

RG-50.479.0007

Interview conducted Feb. 13, 1990, by Gabrielle Simon Edgcomb for the German Historical Institute

(Audio only, 45:56)

Walter Fales was a professor of philosophy at Lincoln University in Pennsylvania from 1946 until his death from cancer on April 18, 1953. His widow, Ruth Fales, was interviewed at the guesthouse of Lincoln University.

SUMMARY:

Ruth Ilgner Fales summarizes the path she and her husband, Walter Fales, took from Berlin, where he taught general education at the Jüdischen Lehrer-Bildungsanstalt, to the historically black Lincoln University in Pennsylvania: They left Germany on Feb. 1, 1939, for Switzerland, where he worked at Winterthur on the Pestalozzi archives and a year later immigrated to the United States, where Walter Fales had two brothers and an uncle, Bismarck Feilchenfeld, in Chicago. Mrs. Fales mentions her husband's decision to change his name from Feilchenfeld to the original Old German FAH-less, for "violet." She describes getting a start in New York through an organization that found them various menial jobs and through the American Friends Service Committee, eventually moving to the Philadelphia area, where their children, Evan Michael (1943) and Corinna (1945) were born, and Walter Fales worked at Haverford College on American Friends Services Committee archives. In 1946, he joined Lincoln University as a professor of philosophy. Ruth Fales recounts settling into their on-campus home in the old infirmary, their objection to fraternity hazing of the young black men, his students' reaction to being told that Africa was the cradle of civilization, other professors' dislike of Walter Fales' preference for essay exams. A second grade teacher in Germany, Ruth Fales was urged by her husband to get an American degree and she became the first female degree candidate at Lincoln, forcing the university to go to court to amend the charter limiting degrees to black male students. After her husband's death in 1953, she went on to get a master's in education, finishing at the University of Pennsylvania. Active in the Friends, she was asked by the London Grove Friends Meeting to start a kindergarten and, as she had done at Haverford, she agreed to take the position if the school were fully integrated. She worked there for 23 years. Ruth Fales discusses her own children's schools and their continued connection to Lincoln University, which 20 years after her graduation changed the alma mater to reflect that the school no longer was limited to men. She talks about experiences in the 1950s with segregation at movie theaters and pools in the area and her efforts to question those restrictions. In an end note, the interviewer says that Ruth Fales' parents and sister had escaped to Holland but all were sent to Sobibor and perished.