Abram Shulsky
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Gayle McKeen: This is Gayle McKeen here with Abe Shulsky, who was an undergraduate and a graduate student—

Abe Shulsky: No, graduate.

GM: Oh, graduate student at the University of Chicago and took several courses with Strauss between 1964 until his departure from the University in 1967. I was hoping you could share with us some of your memories of what it was like to have Strauss as a teacher. Perhaps if you could say a few words first about how you came to enroll in his classes.

AS: Well, that occurred through my acquaintance with Allan Bloom[1] at Cornell. He came in spring of 1962 to Cornell, and that completely changed my whole trajectory. I'd been a mathematics major and planning to go on in mathematics as a graduate student, and you know Bloom was just a force of nature, as I'm sure you remember from your days there. As a result of that, I wound up going to the University of Chicago precisely because Strauss was there. It was part of a fairly big group actually, of us from Cornell my year. There was Chris Bruell; there was Michael Zuckert; Cathy Held, now Cathy Zuckert; David Schaefer; Michael Malbin.[2] There was whole group of us that came from Cornell because of Bloom, so it was a given that we were there to study with Strauss.

As a teacher he tended towards the sort of more formal, I would say. I listened on the website to the introduction to the *Meno* class, the first lecture. It brought back to me the rather sort of Germanic, formal way he had of presenting it. I mean, I think part of what happened was that by '64 his health was already getting worse. Then in '66, I guess it was, there was a long period of hospitalization, '65 or '66 and so forth. I think he was a little more distant from the students than my impression of what he had been earlier on when people like Allan Bloom were the students. It was very formal. He was unfailingly polite, unfailingly gracious to students. He encouraged questions. He never put down students. He never dismissed anything but it was—well, for most of us it was a little intimidating because it was Strauss, after all.

And for the most part, the classes worked in a very textually-based way. There was a graduate student, Donald Reinken—Strauss loved his voice. I think he was sort of the reader. He would tell Reinken to read a certain passage and then he would comment on it

[1] Allan Bloom: see "People Mentioned in the Interviews" [hereafter "People"].
[2] Christopher Bruell: see "People"; Michael Zuckert: see "People"; Catherine Zuckert, Nancy Reeves Dreux Professor of Political Science at the University of Notre Dame; David Schaefer, professor of political science, College of the Holy Cross; Michael Malbin, Executive Director of the Campaign Finance Institute in Washington, D.C. and professor of political science at the State University of New York Albany.

and go through whatever the day's assignment was. And so there was a kind of formality in that sense about it. He would make occasionally more general statements about what we were reading or about specific points, and those tended to be very meaty, so you had to be paying close attention. It took a lot of thinking about to understand. It did raise some discussion in class, but then it would raise just an awful lot of discussion afterwards as we were talking about what he had said and trying to figure out what he said.

GM: This was with your fellow students?

AS: Yeah, among the students. As I said, we were a pretty cohesive group at that point because a lot of us had come from Cornell, and I'm sure some of the other parts of the department thought of us as pains in the neck, I don't know [laughing]. But we were kind of a natural social grouping.

GM: In your remarks at the Leo Strauss as Teacher Conference in 2011,[3] you said that you were struck by the simplicity with which Strauss presented things, and then going back, you realized that it was more complex than you had remembered on first encounter.

AS: Right, that's what I meant. It was very dense in a certain way. In other words, he said a lot; he said it very simply. But there was a lot more than you would notice at first. On occasion as I look back, I probably didn't get as much out of it as I might have because, as I say, I was thinking about again that first lecture of the *Meno* class. But it was similar to a lot of his introductory statements, you know: politics is about stability and change; we want to change things for the better; you want to keep what's good; that implies some notion of the good. On the surface that sounds extremely simple. I mean, what is he saying? It seems perfectly obvious. On the other hand, as you think about it, no, it's saying a lot about how you have to study politics and so forth. So it took a while, I think, to get a sense of what was really going on.

GM: One thing I was struck by listening to the courses for the first time was the way he explained this focus on what was in the center of the text. He said: I figured this out by going to peoples' talks. They say something lively and funny and snappy in the beginning, and then people fall asleep, and then they say "And in summary," and then everybody wakes up. If you want to say something important or controversial, you put it in the middle. That just sounds just as you said very, very simple. It's a much more sophisticated principle.

AS: Right. He also got that from—there's a part in Xenophon where he talks about putting your best soldiers up front and your good ones in the back, and so forth and so forth. You got to see the way in which that evolved if you look at the Xenophon books, which were the last things he wrote towards the end of his life. And those appear very simple on the surface. They almost appear like retellings and so forth, so you have to be paying close attention. But it's also true of Xenophon that he seems to be very simple.

[3] Leo Strauss as Teacher, a conference held at the University of Chicago, April 22-23, 2011. For video of the conference's four panel presentations, see the Leo Strauss Center website, http://www.leostrausscenter.uchicago.edu.

It's not like Plato, with grand clashing themes; it's just kind of almost silly. Strauss somewhere says that Xenophon was content to go through history being thought of as a kind of retired Colonel Blimp or something, when in fact as you read it more closely you see this is a very impressive guy.

GM: Do you think that pedagogical technique served to draw students in, in an effective way?

AS: Well, that's something to which I don't really know the answer. When I think about the way he was described by someone like Bloom, who was a student in the '50s, I think he was much more interested then in bringing students in. And probably it was somewhat different—I mean, the technique was somewhat different. By the time I arrived, the students in a sense came from his students. It was people like Jaffa[4] and Bloom and Walter Berns[5] and other students of his who were sending students to him. I didn't get the sense that he was trying to draw students in as much. I think what he was trying to do with his technique, when I thought about it, was rather than focus entirely on the sort of epistemological questions or on the question of behavioralism, which he addressed—instead of focusing on that, he tended to focus students on the texts. And I think he thought, and I think correctly, that that would be a kind of way of drawing students in, in other words, without having to go through all the arguments about facts and values, where there'd be much more resistance on the part of the students. If he could get them reading Plato seriously they'd sort of forget the "Well, this isn't supposed to be possible" and become drawn into the text and get interested in that. I think the technique of doing the textual analysis was very much trying to draw students in by virtue of the richness of the text, and figuring that that would interest them and they would get into that. Then later on one could address some of these questions: Well, you can't do political philosophy because of the fact-value distinction. By then, they would have had a sense of what it is. The problem in the typical way that's addressed is that ancient philosophy is just presented as a kind of caricature, and if you simply want to debate "Well, is the fact-value distinction true or not," you're not going to get anywhere with that—I mean, you're not going to get any real sense of what the alternative to the social science position is. And of course the texts themselves do have that effect. It was in that sense, in the extent that there was a pedagogical strategy that he had, that seemed to me to be it at least at the time that I was there.

GM: A number of the first generation of Strauss's students had a very strong identity of themselves as Straussians. How much did your cohort have that?

AS: Oh, very much, yeah.

GM: And what did it mean to you?

AS: Well, what did it mean? It meant, I think, mainly the sort of interest in the ancients and taking the ancients seriously and reading the texts carefully. So it was sort of

[4] Harry Jaffa: see "People."
[5] Walter Berns: see "People."

methodological in that sense, and to some extent it had its negative side, which is that it probably—I don't know how to put it. It could lead to a sort of contempt for a lot of the social science that was going on. A lot of it deserved it, but it could lead anyway to a kind of a ghettoization or something, and just not thinking much about what was actually going on in the contemporary stuff. The problem of course was [that] a lot of the stuff was, if you go back to the '60s, what was big then was sort of the early behavioralism, which has kind of disappeared. But it really was pretty poor. It was so ridiculously self-inflated in terms of what it was going to accomplish and how it was going to accomplish it and so forth.

GM: And its predictive capacities.

AS: Yeah, it was just the assumption that now that we can apply the scientific method, the results will come as quickly as they do in natural science, and with no real willingness to think about it and to think about the differences, to worry about what it meant and so forth and so on. Of course Chicago was a little strange back then because it was, from the point of view of the behavioralist, a kind of a backward department, a traditional department. And at a certain point in my time there—and this wasn't really clear to me so much at the time, but there was a sort of upheaval in the department because parts of it wanted to be much more up-to-date, much more like the University of Michigan or something. And that led to Herman Pritchett,[6] remember the constitutional lawyer?—he was the chairman, but he was on leave one year and then he kind of got overthrown in coup of sorts. We were not particularly aware of that at the time, I must say, but it made itself felt that somehow there was a sense among some of the people there that Strauss was a little bit of an embarrassment. It was a sign, a symptom of the way in which the department wasn't really up-to-date.

GM: You were also a student of international relations?

AS: Yes, well that was—

GM: How did that fit with your interest of the history of political philosophy?

AS: The way it was structured back then, the program was that you couldn't just be doing political philosophy. You had five exams, if I remember correctly, one of which could be outside the department, and one of which you took at the end of your first year as part of the master's program. So on that one I chose international relations, which was of a sort of interest, although I wasn't intending back then to wind up where I wound up in fact. My thought was I would go on in political philosophy. I would have preferred a sort of teaching position and an academic career, and that just didn't happen.

So the international relations—I don't know exactly, to tell you the truth, why I picked it as the first field. I mean, in one sense you wouldn't pick political philosophy as the first field, because you intended to do that. I intended to do that all along. You wouldn't want to take the exam right away, obviously. The international relations was something I was

[6] Herman Pritchett: see "People."

interested in but it wasn't a major thing. It turned out we had this very interesting fellow, Mort Kaplan.[7]

GM: I remember him from when I was a graduate student.

AS: Yeah. He had actually done an interesting book, it was called something like *System and Process*,[8] attempting to do it in a social science manner that was intelligent. The paper I wrote for him I did on Thucydides so I suppose you could say that. The book was about the different organizations, bipolar systems, multipolar systems, and so forth and so on. Thucydides is a good example of a bipolar system, and so I wrote the paper on that. Also, Donald Reinken was a student of Mort Kaplan and did a lot of the computer stuff for him, modeling and simulation and so forth. Reinken was an early sort of programmer type. The other fields: I did the constitutional law and economics as an outside field, mainly because you could take a course with Milton Friedman, so how could you pass that up? Also, economics is in a sense the most mathematical of the social sciences because the models are most rigorous, and I had been mathematics major at Cornell.

GM: Going back to the Straussian question, what kinds of things did your teachers at Cornell tell you about Strauss that made you want to go and study with him at the University of Chicago?

AS: Well, Bloom, also Walter Berns but fundamentally Alan Bloom—well, that he was just the most brilliant man, a man who most understood where we were, so to speak, philosophically—what the major issue were and so forth. It made it very attractive. And it's true when you got there you didn't focus so much on the "crisis of the west" or something that was maybe dealt with in the first lecture. Then, as I said, his way of getting you into it was the careful textual reading of some classic work. But the result of that, I think, was that it did draw you into thinking about it without avoiding the superficialities of the way the thing was typically debated, and in a way it diverted you from the big questions at first, perhaps. Bloom was of course a tremendous admirer of Strauss. Once you got interested in any sort of philosophic question, then that sort of led you to him. Actually, before I met Bloom I had taken some philosophy courses at Cornell. The department was extremely analytic. I just got completely bored with it, so this doesn't really have anything to say; there's nothing much to think about here. Bloom was a complete revelation.

Also, the other thing, in a way: I wrote a little thing that showed up in the *Political Science Reviewer* after Bloom died in 1992 about my introduction to him when he showed up at Cornell that first semester,[9] and one of the things that was most impressive in a way was Shakespeare. He did a little seminar on *Merchant of Venice*. As a math major, I sort of tended to think: Okay, English majors aren't very serious, and this isn't really serious stuff; the serious stuff is math and science and so forth: the whole post-

[7] Morton Kaplan (b. 1921), Distinguished service Professor Emeritus of political science, The University of Chicago.
[8] Morton Kaplan, *System and Process in International Relations* (1957).
[9] Abram Shulsky, "A Personal Remembrance of Allan Bloom," *Political Science Reviewer* 22 (1993): 16-19.

Sputnik mindset and the rest of it. Then just to be able to see how intricate and how much was involved in just understanding a Shakespeare play was just a complete revelation to me. It just hadn't occurred to me that that could be possible at all, and how much there was of solid thinking that had to go into understanding it. Then of course Bloom was working on his Shakespeare book back then.

GM: You've written about the influence that Strauss has had on your study on intelligence, for example. But looking back in a more general way about Strauss's influence, what do you think his influence has been?

AS: On me or in general?

GM: Well, both.

AS: Okay, when Strauss was—really, the thing about intelligence came about because of the volume that someone was preparing and it actually created a little bit of trouble for me later on. It was a little tongue in cheek because it's not very direct at all of course.[10]

GM: The title suggests that it is tongue in cheek.

AS: Yeah, it was a little tongue in cheek. When I thought about it, though, as I was writing, the main thing that Strauss did was just a tremendous liberation from the sort of conventional categories. If you begin with thinking: Okay, there's the fact-value distinction or, say, take the way social science would tend to—comparative politics was moving at the time of saying: Well, there's no such thing as a clear distinction of regimes; you can come up with a measure of the concentration of control, and maybe some have a higher percentage and maybe some have a lesser percentage. There's always participation but there's different levels. In essence, where they were trying to get to, and they sort of did a little bit in some of the Soviet studies until the Soviet Union collapsed, was sort of saying: Okay, there's no real differences in kind here; there's merely proportionally more centralization, less centralization, more control, that sort of thing. Strauss was just a liberation from all of that. You could say: Oh, no, you can actually look at the thing and try to figure out what it is, and what it means, and what drives these people, and it doesn't have to be economics, it doesn't have to be power as Morgenthau and this "realpolitik" would say. I mean, it can be different things. It can be religious enthusiasm, it can be ideology that can affect this in various ways.

So the main thing that it gave you, I think, was just a certain sense of liberation that you didn't need to try to grind everything up so that it would fit into these preexisting models and casts. Certainly, the notion of a regime—which, again, isn't Strauss, it's just there in Aristotle, it was there from the very beginning—but to take it seriously enables you to think about international relations a lot better than you could than if you really took seriously the notion that all these things are only quantitatively different in various ways. The other thing, it just sounds strange but it's true in a way, I mean Strauss's emphasis on, well, that it's only a liberal democratic regime that in principle believes that

[10] Gary J. Schmitt and Abram N. Shulsky, "Leo Strauss and the World of Intelligence (By Which We Do Not Mean Nous)," 1999. The essay is available online.

everything true about it can be said publicly, that other regimes don't buy this in principle; and hence the notions of deception and so forth and so on, noble lies and the rest of it. It turns out to be very important for understanding the variety of regimes in the world and certainly in intelligence.

It's strange, but I'm always quite amazed at a kind of—you wouldn't think this—a kind of naiveté that goes into the way people in the international relations business sometimes think of countries. They do tend to take too seriously the surface statements. One example back before Iraq, or even now with certain things that happened in Iran: Okay, there's a secular mindset in the Middle East, at least in the old days, people like Saddam; and then there were these religious fanatics. The view that somehow they couldn't cooperate seemed to be ingrained in the intelligence community in a strange way, and yet there's nothing that Strauss said specifically would have led you to question that. I mean, it's in a sense common sense: of course you can cooperate with the enemy of your enemy. But somehow there's something about the way that current education works that leads people to take these things, what they say too seriously and not analyze it in that way. Now, can you tie that to Strauss? Well, not in any direct way. Somehow he just sort of liberated you to see things more freshly, in a way, than the social science education would lead you to do. That's kind of the point that we were making.

GM: Similar to taking the text on its own terms. You don't impose your own—

AS: It's a similar—you don't come with a formula. I mean, George Will or somebody was talking about the sort of simplistic way in which journalism sometimes imposes categories like left versus right on whatever situation it's looking at. He said something like they would have regarded a pogrom as a fight between right-wing Cossacks and left-wing Jews. The left and right had nothing to do with it; it was a different kind of fight. But somehow if you're in the op-ed world you impose that "left versus right." That kind of thing. Again, you can't attribute it to Strauss in any direct way, but I do think it had a liberating effect, that you could take things seriously. Now of course he would always, I suppose, from the other side be accused: You're not being rigorous enough; or you're not trying to take seriously the fact that there are certain constraints of the system. Which of course there are, but the overall problem now is that people put a very simple mind and matrix on top of everything. He just sort of freed you up from that. And a lot of the stuff I wound up doing later, that would have been the main connection.

GM: And his influence more broadly speaking?

AS: More broadly speaking? It's hard to say now. I mean, obviously, in parts of Europe he seems to have a greater influence—in Germany because of the work of Heinrich Meier.[11]

GM: And in China.

AS: China, this is a very interesting thing which I do not understand, other than that

[11] Heinrich Meier: see "People."

there's a kind of complete breakdown in China of belief in the system, so there's probably an openness among a lot of people to anything. In France I noticed—this was years ago, but I remember going into one of the better bookstores on Saint-Germain or something, and in the philosophy section there were translations of a lot of Strauss's books. It was really quite impressive. Here, it's harder to say. There's obviously a lot of Strauss students of students of students. How that will work out in the future, I don't know. There's a lot of interest but it tends to be among a specific group, I assume; I don't know how much it's sort of fed into the wider world. Certainly in Jewish studies it has; I think there it has been a bigger influence in some ways. But in classics? I'm just not familiar enough with the academic world to know.

There have been some things that make you wonder. I don't know if you're familiar with Artie Melzer's book on esoteric writing;[12] that's a very impressive—if nothing else just a compilations of proofs of all of this, and it sort of sank without a sound. In the wider academic world, as far as I can tell, it hasn't—I mean, you would have thought it would have created a big debate in polemics and so forth and so on, since that was always one of the things that was identified with Strauss and attacked about Strauss. It sort of disappeared, so I don't know. It hasn't—I mean, other than the people who are themselves Straussians. I suppose there's certain people, you run into people now and then who wouldn't call themselves Straussians but have obviously been interested in Strauss, and it's had some effect. But in philosophy departments, I just don't really keep up with the academic world enough to have a good sense of how that works.

GM: I wonder if there's just a hostility to reading in America that makes the Melzer book and an interest in Strauss something that seems very regressive in a way. I remember Saul Bellow saying one time that for Americans words are an obstacle. They get in the way. That's why we always say "you know"; we want to communicate telepathically. You want people to get it without the trouble of having to explain yourself.

AS: Yeah, perhaps. I just don't know where the academic world is. Certainly there was a lot of interest in Bloom when Bellow's book, *Ravelstein*,[13] was published. I don't know. Of course, there was this completely crazy stuff that was connected with the Iraq war and so forth. The guy Robbins,[14] the guy in London, the play—there was that outburst of just craziness that seems to have gone away, thank God. But it'll be there. The books will be there and I suppose it's always possible there will be interest that will spring up here and there. But as to whether the Strauss students, and students and students of students will be able to maintain that activity in this country, I don't know. It's hard to tell. There are people—of course, someone like Harvey Mansfield[15] at Harvard, and Tom Pangle[16] at the

[12] Arthur M. Melzer, *Philosophy Between the Lines: The Lost History of Esoteric Writing* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2014).
[13] Saul Bellow, *Ravelstein* (New York: Viking Press, 2000).
[14] Tim Robbins, *Embedded*. The play was first performed in 2003.
[15] Harvey C. Mansfield: see "People."
[16] Thomas Pangle: see "People."

University of Texas, and Nathan[17] of course in Chicago, and Cliff[18] in Toronto—but whether their students will get jobs at equally prestigious places, that I don't know.

GM: It's hard to say. Any other recollections, thoughts that you have? It sounds like the classes didn't go on and on way over time the way that they did in the earlier days. The conversation would then continue in the tearoom, and so on.

AS: No, we did not see too much of him outside. The person from my era who would know Strauss the best in that sense would have been Chris Bruell, because he was an assistant to Strauss so he drove him from the apartment over to the class and that sort of thing, and did various other things for him. Chris knew him personally better than I did. He always seemed rather reserved. I remember just one occasion out at Claremont, actually this would have been the summer of '68, Tom Engeman[19] and Tom West,[20] who were Claremont students, were his assistants at Claremont in the spring semester of '68. But then they were away somewhere, or it was summertime or something—anyway, Strauss asked me to do some typing for him, so I did. It was the *Oeconomicus*, [his book on] Xenophon's *Oeconomicus*. He had his paper and his little pencil about this long, in a script that was minuscule. He had it in front of him. He read it and I typed it.

GM: Oh, I see. You didn't have to decipher his handwriting.

AS: Oh, no.

GM: That's a challenge.

AS: That's impossible, because it's the sort of old-style German handwriting. Jenny can do that but she's about the only person, I think. No, I didn't have to decipher. He just read and I typed it. I typed some letters for him and so forth. There would be little side comments that would give me a sense of him. The one I remember is [that] as he was dictating this chapter on the *Oeconomicus* book which—again, those books look on the surface like just retellings; it's sometimes hard to know what he's doing. And I don't know if I asked him a question or whether I just looked puzzled at one point as I was typing or something, and he said something like: Well, when I mention a detail it means I've understood it. I felt like saying: Well, why don't you tell the rest of us? [Laughter] But of course I didn't. That little explanation of when he mentions a detail, it means: Okay, he's understood it. It's important so you should think about it, but he doesn't always give you much of a clue. Then a few others—he was very courtly and sort of polite. I never had a personal sense of him from that. He was more distant at that point.

GM: One thing I like is the way he refers to human passions and human failings. For example in a romance, he'll say: I'm sure you all know about that from the literature.

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[17] Nathan Tarcov: see "People."
[18] Clifford Orwin, professor of political science, classics and Jewish studies at the University of Toronto.
[19] Thomas Engeman, professor of political science at Loyola University in Chicago.
[20] Thomas West, professor of politics at Hillsdale College.

AS: Yeah, right. He could be very delicate. No, it was the old style. It was typical at Chicago, I guess, but he always addressed us as Mister or Miss. He would never call a student by their first name or anything like that. Chicago had a somewhat different style than other places even back then.

GM: Ralph Lerner still does that.

AS: Yeah, I imagine. And of course he would always be addressed as Mr. Strauss. In Chicago, you never addressed anyone as doctor, because I think it was assumed that if they were in Chicago they had a doctorate and it was kind of considered a little crass to point it out. It was just taken for granted.

GM: Good. Well, I think we'll stop now then. Thank you so much.

AS: Okay, thank you, it's been fun.