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Interview conducted May 8, 1987, by Gabrielle Simon Edgcomb for the German Historical Institute

SUMMARY: Frances Coker was an adult student at segregated Millsaps College in Jackson, Mississippi, when she met Jewish refugee Ernst Borinski, head of the social sciences and sociology departments at nearby all-black Tougaloo College, "somewhere around 1960." She recounts her introduction to Borinski by one of her history professors, Jim Ferguson. Coker describes the ways in which Borinski worked to bridge the black and white communities of Jackson, notably through his parties and through Wednesday night forums bringing speakers from across the country to Tougaloo. "This was the only place in town that blacks and whites got together," Coker said, and the gatherings were monitored by the state Sovereignty Commission, "which operated as sort of a secret police system." Borinski, who had been denounced by the Mississippi legislature in 1957 as a "white radical professor," in Coker's words, "was well known in a notorious way," a key source for journalists of the era, and a central figure for white moderates in the state.

"He always made sociology relevant to what was going on. He presented theoretical things as well as anybody but he always had them revolving around some central issue of social change." His impact was far-reaching through his students: "They went to Berkeley, they went to Harvard, they went to Chicago, they went everywhere. They ended up doing wonderful things. And it was absolutely amazing to us in Mississippi how he with his terrific German-Polish accent could be understood by the black students from rural Mississippi, and how they learned and overcame their own English deficiencies as well as coped with his particular language style. I still don't know how that worked."

Coker tells Borinski's story of his spur-of-the-moment decision in 1937 to immediately leave his unnamed home town, in "sometimes Poland, sometimes Germany," where he was a magistrate. On a ship denied entry in the United States, he first went to Cuba, and started to teach at a Berlitz language school; from there he went to Chicago, eventually moving to Jackson in 1947. Coker describes the close friendship between her family and Borinski; his lack of active participation in the Jewish community; his influence on her studies and career (she became a sociology professor at Millsaps); his role in the civil rights movement as mentor and sounding board, "sort of the grand old man" watching over younger civil rights activists including Tougaloo chaplain Ed King and sociology professor John Salter; his boundless optimism; his "uncanny sense" of global and local politics; his importance to Tougaloo in bringing in grant money from the Field Foundation and other major supporters; his "incredible" sense of humor and enjoyment of life; his love of children; his continued teaching in Jackson and at Vanderbilt until his death from unknown causes after a very brief illness.