagined everybody should be able to live. And I think there is an integrity to that because he could have also set up this incredibly successful architecture practice and could have become an extremely rich man, had he wanted to, and could have lived on a very grand scale, telling everybody, "Oh, we create interior for the masses, and they should all live like that, but I myself, since I'm the one who invented it, I can live in an ostentatious style." But he didn't. I mean, you can seat four, maximum five people around this dining table. Everything is done to a sort of very human scale. And I think you touched on it, I think that's exactly it, is that he didn't, I mean, I'm sure he would've looked back at the end of his life pleased with what he's achieved. And you go to the Royal Academy and you have a 50th anniversary exhibition for a school you founded. He would be pretty chuffed. But on the whole, I think that my impression is that he was probably fairly modest about it, and that's how in the family he was spoken of - never as this sort of grand important person, but just a member of the family whom they liked and who was a kind person who supported them in difficult times.

CB:

I wanted to touch on something you just said, which is, you mentioned before the 50th, it was the 50th anniversary in 1969, and that your father accompanied him there, which is a very special moment. I know they were close. That must've been a really touching and meaningful moment for your dad.

WB:

Yeah, and my father happened to be in London at the time, interning with a lawyer. He said it was very exciting. He was very excited. I mean, he said also it was a big deal, and there were many people who wanted to talk to him. I mean, many people wanted to talk to Walter. So, he joined him but there were hundreds of people. But he thought it was, yeah, very nice.

CB:

And that was the year that Walter died.

WB:

It was, yes.

CB:

So, I'm thinking he was still well enough...

WB:

To go. Yes. Oh, I hadn't thought of that. But yes. It must have been the year that he died. Yes, exactly.

CB:

And actually, that brings up a question. I wonder if your family shared memories about Walter's death, but also Ise and Ati?

WB:

Yes. So, Walter's death... he was here, and towards the end of his life, in the last couple of weeks or months, apparently he stopped speaking English. I know he spoke German, which became a challenge for his nurses because they didn't understand him. And so, my father's younger sister Sibylle was asked whether she would come to America to look after him, because she had trained as a maternity nurse, and so they thought she might be able to help. And so she did, and according to the guest book, I mean, she just exactly overlapped. So, she wasn't there for all that long to support him because then he died shortly after her arrival. But then she stayed on to help Ise sorting out things and being there for moral support. So, she came then in 1969, and I don't know anything about, or I don't have anything to add to when Ise died. When Ati died, I think I mentioned this earlier, only that my father was pretty regularly in touch with her towards the end of her life. And unfortunately, yes, she left this voicemail, which he only listened to, and he said the spooky thing about it is that in her voicemail, she said to him that, "Oh, well, I'll try again; I'm not feeling terribly well at the moment." And she died shortly thereafter.

CB:

So, let's move on to sort of a closing passage here. In your view, and we've alluded to this in various different ways, but what do you think is Walter Gropius's most enduring legacy?

WB:

Well, it's obviously the Bauhaus school of architecture. What never ceased to amaze me is it didn't exist all that long, and yet it has an extraordinarily enduring legacy, which was really to bring good, simple, clean, and solid design to a broad audience and to have that zeal that everybody should be able to live in a livable environment, in a sort of pleasant environment. And to bring, which we talked about, what I think is so amazing is that he brought all these different artists together with quite a positive and optimistic outlook on the world, which is something that at the time would've been difficult and even today isn't easy. So that, I think, is probably his most important legacy.

CB:

I think that's a really interesting point, his positive outlook. I think the 1920s, and I said it myself because it was a difficult, chaotic, painful time, but at least for some people, and people like him who had a positive outlook, it was a time of some excitement too. Possibility, right?

WB:

Yes, absolutely.

CB:

A good way of thinking about him. And if he were alive today, do you have a sense of what challenges in society or in design he would want to address?

WB:

Well, I think he probably, I mean, these are such speculations. I think he probably would take an interest in technological developments, and I wonder what he would think about... I mean, all the computer technology that we have now didn't really exist and so there's a whole big chapter that's sort of missing. And so, if you jump ahead and think about AI and what he might have made of that and how he would've thought about how it could be integrated in good architecture. It's funny, I don't think about him thinking about how he would approach those elements, because also in terms of mass production, a much broader audience has access today to comfortable living than they did a century ago. So, in a way, some of his visions are achieved. I think he probably would dismiss the kind of consumerism that has developed. I mean, the idea is that, and you see this in this house - this house, basically, they lived in almost unchanged from the early '30s to the time he died. The idea wasn't that you built things cheaply and then rejig or revamp your house every five or ten years, but to actually then live with these things permanently. So, he probably would be dismissive of that kind of consumerism, I suspect, and of course, just the amount of rubbish that's produced to that constant recreating of an interior. But the other thing that I think of much more is what, and we better not go into this, but I think he'd be pretty horrified about the political developments that we've witnessed over the last couple of years. No doubt about that.

CB:

And you mentioned AI. It's funny because I've asked a couple of guests that, "What do you think Walter Gropius would think about AI?" [both laugh] Yeah, so you beat me to it. But I think about his fascination with an acceptance of modern technology, this embracing of the Crafts, but also what can we do with the machine?

WB:

Yeah, yeah.

CB:

And this is the most modern technology that's exploding right now. It'd be interesting. And again, his thoughts on efficiency - AI can help make things more efficient. So, I don't know. I don't know what he would think but it's interesting...

WB:

Yes. The key thing with AI is, and that's the big question mark, is creativity,

CB:

Right. That's the other side.

WB:

What's the role of the artist? And do you just let AI develop ideas and be creative? I mean, I think that's a big question mark.

CB:

Yeah, exactly. Yeah, I think he would be kind of horrified and fascinated at the same time. [laughs]

WB:

Yes, well, as are we all.

CB:

Exactly. [both laugh] What similarities do you see between yourself and Walter Gropius, if any?

WB:

[laughs] Well, it's very difficult to tell since he and I never met. That's a really difficult one because of course, when I think of him, there are all these elements for which I admire him. And so, I wouldn't be so pompous to see them in myself. So, I don't know, other than that I think we were both driven by an interest in the arts, but also, again, in sort of different ways. But I will say that I think it's a great shame that we never got to meet. I would've loved to have met him. I mean, it would've been so fun and so interesting and there's so many conversations I would've liked to have had with him, but I arrived too late.

CB:

Is there anything in particular you would want to ask him or say to him if you met?

WB:

So many things I would want to talk to him about. I mean, I would want to obviously ask him all the questions that you asked me [laughs] over the course of this conversation, about the Bauhaus and about architecture and the arts. I mean, really, I would love to stroll through the Metropolitan Museum with him and look at things together and see what different works of art, what he associates with them, and to really get a better sense of what he was interested in, what he was less interested in, and what his outlook was on the world. And I probably would ask him about politics and would want to have discussions about social matters.

CB:

Is there anything that I didn't ask you that you want to talk about?

WB:

Let me think. Is there anything... we covered so much. No, I think we've covered it all. I think we really did. Yeah.

CB:

Excellent.

WB:

Right. Well, thanks so much!

CB:

Thank you!