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Interview with Ann Davis Thomas

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Interview with Ann Davis Thomas

Conducted by Meghan McCluskey

November 29, 2004

When were your parents married?

1924, in London.

You were born in London as well?

Yes in 1926.

Do you have brothers or sisters?

I had a brother. He died last year and he was born in 1928.

How old were you when your dad died?

He died in 1951, so 25.

What was his personality like?

He was a very charming person and he had a great sense of humor. He was just a wonderful father. However busy he was, he always had time, and he explained things. He taught me a lot. I haven't a degree in architecture at all, but he taught me a great deal about taste, and about things that mattered in architecture, life, and everything.

Do you remember any funny stories or favorite memories of him?

There were just dozens of them; it would be very hard to give you any specific ones. He was genuinely liked by all his colleagues and loved even. One of the great writers on architecture said that he was almost the ideal architect, and all his clients loved him. One of them, Mrs. Ronald Greville wrote him a note that he was such a charming man and so on.

What kind of clients did your father have?

He had an enormous range of clients. His first clients he got through Mewes because Mewes was 25 years older than he and had established his practice before. And then he got his own, there were liners and banks, there were private houses, there were shops. There was just a very wide range of them. Twelve of them with Mewes are national monuments in England.

Do you know if your father had a favorite type of project, ships, etc.?

I think so. I was sort of surprised. He took me to lunch at the Ritz at the end of the war. And I asked him then, I must have been about 21, what was his favorite building and I expected him to say the Ritz or the RAC. But he said the Morning Post which is now a hotel, and the *Aquitania* which was his big liner. And now I begin to see why he liked them both so much. The Morning Post is almost like a ship itself. It was a business; the newspaper was actually printed in the building. It wasn't just offices. As a very young man, he worked with Mewes on the Hamburg America line, the first two ships that they worked on, the *Amerika*, and the *Kaiserin Auguste Victoria*. And I think he was also working on the Ritz in London and on this huge country house Luton Hoo for Lady

Wernher, who he found a very difficult client. He found these very socially oriented buildings, like hotels and big country houses, were a bit of a stress in a way. To be working on ships with the engines and all that, and a building like the Morning Post in which you could actually hear the presses going, and the steel stresses of the building had to be worked out so that the machines in them didn't affect the steel frame. I can see that it would have excited him. Not having to do the likes of social ladies and that sort of thing. But he was terribly young; this is the thing I cannot get into the heads of various architectural historians who've written about him. He was 24 when he did the Ritz. It's an enormous commission and it was the first steel frame building in London. Whenever they illustrate articles about him, they will put in later photos. I have a photo of him at the age when he did the Ritz, and he did the Carlton a few years before when he was 18. I've got records, they look at themselves and think, well, what was I doing at 18 or 24? They keep illustrating him with a very nice studio picture of his age when he did the RAC when he was about 33 or 34. And I beg them, but they just can't accept that.

What kind of education did your father have?

He went to school in Belgium. He was born in London and lived in a square in Leinster place, which is north of Hyde Park, and when he was 10 years old the family moved to Brussels, because his father was called then a merchant, which meant a sort of businessman. I'm not sure what sort of business, I think just general business. And he went to École des Beaux-Arts in Paris. He applied when he was 16 and he got in the next year when he was 17, which was about the youngest they took. Most of them were in their 20s or 30s. He did very well and that's how Mèwes heard about him, because they shared the same professor. Pascal, he was famous and won the Prix de Rome. Mèwes had been a pupil of his long before Davis, but when Mewes was entering the Paris exhibitions of the Grand Palais and particularly the Petite Palais competition, he needed somebody to help. And he went to Pascal and he recommended my father. My father dropped out of the École des Beaux-Arts before he graduated to work for Mèwes, partly because the great step after you graduated was to go into the Prix de Rome, and being an English subject, he couldn't because it was only for French students. So there wouldn't have been much point in him staying on. He did very well, he got several major prizes and so that's when Mèwes took him on. I've even got some of the drawings he may have done for Mèwes for the competitions.

Do you remember him working a lot when you were a child?

Oh yes. We lived in a house, it was an old run down apartment and he made it into a very convenient house which is still there, although it's been mused about a bit. He used to come up to the nursery evenings and do drawings for us, he did Noah's Ark and the fairies in A Midsummer Nights Dream. He did wonderful drawings.

Did you ever see what kind of projects he was working on when you were younger?

Oh yes, not only did I see them, but he took me around them and he explained what he was trying to do, particularly the Royal Automobile Club, the RAC. That one wasn't his favorite building but it was his favorite plan. He explained how it showed anyone coming into it, that it offered these various offerings like the swimming pool and so on, by going in different directions. And at the Ritz he explained to me something which I have I

think successfully passed on to the people who have written about it, that it was a terrible site. It was a narrow, difficult site, because they hadn't been able to buy the land behind it. So to make it function financially, they put on this arcade so that they had air space above the bedrooms, but this also meant that within the hotel, the dining room, which is now considered one of the most beautiful in Europe, was just a nightmare. It was irregularly shaped, and it was very small. It's all what's called tromp-l'oeil, which means you put in lots of mirrors; you take the eye away from these angular shapes by lots of ovals and painted ceilings. It's like a piece of theater. It really worked, people don't realize what a difficult job it was.

When your father was helping Mewes design the Ritz, etc, did they design everything from the structure to interiors?

Absolutely everything. The Ritz and the Morning Post and the RAC, and Mewes' Ritz in Madrid, were all steel frame buildings. The engineer who did all that, he was a very important person in the work. But he did just the structure, which had been pioneered in Chicago. But they did all the planning, the decoration, all that. I have all the records of what they did. And the Ritz in London, Mewes theme was like a country house in France, and it has that almost personal and private air to it. When he did the Ritz in Paris he used a lot of French styles, Louis XIV, XV, XVI styles, but in the Ritz in London he did it all the in the Louis the 16th style, and it has this very nice feeling to it.

Have you been there many times?

Yes I go there every time I'm in London. I've given them lots of materials. I've given them the letters that Cesar Ritz wrote my father after the opening dinner, saying it's the most beautiful hotel in the world. It's almost like home.

Do you stay there when you're in London?

Oh no, it's very, very expensive, but we have lots of meals there. Jeanine Wilson, who is in charge of all the social things, has become a great friend, and so have the people who own it, so it's like coming home. I've given them lots of stuff, and they've given me some things.

Do you keep a lot the drawings, records, plans for you father's work?

Yes, I have a big archive now. I put them in binders, by all the ships, individually and all the buildings individually. I've passed them on to the University of Buckingham, and now they're going to Bartlett School of Architecture, University College London which is a much better place for them. And not just the listing of them, but the materials, and I keep copies of them here, in case people have requests for them. I've been given a lot of materials by all sorts of people, scholars and so on.

Did your father travel often?

Yes. He went to Germany for the liners; he went to Liverpool for the Cunard Building. He went to the US when he was a very young man, sent by Mewes and the Hamburg Company, when they were doing the first ships, to see what it was like to travel on the Atlantic. And when he was in New York he may have seen some of the really stunning buildings there, like the Flatiron Building, because Mewes people have noticed that

because it's on a corner, the Morning Post has that sort of air. I've got some information on this, and he wrote these two great articles on what the liner interiors should be like. It shouldn't have a lot of stuff that suggests the sea, because the people traveling weren't pirates or buccaneers; they were old American ladies and didn't want to be reminded that there was this turbulent sea outside. And he designed the *Aquitania* just a year or two after the *Titanic* sank, and it was full of safety gadgets--so that never again. The thing I've found out quite recently, this is where people do help, that Cunard, for whom he designed the *Aquitania* wanted him much earlier, when he was working on the Ritz, when he would have been in his 20s, to do the *Mauretania* and the *Lucitania*. The German company for whom he was working on their early liners, refused to release him to other people's designs. And later when the Germans let him go, he was able to do the *Aquitania*, and later after the war he did two other liners *Franconia* and *Laconia*. Then he finally did the *Queen Mary*, which he hated. He was made to do it in Art Deco style, and it was not his bag. But the curious thing is, somehow he did it. He managed to do it, and it's become almost a prototype of Art Deco. And he was offered the *Queen Elizabeth* afterwards but he was so ill, and depressed and everything that he couldn't take it.

Did your father work up until the end of his life, or did he retire?

He was a manic depressive, which explains I think why he was able to do so many things at once, and to work when he was so young. The death of Mèwes in 1914 was a terrible blow to him. Mèwes died just before the first war broke out, and my father sort of finished the work he was doing on the Cunard building in Liverpool, and one or two other things he was doing for Mrs. Ronald Greville. Then he joined the British Army as an intelligence officer because he spoke better French than English, he was a lieutenant. He never talks about it, I've just had to reconstruct it. He was in France at the time that the Germans did their big push to try to get to Paris, and it was a terrible time. He had a frightful breakdown and he ended up in Lockhart Hospital for shell shock. I don't think it was shell shock, but it was similar. He was there for a year and a half. He came out of it, and this is why I have this tremendous admiration for him. An old man that I knew saw him there and said that my father wasn't in a very bad way. He was with all these shell shocked people. He came out in 1919 and started up again. Started up a big practice with some wonderful buildings, banks, shops, houses, these liners I mentioned, and then when the 2nd war came, and he was very depressed about the *Queen Mary*, and we lost our house because of the war. It was by the seaside, the army took it over, and my mother died suddenly. He had this long, long breakdown, which I nursed him through. This is when I really got to know him so very well. Right at the very end he started to come out of it, and he designed a very nice bank. And then he died of a heart attack. He had really an amazing life. He was one of the few architects at the time who actually served in the army.

Did your mother and brother see his work as much as you?

My mother went to Hollywood just after I was born and worked for Fox films, as a kind of newsy girl and ran the theater agency. My brother wasn't really interested, he was younger. When my father was sick and I was looking after him, my brother was in Chile working for a company there.

Have you ever been on any of the ships that your father designed?

Not ships, but I have been on liners and other ships. I went to South Africa on a ship, so I have kind of an understanding about it. We lived in a house that he designed. He took me to a service in this wonderful Armenian Church he designed in Kensington. It was an amazing experience. When my brother died I had his memorial service there. And the Bishop and everybody, they were in charge. If you ever get to London, go and see it. It is a beautiful church and he designed it. He was a very scholarly fellow, and he did a lot of research on Armenian churches in Armenia, and he took the bell tower of a monastery there and transposed it almost entirely at Kensington. I've got pictures of the original bell tower, with all decoration and everything. You can see it's almost exactly the same. And the Armenian congregation absolutely loves it. They got so big so they had to be moved somewhere else and they wouldn't go.

You said that you've been on other liners, is that in recent years?

The Union Castle line I was on in late 30s or early 40s. But I mean you just get the feeling of what it's like.

Have you ever seen current liners such Carnival Cruise?

I haven't been on them, I've not seen what the new *Queen Mary II* is like and I just think they don't have any character at all. I knew the guy who designed the QEII, and he was not an architect, he was a decorator. You don't get any kind of particular feeling, it's just one swimming pool after another. So I think that there's a great sort of magic to liners. The amazing thing to me about liners, is that the architects Mèwes and Davis, and I imagine others realized that they [the liners] had a very limited life span. That they only had about 30 years. And when you think of architects designing buildings in the city, they think oh well I'll be like Christopher Wren, people will know me forever. They accepted that the effect of the sea, everything would wear them out in about 30 years. Most of them it did. The *Aquitania* lived for 50 years. She was a tremendous troop ship in both wars. She took thousands of troops from America to Europe and back and so on, and the *Queen Mary* did as well. So when she [*Aquitania*] was taken up to Liverpool to be broken up, all the troops came and saluted her. And he [Davis] loved that ship because it had the reputation of being very safe. It was called the ship beautiful. It was the only ship that had the reputation of never having lost a man. Sailors all wanted to sail on it because it was so safe whereas all these other ships that had been sunk. And he did love it, he decorated it very much in the English not the French style. So I can understand why that and the Morning Post were his favorite buildings.

In doing research on your own since your father's passing, have you found information that you didn't know when he was alive?

Tremendous amounts. A lot of buildings I didn't know about. My husband David is a good photographer, and we go around London photographing them. I've got the lists of Mèwes & Davis' office official list so that's a big help. I've learned a terrific amount since then. He didn't leave an awful lot of papers partly because we were evacuated so fast in the war, people just couldn't leave things. But I've found a great deal of articles, and wonderful scholars. I've learned a great deal about the École des Beaux-Arts and the

work he did there. We've been there, we've been to the Musée d'Orsay and got lots of materials. We've really picked up a great deal of stuff. So I'm beginning to feel, I'm no kitten anymore, I'm 78, but I'm beginning to feel I'm pretty well getting it straight and am able to pass it on to people who are studying. It's on the internet because this great friend of mine, Oonagh Kennedy, and is a very good scholar and lecturer. She's been using it for her lectures. She's going to write a book on Mèwes and Davis. She had found a group of volunteers, I think nine, and they have put it on the internet. Not the actual materials but references to the materials. When I go over in a few weeks I hope to see them.

What of your father's work are your personal favorites?

I love the Ritz. I almost grew up with it. I love the church. I love the Cunard Building in Merseyside. And now Liverpool partly, it and the two buildings around it, which he called his building the rose between two thorns. But it's a famous group of buildings. I love some of the banks and so on. It's hard to say because they're all very different. Beautiful country houses. One of my missions has been to stop any of them from being torn down. One disaster, the Cunard House, which he loved, it was a later one, but it had all sorts of interesting things about it. Somebody came and pulled it down without anybody noticing. I think it would have been stopped but they did it overnight and we found a hole in the ground. And that really set me going, to try and get to know people in English Heritage and the City of London, to be sure that this doesn't ever happen again.

Did your father ever discuss modern architecture?

Yes he did. Well, when Mèwes and Davis were working, modern architecture was Art Nouveau. They thought it wouldn't last and it didn't tie in with anything in the past. So when my father had to do Art Deco, he felt the same, only more so. But at least Mèwes never had to do Art Nouveau. He was very depressed, one of his depressions was that the whole new style made everybody think that his style of buildings were outmoded, he kept using the word. They didn't understand what they were trying to do. And how they weren't just decorative buildings, they had plans, they functioned, they worked, and time has shown that they do. And this was a great worry for him. Just before he died, the Festival of Britain opened in London, in 1951, with The Dome of Discovery and the National Theater, all this stuff, and I took him to the back of the camp where you could see it across the way, all lit up. And I said what you think of it? And he didn't say 'oh I don't like it', or 'I think it's awful'. He said, "I simply can't make any judgment. It's as though it's architecture on the moon." I thought that was like him, he didn't condemn anything. One building he did rather condemn, when he showed me the plan of the RAC with the Dorchester Hotel, which one of these contemporary architects, Curtis Green, had just built. He said it's like a rabbit warren; when you go into it you haven't a clue where you're going. You don't know where the restaurant is or anything and you have to go up and ask somebody. He said no building should be like that, you should be able to immediately get a feeling. And this is what he did with the RAC.

You asked me did I know Mèwes. Of course I didn't, he died in 1914 just before the war broke out, suddenly. He'd always been in very poor health. He was a very, very brave

man, I think, because when you think of the traveling they had to do then, often by hansom cab, or steamers, and they both were dealing with a difficult client, Lady Wernher. He was a widower with three children who became orphans after he died. He wasn't very well, he didn't speak English very well, and didn't like being in England, but he was a wonderful, wonderful man. My father was absolutely devoted to him and just so terribly sad when he died. He died after a severe operation. Mèwes died 12 years before I was born, but he was a presence in the house because they had all these jokes about him, it was as though he was there. Mèwes had this terrific sense of humor:

He had very wonderful taste, and when he got married apparently, a messenger came to the door with an enormous absolutely hideous vase. He was a very big heavy man. And he rushed forward saying 'oh the very beautiful vase!', and knocked it out of the person's arms and smashed it.

One reason he took my father on was to go to London and do the work on because Mèwes didn't really like England very much. And once he "Oh pour moi les joies semi ditat", "Oh for me the joys are semi ditat", meaning how ghastly it was.

Mèwes had this Swiss born partner who worked with him on the German Liners and his name was Alfonse Bischoff, and he was a very nice man, I met him and his wife, they were charming, they lived in Brussels. He was a very nervous and anxious man. And of course he had to deal with the Kaiser's relatives, and it was frightful for him. But they called him Bisch. And when he was in one of his twits, they would look at each other and laugh and say "Look at old bisch getting in a twit all by himself". This gives the feeling that there was in the office, this tremendous comradery and affection. He and Mèwes were both Jewish, they both went to the same school, the École des Beaux-Arts, they both had been uprooted, my father from London and Mèwes from France. Mèwes was born and brought up in Salzburg, in Alsace Lorraine, and then the Germans came in with the Franco German war. And his family had to flee and go to Paris, and then the Germans came to Paris They both in a way had a terrific past. People say looking at their buildings that they did together, 'can you see what is Mèwes and what is Davis?', and the answer is they never thought like that. It was always one thing that they were working on. It's the closest Partnership I would say that exists in English architecture. Even closer than Vander and Hockson. It's quite wonderful. And also Mèwes would take on anything new. They got into liners because they worked on the Carlton Hotel, which was an ugly building that was already there. But they put in this court and restaurant in time for the Edward VII's coronation. It became a tremendously fashionable restaurant. Albert Ballin, who was another very brilliant man, who was the head of the Hamburg-America line, building these great liners for the Kaiser, and he also was Jewish which I think again made a rapport. When he was in London, everybody went to the Carlton for dinner, and he was so taken by this restaurant, that he decided to put a Mèwes Restaurant into these two first liners the *Amerika* and the *Kaiserin Auguste Victoria*, and that's how they got into liners. You never know quite how things are going to happen.

I think it's terribly important if you are working on their work, or even just the liners, that dates are correct. I've worked it all out what they were doing when and where because they didn't just do one building at a time, they were doing all sorts of buildings at once. At the time they were doing the Ritz, they were doing a house of a great friend of theirs who was one of the richest men in England, and they were doing two liners all at once. When you think of the difficulty of traveling and so on, how slow it was, it was rather difficult.