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## INTERVIEW WITH BERTRAM SCHAFFNER, M.D.

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*Abstract:* In 2007, the author interviewed Dr. Bertram Schaffner, one of the first openly gay psychiatrists and psychoanalysts of his generation. In this interview, conducted when Dr. Schaffner was 94 years old, he speaks candidly about the educational and career struggles he faced as a gay man at a time when homosexuality could result in a loss of medical licensure. Among other topics, the interview covers Dr. Schaffner's childhood and college years, his army service, his psychiatric practice, his work as a psychoanalyst, and his work as an activist for human rights.

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**T**HIS INTERVIEW was conducted in Dr. Schaffner's home on April 23, 2007, when he was 94 years old. He died on January 29, 2010, at the age of 97.

**William D. Lubart (WDL):** I thought we would start by asking you about your early history. Tell us about where you grew up, what it was like, and what kind of family you came from.

**Dr. Schaffner:** Erie, Pennsylvania, was a very small town, and I was very happy to leave it at the age of 15. It was very middle class and had all the usual prejudices. And, of course, since people knew that I was either gay or strange early on, I had a hard time socializing. I was very glad to get to college at Harvard. I left Harvard because at that time I wanted very much to see if I could change to become a heterosexual. At Harvard I had already made homosexual connections; and I felt it was better to start over again at Swarthmore. I left, but I did not change.

**WDL:** How early did you become aware that there was something different about you?

**Dr. Schaffner:** I have no way of proving it, but it always seemed to me as if I knew about age three. It does seem to me forever.

**WDL:** I remember reading that you were double-promoted a number of times through the grades in high school. And that's s how you came to Harvard at the age of 15.

**Dr. Schaffner:** When I was a child, the IQ test had been invented. And people were promoted on the basis of IQ. If one could do the work, they assumed you might as well be up there with the older students. The issue of social development was completely ignored. So I was getting A's in school but having a terrible time socially.

**WDL:** Can you tell us a little bit about what high school was like and what your adolescence was like, as you were feeling somewhat different from the other kids?

**Dr. Schaffner:** I think I never felt welcome, had a hard time making friends, and spent a great deal of time reading. I invented a little theater and stage and produced plays all by myself. I wasn't interested in athletics. It was just a hard time.

**WDL:** So, going away to college was your getaway?

**Dr. Schaffner:** Yes. I felt it was going to be liberation, and in many ways it was.

**WDL:** How did you choose Harvard?

**Dr. Schaffner:** A good friend of our family, whom I respected and who always treated me very nicely, had gone to Harvard. And I thought that if it had made him happy I would probably fit in there. Actually, I did. I had good marks and everybody was surprised that I wanted to leave Harvard. But I did, because I thought I would have more of a chance to become heterosexual.

**WDL:** How did you decide on Swarthmore, of all places?

**Dr. Schaffner:** I had one friend from high school who went to Swarthmore, and I knew that I would have a friend when I got there.

**WDL:** Was there any problem transferring to Swarthmore?

**Dr. Schaffner:** They did wonder why I wanted to leave Harvard with an A average. I think I made up as good a reason as I could: that I thought it would be better for me—that I was too young to be at Harvard. Because at Harvard I roomed with people 18, 19, who were going to football games and having dates, going on weekend trips with girls. And so I was quite alone at Harvard until I made the social connections that I did.

**WDL:** And did you find Swarthmore a more hospitable place?

**Dr. Schaffner:** Only because I met my first important lover there. I did not become more heterosexual at Swarthmore.

**WDL:** Although one of your goals was to see if the coeducational environment would stimulate some heterosexual feeling in you.

**Dr. Schaffner:** That is right. I forgot to mention that Swarthmore was coeducational. I guess I assumed that everybody knew that.

**WDL:** Did you find yourself dismayed at the time, that you were not making the transition to being straight?

**Dr. Schaffner:** Was I dismayed? I think I was generally troubled, just glad to be surviving and waiting for somebody to guide me.

**WDL:** And then how did you decide on medical school?

**Dr. Schaffner:** My lover at Swarthmore, whom I turned to and asked. At that time, you know, it was the Depression. It was very difficult to get a job of any kind and to make a living. I felt I was versatile. There were a number of things I would enjoy or like to do, but I had no idea how I would manage. And I didn't want to go into the family business. And so I asked my lover what he thought would be good for me. He said, "I think you'd make a good doctor." That's how I became a doctor.

**WDL:** That's an interesting story about how you became a doctor. Once you were at Johns Hopkins, were you "out" there or private about your sexuality?

**Dr. Schaffner:** In those days it was dangerous to be "out." You could be arrested for being gay. There were very few places to meet anyone, and you would be socially ostracized. So, in one way I was very careful, and in another way, I was very careless because I couldn't resist my impulses. It was dangerous, and so I wasn't "out" to many people. It was a kind of closely guarded secret and had to be. I could have been expelled from college or medical school for being gay.

**WDL:** At one point I think there was some threat from your parents that you would not be able to finish college because you were gay?

**Dr. Schaffner:** Yes. When my father discovered that I was gay—because he opened the letters that I received from my friend at Harvard—he threatened that I could no longer be educated and he would not send me to school anymore. And I threatened suicide. I was allowed to go on and complete my education.

**WDL:** So you had to threaten suicide to continue to develop professionally?

**Dr. Schaffner:** Right.

**WDL:** Were you at all serious about the threat? Or was it just a way to get them to let you continue?

**Dr. Schaffner:** Well, I was serious without knowing how one would go about it or how one would do it. But in my family, which considered itself liberal and intellectual, people had always talked about the right to commit suicide if life was too hard. So I threatened it, not having an idea

of how I would do it; but simply that life wouldn't be worth living if I couldn't complete my education.

**WDL:** And you did?

**Dr. Schaffner:** Yes. That was one of the things that is so important to me about the William Alanson White Institute. Because after succeeding in everything else that I had tried, when I wanted to have a psychoanalytic education I was refused by both the New York Psychoanalytic Institute and Columbia. And it was only the William Alanson White that opened its doors to me.

**WDL:** I would like to ask you about the few years before that when you were in the army. You were drafted.

**Dr. Schaffner:** Yes. Very early.

**WDL:** But I read that you wanted to stay. You didn't want to withdraw. You wanted to go into the army, as a Jew.

**Dr. Schaffner:** Yes. I thought it was my duty to serve. At one time I had tried to not go into the army by becoming a Quaker. But after Hitler came into power and began to carry out his atrocities, I felt I really must serve and I didn't try to get out of the army.

**WDL:** You did some interesting work in the army. Could you tell us a little bit about that?

**Dr. Schaffner:** From the very beginning I was put into selective service examination of candidates for the army; and I served in that capacity here in New York and upstate New York for almost four years. It became rather dull seeing people every day and for only a few minutes and then passing them on. And the next important lover I had was a psychiatrist. He suggested that it might be interesting to study the men I was examining and to do some research that could be useful. This was just before Kinsey began to do the same kind of work. We set up a research study into the sex lives of men, and we devised a very short standard test that could be given to every candidate coming along. So we got a good cross-section of the population. And that was my first paper, "The Sex Lives of Unmarried Men" in 1947 with Leslie Hohman for the *American Journal of Sociology*.

**WDL:** Do you remember any major findings from that study?

**Dr. Schaffner:** One of the findings at that time was that three percent of the population had had homosexual experiences. Kinsey thought it was higher, although he later revised his figures.

**WDL:** You mentioned a few minutes ago that, when you applied to institutes, you encountered some difficulty because you were homosexual.

**Dr. Schaffner:** I should say I knew that I encountered difficulty. To say that it happened because I was homosexual, that is only my guess. But they did Rorschach tests at both of the institutes; and I am assuming that the Rorschach revealed my homosexuality and that that was enough because they never gave explanations.

**WDL:** So how did you happen to come to the White Institute?

**Dr. Schaffner:** I remember being desperately unhappy at the thought that I could not pursue my psychiatric education. But someone, and I wish I could tell you who it was, suggested that I apply to the White.

**WDL:** How did the interview process go there?

**Dr. Schaffner:** Very well, because the officials of the White Institute knew that Harry Stack Sullivan was gay, although it was not generally known. And so they were not averse to accepting me. And I already had somewhat of a good reputation because of the work I had been doing between the army and my psychiatric education. So my interviews at White were very cordial.

**WDL:** Do you remember who your interviewers were at the time?

**Dr. Schaffner:** Janet Rioch, Leo Rosanes, and Erich Fromm.

**WDL:** How did your interview with Fromm go?

**Dr. Schaffner:** Very well. I had the feeling he was not very much interested—in me or in homosexuality.

**WDL:** So you were “out” during your interviews? You talked about it?

**Dr. Schaffner:** Oh, absolutely.

**WDL:** You came to the Institute in 1949. Did you ever have a chance to meet Harry Stack Sullivan before he died?

**Dr. Schaffner:** No, unfortunately I never met him. I was on my way to meet him at a conference of the World Federation for Mental Health in London in 1948. But he took ill and left, and so I did not meet him. But I had been looking forward to it.

**WDL:** You were aware that he was gay?

**Dr. Schaffner:** Yes.

**WDL:** How did you happen to hear that?

**Dr. Schaffner:** Margaret Mead told me.

**WDL:** How did you know Dr. Mead?

**Dr. Schaffner:** While I was doing the research in the army, I noticed that draftees from different cultures had different patterns of physical symptoms. And I wondered whether they were related to their cultural background. In New York State we had descendants of the Dutch settlers and the British. There were the Indians. There were the Blacks. There

were the French Canadians. The Italians. Every one of these groups had a distinct physical pattern that they mentioned. And I wanted to find out if there could be a relationship and whether it was psychological or cultural. And I wrote to her to ask what her experience had been. And she answered me, and then we became good friends.

**WDL:** How did you get involved writing your book, *Father Land*—the book you wrote in the 40s about German families?

**Dr. Schaffner:** As a result of my writing to Margaret Mead about the patterns of physical illness in different cultures—and the fact that I spoke German, having learned it as a child—she recommended me to go to Nuremberg. She wanted me to participate in the interview survey of the war criminals. I did get to Nuremberg, only to find out that two other psychiatrists were already there. And instead, I was transferred to study the military government that was to select future officers, officials, and educators in Germany. And so I spent the next six months interviewing applicants for publishers, editors, educators, professors of all sorts in military government, along with Dr. David Levy and Dr. Richard Berkner. When I came back it seemed worthwhile. It was actually suggested by Dr. Henry Dix that I write a book on my experiences examining these high-level Germans who were applying for office. And the book turned out to be *Father Land: A Study of Authoritarianism in the German Family* and was used by people in the German government.

**WDL:** Did you feel that the structure of the German family had something to do with the development of Nazism during World War II?

**Dr. Schaffner:** Yes. I felt that the authoritarianism in the German family had made it very easy for the average German to accept the kind of dictatorship that Hitler imposed.

**WDL:** How was the book received here in this country?

**Dr. Schaffner:** It was, I think, quite well received in educational institutions. It was assigned in most political science courses. And it had the dubious honor of being pirated. People began to make their own copies of the book and distributed it. It went into several editions. And then by that time the interest had shifted to finding anti-Communists, and the federal government stopped being interested in the work on German officers.

**WDL:** When you got to the White Institute, were you “out” as a candidate?

**Dr. Schaffner:** Yes. I had no choice. But that did not mean that the candidates in my class were equally happy or receptive. The officials in

the Institute were friendly and receptive. But the men in my class really were mostly not.

**WDL:** But you pushed through?

**Dr. Schaffner:** Well, I managed to pass.

**WDL:** Whom did you turn to for your training analysis?

**Dr. Schaffner:** I went to Clara Thompson.

**WDL:** And how did that turn out?

**Dr. Schaffner:** It had an interesting and sad ending. She knew that I wanted to become heterosexual. I think I must have made a very good plea because she believed me, as far as I know. And she never objected or warned me that there could be trouble ahead. In fact, I would say at that time it was not clear, as it is today, that the desire to change can lead to great trouble. And so I don't think she had any foundation at that time to warn me. And when I told her a dream, that I was planning to fly to Europe to my fiancée to get married, that I was going to fly in a plane that had no ceiling and that the plane was flying upside down, we both realized that that was a pretty impossible situation. But she did not really bring it out to me that there was something to be scared about here. Shortly after that I had a momentary feeling of what it might be like to lose your mind. It was just a moment. But it told me that something was grossly wrong with my work with her. And I called up and said that I was not coming back. And we never continued. We also never discussed the situation. So, my treatment with her ended on a sad note, for which I do not hold her responsible. It was at a time when so little was really known about homosexuality; even though she was very kind and very tolerant. I cannot blame her.

**WDL:** So where did you go to complete your training analysis?

**Dr. Schaffner:** I turned to the Columbia Institute and continued my analysis with Grace Baker, with whom I kept on having psychotherapy and supervision for the next 30 years.

**WDL:** You were able to have your analysis with Grace Baker, and yet you continued your classes at White?

**Dr. Schaffner:** Yes. White, as I realize now, was very kind to me. I was not told to leave. I was not kept from graduating. And I was elected president of the White Society, in spite of the fact that I had rejected Clara Thompson as my analyst.

**WDL:** At that time when you had been going through all of this, when you were working with Clara, did you feel that being gay was an illness—in yourself?

**Dr. Schaffner:** Yes. I kept looking for the causes of the illness. Of course, I ended up feeling that I could understand many of the sources of my thoughts and feelings and behavior. I became less depressed. I began to have good self-esteem. But there was much unfinished work.

**WDL:** It sounds as though your analysis with Grace Baker helped you. Do you feel that, in general, analysis has helped you as a gay man? At the time did you feel that way?

**Dr. Schaffner:** I would say that analysis helped me as a person, but not particularly in dealing with my homosexuality. That help I got outside of psychoanalysis, through the Gay Caucus of the American Psychiatric Association and through helping to found the Gay and Lesbian Psychiatrists of New York.

**WDL:** What was it like for you to be a gay psychoanalyst in the 50s and 60s, which were very homophobic times?

**Dr. Schaffner:** To put it in a word: it was tough, because it was a constant life of hiding, pretending. Clara Thompson did once say to me, "I do not know why you bother pretending. It is so obvious to everybody." That incidentally was very helpful because it enabled me to drop some of the impossible goals and to accept myself as I was. I had to make do with reality, and I did. So Clara Thompson helped me (not in the crucial way that I needed) to drop the plan altogether.

**WDL:** The plan to try to be straight?

**Dr. Schaffner:** Right.

**WDL:** Or pretending to be a straight analyst?

**Dr. Schaffner:** I never pretended. When people asked me, I always tried to find out why they needed to know and what they needed to know and what would be good for them to know. But when they needed to know, I told them.

**WDL:** So it sounds as if you knew how to hold the tension between staying analytic and being validating or affirming to your patients?

**Dr. Schaffner:** Absolutely. I was very proud of that. Because I felt there were too many patients who needed that kind of support and could not get it. I knew of a number of gay analysts who would never have revealed their own state.

**WDL:** Were you friendly with them at all?

**Dr. Schaffner:** Yes. In fact, getting ready for this talk tonight I remembered that I actually knew several married psychoanalysts who were gay and who had gone through analytic institutes never revealing their homosexuality to their analyst and marrying. I think they were able to make a

good relationship with their wives. I think there is a group of people I would call bisexual, who are probably not studied enough because they probably are not open enough. But I met a number of them because they came to me often to have someone gay to talk to—whom they could trust.

**WDL:** It sounds like you developed a good reputation, as a gay psychiatrist and psychoanalyst.

**Dr. Schaffner:** Yes. Which was not always easy.

**WDL:** Say more about that.

**Dr. Schaffner:** There were times when patients would reproach me for being gay or taunt me for being gay. When there was hostility, it would sometimes come out that way.

**WDL:** So that came from patients?

**Dr. Schaffner:** Yes. As well as sometimes from patients' families.

**WDL:** Were some of these gay patients? Or were they straight patients who would taunt you?

**Dr. Schaffner:** I don't remember ever being taunted by a gay patient.

**WDL:** So it was straight patients?

**Dr. Schaffner:** Yes.

**WDL:** And yet they stayed in treatment with you?

**Dr. Schaffner:** Mostly.

**WDL:** I guess they felt that they were getting something out of it.

**Dr. Schaffner:** I think so.

**WDL:** But it sounds as if that was very hard. Did you develop a network of colleagues that would refer to you?

**Dr. Schaffner:** That has been a difficult part of my life. Because when I really came out to the other psychiatrists at White, they stopped referring patients to me. And I had to begin to depend on referrals from friends and former patients. I have never had an easy time developing what would be called a good psychiatric practice. I have always been busy. But I never had well-to-do, prominent patients. I have had good results, but I never had a worldly success.

**WDL:** How did you keep your spirits up during that time?

**Dr. Schaffner:** That is a very good question. I think I have had some wonderful friends.

**WDL:** So when the psychiatrists at White stopped referring to you, did you continue to be involved in White? Or did it change how you felt about White?

**Dr. Schaffner:** I think I began to withdraw from White. I no longer took great part in the social activities at White or in the political aspects of

White. I became much more interested in the Gay and Lesbian Psychiatrists of New York. And from 1982 on, I was one of the first psychiatrists to become involved with AIDS and HIV. And my work centered much more largely on working with HIV.

**WDL:** So was the HIV work a way that got you reintegrated into the White community?

**Dr. Schaffner:** Mark Blechner and I met and discovered that we had this common interest in HIV and wanted to do something together. Mark was more interested in establishing a service for HIV patients, while I had less confidence it would be possible, because HIV patients, from what I knew, were not going to be able to go through the long ritual of applying and being accepted. HIV patients in my experience needed to be treated and helped right away. But Mark wanted to create the service and Mark did the hard work of helping to organize that. I think the Institute did support him very much in pushing his service. By the time HIV came along, much of the stigma for being homosexual had dissipated, especially within the Institute.

**WDL:** Could you talk about your work with the HIV positive physicians group?

**Dr. Schaffner:** You are referring to the group really started by Stuart Nichols. He felt, when AIDS broke out, that there definitely had to be a place to assist gay physicians with AIDS because it would have been extremely dangerous for them to have anyone in their practice know they were gay. It would have been difficult. They could have been expelled from the practice of medicine. They had no one to talk to, no one to share it with, no one to get advice from. And Stu Nichols started this group. I had the privilege of being asked to go along with him in it. It was really his conception. We could not meet in a hospital because the other physicians would be recognized. It was very important to keep their identity secret. Therefore, we met in my home, where their identity could be protected. Dr. Nichols is dead now, but I am still running the group. We have never charged a fee. And the group has been as large as 25 participants in the beginning. It is now about five or six, but it still continues. There are not just physicians, but professionals of any specialty who join the group.

**WDL:** Who are some of the people who really supported you through the years at White? Can you think of certain people who were especially helpful to you, supporting your work and you as a professional?

**Dr. Schaffner:** Jack Drescher was wonderful to me all along—very supportive and always somebody that I could talk to. As a matter of fact, we

worked together on applying to become supervisors, and we coordinated plans to become training analysts. I had a very unfortunate experience and gave up trying to become a training analyst. Because one of the White's officers came up to me and said, "Do you think you are going to live long enough to see any of your training candidates finish their training treatment?" And it knocked the stuffing out of me. I was so hurt that I was unable to go on and apply to become a training analyst. There was another person who was a very good friend and helped me, and that was Dr. Leah Davidson.

**WDL:** So do you feel that your promotion at White through the years was hindered by people's prejudice against you?

**Dr. Schaffner:** Yes.

**WDL:** You have spoken in the past about how you had to work through your own internal homophobia to advance your career and become an effective analyst. Could you say a little bit about that?

**Dr. Schaffner:** Clara Thompson had helped me to accept the fact that it was unrealistic of me to want to change. I used to quote Martin Luther, because as a child I had played around a statue of Martin Luther in Germany, declaring: "Here I stand. I can't be any different. God help me. Amen." And I made that my motto, that I would from now on declare myself and not be ashamed and just go ahead. And that became my attitude.

**WDL:** That was a very inspiring answer. Do you have any particular advice for the young generation of analysts coming up today?

**Dr. Schaffner:** I think the AIDS epidemic, as terrible as it was, opened the eyes of most of the world to the prevalence of homosexuality and the need to understand it, and has uncovered the large number of American families who have gay members. And I think it is no longer disgraceful to want to understand it or to have gay members of the family. But there still is an enormous amount of prejudice abroad. And it is very important for the members of the faculty to be able to be free from prejudice.

**WDL:** I know that you are a collector of Indian art. Could you tell us about what the significance is of this to you? How did you become interested in Indian art?

**Dr. Schaffner:** I had worked for 14 years in connection with the mental health departments of the West Indian islands. That work came to an end in 1967. And I was looking for another interest. But I wanted it to be non-medical and nonpolitical, because my work in the Caribbean had involved a great deal of pain. And at that time the Brooklyn Museum, in

connection with the government of India, was offering a trip to India with advanced collectors and curators. I was fortunate enough to hear about it and to be able to go on that trip, and when I got to India found myself fascinated and never got over it. Fortunately, Indian art was inexpensive compared with other art. I could afford to acquire some.

**WDL:** Is there anything else you would like to add about your career or your work over the past 50 years?

**Dr. Schaffner:** I belonged for many years to an organization called GAP, the Group for the Advancement of Psychiatry—a very conservative group of psychiatrists. And I felt bad that there was no committee studying homosexuality and decided to try to work toward one. I was able after five years of blood, sweat, and tears—through the help of John Spiegel—to get GAP to accept the existence of a committee on homosexuality. That was really difficult because, again, I had to expose myself in a hostile environment. I was able to persuade them to at least consider that homosexuality was worth talking about.

**WDL:** There was a monograph that GAP produced.

**Dr. Schaffner:** Yes, it was on prejudice against homosexuality in the medical profession: Anti-homosexual Bias in Training.

**WDL:** Anything else you want to add about your career?

**Dr. Schaffner:** Well, I think I have had a number of wonderful friends, and I am sorry that I cannot mention all their names tonight. I really feel I have been blessed. I am very glad that I have lived through this period. I think it is wonderful to have started off in a period of such condemnation and danger, fear; and to live through this period when one can freely admit to being gay and help people who are gay not to suffer the way I suffered. It is wonderful to feel that a lot of that is in the past. I cannot believe it happened so quickly.

**WDL:** Thank you for this interview, for sharing with us your amazing 50 years in the profession and memories of your early life.

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