

RG-50.479.0007

This is a rough transcript of an interview with the widow of professor Walter Fales, who taught philosophy at Lincoln University. Conducted Feb. 13, 1990, by Gabrielle Simon Edgcomb for the German Historical Institute at the guest house of Lincoln University. The questions are in bold script.

You and your husband were married in Berlin. May I ask when?

December 1936. We left for Switzerland from Germany in 1945?

No, that was after the war.

We left Germany on February 1, 1939.

That was fairly late in the game. You had already lived through the Kristallnacht. You left as late as it could be.

My husband was teaching at the Jüdischen Lehrer-Bildungsanstalt in Berlin and I was one of his students. He taught general education.

Before the Nazi time, your husband taught in the Gymnasium. You decided there was no future and you went to Switzerland to work in Winterthur on the Pestalozzi work.

[Inaudible]

When did you leave Switzerland to arrive in this country?

We left a year later. We had only permission for a year to the United States.

How did you get to the United States.

On one of the American ocean liners, boarding in Naples, through the Strait of Gibraltar, to New York.

Whom did you know in New York City?

Two of my husband's brothers were already in the States.

At that time your name was Feilchenfeld and you changed it to Fales?

Yes, that choice was made by my husband who was very much interested in the history of his family and the old, old family name was Fales [FAH-less], Old German for "violet." He just retrieved the old name of the family. There was a time when Jews in Germany were supposed to take real German names. That's when Feilchenfeld—

I know. Feilchenfeld means "a field of violets." Was the German Fales spelled f-a-l-e-s? Fascinating.

[Inaudible.]

Do you have some sense of what you and your husband knew or thought you knew about the United States before you came?

Somewhat, because we had relatives here. As a matter of fact, we were given affidavits by one of our relatives, [an uncle] Bismarck Feilchenfeld (strange name) in Chicago and they were very well-to-do... [interrupted]

What I'm getting at is what did you know in historical terms; I'm aiming at the whole issue of race, about this country and the conditions prevailing when you came?

What we knew was what we heard, what we read, what our relatives told us. We knew about the situation as far as the place of the Negro—

You knew there was a problem with racism and equality?

We knew that. Yes.

Now 1940 was of course before the war started in the United States but the draft had begun... You did not yet have children, right?

We had our children [interrupted]

I'll come to that. How did you get to Lincoln University? Or, what happened when you first came?

We landed in New York City. We had to find some way of earning our bread. We went to an organization for self-help and they found us some ways of earning some money. We did several different things. I went to clean rooms for people and my husband the same sort of things. We both learned to drive cars. We just had a rented room with a family [did not want to discuss details].

It's very important in terms of how people survived when they first got here. How was your English?

Not too fancy. Mine was better than my husband's, I must say that. We did somehow get along somehow. We were of course known to the various agencies; that was one way to find work and find some ways of learning more English, etc. The American Friends Service Committee was very much responsible later on to find us places to—

The committee tried to help refugees from other countries. That's how we got to some of the places where we worked.

What was your husband's first professional assignment here?

Teaching. Or writing. It took quite a while. We were cooks, maids etc. etc. for quite awhile. We were asked for a get-together one evening where we qualified for Friends and we then found that we could go to the Philadelphia area and find some work there. We lived in the Bryn Mawr area first, Haverford area, right across from Haverford College in an apartment house. That was after the children were born; they were still small. We had meanwhile Evan Michael Fales and Corinna, only 13 months apart, in 1943 and 1945. That's when we switched to Pennsylvania from New York. They were born in Pennsylvania at Bryn Mawr Hospital and we lived right across from Haverford College because my husband had been asked by the American Friends Service Committee to go to Haverford College and look at the very long-time stored materials there about the American Friends Service Committee, etc., etc.

So he started doing archival research?

He did that [answer muffled as interviewer continued]

And was that his first professional assignment in this country? and was it around that time you joined the Friends?

Not right away, no. But we did get a great deal of friendship and help from them, and the Meeting was very close to us and we then started to—we were asked if we wanted to—started to attend and we found it very congenial, yes, indeed.

We're now up to 1945 and near the time when Dr. Fales was joining Lincoln.

1946.

So your stay at Bryn Mawr and Haverford led to his appointment here at Lincoln.

We were very excited of course. We were located on campus. I would like to take you to the place; it's very close. In the house that used to be where the students were kept when they were sick—in the infirmary; pardon me, it eluded me there for a moment. The evidence of that was there. The house had been for quite a while abandoned. I should say that the very first dwelling we were in was what was called then Vets Village at Lincoln, temporary housing, and people who came to Lincoln who were veterans were housed there. I will never forget, I had by then two babies, and a very strange coal stove that gave some heat, was very different, and with two babies, really. Not grass, but plain mud, but I can still see it. But we had some company there; Mr. Matt was living there, too, for a while. We lived there for a few months and then moved into the abandoned house on campus, which still showed signs of that. When I went to the house to orient myself I went upstairs and under the roof there was an artificial leg hanging down from the rafters. I couldn't quite see how I could possibly move into this house. One of the rooms in particular — the one we later chose for our bedroom, as a matter of fact—was from top to bottom filled with old newspapers. And I said, how can I ever... Somehow or another I wormed my way through to the window, opened the window and threw all the newspapers down to the ground from the second floor. I don't know who left them there. Then I called the grounds crew and said, Take those papers away. And of course we had to clean the whole house up but it became a very nice house to live in. There was no furniture; we got our own. It was a very very nice house to live in, right in the middle of campus. My children were out there; next door was Marita [Rivero, child of Lincoln University coach] and they had a good time. It was a little iffy sometimes, a little side trip here, a student, Greek organization: Two days before Christmas, they were very visible from our house, going from dormitories to other buildings on campus where they had classes. It was a sight to behold; they had to go two steps forward and one step back, wear special hats and be ridiculed.

It's called hazing.

Exactly. My children being small found this very amusing and started to go behind them and imitate them. But my husband and I felt very much against the hazing and spoke against it. We were told, "You come from a different country, you don't understand. That's the old boys network." My husband said, how can black people do something ridiculing others like that. He was strongly reprimanded by some of the other professors who just didn't understand.

He also found a very strong reaction from the students, when he came in his classes and said the cradle of civilization was in Africa. Now, these American students they did not like to hear it. But on the whole they had a group of students that came together every week, the club.

The African origins at that time were not accepted, recognized.

A few other things they didn't like. The other professors, many of them, were not too happy about my husband's type of exam, which was not just multiple-choice, right or wrong but essay type, which it seems to me and to him, fit for a philosophy course. They were not happy, the professors. Didn't bother my husband, he went right on; but it was different from what people were used to.

Walter had urged me to get my American degree also. In Germany I was a teacher; I had my teachers degree, yes. I taught 2nd grade. So I did become a member of the class of '52 at Lincoln. No women at all; I was the first to take a degree. Faculty wives, for example, did take some courses but not for a degree. I must say, the students were very affable; the alumni were very doubtful about the whole thing, not outwardly so much, as you know they are talking to each other. I did not get a degree in '52; the university decided the charter did not allow for women to get a degree; two paragraphs in charter spoke of males. And they decided they would have to bring it through the courts. It took one year to go through the court, so I got my degree with the class of '53. Not contested; at that point they must have been resigned.

What did you do after you graduated, children etc. aside?

After it took one year in court to change the charter, I decided to get a master's degree in education, not at Lincoln, because you could not get a master's degree at Lincoln. Went first to University of Delaware and later finished at the University of Pennsylvania.

And then did you teach?

I was approached by the Meeting we attended, Haverford Friends Meeting, because there was a community center in the area, they wanted to have somebody, right between the white community and black community. Everything was offered to children of white community. I said I would work there if they were open to all children in the area, not just white. And the person who was running the organization said yes. It was not Friends but right in the middle of Friends territory. It worked very well, they had a great summertime with the children; the parents were happy; I had enlisted the debutantes as helpers. So many of the families in that area are, you know ...

Classy —

Having been members of Haverford Friends Meeting, we had changed our location to too far away. Closest one was in Oxford, but that was under Baltimore Yearly Meeting. Started to check around to see which Friends Meetings were in this area; we were members of the Philadelphia area and therefore opted for London Grove meeting, another locality not too far removed. It was at London Grove where I was asked to start a kindergarten, after a longtime meeting member had a part-time kindergarten there but had passed away. We started a kindergarten, open not only to children of Meeting but children in whole area, 5 years, or just a little under. Not a nursery, a kindergarten. We made the point at that time, public schools did not in our

area have kindergarten. Churches did but there was no kindergarten where black children were also welcome. We made a point as I had done previously at another location to make sure—I went to some of the black churches, they asked me to come and explain. So our kindergarten started with children from the Meeting and the surrounding area. That kindergarten is still in full bloom. I worked there so many years; I finally retired after 23 years. The kindergarten is doing well and is still integrated, absolutely. And the Meeting now has people of different races. There were scholarships available for people in need. That's where my many years in this area were spent.

My children went to the public schools in the area; since the Oxford school was not the best, my son was unhappy there. When he was about 11 he said he wanted to work after school, earn money, so I could afford to send him to a good school.

Describe the schools.

There was a kindergarten right on campus run by one of the faculty wives, with some children from the village also. There was a small public school in Lincoln Village, a two-room school with two grades in each room. That school unfortunately was below par. Evan and Corinna did not enjoy that school but then they went to Oxford after schools became consolidated, in about 4th grade. Oxford school also presented problems particularly for Evan as he would not go along with some of the things the boys in the class did and he felt were not things he wanted to engage in — rough housing, playing tricks on people. I went to see his classroom teacher and said he was having trouble with other boys and she said he was doing nothing wrong, that was the problem, he was not in the other boys' good graces. Though he was younger than the other children, he turned out to be their best runner. The minute he was good in athletics, he turned out to be their fair-haired boy.

The teachers were very strange in some ways; Evan loved math, it was like a toy to him. And he would get through with the problems they were supposed to solve and started doing other things. When he was doing square roots, the teacher said, Don't you think you're a little ahead of yourself. I got in touch with Westtown school, which is a Friends school, an excellent school, but I said I don't have money for that. They said let him take the exam; he took the exam with flying colors. Corinna who was 13 months younger also did not enjoy the school and since Evan had now the pleasure of being in a good school, I felt I should do something for Corinna who was very gifted in other ways — she writes beautifully and very gifted artistically, too— and got in touch with the other Friends school in Bucks County — George School — and she also got a scholarship.

Walter, of course, had passed away and it was up to me. Both of them did very well.

Did you continue to live in the house on campus?

No, I moved into a house— I was always considered part of anything, programs etc. that were available. Built a new house right next to the campus.

The alma mater, how did the words change?

Twenty years after I graduated from Lincoln, the alma mater was changed from “Dear Lincoln, dear Lincoln, my sons will ever be true. The golden hours we spent beneath the dear old orange and blue will live forever in our memory.”

They got it through the courts, I did tell you that, and finally after 20 years they changed it to very simply to “Dear Lincoln, dear Lincoln, to **thee** we’ll ever be true.”

We heard yesterday how segregated this area was, for example swimming pools etc. Did you or other white faculty avail yourselves of the segregated facilities.

[Vehemently.] Absolutely **not!** in fact I took my children to the cinema in Oxford only to find out that the blacks were only supposed to be in a particular place. I took my daughter and Marita [an African American girl] together to see a children’s picture and we sat together in the middle of the theater. There was a member of the Friends Meeting who had a swimming pool and they wouldn’t let us go there to swim with our friends. They said it was private. We would not go swimming anywhere unless — I would go to another one and with another faculty member right behind me and they said, no it was full. If I went after him, they let me in, and I said, Hey, I thought it was full. We did all sorts of things like that.

Any white faculty members who did not observe the principles you did?

Not that I know. It was not an issue on the campus.

[After Ruth Fales left, the interviewer noted: Her father, her mother and her sister went to Holland to escape from Germany. Her sister married a Dutchman and when the Nazis came to get them, he had an opportunity to get away. He would not do this and the four of them were sent to Sobibor extermination camp where they all died.]