

Rough transcript of interview conducted on June 13, 1985, for the German Historical Institute (46:46, audio only)

Walter Fales was a professor of philosophy at Lincoln University from 1946 until his death from cancer on April 18, 1953.

George Carter: In 1946, after 2½ years in the Army, I started at Lincoln [University in Pennsylvania] as a sophomore. It was my intention to major in philosophy. One of the first persons I met on the faculty was a German by the name of Fales, Walter Fales. I probably took more courses and spent more time with Dr. Fales over the course of the next three years than with any other single faculty member.

I was not aware for a good part of the beginning of my relationship with him that he was Jewish. I thought of him as German. He was German in every sense of the word: His thinking, his thought patterns, his culture, his attitude was that of a German. I'm not sure what the incident was which made me aware of the fact that he was Jewish, but one day I learned that his former name was Feilchenfeld, and I really cannot remember at what point but it was at that point that I realized he was a German-Jewish refugee.

Do you know what Feilchenfeld means? A field of violets.

Somehow I realized he had spent the year prior to coming to Lincoln at the Yale Divinity School. He frequently spoke about the architecture of the Yale Divinity School and spoke of it as certainly a new architectural form ... and one of the most beautiful pieces of architecture he had ever seen. And I learned quickly to have a great deal of respect for Fales' aesthetic sense.

In fact the most moving experience I had with Fales was one day we were in a class, there were eight or nine of us in the class ... It was very hot, late spring, the windows were open. He had his foot up on a chair as he was lecturing in a very relaxed fashion, and at some point he stopped talking and he just stood there. One slowly recognized he was looking down toward his foot and for long enough for the students to become concerned about the fact that he had stopped lecturing.... It turned out that a white moth had flown in the window and had lighted on the chair where his foot was, and he stood there transfixed by this moth. He had an incredible sensitivity.

You've talked about some of the things that interested you looking into this. I really can't speak to anything significant as to how I saw Walter Fales as a German-Jewish refugee in this country. I did not experience him as such. It was late in my relationship that I realized he was Jewish. If I were really to do a lot of introspection that I was not sensitive to this at all. I saw him as a mentor, as a very brilliant person, as a person who had a great deal to teach me in a field I had chosen to major in. His impact on me as a teacher was monumental.

He had more impact upon me than any other single person on the faculty at Lincoln. ... In some way his impact was more significant because he was the first. I knew very little about philosophy; I knew this was an area I wanted to spend some time with; thing that motivated me

to study philosophy were some questions more theological in nature. I grew up in a very fundamentalist Baptist tradition and by the time I was 18 or 19 I had some questions in my mind that were not to be entertained by people like me in the minds of my uncles, my mother, the family. I had two or three experiences as a soldier which made these questions very real. I came back to Lincoln to study philosophy because I was gonna get some answers to some of these questions.

The more I got into philosophy the more my concerns became philosophical rather than theological ones. After Lincoln it took me more than a day to decide I did not want to go to Yale Divinity School; I went to Harvard and studied philosophy.

Fales' impact on me: I think of myself as a person who thinks fairly well. One of my greatest assets, the one that I use most, is my ability to look at a problem and to understand it, to break it into its pieces and come up with some understanding of the problem, if not a solution to it. I think that goes back to some of the ways in which Fales taught me to look at things. He taught a course in Immanuel Kant, which was the most difficult thing I had ever tried to do; Kant is a very complicated, abstruse writer. [Fales] taught me first to understand what I was reading. He provided the kind of background where the kinds of problems Kant was dealing with were real problems for me: I understood them. I began to understand Kant's approach to them. That course was one of the half-dozen most important courses in my whole intellectual development.

I got some real sense of what a European intellectual was like. I got some real sense of the differences in the way he saw history, current events, from the ways in which the New York Times talked about them, or the way in which some of our more well-respected analysts, publications talked about them. Through Fales I first understood the relativity of point of view, of approach, how people's differing cultural assumptions affect the conclusions they came to. That stuck with me. I subsequently spent many years in Europe, so that all of this became very much real, very much alive. It was Fales who first showed me that world.

Interesting to watch Fales adjust to living in a black world. I found him at times doing things and saying things he shouldn't have been doing and saying in that community. On a couple of occasions I took him aside and said, "Hey, look, you don't do that here!" One was particularly pertinent. In one of my classes he was talking about cultural differences and he referred to another class of his, with many more students, and he talked about the odor of the students. He did that very innocently; said that group smelled different from any other group. A couple of days later I told him be careful: Your motivation, your interest, your curiosity is very real but it will not be taken this way. You're dealing with a group of young black males in the middle of the 20th century and they're not ready to have a white European tell them that they smell bad, and that's what they're hearing. And then we had a discussion about why people smell differently, in Dakar, India, Rome, and that's because of what people eat, bathing, and that's fine.

By then Fales, a very sharp, perceptive person, and I would presume he came looking for differences. I found him very very curious about the complexion of the women that the

students were involved with. Lincoln was an all-black, all-male school, 50-60 miles from Philadelphia, and the only women there were wives of faculty.

He made what I was studying real, spent a lot of time, effort going beyond normal student/teacher relationship in working with me, thought I had a mind exceptionally suited to the kinds of things we were doing.

Lincoln up through 1949, time I graduated, was the school where something over 30 percent of the black doctors in the United States had spent at least one year there. There were 67 men in my graduating class, 65 of them pre-med students... so that the arts, the humanities were not very popular there.... Anything but chemistry, physics was “bunkum.”

I believe there were just three philosophy majors in the school. Very few classes with Fales that had more than five students. Philosophy of History course Fales gave shortly after publication of Toynbee's *A Study of History*. Five or six of us in that course, among them a Nigerian who had come to Lincoln as an advanced student; extraordinarily brilliant, well read. Youngsters who came from French or British systems were certainly much better educated than we were from Philadelphia high schools. Good deal worse now; certainly not better. My skills in writing English were not good when I finished high school. ...

But we had this course in which the Nigerian, Vincent Ikeotuonye, a convinced and well-read Marxist. Myself at that point, a middle-of-the-road Truman supporter. That course became five months of a running argument between us, and Fales had a great time listening to this thing and taking advantage of points in our discussion. On my first trip to Africa, Lagos, in 1953, I learned Ikeotuonye was a member of Parliament; he came to my hotel. He was killed in a car accident two years later....

I'm a very fiery person; I love to discuss things, and I do it because I do it well. ... Much of that was just my sheer arrogance; I knew the guy was better read... but I'd just try to find ways to tear him apart with words ... but we both learned an enormous amount in that course because Fales just used it.... He'd stop us and say, “Consider this.” I'm sure I learned a great deal more out of that.

Fales didn't project his own viewpoint. His basic point of view: He was an idealist, a modern-day, German idealist; in almost the Romantic sense of that term. He certainly came out of a tradition, the Kantian, Hegelian, Fichte part of it. He frequently referred to the poet Novalis. He had a great deal of spiritual sympathy. He had done a piece of work on a Swiss educator by the name of Pestalozzi. And he once said to me that his thinking was closer to that of Pestalozzi than any other person. ... He was an idealist in the sense that Hegelian tradition is idealist.

Pestalozzi was the person who started kindergarten in Germany.

One of the interesting things as I look back on it—and this may be talking about his impact—after studying with him for three years... I went off to Harvard. If someone had asked what was my philosophic point of view I would have described myself as an idealist; I would have

associated myself with people like Kant, if not Hegel, certainly some of the people who came out of the Hegelian tradition. ... I tended to associate my thinking at that time more with people like Dilthey, the so-called historicists school. But fully recognized the Hegelian thing was underneath of that. Hegel, whom I've never understood ... he just goes too far off in a direction. But all of philosophy is a footnote to Plato. ... I guess I would have come closer to describe myself as a Platonist. You divide Western philosophy into two schools, Aristotelian and Platonic. I would have thought of myself as a Platonist.

Interestingly enough, ... the choice I made to go to Harvard as distinct from Yale graduate school of philosophy was a high-impact decision because the kind of thing I had done under Fales would have prepared me much better for the approach to philosophy which was in the ascendance at Yale. Almost not at all for Harvard. At Harvard you had people like C.I. Lewis, H.M. Sheffer ... all of these people were related to the British empiricist side of the fence as it had developed into some of the more extreme kinds of positions of the logical, the Vienna circle, the logical positivists. Everybody up there was writing books on philosophy of mathematics. On logical theory ... The first semester up there I sweated nails trying to catch up. This was not Fales' fault, I'm not saying that. ... In short order I was able to relate intellectually, spiritually with that [Harvard] approach to philosophy. ... But I became a person interested in mathematics, set theory, empiricism. I would have looked back on the 18th century much more toward Hume than I would have toward Kant....

In the last eight or nine years... my interest has become literature. ... I can see some of the strains of the '40s with Fales coming back into my thinking. I am no longer the hard-nosed, crass, show-me empiricist type.... I suppose a lot of that has to do with the fact I spent a good 10 years being very interested in African philosophy, African religion... it does play with some mythological figures which I think are very real in our cultural life, in our mental life. I've done a study on the trickster, West African thinking, and I'm convinced that the Trickster is a very fundamental mode of thinking and behavior. I'm quite prepared to call all kinds of things in all kinds of cultures manifestations of the Trickster. It's the kind of thing that Hume talks about when he talks about the shadow... an archetype. ...

But the kinds of things that I have spent my life being interested in, the kinds of things which are important, it was Fales who started that part of my life. In that sense his impact has been very very fundamental. The other thing about Fales—I developed at very young age... a love of ... classical music.... Fales was the cause of whatever it was that drove my interest in music spreading out to other art forms. ... That part of my life, my interest in philosophy, literature, music, painting is an area of my life where I deal with the very fundamentals of who and what I am, and why it's important to continue things. You divide your life in two parts; that part which you can share; that part which you cannot share; and then there's that gray area where you try to share but can't. Which is part of what art is all about.

If Fales did not awaken that in me he certainly made it real enough for it to become important. He had a highly developed, highly refined sensibility. A very remarkable human being. We spent hours sitting on his porch, sitting in the field, just talking. We had to have an oral examination

as a senior and he asked me to choose a subject. I said Plato, and we must have talked about that for 10 minutes and the other three or four hours about everything under the sun. I was a great one for getting an examination and not liking the questions and saying let me answer this one. I had a lot of fun with him and he's been very real in my life.

But, to go back: The fact that he was a German-Jewish refugee was just not a significant recognition on my part; it never entered into any of my thinking. I think... Fales was one of the first whites whom I got to know on a long-term, intimate basis... and I grew up in an integrated neighborhood, went to integrated schools.... But I got to learn more about white thinking about blacks as I observed Fales, heard him talk about things, and talked to him about them....

Fales fits kind of a stereotype in our culture, in the American culture. He was a small man, kind of frail, almost delicate. He was the crazy professorial poet in the minds of most students... I have a picture somewhere of Fales with a tennis racket, and he's about the most nonathletic person imaginable. The society tolerates people like that but it also kind of smiles at them. He was certainly the kind of person that the bulk of the people at Lincoln saw as a crazy poet philosopher....Lincoln's values were very very different from those that he represented. So he fit into that stereotype.

His kids, his son and daughter were quite young. Very funny story. His kids played with [the kids of the football coach]. [Fales' daughter] one day said to [the football coach's child], Warum hast du die Blätter in den Haar gesteckt? Now this is a little black girl and they'd been playing together. ... They fitted in well. Ruth Fales is a human dynamo, very bright, energetic, open kind of human being, and she was just another member of the faculty, running around there, and buying eggs, screaming at students who'd gotten too close to the house, she was just regular Mrs. Fales.

Dr. Fales was different. He's a distant person. But there was no sense—they were not the only white faculty members, at that time about half white and half black. I had no sense of any serious adjustment problems that they might have had.

Social life?

I don't really know....Went to Philadelphia from time to time. He got to meet a number of people out on the Main Line.... On campus, I really don't know. Other faculty members in and out of their homes. ... I had dinner at their house many times ... I used to go down there for schoolwork, whatever. ... He had one of the better houses on campus, right in the middle of things. ...

Did he ever discuss civil rights?

There was a guy there who was dedicated to breaking the barriers. There was a movie house in Oxford, he would go down there with half a dozen other students to try to integrate. Lincoln is located below the Mason-Dixon line. That part of Pennsylvania which is the South. It was segregated; it certainly wasn't Alabama.... He also got involved in some stuff up at Kennett

Square.... Most of the students were disengaged; this is before the '60s... There'd be some big incident, somebody got lynched ... and you'd have a lot of anger, there certainly was a great identification with the black thing ... but a campus-wide activism, no..

Fales never talked about European history. I don't remember a single discussion with him on anything other than American politics.

Adolf Hitler's name never came up?

Never. ... Why didn't [Fales talk about Germany]? Don't know. ... We certainly had political discussions. In my senior year, the year that Truman defeated Dewey ... I'm sure these discussions went on in class or in the social thing around class but I cannot recall a single discussion on politics at the national level in Europe. Obviously when we got into this course, this philosophy of history course, all kinds of philosophic questions related to political philosophy, a good bit of that.

You asked a few minutes ago did Fales ever declare himself in the Toynbee-Marx thing. ... I have a sense now as I think back that Fales probably thought there was more weight to [the other student's] arguments. I was flailing about... He used this as an opportunity to get me to learn things...

He was dispassionate as a teacher?

Yes.... I do remember some lectures, one day in class he was talking about a building. That's the first time I realized anything about architecture as a mode of aesthetic expression.

[Recording ends abruptly.]