

INTERVIEW I

DATE: April 22, 1996

INTERVIEWEE: ABRAM V. GOODMAN

INTERVIEWER: Ted Gittinger

PLACE: LBJ Library, Austin, Texas

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TG: Why don't we begin with you telling us about your first contact with Lyndon Johnson?

AG: My first contact must have been shortly after the death of his predecessor, whose name, I believe, was [James P.] Buchanan. It was a private meeting and not terribly momentous. My close relationship grew up out of the case of a distant relative in Germany who was trying to escape the Nazis. This story properly begins in 1911, when I went to Europe with my parents. We visited my mother's grandparents' grave in a little village called Glehn, outside of Mönchen Gladbach.

TG: Glehn--how would you spell that?

AG: G-L-E-H-N. I met there an old lady who was my grandmother's--[my grandmother was] then deceased--my grandmother's cousin, who had taught her how to walk. Now we jump to 1937. I get a letter from that lady's grandson, asking me if I can help him get to America and escape the Hitler threat. I immediately wrote back that I would gladly sponsor his coming here, my wife and I, and I got in touch at once with my congressman, Lyndon Johnson.

TG: What was the young man's name?

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AG: Hermann Winter. That's a good question [inaudible]. Mr. Johnson was immediately interested in my problem of getting him out of Germany and through the difficulties of migrating to the United States, and he got busy right away. Shortly afterwards was what they called *Kristallnacht*, and I got a cable from this distant cousin of mine, from Dachau. He had been hauled in as a result of the police raids that night, and he wanted assurance that I was trying to get him into America. I showed that message to Mr. Johnson, and shortly afterwards he was complaining that I wasn't working hard enough on the case, which was not quite true. I was doing the best I could. But he was working quite indefatigably. And, to make a long story short, he couldn't get him into the United States, but he could get him into Mexico. He made a reservation for him on a steamer going from Hamburg to Tampico, and Mr. Johnson said, "It'll be easy for him to transfer from Tampico to Monterrey, Mexico, and after a certain interval he will cross the border into the United States a free man and settle there." The date of the departure of that vessel was the first of September, 1939. It never sailed. As you indicate, you know what happened that day--the outbreak of the war with Poland. He never got out of Germany. He was eventually sent--I learned afterwards from a relative of his that he was sent to a quarry and worked to death there. But the concern and the effort and the imagination of Lyndon Johnson have always remained with me, and I have been eternally grateful to him for his efforts even though, miraculously, they failed.

After he became senator I visited him several times in Washington. My last visit must have been 1941. I went up to his office and his clerk said to me, "He's not available today, but next time you come to Washington, let us know, and I'll arrange for him to

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have lunch with you." Well, the next time I came to Washington, I was no longer in Austin; I had moved to Iowa, and I didn't think it was fair for a non-Texan to take up his time that way, and I did not contact him again. After he became president I admired him for his social vision, which I think is not yet appreciated in the United States. I did not agree with him on Vietnam, but he inherited that bugbear from previous administrations, and he did not play quite fairly to himself.

That's my story of Lyndon Johnson, in a nutshell. You may not have much material on his efforts to help Jewish people get out of Germany, but that should be commemorated. I don't know if this is--

TG: No, this is fine. This is good because we don't have much--I have heard similar rumors, but that's as much basis as they had, rumors, stories that were passed on third- or fourth-hand. This is a first-hand account, the first one I have heard.

AG: Is that right?

TG: That's right.

AG: I have been wanting to come to Austin and incidentally make this report that I just made.

TG: Did you have a congregation in Austin at that time?

AG: I had--I was carrying at least three bucketsfull at once. I had the Hillel Foundation; I had the Reform congregation; I was working on my Ph.D. here, I finally got it here--

TG: At the University of Texas?

AG: Yes. I was quite busy. I've never been so busy since then in all my life.

TG: That's a fascinating story and a good one. Did you have much opportunity to observe LBJ and the Jewish community's interaction at all?

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AG: The Jewish community at that time was rather limited. They did not even provide me with a secretary, but I had the secretary through the Hillel Foundation who also served for the other [group]. And they had one notable individual here--you've probably heard about him--Joe Koen--

TG: Sure.

AG: --who was a rather unique personality. He had a bad foreign accent combined with a slight impediment of speech. But he was a bright, bright old man, and somebody should have collected the anecdotes about him that were bursting out all the time. He was very much sought after by Protestant preachers, and he had a keen wit and an amazing mind but somewhat unpolished. I remember, after I left Austin, reading on the front page of the *New York Times*--it may have been about Lyndon Johnson; it was a presidential candidate who stopped by his jewelry shop to visit him. [It was] on the front page of the *Times*, on a Sunday.

TG: It must have been LBJ.

AG: And there were some very able Jewish members of the faculty in those days. The community itself as a whole was not outstanding. I believe it is today [although] I'm just here a few days.

TG: Did he ever come to visit the synagogue, for example? Did LBJ ever come to visit?

AG: I don't know. He perhaps did. His predecessor was quite a negative personality, politically speaking.

(Interruption)

TG: You visited the town of Glehn a second time.

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AG: The second time was 1960, at a period when I was very anti-German as a result of the outrages during the war. We crossed--in a car we had bought in Paris--we crossed the frontier from Holland to Glehn, which is near the border. It was a very rainy Sunday; streams of water were descending. And when we got to the cemetery, at the gate was a man with a Tyrolese hat and a gun on his shoulder, walking up and down in the pouring rain. He approached us [and] wanted to know if we were French, and we said, "No." Why were we there, and who did we know who was buried there? I rattled off some family names, and that satisfied him. We went in and saw a large boulder with a bronze tablet on it which said in German and in Hebrew the names of the family Vossen. The stone had been set up by their seven children in America. And the interesting thing was, here it was, shortly after World War II, and they had not taken the bronze to use for munitions. It had been untouched. Why the man was outside parading back and forth in the deluge I don't know. He said he was the mayor of the community. He said also that in 1943 there had been forty-three Jews in the community, and they came one day and took them all away, and there were now none there.

I'm going to go to Glehn [in] late June this year for my third visit and see if the Jewish cemetery is untouched as it was at that time.

TG: Well, it's interesting--

End of Tape 1 of 1

(Ed. note: On March 11, 1997, Rabbi Goodman dictated the following postscript to his secretary, who in turn relayed it over the telephone to Ted Gittinger.)

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Last July [1996] I was in Germany, and repeated my visit to the Jewish cemetery in Glehn. I found that all the bronze tablets on the tombstones had been stolen, so that it was impossible to identify the individual graves. Subsequently, on a visit to Essen, I went to the former synagogue there, which had been in its day the largest synagogue in Germany. It had been rebuilt by the municipality and converted to a museum of the holocaust. I found in those records two men by the name of Winter. One of them was Hermann Winter. Hermann Winter was born in 1856 and came from Glehn. He presumably was the grandfather of the Hermann Winter whom we tried to rescue. He too went to a death camp and was presumably killed there.

End of Interview I

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