

RG-50.479.0005

Rough transcript of an interview with Frances Coker conducted May 8, 1987, for the German Historical Institute by Gabrielle Simon Edgcomb at the home of Mr. and Mrs. Lee Coke

Duration 00:40:28

Frances Coker: We first met Ernst somewhere around 1960. I was finishing school as an adult student; I had two children; I had returned to school. The times in Mississippi were becoming very critical in terms of the integration, segregation issue. And while I was in school — I was at Millsaps College [in Jackson, Miss.], majoring in history — and one of my major professors, Jim Ferguson and his wife, Frances, became very close friends of ours. We met about once a week, and Fran and Jimmy had known Ernst for years. He'd come here in 1947; they must have known him since about the time he came.

During latter 1950s Millsaps and Tougaloo [about a 15-minute drive away] had a very close relationship, by that I mean certain professors like Ernst Borinski and Jim Ferguson were friends and there was an exchange even that went on between classes and between professors. Ernst was teaching sociology; Jim was teaching history, so he was the person I got to know. However, there were other professors at Millsaps who also were close friends with Ernst, such as George Maddox who was teaching sociology.

I knew of Ernst because he came to Millsaps and taught some German classes; some students went to Tougaloo and took German classes. Ernst's and George Maddox's sociology classes would sometimes meet together; they would have joint programs. My knowledge of him came from Jim and Frances Ferguson. They asked us if we would like to go with them to Tougaloo; every Wednesday night there was a program with speakers from different parts of the country speaking on contemporary issues, and they would have discussion periods. The significance for us was not particularly in regard to the speakers and issues; the significance for us was this was the only place in town that blacks and whites got together.

This was a very critical time after the 1954 decision that integration should proceed with all deliberate speed. All kinds of opposition had arisen including the state Sovereignty Commission which operated sort of as a secret police system, gathering information on anybody who might be friendly with blacks, meeting with blacks. Anything you were doing, you could be listed by the state Sovereignty Commission and they would keep a file on you and you would be subject to various kinds of harassment in case they decided you were getting *too* friendly. So these sorts of meetings had dwindled down and this was the only one I knew of that was existing. The other place blacks and whites could continue to meet was the Catholic Church but frequently when they left, there would be arrests made on the grounds of disturbing the peace or whatever kinds of local ordinances there were; they saw blacks and whites together, they'd arrest them because that was a threat to public order.

So anyway we were interested in what was happening and I was finishing Millsaps during this time between '60 and '62 and since I was an adult student, finishing when I was about 31 years of age, I was of course involved in these issues in particular since my major professor, Jim

Ferguson, was a Southern historian by specialty, so a lot of what he was teaching us was about the system here and how it had developed. At any rate, he invited us to go out to these forums if we wanted to, and that's how we met Ernst. Ernst thereafter became a friend and we went every Wednesday night and became involved with the white moderate community—we weren't going out and doing anything radical—with blacks on Wednesday night. I guess our attitudes were different from the rest of the community.

Ernst became a focal point for this group of white Mississippians. Anybody who came to Mississippi during this era to look at the situation, they might be reporters from all parts of the world, not just this country but international people, no matter whom they would call in Mississippi, they would be told to call Ernst Borinski. So he was the bridge in a sense between the blacks and the whites. He got to know us on a friendship basis. He would visit our homes, we would go to his home, we would go to his parties. He was a wonderful party-giver; he was always having parties and using this as a vehicle for social change. He would invite blacks and whites and have them in these informal situations just to help know each other.

Incidentally prior to this time, prior to my getting to know him, he had been denounced in the Mississippi legislature in 1957 as that white radical professor at Tougaloo College, and there are articles. He may even have been called a communist; that really is what he was called and thought of by the whites. He was denounced. He was well known in a notorious way. He always felt himself as part of his mission to be as much in the white community as in the black community. He would shop in the white community, he would go to restaurants which of course were segregated, he would have his hair cut at the local barbershop. He made it his business to talk with and be known by the white community, not just staying in the black community. He really felt it a critical thing for him to be able to go back and forth between the communities.

Ernst had no family, here at least; I don't know whether he had family in Germany. He never spoke of it. He had told me the story of his leaving Poland. This town where he was from was sometimes Poland and sometimes Germany. He would go to school and it would be a different language. He didn't talk about the Nazi times; just talked about leaving. This is the story he told about leaving:

He said that he was a magistrate of some sort. That he had gotten his education. He did talk about home and how his mother used to make this or that in the kitchen, he did talk about that all the time, what they would do on holiday, but he never talked about the actual era very much at all. In 1937, when he came here, he was having coffee in some coffeeshop in his home and it came to him it was time that he had to leave. And he went home and packed a bag that very day and he got on a train that night. He gave the

conductor extra money to not call him if they were stopped, just to leave him in the compartment asleep. He went in the compartment and the conductor did this; he was not awakened, the train was stopped, he was not awakened and he got out. From there I don't know how he got to this country. I don't know why the story ended at that point.

At any rate he came to this country and he could not enter the country on the ship because there were too many immigrants and he went to Cuba.

Edgcomb: That was true of a few people who then got numbers to wait for their entry.

Coker: He had no money and he was wondering what he would do and he saw Berlitz language school and he went there and he taught. And he went from there to Chicago and that's all I know about this.

Edgcomb: Do you know whether the suitcase he packed was everything he took out of Germany?

Coker: As far as I know it was.

Edgcomb: He never said anything about having had a wife?

Coker: No. No.

Edgcomb: That's the story I get from everyone. Very interesting.

Coker: Never mentioned whether he did or did not. You would ask him if he had family and he said no. I know he had a cousin still in East Germany because he talked about going back... That's the only person he mentioned.

At any rate, here he made this place for himself and of course the obvious similarities are very significant and he I guess saw his chance to try to play a role in preventing maybe some of the things that had happened.

Edgcomb: I was reading in the files yesterday, something he had said or written about changes that were necessary in the practice of sociology, in the study, in the theory. And when I read this I thought, that comes from saying, *Look at what happened. We must rearrange our conceptual framework.* He did not say that, but that is what I inferred from what I read about sociology as a discipline. Did you ever have any such sense?

Coker: I suppose. We didn't exactly have that kind of conversation. It was a position he always had; and that was sociology had to deal with the real issues that were going on. I presume that's what he was talking about there, because maybe it used to didn't. It presumed to be neutral.

Edgcomb: Value-free but especially also in Germany, the ivory tower thing. You want explanations of how what happened in Germany could happen, which of course there are no answers to that. There are many answers and I think that is one of many, the isolation.

Coker: 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. And his students ended up being practitioners of sociology not just researchers and he sent them to graduate schools all over the country.

Edgcomb: I have a little question-answer thing from him where someone said, toward the end of his life, *Where are your students now?* and he said, *Everywhere.*

Coker: Yes. They went to Berkeley, they went to Harvard. they went to Chicago, they went everywhere. And 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 the 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.

Anyway, back to the story of our relationship, this is what he did. When the Maddoxes and the Fergusons moved on to North Carolina, and we already knew him and been closely and intimately associated with him, he sort of gravitated to our family. He also had another family, the ?, she is from Belgium,—she may have had more conversations with him about the past. But he was sort of in both of our families. She was a Belgian war bride; they talked about lot of European things.

So he gravitated to us. He began to spend his holidays with us, got to know our extended family, who were very conservative, pro-segregation. He found it extremely interesting; he wanted to know them. He might give a question to them that would slightly challenge their point of view but he never took advantage of the situation because he obviously would lose his access. But he went along because he wanted to hear and see and know them. He found it all very interesting and that goes both ways, too. Imagine I'm bringing this professor from Tougaloo to these family gatherings and they could never quite could quite understand that. They related to him basically as Jewish, being kicked out of Europe. And as long as they could do that and deemphasize the "Tougaloo professor of black students," they could manage. It was very tenuous, because they —

Edgcomb: Less threatening than quote one of their own. An outsider anyhow. Made his position here probably more tenable, accent and all.

Coker: Interesting thing was, he was friends with the Jewish community, but he never became really an active member in the Jewish community here.

Edgcomb: A lot of German Jews have found that very difficult and he probably wasn't in the least religious.

Coker: He wasn't. He went to the Unitarian church, incidentally. Different families knew him and would invite him to Hanukah at their homes, and he would go. But he did not have close

family relations with them. He became friends with the Catholic hierarchy and of course they were as active in promoting some of these clandestine meetings as he was. And I guess they had that in common. The Jewish community was of course recognized as extremely liberal but it was too dangerous for them. The Catholics had more protection.

Edgcomb: Very interesting history there. I read two books about Jews and blacks. I found out there were Jewish slaveholders which I hadn't known.

Coker: This role of being a bridge was very important. He found acceptance and a deep affection and closeness with families, white families and black families. He had a skill, amazing, really amazing. He did all he could to bring those communities together through all those associations.

In my own life he was one of the most important figures I can imagine. When I got ready to go graduate school it was in my major, history, at University of North Carolina, and he interceded and told me I needed to go to Chicago, to IIT, which is where I went, because his friend Daisy Tagliacozzo was running this program, sponsored by the National Science Foundation, and he had students up there and thought I should go to this program for teachers. So he is why I'm in sociology. I didn't even know what it was. One of our friends from the University of Chicago was a dean there...

When I got ready to come back in public schools, a position was open at Millsaps in 1967. And [Borinski] and I worked closely again with the students in terms of exchange and the students getting to know each other and being involved in the same issues of the day. Millsaps had integrated that same year; it was the first white school in Mississippi to integrate, run by Methodist church. They had applications and simply at some point began admitting them.

A significant person, Ed King, a white chaplain at Tougaloo, was the white leader of the civil rights movement in Mississippi. He's the one who virtually started it in terms of political demonstrations. Ed and his wife, Jeannette, had been sociology majors at Millsaps who had gone off to Boston for their graduate degrees and then when he went into the ministry and was assigned to Tougaloo, he was white but was therefore a member of the black Methodist conference rather than the white conference; even the church was segregated.

Edgcomb: Did he go to Boston University?

Coker: Yes.

Edgcomb: That's where Martin Luther King went.

Coker: Ernst was sort of the grand old man here of watching over these younger people who were out doing all these things, and Ed and someone else in the sociology department by the name of John Salter were the ones who led until such time as the blacks took it over

themselves. But it was some years that they were the leaders of it. Ed brought Tougaloo students to Millsaps to integrate his alma mater, and they were arrested and all these things went on. I mean Millsaps didn't just one day say, *Come in!* It was after Ed had taken black students there and knocked on the door in two events and been turned away and all that kind of thing.

Edgcomb: Was Borinski threatened?

Coker: Oh, I'm sure he was threatened a lot because everybody was threatened. The State Sovereignty Commission and all. Oh yes, no doubt about it. In fact, Ed King was in a serious accident where cars were following them and ran into them on the night; he was almost killed.

But Ernst, while he was notorious and people knew about him and all that kind of thing, he was never out in the streets marching. That was not his style. His style was in the intimate, big parties and teaching. He was the one you would go to to talk about maybe your strategy or your conceptual understanding.

Edgcomb: I was reading a paper he wrote about negotiation, about the analogies between the unions, the labor movement and the movements for change.

Coker: The interesting thing about Ernst was in spite of the horror of this era here, he was the most optimistic person I ever met in my life. Despite everything, he was totally optimistic. It was more than

some of us could handle at times. I mean, he insisted upon that point of view. I guess it's what kept him going. He was optimistic about Mississippi, he was optimistic about the United States, just incredibly optimistic in spite of everything that had happened and everything worldwide. And all these things and he had always wonderful comments and he predicted what came out of the Vienna conference between Kennedy and Khrushchev before it did. He had an uncanny sense of political stuff; but in spite of all of it, he remained this optimist. [*Chuckles.*] Just not understandable.

Edgcomb: Did he speak about Vietnam?

Coker: Oh yeah, he would speak about everything. He thought it was terrible, we shouldn't be there, but he thought this system had a way of overcoming its wrongs. I can see that, too. He was somebody you could go and talk for hours about global things... . Even if it was bad, he was still an eternal optimist, he thought it would work out or something else would happen; he never lost faith that it would work out. He didn't think it would work out through a mystical reason, he had a belief that when people recognized what the issues were somehow they would do something.

And he had a sense of humor that was incredible and a sense of enjoyment of life that was incredible. And I also credit him not just with sending me for my degree in sociology but with

giving me a sense of appreciation of life, and fun, and enjoyment of things that I would not have had otherwise. I thought if he can, given his past, enjoy things; he enjoyed going out to a really lovely restaurant and having really elegant experiences, he didn't see anything to be guilty about doing that, when you had people in poverty. He took it as it came. He thought—he didn't believe in guilt. You just go on, do what you can.

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Ernst loved children. First off, let me say before talking about children specifically, Tougaloo was his family, Tougaloo was his first family. He built his house on Tougaloo property so Tougaloo could later use it.

He gave Dr. [George] Owens a lot of hard times; he always gave the administration a hard time. But the thing about Ernst was, he also brought so much money in, from foundations. The Field Foundation was a constant supporter. See, he was chairman of the social science division as well as chairman of the sociology department and he had contacts in New York and Chicago. He would go every year on his annual renewal of his grants. He had grants to do these Wednesday night programs, that's how he got all those people here. He had magnificent grants from the Field Foundation as well as others. So Tougaloo had to listen to him because he brought in so much money. Not only just to have programs but to send students here and there and do things for students. He had a leverage; he recognized power and how to get it and how to use it.

Anyway, back to children. He loved children and he liked the holidays. And he always bought gifts and he had parties and he loved to observe them, whatever they were doing and very much encouragement of them in any and everything they could possibly do. You see, it was how some white children got to know there was a biracial community, by going to [inaudible]. At Christmas he had gifts and all for them and he encouraged them to do things to enlarge their horizons in any way possible. He was a moderating influence in families. When we had trouble with the teenagers he would see the fun part of it or he would laugh or he had very interesting insights. If you were having family difficulties, he would pick up on them, although you might not want to discuss them with him [*laughs*], he would pick up on them and he would tell sort of tell you in little asides about what you ought to be doing. Or that you ought not pay attention to that, or you ought to do thus and such. He was a manager, not just at Tougaloo, but he was a manager of these families he was a part of. [*Laughs.*] Everywhere he went, he was a manager.

Edgcomb: How did the kids react to him?

Coker: They loved it. They didn't get into any long serious discussions with him. They would always expect him to be included in any family activities. The interesting thing is he died the week after my granddaughter was born. He had invited us all to supper the week my daughter went home from the hospital. And he called her in the hospital and sent her flowers when the baby was born and all that. And the other family [the Belgian war bride] had had a grandchild born the week or two before that. It was like he was waiting for these grandchildren to be born, he wasn't going to die until the grandchildren were born. He had been talking about the fact he

wouldn't live for more than a couple of years, but he didn't have any health problems. He just all of a sudden, he went in the hospital Wednesday morning and said he was really sick, and they couldn't find anything. He was in intensive care and he died on Friday. I don't know what it was. Maybe his heart; maybe his whole system.

He had just finished teaching; it was in May. He retired but he never quit teaching. He had taught sociology of law course that spring, which he taught every spring; he had Millsaps students and he had Tougaloo students. He finished that class and he was to start at Vanderbilt, he taught in summer at Vanderbilt. He was going up there the first of June. He didn't interrupt anything when he died; he just died right in the middle, and after these babies were born. In fact some friends took a picture of our grandbaby and took it up to the hospital while he was in intensive care. It was all just like he would have done it. My daughter had just gone home from the hospital and that was the first place she went, was to Ernst's funeral.