

Interview with Mr. Hilail Gildin
May 2011

Stephen Gregory: This is Stephen Gregory. I'm sitting in the home of Professor Hilail Gildin. Thank you for having me.

Hilail Gildin: A pleasure, and I look forward to this interview.

SG: Okay. You studied with Professor Strauss at the University of Chicago?

HG: Yes.

SG: [Beginning] at around 1950?

HG: 1952. Actually, I couldn't have begun until the winter semester—the winter quarter of 1953. But I heard him deliver the “Progress or Return” lectures at Hillel House and that is what got me interested in studying with him.

SG: So you heard him at Hillel House, and then you looked him up as someone you might take courses with.

HG: I registered for his courses.

SG: What was the first course you took with him?

HG: You know, I thought I remembered it, but I'm not sure. I just remember that the first three courses were on Machiavelli, Hobbes, and Plato's *Statesman*. And then later there were courses on Rousseau and Montesquieu. And then he went off, I think, to Israel.

SG: Right.

HG: So that was the, that's the sequence I recall.

SG: And how did you find Leo Strauss as a teacher?

HG: Illuminating. Prepared, needless to say—I mean, by that standard more prepared than any teacher I've ever had before. Accessible in the things he was saying and the examples he used to illustrate the points he was making. Excellent at dealing with questions that students asked, and I found that the students were capable of asking better questions in the atmosphere created by one of his classes than they were outside the atmosphere. He established a framework that made that

happen. I'm sure it will get reflected in the tapes that you're publishing and the transcripts that you're bringing out.¹

SG: That's an interesting remark, that the students would ask better questions in the context of the classes than they might ask outside the classes.

HG: Yeah. A framework was established for the subject under discussion.

SG: And when he gave his classes, he would—I'm told he would typically assign a short paper.

HG: Yes.

SG: Did he read your papers, your class papers?

HG: We read them out loud to the class and then he would comment on them.

SG: And that would be the basis of your grade?

HG: That, plus a final exam. So there was this—this is the way the class opened. Now I learned from the transcripts that when the classes grew larger it became necessary to assign several papers for a given session, and as a result they could not all be read. I don't know how the decision was made whose paper would be read and commented on, but I mean I'm sure they were all commented on.

SG: And how was he at—I've never attended a class with this format—how was he in commenting on papers in class?

HG: It led to an interesting discussion with the person who'd written it. And that's the material you have on the tapes.

SG: Right. They would turn it [the tape recorder] off when the student read the paper and then the tape would begin when Strauss would begin commenting; but you didn't know, you often didn't know who he was commenting on. You had no context for the comments because you hadn't heard the paper.

HG: I remember now. I thought all the courses had that structure. I don't think the *Symposium* course had that structure. That is, I don't remember any papers being read at the beginning of the *Symposium* course. And there were times when students were asked to comment on a passage that had not yet been discussed in class; there were other times when the paper took the form of a summary of what had been said in a previous class. I do recall that. But I can no longer tell you exactly in what classes this was done, exactly in what classes that was done.

SG: Of course. So his comments would lead to an interesting discussion with the paper-giver.

¹ That is, the Leo Strauss Transcript Project. See <https://leostrausscenter.uchicago.edu/about-transcripts-project>.

HG: There are some transcripts, the old transcripts, that have those comments.

SG: I understand. You say Strauss was very accessible. You'd go to see him after class?

HG: Well, depending on the state of his health. And this changed, I think, as he grew older. But the classes would last longer than they were scheduled for. And I don't know whether you had that experience. I have office hours. The time students want to talk to me is right after class, and usually there's a professor coming right in—and once you go into the hall or say come upstairs and so on, it's not the same thing, for some reason. I mean, I remember occasions during which I saw him in his office. I no longer remember how they occurred, but there were lengthy discussions after class. There were periods that lasted much longer than the length of time assigned to them.

SG: I've heard that he would, in the 1950s at least, that he would answer questions after class was over for one or two hours.

HG: There you go, yeah. You know, and that was the time when one was most motivated to ask them because the material was fresh and—

SG: Why do you think he expended so much energy on teaching in those years? That's a, that's a tremendous commitment. That means he would have been spending four or five hours on his feet answering, asking questions and lecturing.

HG: I think I heard Jenny² say once he enjoyed it. Yes, I think that is true. And as age took its toll, he might have had to cut back on it somewhat, but he enjoyed it. That's why he had these reading groups.

SG: I mean, he had reading groups separate from the courses, the official courses he taught.

HG: Yes, I mean, during the year—even during the year in Palo Alto, when one might have thought he was away from everyone, there were others who were around and there was a reading group. I mean, Martin Diamond³ was there and—

SG: Was he different in the reading groups than he was in the courses?

HG: In the reading groups, those who took part in them were usually people who had been through his courses. And they did not need to have a framework established, like: Why are we studying this in a department of political science? From what I've seen of some of the transcripts from St. John's College, he felt: Well, now that I'm here I don't have to do that—he actually said that on one of the transcripts.

² Jenny Strauss: see “People Mentioned in the Interviews” [hereafter “People”].

³ Martin Diamond: see “People.”

SG: Right, right. But then he went ahead and did it. I mean, he didn't provide justification for why political science, he provided justification for why to read this book.

HG: Yeah, yeah, yeah. The importance of the book, yes.

SG: So in the reading groups, he didn't feel the need to establish a framework. Was his manner with the students different at all? [Pause]

HG: Well, I guess the form was different. I mean, the ones that I experienced—[a] short Platonic dialogue, which we just went through passage by passage, discussing it as we went, him leading the discussion. It wasn't like a course on Kant where every session was as it were planned in advance, and people were chosen to read papers; and the next time one had to go on to this, the next time one had to go on to that. To that extent, it was a looser structure and when we finished one work, we moved on to another.

SG: Right. You took classes with Strauss for about a half a dozen years?

HG: Yeah.

SG: And what do you, how do you think Strauss understood his own activity? How do you think he understood his role as a teacher?

HG: Well, it was clear that he thought [pause] that political science, at least, [pause] was on the wrong track and wanted to encourage truer understanding of political life than was available in those inspired by the ideal of turning it into a natural science, deserving a place alongside the established respectable natural sciences. That he was clearly undertaking, and through his reacquainting us with what one has to call common sense. In the debate with Schaar and Wolin,⁴ one of them challenged him with the question: What is common sense? Now that's one of the hardest questions in the world to answer, but he said he will content himself with a commonsense understanding of common sense. But without denying that it is—there is a place where he calls it the fundamental riddle. That's in the epilogue.⁵ That's pretty strong language from Strauss. And it's not what one usually thinks of as the fundamental riddle when one thinks of Strauss.

SG: So one way in which he saw himself as a teacher: someone who is trying to encourage or to recover a better understanding of political life than was available through scientific political science.

HG: "Scientific" in quotes.

SG: "Scientific" in quotes, yes, okay.

⁴ John H. Schaar and Sheldon S. Wolin, "Review: Essays on the Scientific Study of Politics: A Critique," *American Political Science Review* 57 (1963): 125-50.

⁵ Strauss's epilogue in Herbert J. Storing, ed., *Essays on the Scientific Study of Politics: A Critique* (Holt, Rhinehart and Winston, 1962).

HG: But not science. I remember references in the writings of the Founders to recent advances that have been made in political science; there it was not in quotes. And Bloom⁶ speaks of political science without embarrassment, and he doesn't mean anything that's the least bit reminiscent of mathematical physics.

SG: Did he ever discuss with his students what the—perhaps even in the context of some of the books that you read with him—what the role of a teacher is? I mean, certainly in the context of the Platonic dialogues he discussed—

HG: Well, I mean, Socrates was always there, and [pause]. But I don't remember any—I remember hearing from others, or even reading, I think it's in "Liberal Education and Responsibility,"⁷ his comments on—the rule of thumb he gave to students who were going to go out and become teachers: Always assume that there is a silent student in the class who is your superior in mind and heart. Take what you are doing seriously, don't take yourself too seriously. That's how I remember it. But anyway, one can check that.

SG: Right.

HG: It's been written.

SG: Was that principle of, I would call it modesty? Did you see that at work in his teaching? Did he follow his own advice, do you think?

HG: Well, he always gave the thinker he was teaching the benefit of the doubt, though I mean I must say there are places where he permits himself to be critical even while teaching someone. I remember finding them in the Grotius transcript where he felt he was parading his scholarly learning a little excessively, or in the Vico transcript where he was hammering a point in repeatedly—a remark to that effect. But you know the courses I took with him have to include the things that I read in the transcripts after I—there were courses I didn't hear, the subject interested me and so on. And so from the transcripts—and they have to be a part of the experience although I wasn't physically there.

He didn't feel that his course on the *Statesman* had been understood by enough people, that I do recall. So I don't think that's one he went back to. Others he would return to.

SG: He taught the *Politics* most frequently of any one text. And as far as I know—and, I suspect that after the *Politics*, probably the *Republic* was second in terms of numbers of courses he offered, although I don't think we have records of several of those. But I would have to go back and look at the course records. And I don't know what he taught at the New School—I don't know if anybody has the course records for the New School.

⁶ Allan Bloom: see "People."

⁷ "Liberal Education and Responsibility," in Leo Strauss, *Liberalism Ancient and Modern* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1968), 9-25.

HG: Well, you haven't interviewed David Lowenthal⁸?

SG: No. No, I haven't, we haven't. We have not interviewed David Lowenthal.⁹

HG: He is—he may outlast me but he is more mortal than I am. As these things are ordinarily understood, so—. He probably has valuable recollections. Others have passed on. Henry Magid¹⁰ long ago.

SG: In a letter to, in a letter to Klein¹¹ in 1949, Strauss complains to Jacob Klein that students need a political teaching, and that he has to come up with a political teaching for this in order to teach. Have you seen that letter? It's been published.

HG: I have not read through that wonderful trove that Heinrich Meier¹² has made available to us. I mean, I've been teaching full time at Queens and trying to figure out . . . what to include as good an introduction [in] the philosophy course as I can teach. I still haven't been able to Anyway, no. Please acquaint me with what you're thinking about.

SG: Just simply that's a provocative remark for him to have made, that he felt that he needed to come up with a political teaching for the sake of his students. This would have been in 1949, back when he was starting at the University of Chicago. I don't understand political to mean in that instance, in that context, to mean Republican or Democrat—I mean, I think that the word has a much broader meaning in that context.

HG: If he came up with one, I confess I don't know what it is, except that I remember him quoting Max Weber's remark that accomplishing something in the political arena was like drilling a hole by hand in extremely hard wood. But clearly extravagant folks were identified for what they were even though you knew they were present. When he taught Nietzsche, it was not an anti-Nietzsche polemic. If there was something to be learned from the thinker, he wanted to communicate what that was. That went for Hobbes and Machiavelli as well.

As far as that *Politics* course, it might have been 1960, I think that was; I don't know whose idea it was to have him teach undergraduates, but I think it was a younger group, not the usual older graduate students. But it was a younger group that poured into the classroom when he went through the *Politics* with them.

SG: That's an interesting question. In the courses that you attended, how many people were attending? How many people were attending his classes? Do you know?

⁸ David Lowenthal: see "People."

⁹ Gregory later interviewed Lowenthal; the audiofile and transcript of the interview are part of this collection of interviews with former students on the Leo Strauss Center website.

¹⁰ Henry Magid (1917-1973), professor of philosophy at City College of New York.

¹¹ Jacob Klein: see "People." The letter Gregory refers to is in *Leo Strauss: Gesammelte Schriften*, hrsg. Heinrich Meier (Stuttgart: Verlag J. B. Metzler, 2001/2008), bd. 3, 597-98.

¹² Heinrich Meier: see "People." Gildin is referring to the *Gesammelte Schriften* (3 vols.), edited by Meier.

HG: I get the impression that afterwards it got much bigger. And someone said something that reminded me that the class on the *Statesman*—a lot of people poured in. It had the subtitle, “Metaphysical Foundations of the Political Philosophy of Plato.” I may not be getting that perfectly right, but “metaphysical foundations” was in there. They wanted to hear what he would have to say on that, and that was unusual; that had to be—someone reminded me of that, I didn’t realize it at the time—it had to be moved to a larger room than the one in which he usually taught. But while I was studying with him, the classes were not unusually large. I understand that they became unusually large in subsequent years, as his students started sending their students to study with him.

SG: Yeah. Do you think—what was, what did Strauss want to accomplish by teaching political philosophy?

HG: Well— [pause].

SG: I mean, an interesting thought experiment might be if someone had come along and said that they would give him a stipend to live the rest of his life out reading and studying and writing, he never had to teach another class again, would he have accepted that, or was there something in teaching that he felt he needed to accomplish, just as he needed to write his books?

HG: That’s an interesting question. But [pause] those who studied with him and were impressed by what they experienced in his classroom went ahead and read his books. If they’d just been lying there on the shelves, not too many people would have become aware of what they contained, and given the amount of noise—I mean, I have the impression that if you asked the average political scientist who the more prominent thinker is, John Rawls or Leo Strauss, you’d probably get Rawls. Now how do you combat that?

Now, it’s not as though he didn’t enjoy teaching; I mean, he did. I do remember one thing I heard of, heard about: one of the first students and one of the ablest that he had, [and who] published little, became specialized in constitutional law—taught what he had to say by teaching courses in constitutional law: Leo Weinstein.¹³ I just learned from talking to someone at the reception¹⁴ that he was involved in the project to tape-record Strauss. But he started out very opposed to Strauss. I think Strauss told me something about that. And he was very able and very bright and kept raising objections, and by the end of the semester Strauss had brought him around.

HG: The quarter.

HG: Pardon?

SG: The quarter. [Laughs]

¹³ Leo Weinstein: see “People.”

¹⁴ Presumably the reception after the “Leo Strauss as Teacher Conference,” held in April 2011.

HG: And—but it was something of a struggle and that indicated to me that it may have taken work, very early on, for him to establish himself and his way of looking at political life against the prevailing view at Chicago.

SG: Right. Yes, I'm told his first few classes were very poorly attended. I mean, there were very few people there. Is that right? Or—he would have already been teaching three or four years by time you studied with him.

HG: Well, I remember a seminar on Rousseau. Not even a class. I mean, a small room; if I remember correctly, we sat around a table. I don't recall the exact physical layout.

SG: Yeah.

HG: But at the same time, the other classes were full classes, so it depends—I mean, people knew he had written a book on Hobbes and acquired a reputation, so when they gave him the Hobbes course it was very well attended. The seminar on Rousseau—which I don't think got recorded, but which I learned a tremendous amount from. And then I remember a seminar on Montesquieu for which I wrote paper that was too long—not intending to be arrogant, just not realizing that it was too long.

SG: So Leo Weinstein had something to do with getting the project to tape Strauss's courses started. What do you know about that?

HG: Something that someone told me. Now who is this man at Roosevelt college, again?

SG: Stuart Warner?¹⁵

HG: Stuart Warner. He said that Carol Lerner¹⁶—he was the one that told me that Carol Lerner told Leo Weinstein (this is how far back it goes) and Bob Horowitz¹⁷ that they not only have to get Strauss's permission, but they have to get a letter saying that they have his permission, and they had to get that letter notarized. That was the first time I learned that, the first time I heard that Leo Weinstein had anything to do with that, but I could see this happening because he saw the difference between the old way of studying political life and the way of studying political life that Strauss encouraged.

SG: So it was Weinstein and Horowitz who were the students who had pushed for the taping?

HG: This is what I learned from Stuart Warner; I did not know it. I knew that Horowitz had played a role, and I conveyed the version of it I got from him: You know, Strauss said okay, if I don't have anything to with it, by which I think he meant: If I don't have to read the transcripts

¹⁵ Stuart Warner, professor of philosophy at Roosevelt University in Chicago and Director of The Montesquieu Forum for the Study of Civic Life.

¹⁶ Carol Lerner, wife of Ralph Lerner (see "People").

¹⁷ Robert Horowitz: see "People."

and make corrections and the like. But that Leo Weinstein and Carol Lerner were in on it from way back, that I did not know.

SG: That's very interesting.

HG: Yeah. Is this news to you?

SG: Well, I had been told that students of Strauss had been the impetus behind this project, but all that I knew about the organization of the project was that—were that Storing, and I'm told Cropsey,¹⁸ kind of after Cropsey arrived at Chicago, took charge of the organization of this and there were grants gotten from the Relm Foundation, and I suppose, I don't know, they probably applied for those grants. So I didn't know the names of the students who were behind the transcript project. Carol Lerner is someone who can be asked for her recollections, and it will be interesting to have a conversation with Carol.

HG: I think Stuart Warner said: I have—apparently he was a little annoyed at the impression created by my saying [that] Strauss said: Go ahead as long as I have nothing to do with it—

SG: Yeah.

HG: So he said: I have a copy of the letter in my briefcase. You know, I was astonished to learn that the letter existed, that Carol Lerner had anything to do with it, that Leo Weinstein had anything to do with it, and that he actually had a copy of it.

SG: Warner had a copy of the letter?

HG: That's what he said! I did not ask to see it.

SG: I see. Well, I'll also have to give Stuart a call and find out what he knows. That's very interesting. So the—Weinstein had come with a point of view that was hostile towards what Strauss was teaching but he was interested, he came to the class, and by the end of the quarter he had turned around and became one of those, with Horowitz, who wanted to see this teaching preserved.

HG: Yeah.

SG: Was there, again, this may—do you think their interest was in seeing it preserved, or simply to make it available to those who were attending the course so as to use just as lecture notes for them to have personally to study? I mean, what do you think their motives were in arranging for the recording?

HG: They saw that something was happening that was immensely important and they wanted to contribute to its success. There was a commonsense understanding of political life—there's common sense again, getting trampled underfoot. That would be—I mean, surmising this, this is

¹⁸ Joseph Cropsey: see "People."

not—as a matter of fact there is something Horowitz said to me once that indicated he felt as though he was taking part in a kind of reformation of the political science profession, but of course what Strauss got across without [pause] explicitly saying it was that he was trying to restore an older notion of philosophy, and one that included Plato, and Machiavelli, and Aristotle, and Hobbes, but still [pause]—

SG: So Strauss was engaged in a project of restoration?

HG: Yes, and of course at the same time he found that things had been learned since the days of the ancients, which made the confidence the modern felt, at least for awhile, in having surpassed them—which helps understand the existence of that confidence. And it also implied that some of the solutions offered by the ancients in most perspectives need to be reconsidered, which [pause]—

SG: During Strauss's lifetime a new term entered the lexicon of political science, that is: Straussian. What did Strauss think of that, that there were now people running around who were called by others Straussians?

HG: I don't recall his ever discussing it. I don't ever recall his saying anything explicit about it. I mean, [pause] as regards contemporary affairs, he was remarkably open to disagreement. It was different from—disagreeing with him about whether there should actually be a flat tax instead of this arcane income tax structure: it was very different from disagreeing with him about whether something he said about Maimonides was true. And people did, and felt they could.

SG: So your experience of actually conversing with Strauss was of an open-minded dialogue.

HG: Yes. Oh, yes. Oh, yes.

SG: And your bringing it up now suggests that the word Straussian suggests to your mind the opposite.

HG: Falsely, yeah.

SG: Falsely suggested.

HG: Since we don't think highly of John Rawls, since we don't accept scientism or ordinary language philosophy (which also doesn't accept scientism, you know)—who are these strange people? So there are things that—

SG: Do you think Straussian is a useful term?

HG: Kantian, Hegelian—yes, they're all misleading. I'm told that the neo-Hegelians are not really neo-Hegelians. So I guess they're more in need of being intelligently understood than other terms might be. But when I have accepted the label, it was: I'm not going to disown something that I found enlightening.

SG: What does, what does, what does that term mean to you? If someone were to come up to you and say (I guess as I am now): What is a Straussian? How would you gloss that?

HG: I would walk the low-trodden path of historicism, neo-positivism, paleo-positivism, what the alternative to them is. But beyond that, [pause] the importance of an understanding of human affairs for an understanding of the possible answers to the great questions of philosophy. So it comes back to, well: How *should* one understand human affairs? Well, I would have to say: Well, not that way, and not that way, not that way. And then what are the issues that would have to be faced—and we're back to that. One student suggested that the life-long effort—the historicist he took most serious was Heidegger. And he did not think that the common argument against historicism sufficed to refute Heidegger, namely, that they make an exception for themselves and claim to be timelessly valid, because Heidegger represents that and what fate has allocated . . . fate has allocated to our age. But to show that it fails to face up to questions about good and bad, right and wrong; admirable, contemptible—their sources. Incidentally, there is a passage in the end of the first part of *What is Political Philosophy?* where he says that thoughtful historicists recognize these things but fail to accord them the full importance that is due them. And that is the source, so it's not as though they don't think there is such a thing as courage or arrogance. It gets very subtle. But yeah—I mean, connected with the restoration of a sound understanding of political life that just walks us into the confrontation between the great ancients and the great moderns and so on is a restoration of a sound understanding of philosophy. And that is always in the back of his mind.

SG: So if I was to unfairly summarize your answer in one sentence: that if one were to use, if one wants to refer to Straussians, Straussians are those who are looking to adopt a, to recover a healthy understanding of philosophy while engaging in the greatest challenges—to the greatest philosophical challenges facing us today. Something like that. I think I lost the thread of your answer, I'm sorry.

HG: I mean, the focus on the political, the moral, and the religious. And the right way to face the issues they raise and then the larger implications thereof.

SG: When I first mentioned the term Straussian, you immediately responded with: Well, there're Kantians, the Hegelians—or there were, I don't know if there are any today. Do you think Strauss wanted there to be a Straussian school in the same way that there was a Kantian or neo-Kantian school, or a Hegelian school, or the Academy back in ancient days?

HG: Well, he certainly didn't teach us any articles of faith, if he did. I mean, that's not what we experienced.

SG: You studied with—you were enrolled in the Committee on Social Thought?

HG: Yeah.

SG: And, but you were able to take classes with Strauss? Was Strauss on your dissertation committee?

HG: Yep.

SG: And what your dissertation was on?

HG: Spinoza's *Theological-Political Treatise*.

SG: Okay. How did you arrive at your topic?

HG: Well, originally he suggested Shaftesbury and I thought I wanted to work on a *greater* philosopher than that, so I suggested Leibniz. He knew that that was impossible, waited until I found out, and then we settled on the *Theological-Political Treatise*, which I had taken his course on.

SG: Which, of course, he had written on.

HG: Which he had written on, and I read what he had written, and I had taken his course on it.

SG: Was he the chair of your committee?

HG: Yeah.

SG: And how did he perform as chair? What did he do?

HG: Well, he was thorough.

SG: Did he read, did he read drafts? Did he wait until you had a completed draft and he read that? Did he make comments?

HG: He approved—

SG: Did he make comments?

HG: I'm sorry, he approved the completed draft. And there was something in it, I thought, good and worthy of publication. When Marjorie Grene¹⁹ asked him to submit the piece for a book on Spinoza, collection of essays²⁰ that she was editing for Dover, he explained that he couldn't, but he recommended me. I had made a favorable impression on David Grene²¹ somewhere along the lines. And whatever was valuable in that dissertation, I put into that paper. I can't bear to look at it. I know others who've had similar experiences. Marty Diamond said he wrote his holding his nose, as he expressed it, but then he looked at it many years later and said, you know, it's not so bad. Well, I taught a course on the *Theological-Political Treatise*, and when I taught that course I realized that I had missed a very crucial point which gets mentioned in passing: Why were there

¹⁹ Marjorie Grene (d. 2009), philosopher who had studied with Heidegger and Jaspers; professor at University of California at Davis from 1965 to 1978.

²⁰ *Spinoza: A Collection of Critical Essays* (1973).

²¹ David Grene: see "People."

all these rebellions against the true God, and ceremonies to all these bad gods, idols, and so on, and kings wanting to legislate and prevented from doing so? By the way the thing was structured, that's Spinoza's analysis. I totally missed that.

SG: Did Strauss give comments on your completed draft?

HG: Yes, I don't remember the process at this point. I don't think I remember the details of the process; I remember there were criticisms. I remember there were criticisms, but I don't recall whether I submitted a draft to him, had to make corrections. I know I didn't have to resubmit it. I know I didn't have to resubmit it. I had more of a problem getting it typed up in accord with the University of Chicago standards.

SG: The University is very strict about that: the correct quarter-inch wide margin. [Laughs]

HG: I had to employ one of their typists in order to get it right, and even then, that's where I had things bounced back at me. There were certain pages: I quoted not only the page, but the line numbers, but I didn't do it everywhere. So the rule came down: Either do it always or not at all. And then I had to do it always.

SG: Spinoza was not only a great early modern thinker, he was also a Jew. Do you think that entered into Strauss's—when in your conversations with him about what to settle on for a dissertation, do you think that Spinoza's Jewishness played into Strauss's recommendation?

HG: No, I don't think it did. I think I had the impression—

SG: I raise the question because your introduction to Strauss was “Progress and Return.” So in a way, you encountered him first of all by what he had to say about Judaism.

HG: Well, you're right to bring that up, because at first it looks like a clear case is going to be made for return, and then it turns into the debate between return and Spinoza, and that crops up again in his later preface to the new translation of *Spinoza's Critique of Religion*.²² But no, I don't think that played a role. I mean, my suspicion is that he was saying: Get it over with. I mean, you know, you've taken a course. He read what I'd written. These words were not uttered. So go and, you know, and—

SG: As you got to know Strauss over the years, was his Jewishness significant in any way to the Strauss you encountered in the classroom at the University of Chicago? In Hillel House, he gave not only “Progress and Return,” but several other remarkable lectures on Jewish topics.

HG: Let's see. [Pause] Not that I can think of, but that may not mean that it wasn't there. I mean, [pause] I don't know how to improve on that answer.

SG: Okay, that's fair.

²² Leo Strauss, *Spinoza's Critique of Religion*, trans. Elsa Sinclair (University of Chicago Press, 1965).

SG: You were, have—no, had—a full career as a professor of political science, political philosophy, but you have also had a career as an editor: [HG chuckles] the founder of *Interpretation*. Leo Strauss often published in *Interpretation* after you founded it.²³

HG: Yes.

SG: These would have been the last years of his life. Did you consult with Strauss about founding *Interpretation*? Did you do that independently and then he—what was the relationship there?

HG: We came up with the idea—Seth Benardete,²⁴ Howard White,²⁵ and I. I remember riding in a taxi with Strauss, I don't quite recall the occasion; there were a few occasions he came to New York. I said we hadn't decided on a name, and he suggested *Interpretation*.

SG: Yes.

HG: And I thought that was wonderful. *Interpretation: The Journal of Political Philosophy*.

SG: Leo Strauss suggested the name.

HG: He suggested *Interpretation*. I don't remember whether—he suggested *Interpretation*; I don't remember whether he suggested *Interpretation: A Journal of Political Philosophy*. And we did it. And it was originally published by Nijhof because the exchange rate was good, and then when the exchange rate became bad they cut back on the copyediting and Klein was very displeased with the result.

SG: What was the original idea, when you and Howard White and Seth Benardete discussed the journal? What was the original idea for the journal?

HG: There are some good ideas we didn't implement. Seth Benardete suggested that we start reviewing old books. He didn't mean Plato and Aristotle, but he meant some important works of nineteenth-century scholarship that people have forgotten about, but that—something that would draw people's attention to it. And we've never really done that, we've just been—once you have a journal, it keeps you going. You have to deal with emergencies that show up, and they keep showing up, and the time to do long range planning begins to pretty much vanish. Just keeping your head above water is often the best you can do. That's something I had to learn and I've been living with once the thing was launched.

SG: Right. When Strauss published in *Interpretation*, he would contact you and say: I have an article?

²³ *Interpretation* was founded in 1970.

²⁴ Seth Benardete: see "People."

²⁵ Howard White: see "People."

HG: Yep. And it went.

SG: Right. Okay. Many of Strauss's students have published in *Interpretation*.

HG: They did. I mean, they began there and their students now are writing reviews for us and—. It succumbed to the recession, when I suddenly realized we weren't getting sufficient subscriptions from college libraries, the thing to keep going—college libraries were cutting back their budgets, their journal budgets, and when times got tight—. So we went electronic and I am currently dealing with an ongoing crisis: finding a copyeditor to replace the wonderful copyeditor we had, who had been looking for a long time for a teaching position and finally found one, and who has devoted himself full-time to the teaching he was required to do. So this is the current emergency that is keeping me from any long-range planning, which would have to include: Why haven't we reviewed *Straussophobia*²⁶ yet?

SG: [Laughter] Do you see *Interpretation* having a—I mean, not entirely by accident, it's always had a special relationship to Strauss and his students. Do you see it having a particular role to play in terms of Strauss's thought or the thought of Strauss's students?

HG: Well, I think they represent a healthy current. I think they're misunderstood to the extent that people falsely believe them to be marching to the same tune. Anyone who knows the least thing about them knows better than that.

SG: Ralph Lerner recommended to me a review by Father Fortin²⁷ of Shadia Drury's book on Strauss,²⁸ in which Father Fortin takes up the question of what a Straussian is and then provides, apparently, fourteen different classifications. And the result of his taxonomy is by the time that you've finished the term has no meaning any more, there's so many different varieties.

HG: It can be. I can predict that there are—or know people who regard Rawls as the leading light in political theory for the last forty years. In other words, there were negative characteristics, but as for positive ones, no. No.

SG: Was Leo Strauss a philosopher?

HG: I think so.

SG: What does that mean? It's a term—

HG: Oh, he did think about important [pause] philosophical questions, and there're pages about them: the beginning of *City and Man*, in *Natural Right and History*. He did lean to a certain view of the whole. [Pause] But he did not write works like the *Grundlegung* or Hegel's *Logic*. There are places in which he spells out the Platonic-Socratic view. I mean, one would have to—here go

²⁶ Peter Minowitz, *Straussophobia: Defending Leo Strauss and Straussians against Shadia Drury and Other Accusers* (Lexington Books, 2009).

²⁷ Ernest Fortin: see "People."

²⁸ Shadia Drury, *The Political Ideas of Leo Strauss* (St. Martin's Press, 1988).

into the relation between his thought and Klein's thought, what the important areas of agreement were, what the disagreements meant, and I'm not sure I'm competent to do that. But yes, and in fact, the word keeps coming up: philosophy, in its broader sense.

SG: He himself was reported to have said that he was not a philosopher. He was a teacher or a scholar of political philosophy.

HG: In those lectures on Heidegger: I know I'm only a scholar. Well, if he restricted philosopher to thinkers of the stature of Plato, Aristotle, Kant, Hegel—no, he didn't consider himself as a thinker of that rank. If you include Rousseau, Montesquieu, Hume, Berkeley, it becomes a different matter. [Pause]

SG: After you left Chicago, you stayed—obviously you stayed in touch with Professor Strauss.

HG: Yes.

SG: Did you consider him your friend?

HG: No. I mean it was—it always remained teacher-student. Let's say older friend.

SG: And this was an earlier time, but I assume that you always addressed him as Professor Strauss.

HG: I never called him Leo.

SG: Or Mr. Strauss.

HG: Mr. Strauss.

SG: Mr. Strauss. Yes, at University of Chicago you would say Mr. Strauss.

HG: Mr. Strauss, yeah. [Pause] I don't think any of his students were on a first name basis with him. [Pause]

SG: We've covered a lot of ground in the past hour. Is there anything that comes to mind you'd like to discuss about Strauss and how you knew him, and—

HG: I think we've covered the important subjects.

SG: All right, okay. Well, thank you very much.

HG: Well, you're very welcome.