

**Interview with Ralph Lerner**  
**January 14, 2013**

**Stephen Gregory:** How did you first come to know Leo Strauss?

**Ralph Lerner:** Well, I knew something about him before he even came to Chicago. When I was an undergraduate or maybe in my M.A. program, although I was very happy being in the Hutchins College, I used to read catalogs of other schools as though I was looking for other places where I might study or have a better sense of the academic world.

The Office of Career Planning, or whatever it was called in those days, kept a library of catalogs in the Reynolds Club, up on the second floor. So I would borrow catalogs and look at them. And I was thinking of something in the line of political science; I don't know exactly that it was limited to that. And one day I picked up a catalog of the New School for Social Research. Someone whom I had known somewhat from high school—several years ahead of me in high school—had gone on and studied at the New School, and I guess the feedback I got from his younger sibs was that it was a very exciting place to be. So I looked at the catalog and I didn't know these European teachers who were listed as giving courses. The names didn't mean too much to me. They were largely German refugees, occasionally Italian, all refugees from fascism and Nazism. But one thing struck me: somebody was giving courses with just the name of a person in political science or government or whatever it was called there. So although one wouldn't be shocked to read, in those days at least, that someone was offering a course on Wordsworth or what have you—that someone would offer a course on Machiavelli or what have you like that: I'd never seen that before; had never heard of it. And certainly there was nothing Chicago did that corresponded to that. Rather, there were comprehensive courses: the history of this or what have you. So that stuck in [my] mind that somebody was giving a course on Burke, pure and simple. And I don't recall any explanation of which works were being read; it was someone's thought as a package. And that person was Strauss. So I remembered that. I wasn't about to go to the New School, but I thought, what an unusual way of presenting the subject.

So when Strauss came, it was in January of what year?

**SG:** 1949, I believe.

**RL:** 1949. Yeah, I was finishing my M.A. program at that time. And he came with very little announcement or fuss and bother, no blaring of trumpets, and proceeded to offer a course I think on the *First and Second Discourses*. So I thought: Well, I'll sit in; see what *que pasa*. Well, there were only three other people in the class, counting myself, and I was alarmed. First of all, there was no hiding. It was a big room. There were a total of four people around the table. And I was not prepared at that time—I was working on a dissertation, on a thesis—to devote the time to reading these works, though of course neither of them is very long. So after a few meetings, I silently stole away. But I observed something. This is another kettle of fish. I don't know that the other two people in the class were especially stellar or risk-averse or what have you, because I left knowing that I was neither of those. But then I saw him and the way he asked questions and

the way he worked his way around and into and burrowing into a text. I could see that in two meetings. And I had nothing further to do with him until that May or June, when I had a defense of my thesis and he was going to be one of the people who was going to do it [i.e., participate in the oral exam].

**SG:** And your M.A. thesis was on?

**RL:** On state control of science. Not a distinguished work. It was raised in the context for me of hearings Congress was having on the establishment of the National Science Foundation. I mean, all this was as a result of the huge investment in scientific research that went on under the name of the Manhattan Project and so on. But there was a theoretical issue there, too. And he asked: What would be the position of Plato on state control of science? So I said, out of my deep understanding of scientific inquiry, “He’d be against it.” And Mr. Strauss then said, “You’re mistaken.” And then he asked, “What would be the position of Plato with respect to the free publication of scientific results?” Because that was one of the things involved in NSF research and so on, much debated at the time. And I said confidently, “He’d be against it.” And he said, “You’re right.” So does that mean I was batting .500? No, I don’t think so. So those were my first engagements with Strauss.

Subsequent to that June, I left school for a year. I thought I wanted to go to work in journalism, my true love. That year that I was away, an enormous upheaval took place in the political science department, and that was expressed to me through the reactions of my friends, all of whom were considerably older than I. I’d been too young to be drafted in World War II, and all these fellows—and they were all men—had not only served in the military but had served for a long time, some of them six years. So I was just a kid on the block. And that was the audience that Strauss met that September, that fall quarter of ’49. None of them, as best as I can recall, was a major in what used to be called political theory. They might have had inclinations in that direction, but they didn’t pursue it owing to a peculiar rule in the political science department about what fields you had to take preliminary examinations in and which fields you didn’t. You didn’t have to take a preliminary examination in the field in which you were going to write your dissertation. But that meant you had to take four other fields, one of which was Political Parties and Behavior, which was taught by Avery Leiserson<sup>1</sup>—who was very difficult to fathom what he was up to. He was interested in methodological questions, and his courses consisted usually of talking about a variety of approaches adopted by the authors of this two and a half-foot stack of books that he would bring into class each time. So it got you into that. And how would one deal with questions that he might pose on the exam—the uncertainty of it—created anxiety in these men, many of whom had faced live ammunition! And as a result, they chose to write their dissertations on political parties and political behavior so as not to have to take the prelim.

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<sup>1</sup> Avery Leiserson (d. 2004) left the University of Chicago in 1952 and went to Vanderbilt University, where he chaired the political science department until 1965. He served as president of the American Political Science Association in 1974. His books include *Parties and Politics: An Institutional and Behavioral Approach* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1958).

So these students, who were being trained in behavioral social science, political science, out of curiosity or whatever—or because they thought we’d better scope out this fellow and see what kinds of exam questions he might pose—they were his audience. It was not an audience inclined in his favor, not at all. The predispositions ran quite to the contrary, and I know this. I don’t have to name the names of these people who were friends of mine and were students at the time. They were very—most definitely they weren’t the ideal audience, but they were very smart. And in the course of that year that I was away, there’d been—he [Strauss] had won them over.

He had shown something. And when you look at or listen to those old transcripts of his seminars in those early years, you will note they will begin with the state of the question in political science, to which this particular character (name whom you will) might have something to say. So it was a piece of *kalām*, you might say—defensive theology—that he would begin in this way, to say: I’m not leading you up a *cul de sac*; I’m leading you up through a particular author or a particular work to something that will deepen and broaden your understanding of questions that you already think are important, or will lead you to see that questions that you think are important are themselves too narrowly conceived, carry too much in the way of predispositions or even prejudices to get you—to keep you from seeing what’s there.

So when I came back it wasn’t any longer a question of, you know, two other students sitting with a teacher at an oversize seminar table, but rather wall-to-wall. I mean, here’s the new dancing bear who can do all sorts of things, come and watch. And there were hard questioners. It wasn’t a monologue by any means, so that became a very exciting place, and not least because there were other teachers in the department—I think especially of Hans Morgenthau<sup>2</sup>—and there were others, and of course those who were more dedicated social scientists, whose approach Strauss didn’t refrain from putting up in contrast to what he thought his particular author that quarter was proposing.

Strauss was the soul of bourgeois respectability. I mean, he would never commit an incivility or anything like that. No snide remarks or anything of the sort. But by bringing up the issues in this way, it then turned out that when I sat in Mr. Morgenthau’s political theory course on modern political theory, I think it was called, questions came from the audience that two or three years before would never have been raised in that setting. So intellectually it was a very exciting time: civilized confrontation; hard arguments. And I say, that was all owing to Strauss: his willingness to take it on and to show another way.

**SG:** I’ve heard from those days that if the class were scheduled to run for an hour and a half twice a week, that in fact they would often run four or five hours. That he would simply—he would teach and then he would take questions and take questions until all questions were done. Was that the case?

**RL:** Well, five hours suggests something heroic. I mean, I think he—and not only he, but some other people in the room—might have had to visit the washroom in that period. But certainly he started punctually but never ended according to the canonical hours, as we say around here. I mean one really had a sense that you were in hot pursuit of something really interesting and

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<sup>2</sup> Hans Morgenthau: see “People Mentioned in the Interviews” [hereafter “People”].

important, so it went on. So he might have begun at whatever the hour was, two, or something like that in the afternoon, 1:30, I don't know. And at five o'clock, you know, it broke up. And then there were people who walked him home. They had more on their brain that they wanted to relieve themselves of. So—no, it was exhilarating. And as I say, there were hotly debated issues with which the individual students, these mature men, had to grapple.

These are people—almost all of whom that I knew were married and were having children and all that—I mean, they weren't sophomores. And he was saying something really destabilizing of their intellectual universe. That didn't mean all of them were going into political theory; far from it. I mean, think about it: some of the best students, like Herbert Storing<sup>3</sup> and some others who went into other things, Walter Berns.<sup>4</sup> But the reach of Strauss's approach to political philosophy and to its history raised all sorts of disquieting, destabilizing, second, third, and fourth thoughts about what they were doing and how they might go about it. Yeah. So it was intense.

**SG:** In these early years, was his teaching style what we've come to know through the [course] transcripts in which he would give kind of the introductory course that you mentioned, explaining the relevance of whatever figure he's teaching to our current concerns, whether in political science or society more generally, and then begin going through the text—whatever it was—one passage at a time, commenting on it, and, then towards the end of the class, taking questions. Was that his general approach from the beginning?

**RL:** Yes, but with one little difference. At the first meeting he assigned or accepted volunteers for the different sessions of the class. In other words, it was blocked out in his mind or on paper: we'll do this many pages or so many chapters and so on at this meeting; then the next, and the next, and so on for the whole ten weeks. And people would lay claim to making an oral report on that passage or section for that particular class. So it was an oral presentation of, whatever, ten minutes. And they would submit a paper with it, essentially of what they were saying. It wasn't a question of delivering it extemporaneously, but that was the beginning of each subsequent session, before he turned to the passage.

And he would have a few remarks, sometimes Delphic or whatever. Talk about interpreting language, about his response to the thing. And sometimes his student would raise a significant issue and he would address it. I mean, you know, someone like Seth Benardete<sup>5</sup>: he's going to say something that Strauss would deal with and will come back to through correspondence or conversation with him privately. So that's how each class began, with about ten minutes of a student presentation of whatever issues he found there. It could be a summary with questions or interpretations or an avowed puzzlement about this or that, and then Strauss would respond briefly to it and then would go on with his own explication.

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<sup>3</sup> Herbert J. Storing: see "People."

<sup>4</sup> Walter Berns: see "People."

<sup>5</sup> Seth Benardete: see "People."

What I'm remembering, because I sat pretty close to him to see how he was working: he had a small piece of paper (waste not, want not), small piece of paper, a small stub of a pencil. He had some things written on it. And then when he finished with it, he drew a horizontal line through it. So these were not yellowed notes to be retained for further yellowing, they were the product of fresh readings. Which is not to say that he didn't—could have had spiral notebooks at home with many of his observations about the text. I'm sure that's the case. But yeah, he knew what ground he wanted to cover in the class and usually—well, you know, it was a firm hand on the tiller.

**SG:** Okay. Did his teaching improve over the years?

**RL:** I can't say that. I think it altered, because in later years, when I'd started teaching and he was still here, I would sometimes visit some classes. And I think he felt less obliged to make the connection to present-day issues in political science and just go into the work itself. In a way the novelty of his approach didn't have to be belabored. Dead ground didn't have to be won again and again when students got the hang of what he was doing. And of course he was writing more, too, and giving these big lecture courses. So it was easier for students to figure out what it was he was doing and what he was headed for. And certainly the lectures made for *Natural Right and History* made things pretty clear through the solid example you could follow and see. I don't know that he became better at it.

**SG:** How do you think he understood his role as a teacher? Was there something in particular he was trying to accomplish?

**RL:** I have to say that when I heard Heinrich Meier<sup>6</sup> on more than one occasion speak of Strauss as being intent on establishing a school, I found it counterintuitive; or that at least I wasn't conscious of that as a student. Well, I was a kid, what did I know? That he was trying to win over able students to this line of work (I say to this line of work as distinguished from this way of thinking), to be sure, but I didn't see it as a school. He was trying to win over really good students. He had found something or recovered something or belatedly rediscovered something that was valuable—indeed, that was extremely important. And I think it's fair to say minimally (this is not making too much of a claim): he didn't want it to die out with him. But I don't think it was an issue of a school, the way there was the Chicago school of sociology or Chicago school of economics. Though even they were not monolithic, right? [That was] certainly true of economics, or for that matter the Chicago school of political science when Merriam<sup>7</sup> and Gosnell<sup>8</sup> and those people were here in the '30s.

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<sup>6</sup> Heinrich Meier: see "People."

<sup>7</sup> Charles E. Merriam (d. 1953), professor of political science at the University of Chicago from 1900-1940. He is known as one of the founders of behavioral movement in political science. He believed that theories of the political process needed to be linked to practical activity, and Merriam served himself as alderman and on commissions for the City of Chicago, and on several national committees, including the Natural Resources Planning Board under President Franklin D. Roosevelt.

<sup>8</sup> Harold F. Gosnell (d. 1997) studied with Charles Merriam and became his close associate in the political science department at the University of Chicago. Gosnell published two studies of

So—but maybe, you know, reading his correspondence to Jacob Klein<sup>9</sup> and others lent some support to that view. But I didn't think of it as a school, and I still find it hard to believe that Strauss thought that he was making a school, because it puts him too much in the center. You know, it's a heliocentric view of the thing and I don't think he expected that or necessarily wished it.

**SG:** He didn't see himself as the last man left to keep classical learning alive, to keep Western civilization alive, or something like that?

**RL:** No. I think there were other claimants to that, in the Classics Department. No. I mean, his manner was not such as suggested that he was seriously engaged in massaging his own ego—not at all. The biggest person in the room lay in that book in front of us. And in that sense, we were all there to learn. Now you can say: Well, how artful of him. I mean, our deepest cogitations—and when I say “our,” I mean of the finest and most able students—that was kid's play compared to what he could do right then and there. But that wasn't the way it was presented, [and] not as a result of some beliefs about the limits of human understanding, but the notion is that we have to earn our conclusions, and it isn't obvious that one can do it in the short run at all, or even the course of a lifetime. So that suggested a certain kind of modesty that I believe he tried to exemplify, and for more than prudential reasons.

**SG:** So there was a modesty before the tradition, an unwillingness to call attention to himself. And in your view, no project that lay behind his teaching—simply understanding something.

**RL:** I would say that was what I took away from it: that that was our highest calling, as it were. Who can read the hearts and souls of men? I mean, we don't know about that—you know, what his own ambitions were. And even if you find letters, there's a discount rate that has to be applied to everything. I mean, one of the things one learned about reading any of these authors is that they're presuming a certain kind of reader. So Strauss would not have been the last guy on the block to have thought about that in relation to what he himself was writing. That he was ambitious, you know, in terms of understanding is testified by the rigor and dedication that he brought to his work. I didn't see it, and maybe that's a sufficient statement: I didn't see it. That's all.

**SG:** During his lifetime he would have heard people in political science departments begin referring to his students as Straussians. And his own students began referring to themselves as Straussians, and even beginning to quarrel among themselves about what it means to be a Straussian. Were you aware of him ever commenting any way on this appearance of this new term, Straussian?

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voting that pioneered the use of statistical analysis and was the author of *Negro Politicians: The Rise of Negro Politics and Chicago* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1935).

<sup>9</sup> Jacob Klein: see “People.”

**RL:** I don't know. I myself have never used it except to say I don't believe in it, and I don't use it. The question of the closed sect, what Michael Zuckert<sup>10</sup> calls the secret handshake and all of that: I think with respect to that Strauss would have said—certainly could have said—what Marx himself said: he was not a Marxist. And Strauss could say he was not a Straussian. I mean that people, when they get to see something like this, you know, might get a little giddy—okay, we're into something that the rest of the world doesn't see. No, it isn't a delusion and it isn't an illusion, but the scales have been lifted off our eyes and all that. They can go pretty far. Okay. I think that Strauss would have referred to that somehow as the behavior of young puppies, to steal a term from an author he admired. But I don't see it.

**SG:** Good. Okay.

**RL:** And all these internecine quarrels between, you know—I mean, the taxonomy of “quote Straussians” that Ernest Fortin in a review of Drury's book<sup>11</sup>—

**SG:** One hundred and fourteen—

**RL:** Yeah, she missed some. I think that's the right approach—I mean, demolish it with wit.

**SG:** Okay. Strauss was your thesis advisor?

**RL:** Yes.

**SG:** On political Zionism?

**RL:** Yeah. Not a distinguished piece of work.

**SG:** Pinsker and Herzl?

**RL:** Yeah. But that got me into—you know, when he broached the subject with me and so on—I mean, at that point he could have written a book, more than a book. And he had of course traversed that ground in part. The advantage of the whole thing for me was that he led me beyond reading those five fat volumes of Herzl's *Diaries* (in German) and Pinsker (also in German) to Spinoza, and even more significantly for me: Maimonides. That was my introduction to Maimonides.

And that was one of the reasons he suggested that as a theme because he knew that I knew a certain amount of Hebrew and was at home with it; not necessarily medieval Hebrew, but the

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<sup>10</sup> Michael Zuckert: see “People.”

<sup>11</sup> Ernest L. Fortin, “Between the Lines: Was Leo Strauss a Secret Enemy of Morality?” in J. Brian Benested, ed., *Ernest Fortin: Collected Essays*, vol. 2, *Classical Christianity and the Political Order: Reflections on the Theologico-Political Problem* (Rowman & Littlefield, 1996), 312-27. “Drury's book” refers to Shadia Drury, *The Political Ideas of Leo Strauss* (Macmillan, 1988).

technical vocabulary for that that had to be learned (leaving aside works on astronomy) was really not that great, so he thought I should. I think he probably thought that with respect to any student he was advising or who was consulting with him about a dissertation: work from your strengths. If you know something, work with that. So that introduced me to Maimonides, and that was the most significant thing about the dissertation, that it introduced me to Maimonides. For which I am eternally grateful.

**SG:** So you sat down with him and he said: Mr. Lerner, you should consider writing on political Zionism?

**RL:** And gave me a few clues about the kinds of issues that might be involved there: the politicization of the understanding of what was the situation of the Jewish people, and so on.

**SG:** And so he gave you a few clues about what the topic might involve. Did those clues involve the names of Spinoza and Maimonides?

**RL:** Yeah. Okay. I mean, you could read a more than adequate executive summary of the subject in his introduction to the English translation of Spinoza's *Critique of Religion*. It's all there, and a thousand things more.

**SG:** So he gave you a very specific topic and you took to it?

**RL:** He offered something for me to ponder. He thought it would be within my capacities. That has to be a consideration, too. He obviously thought that I could manage the linguistic burdens, such as they were. And maybe he even thought—that's what I would think in giving advice to a graduate student—maybe he even thought that the student would enjoy the topic. You know, really like it. But as it turned out, I did. So, as I say, I was grateful for that.

**SG:** Did he read any chapters as you wrote your dissertation?

**RL:** No. He said, you know: Write it. I mean, that didn't mean I was unable to query him about things I was working on. One quarter, I think, at least one quarter, I was his "quote assistant." I was typing a chapter of *Natural Right and History* that he was dictating from his notebook, the chapter on Burke or the subchapter—wonderful chapter. And so we had occasions to talk. Then he and I met a couple of times over a text of Maimonides. And of course I attended those seminars that he gave at Hillel on Maimonides and so on, so there were plenty of occasions to check in with him about things that were puzzling. But on the whole, I didn't bother him much and he didn't pester me, certainly.

**SG:** Okay. And once you turned in the final draft, did he give you any comments?

**RL:** I am sure he did, but I cannot remember them, among other things. I mean, doubtless he raised some points that would need, if not restatement, perhaps amplification, because in my own timidity I think I worked toward minimalist prose rather than waxing. But there's no doubt he read it with care. And as in all these things, his criticism goes to the heart of the issue; [it] wasn't distracted by trivia.



**SG:** In addition to—I forget, either a lecture—a series of either two or three lectures at Hillel on Maimonides, also at Hillel he gave lectures that have come to be known as, you know, very famous articles: “Progress or Return?” “Jerusalem and Athens.” Do you know how these events at Hillel House happened? That he happened to begin lecturing there on Jewish topics or topics related to Judaism?

**RL:** I would say that it all stems from a very special relationship that Mr. Strauss had with Rabbi [Maurice] Pekarsky, who was Director of the Hillel Foundation at that time. Rabbi Pekarsky in some ways reminded me, physically, of Moses Mendelssohn: short, slight, hunched—a very winning, modest, highly intelligent person. And he and Strauss obviously got along famously. So there must have been some occasion when Rabbi Pekarsky perhaps proposed to Mr. Strauss: Would you care to speak on this, or something? And the fact that Strauss did, and repeated, and repeated again, tells you that he clearly enjoyed it. Not that Strauss had time on his hands. He obviously thought or was made to believe that it would be helpful and valuable, and not least to Jewish students—to say perplexed Jewish students—but to others as well. So these were real occasions. S.R.O.

**SG:** And I gather not just Jews were attending?

**RL:** Oh, no! That’s even true in the seminars—that not just students attended. Frank Knight<sup>12</sup> attended regularly some of those seminars.

**SG:** Edward Shils.<sup>13</sup>

**RL:** Edward Shils as well, right. They didn’t come there to mock, though I’m sure they had reservations aplenty. And sometimes Knight would raise a question in the class. So I think that’s the origin of those Hillel appearances. They were real events.

**SG:** Okay. Do you think that Strauss’s Jewishness was relevant to his teaching, his teaching at the University as opposed to his lectures at Hillel House? Did it matter that he was a Jew?

**RL:** Well, in Hillel, I would say, quite obviously. I mean the very formulation: “Why We Remain Jews?” I suppose that’s not a question posed by someone who is secure in his

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<sup>12</sup> Frank Knight (d. 1972) was one of the founders of the Chicago school of economics and also of the Committee on Social Thought.

<sup>13</sup> Edward Shils (d. 1995) was a professor in the Committee on Social Thought and in the sociology department at the University of Chicago from 1947 until his death in 1995. (He also held joint appointments with universities in England and at the University of Leiden.) Shils worked to bridge the European and American approaches to sociology and was the author of numerous books. In 1979 he gave the Jefferson Lecture by the National Council on the Humanities, the highest national honor in the humanities.

Jewishness<sup>14</sup> [for whom], I mean, it wouldn't be a problem; it couldn't be a why question. So that already suggests a stance or a platform from the outside looking in.

On the other hand, the whole tenor of the argument is one of quiet pride in the Jewish heritage, which is not only the Law and all that, but fortitude under persecution, which is presented as honorable in and of itself. I remember a line from one of those: After all, he said, we are not gypsies. In other words, we come with something; this is a politically incorrect remark. We come with a heritage of which we can be rightfully proud and in defense of which we need offer no apologies. It's not quite what Disraeli said in the House of Commons when attacked for being Jewish (of course, he'd been converted as a child by his father): he says that when my ancestors officiated as High Priests in the Temple in Jerusalem, your ancestors were wearing red paint and going around in animal skins. It's not quite that.

**SG:** In a way, you've answered this question, but let me ask it. Did it matter to his Jewish students that Strauss was Jewish? Did his Jewishness matter to them?

**RL:** He didn't conceal it. I mean, you didn't have to infer it from his surname or something like that. But of course his seminars were not taught from the standpoint of being Jewish.

**SG:** Why do you think he wanted to move from the New School to here, to the University of Chicago?

**RL:** Better job. Probably better students, more money, right? You know, the New School—all honor to it—was a special place. These were people who had been set adrift by terrible developments and found a resting place. Whether it was a home, I don't know. And here, in effect, when the President of the University makes a direct appointment to a department<sup>15</sup>—I don't know whether, you know, the extent to which he did nor did not consult with whoever was the chairman of the political science department at that time—that's big. It's meant to be a compliment, and I'm sure Strauss took it as such. Remembering, you know, that he was a stateless intellectual, for whom the market demand is very slight.

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<sup>14</sup> The full title of the lecture is "Why We Remain Jews: Can Jewish Faith and History Still Speak to Us?" Strauss began the lecture by distancing himself from the full implications of the title: "When Rabbi Pekarsky first approached me and suggested this title, I was repelled by it, not to say shocked by it. But then, on reflection, I found one could say something about it . . . I learned of the subtitle only a few days ago . . . I could not with propriety speak on the theme of the subtitle, because, after all, everyone is a specialist, and my specialty is (to use a very broad and non-specialist name) social science rather than divinity." Leo Strauss, *Jewish Philosophy and the Crisis of Modernity: Essays and Lectures in Modern Jewish Thought*, ed. Kenneth Hart Green (Albany, New York: State University of New York Press, 1997), 312.

<sup>15</sup> Strauss was appointed to the Department of Political Science by University President Robert Maynard Hutchins.

**SG:** I wouldn't have thought of it that way, but okay. After Strauss gave his lectures on Natural Right and History, and particularly after publishing the article "Epilogue," he had not pulled his punches.

**RL:** No.

**SG:** He had staked out a strong, no-holds-barred criticism of the dominant school of thought in this political science department, other political science departments—

**RL:** In the profession, you could say.

**SG:** In the profession. How did his relationships inside the department fare over the years? Was there a countermovement against Leo Strauss here at the Department of Political Science among the faculty because they didn't like this criticism?

**RL:** Now what does that mean: this countermovement? To expel him to Berkeley or somewhere?

**SG:** Well, to not want to have him around. To consider him, perhaps, a brilliant but troublesome nuisance.

**RL:** Oh, I don't know. You know, my view of that world was that of Euclidian geometry to an earthworm. I wouldn't have known about that. That there were people in the department and some who became chairman who really viewed it as—I don't know, I suppose with some measure of contempt and alarm, [and who] certainly didn't like the message, so to speak, the whole stance: that's a certainty. On the other hand, you know, he attracted students, and there was no gainsaying his intellectual vigor. And in all these matters Strauss was the model of a good citizen. You know, when I spoke—you might have thought, slightly—of his adherence to the bourgeois proprieties: no, I mean, that's what you do. You remain on good terms with everyone with whom you have to be on some kind of terms. Okay. You don't needlessly affront people and all that. The different tone, the different overt tone of the "Epilogue" to *Essays on the Scientific Studies of Politics* was a response to the Wolin/Schaar book review<sup>16</sup> of the *Essays on the Scientific Study of Politics*, edited by Herbert Storing, with these essays by various hands and ending with the epilogue by Strauss. That set out to be a critical—but it was expected that it should be a fair-minded assessment of the work of these leading figures, most of whom were still alive. Arthur Bentley<sup>17</sup> was not, but Lasswell,<sup>18</sup> and Simon<sup>19</sup>, and so forth and so on [were].

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<sup>16</sup> "Essays on the Scientific Study of Politics: a Critique," co-authored by John H. Schaar and Sheldon S. Wolin, appeared in the *American Political Science Review* 57 (1963): 125-50, along with replies by Herbert J. Storing, who had edited and contributed a chapter to the *Essays*, and the other contributors to that volume: Walter Berns, Robert Horowitz, Leo Strauss, and Leo Weinstein.

<sup>17</sup> Arthur F. Bentley (d. 1957) developed a theory of groups as the basis of political life, set out in *The Process of Government: A Study of Social Pressures* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1908). In the *Essays*, a chapter by Leo Weinstein critiqued Bentley's theory.

And I think a special effort was made not to diminish or patronize those authors but to take them seriously and figuratively speaking to hold their feet to the fire. Okay; so it was a collection of essays that were critical in a very good sense: the emphasis was on the shortcomings of these different approaches, but it wasn't snide or disdainful in any way. It elicited a most extraordinary review by Sheldon Wolin and John Schaar: very long; taking up, you know, the different essays and so on and sticking it to them. And the editor of the *APSR* at that time invited a response, so altogether you're getting a review and a response to a review that probably added up to fifty pages, maybe more. And that whole thing: those are the drawing of battle lines; I mean, finesse and *politesse* almost get lost in the clashes here. So that made a big stir, a really big stir: the book itself, the review, and the response to the review. So this was not passive obedience or something like that. I'm sure that heightened tensions, but it wouldn't have occasioned Strauss being expelled or something. But whether it had some bearing on how much of a guarantee the University was willing to give him that he would be employed beyond his retirement age, which at that time was 65 years—it might have. And it certainly had a bearing on Strauss deciding to leave the University after a couple of years beyond retirement, I guess, because he didn't want to have that insecurity.

**SG:** So his decision to move to Claremont was partly he didn't want to be left at the pleasure of the departmental chair?

**RL:** Yeah, and probably some combination of good sense and vanity. Not that he found happiness, but that's another issue.

**SG:** Let me take you back to your thesis, your dissertation thesis. Strauss proposed the topic of political Zionism and then he showed you the way to Maimonides. And then that led to part of your career; you spent most of, much of your life studying Maimonides.

**RL:** Nibbling at the edges.

**SG:** Okay. Did Strauss do more than just—I mean, with—let me try to make this question clear. If, for instance, you had been interested in Machiavelli, then in Strauss' lectures, he worked out a full interpretation of Machiavelli, depending on which course you're talking about. But you know he did one or two courses here in Chicago on Machiavelli.

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<sup>18</sup> Harold D. Lasswell (d. 1978) is regarded as one of the most influential political scientists in the post-WWII era. A prolific author, Laswell focused in particular on power relations and the role of personality in politics. In the *Essays*, an article by Robert Horowitz critiqued his views on propaganda.

<sup>19</sup> Herbert A. Simon (d. 2001) was a prolific and highly influential political scientist who has been honored for contributions to a number of different fields, including artificial intelligence and information processing. His book, *Administrative Behavior* (Macmillan, 1947) was critiqued by Herbert J. Storing in a chapter in the *Essays*.

**RL:** I remember one of those.

**SG:** Yeah. But if you're interested in Maimonides, there was no such full architecture of how to approach this author. Did he, in your conversations with him, did he lead you along an approach to interpreting Maimonides or how to think about him? Or simply give you an appreciation of the greatness of this figure? Had you been aware of who Maimonides even was before you began this work with him?

**RL:** I knew something about him from Hebrew School because our composition notebooks had, obviously, a fictional portrait of Maimonides, but I certainly hadn't read anything of his.

I mean, Strauss didn't draw my attention to what he had already written on Maimonides. Quite a bit—he'd already written quite a bit in French and in German, and of course in English. No. He said enough for me to believe, one (which was easy to believe, for me to believe): there was pay dirt there. And two: I might be able to dig a little out for myself. So it wasn't a question of—it wasn't presented as this. In fact, I would say just about any of us—I don't mean Jewish students, [but] students generally of Strauss who come to a subject that he's treated, I would say [that] we should be happy if we found something interstitially that we could work out. I remember a review, a very witty review that Harvey Mansfield<sup>20</sup> wrote about someone's treatment of Machiavelli, and he said wherever you go on this island and you're checking out here and there, suddenly there appears a little coin box and it says: Deposit coin here.<sup>21</sup>

**SG:** Leo Strauss was here.

**RL:** That puts it beautifully. Okay. So then as I worked on things of my own, I would give them to him for criticism. Didn't matter that I wasn't enrolled in a course, needless to say; and he would read them with obvious attention and with enormous capacity for seeing where I was struggling to go and help me. And I would say the most extreme form of that was when I was working on the translation of Averroes' paraphrase of Plato's *Republic*. Very difficult Hebrew of a missing Arabic original. And I sent him my draft translation with hundreds of queries embedded in the text that had remained uncertain or highly problematic after I had consulted on those very points with Muhsin Mahdi<sup>22</sup> and Shlomo Pines<sup>23</sup>. And he had to have spent many hours going over that manuscript and checking it against the Hebrew. And I was blown away by what he had invested. And this is when he was already close to the end of his life, and weak, and all kinds of physical conditions and probably hustling as much as he can to finish work he has in

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<sup>20</sup> Harvey C. Mansfield: see "People."

<sup>21</sup> In "Strauss's Machiavelli," Mansfield writes: "when studying Machiavelli, every time that I have been thrown upon an uninhabited island I thought might be unexplored, I have come across a small sign saying, 'please deposit coin.' After I comply, a large sign flashes in neon lights that would have been visible from afar, with this message: Leo Strauss was here." *Political Theory* 3 (1975): 372-84.

<sup>22</sup> Muhsin Mahdi: see "People."

<sup>23</sup> Shlomo Pines: see "People."

hand. I know I wrote to him in a very different tone than a [student] would write to his teacher, and I think that letter he kept. It may be in the archives. So he was generous—he was certainly generous to me and, you know, I wasn't his most promising student or the one on whom he placed the greatest hopes. He gave of himself. I suppose some element of affection might have been involved. But, you know, how is one to tell?

**SG:** Leo Strauss, in giving you this dissertation topic, showed you its connection to deeper things; in particular, [to] what Maimonides thought, and gave you an idea of what this thought could really be, and there was a place for you there.

**RL:** Yeah, as a political thinker.

**SG:** And then after you began tilling that acreage, you found, over the course of your career, there were not only writings of his that were very helpful, but that he would respond as you had queries as you were working and give you feedback.

**RL:** Yeah. Yes. Emphatically yes.

**SG:** Yeah. The other great theme of your career has been American political thought, the American founding and Tocqueville. Did you ever discuss those topics with Professor Strauss?

**RL:** Well, I'd been interested in constitutional law, the way it used to be taught in those days. I can't recall that [i.e., discussing these topics with Mr. Strauss]. Certainly there were among Mr. Strauss's students those who worked in the American field. I've already mentioned Herbert Storing, and Walter Berns, and of course Harry Jaffa.<sup>24</sup>

**SG:** Martin Diamond.<sup>25</sup>

**RL:** And Martin Diamond, right. So I'd detected nothing remotely resembling—well, these are guys who are—I mean, they're not slumming—I mean, they're not doing this because this is just about all they can do. It's not that at all. It was regarded, I think, as respectable—more than respectable—work to be done by someone who was trained with an awareness of the larger context of thinking about political things. I did send him my writings on that, but I wasn't pestering him to help me work out some of the perplexities of American government policies towards Indians and stuff like that.

**SG:** You were letting him know the itinerary of your trip, but not asking for guidance about where to go.

**RL:** Right.

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<sup>24</sup> Harry V. Jaffa: see "People."

<sup>25</sup> Martin Diamond: see "People."

**SG:** A remarkable thing, it seems to me, is that with you and Herbert Storing, Martin Diamond and Harry Jaffa—

**RL:** And Walter Berns.

**SG:** And Walter Berns, yes—you had a real significant contribution to the understanding of America and American thought, and all of you were students of Leo Strauss. But Strauss never taught American things. It's not clear to me that he had very much to say about these figures. Was there a connection between studying with Leo Strauss and your reading of Tocqueville or your work on the *Founders' Constitution*?<sup>26</sup>

**RL:** It is hard for me to say. Walter [Berns] might have another response to that because he probably had Strauss as his dissertation supervisor—or one of them; probably the first was C. Herman Pritchett<sup>27</sup> or Robert Horn,<sup>28</sup> a wonderful teacher. I don't know. I don't know how to answer that.

This only expresses my awareness, but it may be an inadequate appreciation of the things that studying with Strauss brought to my study of American things. I would say the person who had most influence on me in thinking about American things was Marvin Meyers,<sup>29</sup> who was in some odd way a kind of fellow traveler of the Straussians—"Straussians"—without being one of them. He was an extremely perceptive and subtle thinker—a one-book man, okay. And I studied his way of looking at things quite intensely for a number of years. But, as I say, I sent Strauss everything I wrote on American things knowing, one, that he was interested in American things—I mean he was the one who recommended Charnwood's *Life of Lincoln*, not to me but to everybody. And [two], presuming on his friendship.

I would have been very interested in his reaction to an essay that I sent him early on, "Reds and Whites, Rights and Wrongs."<sup>30</sup> I know he received it and he wrote back to me, but the letter got lost, probably the handwriting was illegible for the post office. And since that raised some very interesting questions, even of political morality, I regret that.

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<sup>26</sup> *The Founders' Constitution*, ed. Philip B. Kurland and Ralph Lerner (University of Chicago Press, 1987).

<sup>27</sup> C. Herman Pritchett: see "People."

<sup>28</sup> Robert A. Horn: see "People."

<sup>29</sup> Marvin Meyers (d. 2000), author of *The Jacksonian Persuasion: Politics and Belief* (Palo Alto, California: Stanford University Press, 1957). At the University of Chicago Meyers was honored for his teaching, receiving the Llewellyn John and Harriet Manchester Quantrell Award for Excellence in Undergraduate Teaching. In 1963 he accepted a position as professor of history at Brandeis University, from which he retired in 1985.

<sup>30</sup> In *The Thinking Revolutionary: Principle and Practice in the New Republic* (Cornell University Press, 1988).

**SG:** So there's this remarkable phenomenon of all at the same time: several students of Strauss coming upon the scene, doing very interesting work on the American founding and American political thought. Somehow all of this was inspired by, to some degree—I take your example of Meyers as being supplemental to this account—but to some degree by Strauss's teaching. But the connection or causation is not clear. Strauss was teaching mainly Plato and Aristotle; he wasn't teaching Lincoln and Madison or Tocqueville—

**RL:** Though occasional mentions, where they illustrated a case in point.

**SG:** And each of you understood that this was, as you said earlier, a subject worthy of understanding. There was no—on Strauss's part there was nothing that would have caused you to feel that you were doing second-rate work if you were spending your time working on Lincoln as opposed to Plato?

**RL:** Not at all.

**SG:** And that's an interesting aspect of his teaching: that respect for a figure like Lincoln or Madison was there. He was communicating a respect for something other than those whose main business was ideas—

**RL:** Right, right. There's no disdain that I recall towards political practitioners who are at the top of their game. Not at all.

**SG:** Was there in the approach that you gentlemen took an application of, if there is such a thing as Straussian political science—an application of Straussian political science, assuming that exists, to the field of American political thought?

**RL:** Well, this would be my formulation. And you could hear different things—and of course we haven't mentioned other people who worked in the American field: Robert Goldwin,<sup>31</sup> for example.

**SG:** Horowitz.

**RL:** Yeah. I was going to say Robert Horowitz.<sup>32</sup> I think it was the stance of respectful but critical attention to the serious argument that's either expressed or underlies the argument as it's expressed. I said to Herbert Storing, when he allowed me to read his long introductory essay, *What The Anti-Federalists Were For*—I said to him at the time: This is really an achievement; you've accomplished what the anti-Federalists couldn't do for themselves. That's not to say he was being unhistorical or anything like that. He really grappled with the things that were agitating them and stating it in powerful form which was intellectually respectable, and where it could stand on its own two feet, as they say, with Madison and Hamilton and James Wilson.

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<sup>31</sup> Robert Goldwin: see “People.”

<sup>32</sup> Robert Horowitz: see “People.”



**SG:** Right. Do you think that Strauss's encounter with America changed him in any way? Changed him personally? Changed his approach to things? Or changed his understanding? He was a European *émigré*, and he had been fully formed in Europe before he decamped eventually for London and then New York. Was there something about America that might have caused Strauss to see things differently or act differently than perhaps he had before?

**RL:** Well, this is all surmise. At first I thought Strauss had never taught before he got to the New School. That's not strictly speaking true, because he had done some kind of adult education thing for Franz Rosenzweig's<sup>33</sup>—whether it was an institute or something—in the 1920's in Germany. Probably adult education. But it wasn't university. I supposed it had its own Jewish or quasi-Zionist agenda. Paul Mendes-Flohr<sup>34</sup> could tell you something more about that.

So yes, I would say, if he had been a professor at the University of Hamburg it would have been a different way of teaching altogether. Am I imagining it, that German professors stood, delivered, and left? Yeah. They still have that in France. So it's a very different sort of thing [here]: very much a heterogeneous student body; people who, you know, suffer from a certain lack of modesty, have to be met on their own ground. Real teaching, heavy lifting which one would not necessarily presume certainly in my picture of the nineteenth-century German university.

**SG:** One delivers a lecture and leaves.

**RL:** Yeah, and they work it out. Maybe it's a caricature but I'm not sure it's altogether false. But I feel safe in saying that the intellectual environment at the U of C in those days was probably significantly different from that at the New School. And Strauss was a quick study, there's no doubt about that—and that independent of the whole business of what he's really aiming at. Is he trying to win souls? Well, yes, in the sense that any teacher trying to get students to see something and to believe that it matters, but that's not the same thing as proselytism. But it's getting someone to see that there's something too valuable here which I'm happy to share with you but—to change the metaphor—you've got to put some skin in the game.

**SG:** His first encounter with Chicago was to some degree with your friends—war veterans, mature men who had families. Do you think that that made an impression on him in one way or another? You know, he didn't come here and he wasn't teaching, you know, dewy-faced babes.

**RL:** Right, right. It's hard to believe that it didn't make a big difference. As I said, these were people who had seen action, many of them: sometimes in trenches; sometimes in traveling on seas that were filled with U-boats with hostile intent. They were grown people and had done

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<sup>33</sup> Franz Rosenzweig (d. 1929), a Jewish thinker concerned with theology and philosophy best known for *The Star of Redemption*, published in 1921. In 1920, Rosenzweig founded the House of Jewish Learning, an enterprise carried on by Martin Buber in 1933.

<sup>34</sup> Paul Mendes-Flohr (1941– ), Dorothy Grant Maclear Professor of Modern Jewish History and Thought in the Divinity School at the University of Chicago.

something admirable and worthwhile. So I'm not going to speculate what Strauss would have been as a teacher in a four-year college somewhere. He offered them a challenge as they, in turn, offered him a challenge. I think he would've believed that to have been an enriching experience for himself.

**SG:** I've heard you say on another occasion that Strauss was always grateful to America.

**RL:** Well, yeah. I'm grateful that my parents left the Russia of the Civil War. You know, otherwise one would have been smoke.

**SG:** Did you consider Professor Strauss your friend?

**RL:** I was very affectionate toward him and I had the sense of some reciprocation, but not friendship in this sense that friends are with more or less equals. Okay. There is an interesting little talk that Herb Storing gave (it was reprinted in the collection of his papers) about the role of a faculty friend. It's not quite a buddy. There's a difference, and the difference is worth maintaining. If I had developed or had had the capacity for much more elevated things than I did or do, then, you know, that could have been. But not really.

**SG:** Looking back on Strauss now, how do you remember him? What are your thoughts?

**RL:** He was a human being. He had features of smallness that, you know, didn't do him honor. But the big thing was enormous, and he brought something into my realm of possibilities that I find hard to believe I would have got from anyone else. That doesn't mean it might not have happened. But I would have had a very different life and I think in significant ways I would have been a different person. But, you know, these are non-replicable experiments.

**SG:** Of course.

**RL:** Gratitude, that's the big thing. Not idolatry, not adulation, but gratitude.

**SG:** Is there anything else you'd like to add? We've covered a lot of ground.

**RL:** I mean we owe—and it's not true to me of Strauss only—we owe unending gratitude to people who show us some ways, ways of focusing or refocusing our minds. And it's lucky, or do you want to say providential, that one has these kinds of occasions, especially if one only goes around once in life. I don't think that Strauss believed in metempsychosis. It's occasion for unending, quiet gratitude.

**SG:** Thank you very much. You've been very generous.

**RL:** I'm happy to have been of any help to you or anyone who might be curious enough to probe into these things.