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Interview of John Lukacs, Ph.D.

John Lukacs Ph.D.
La Salle University

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Field Notes

Interviewee: John Lukacs

Interviewer: Leo Wong

Interview Date: February 14, 2013

Interview Location: John Lukacs' home at 129 Valley Park Road, Phoenixville, Pennsylvania

The Interviewee:

John Lukacs was born in 1924 in Budapest Hungary. He grew up in a middle class family raised by a Roman Catholic Father, and a Jewish mother. While he received most of his education in Hungary, he went to high school in Great Britain during his teenage years. During the Second World War, he was drafted into a forced labor battalion for much of the war. When German troops occupied Hungary in late 1944, he had to avoid getting sent to death camps by avoiding German patrols. In addition, he had to avoid being caught in the crossfire during the Siege of Budapest in December 1944 when the Soviets slowly pushed the Germans out of the city. After a living under Soviet occupied Budapest for less than a year, he left for the United States in 1946. In the United States, he worked at Chestnut Hill and LaSalle teaching history. Although he taught at both institutions until the 1980s, he preferred writing books and other academic articles not limited to: Winston Churchill, Hitler, the Soviet Union, the Eastern Bloc, and Pennsylvania history. Even after retirement, he wrote prolifically, publishing many works. He has been married three times and has two children. As of the time of the interview, he had no plans of writing in the foreseeable future. He currently resides in Phoenixville, PA.

The Interviewer:

I, Leo Wong (b. 1989 in Lakewood, NJ), grew up in Toms River, NJ, earned a B.A. in History at Saint Joseph's University in 2011. I am currently a student in the Public History track of the Graduate History Program at LaSalle University. My interest in interviewing Dr. Lukacs lay in the fact that he wrote extensively on both the Second World War and the Cold War; topics that I had a great interest in.

Background:

As part of the Oral History course taught by Dr. Barbara Allen, the major project of the class was an interview with either a member of the La Salle alumni, or a long time employee of the university. On the list of potential interviewees, Dr. Lukacs stood out the most to me since he was described as a teacher in the history department, as well as a "prominent historian." Upon researching his bibliography I was impressed by the large amount of books and journal articles he wrote on the Cold War and World War Two.

Since I thought that setting up the interview as soon as possible, I contacted Dr. John Rossi on how to get a hold of Dr. Lukacs on January 22. On the following day, he sent me an email stating that he had spoken with Dr. Lukacs and he had told him that he agreed to be interviewed, as well as his phone number. Over the course of the next two weeks, we had brief conversations about scheduling the interview, the length of the interview, and the legal documents involved in the project. I had to take into account my work schedule, while he had to see when his doctor's appointments were. On the first time we spoke on the phone, we determined that we would conduct the interview at his home since he could not drive due to health issues. Ultimately, we agreed on February the 14th at 2 pm.

In terms of research, Dr. Rossi provided me with an informative article he wrote on his former teacher that was published in *The American Conservative*. Since I could not get a hold his books, I relied on reading his academic articles and other interviews done on him that were available on JSTOR. In terms of questions and structuring the interview, I based them primarily on the Thompson Life Story Interview Guide, and to a lesser extent, on the various articles I found.

Description of the Interview:

I arrived at Dr. Lukacs' residence at around 1:50 on February 14th. His home, which he had constructed with the help of his second wife, was a sizeable two story house located on a plot of land off Valley Park Road in Phoenixville Pennsylvania. Just as one of the articles I used as research stated, the name of the residence "Pickering Close" was inscribed on a stone post along the drive way. When I got out of my car, I was greeted by his daytime nurse who led me into the house. While the interior of the house looked like a modern home, I was surprised at the room where Dr. Lukacs greeted me. It was a spacious two story library full of books, DVDs, and videos of history documentaries.

We greeted one another in the library and sat down on two large chairs facing one another to start the interview. I moved an ottoman between us to place the digital voice recorder on. Before we began recording, Dr. Lukacs asked me about the nature of my major (public history) and why all kinds of history are not considered "public." He also asked me if I was going to transcribe the interview, to which I explained that I would only be doing field notes and an abstract. I also explained how I had a list of chronologically ordered questions that would serve as a guide to the interview.

The interview itself was much shorter than I had expected; it was roughly an hour as opposed to the two hour minimum I hoped we would have at least reached. Regardless, Dr. Lukacs had many things to say. We did not have any interruptions or breaks during the recording session. However, I could not ask the questions in the order that I had planned out because he began talking about his time at both LaSalle and Chestnut Hill immediately (which were topics I had planned on touching on in the middle of the interview), and refused to talk about anything prior

to 1946. These changes made me have to reevaluate which questions I could still ask since it threw off my planning. I also noticed him checking his watch at certain points which made me worry that he was growing tired of my presence. After the interview was complete, he signed the release form without any objections or questions. It was after he finished signing the document that I turned off the recorder. Dr. Lukacs also requested me to let him know how the project went as soon as it was complete.

There are a number of points that I should have taken into account for a better interview. First, I should have sent Dr. Allen my preliminary questions in order to see which ones were appropriate, expandable, etc. Second, I should have asked Dr. Lukacs about what topics that he did not want to discuss. Because he did not wish to talk about anything prior to 1946, I could not ask half of the questions that I had prepared. Third, I should have better planned out what questions to ask. He began the interview by going on length about his time at Chestnut Hill College, and LaSalle University, which threw off the order of the questions that I had printed out on paper for myself. Fourth, I was very audible with my responses in the recording when I should have nodded silently to acknowledge Dr. Lukacs' responses. Fifth, when asking him about how he was feeling in the beginning of the interview, my tone came off as rude. Finally, I should have taken into account that his physical health could have played a role in his desire to shorten the interview.

Note on Recording:

I recorded the interview with an Olympus VN-702PC digital voice recorder on battery power. No external microphone was required for the recording. Immediately after the interview, I connected the recorder to my laptop via USB cable and uploaded the recording as an mp3 file. I then downloaded it onto a flash drive.