

Kevin Bretz  
HIS 665  
4/30

## Interview of John P. Rossi

**Interviewer:** Kevin Bretz

**Narrator:** John Rossi

**Locations:** Interview session #1: Olney Hall, Room 340  
La Salle University  
Philadelphia, PA

Date: April 3, 2013

Interview session #2: Dr. Rossi's House  
500 Cheltona Ave.  
Jenkintown, PA 19046

Date: April 14, 2013

### Abstract

This interview examines Dr. John Rossi's life since his formal retirement in 2006. Major topics in the interview include Dr. Rossi's publication of the La Salle history book, *Living the Promise*. Rossi details the archival experience, the research, drafts, and publication of the book. He also discusses the book's reception at the school, as well as the community. Another major topic that was explored was Dr. Rossi's travels and experience in Great Britain while he was researching his doctoral dissertation in the 1960s. Other topics include his analysis of history and his perspective on how technology has affected the classroom and teaching experience. Dr. Rossi also describes his reaction and the process of being granted the title of *professor emeritus* in 2006. Finally, his post-retirement life is explored; he continues to remain connected to the university through his teaching, as well as several writing projects that he is involved with.

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0:04	Full name is John P. Rossi. He gives permission to conduct interview
0:25	Informed that the purpose of interview was to follow-up with 2006 interview. Other topics covered include <i>Living the Promise</i> , teaching philosophy, analysis of history, technology, his stay in Britain, and other personal questions.
1:00	"A great honor" to write <i>Living the Promise</i> . Discusses process of writing the book. He does not read his own publications. Brother Joe Grabenstein was very instrumental in the book's development. No real editor or formal peer review for book. The book went through 7-8 drafts. Relied on <i>Conceived in Crisis</i> for book, but he understood the audience and created a "celebratory history" rather than a "serious" one.
7:00	Asked what the audience's (community and school) reaction was to <i>Living the</i>

*Promise.* Admits that he is somewhat skeptical of initial reaction but highly trusts his wife's judgment. An author is "always worried what the reaction is." Once he did general works, he always let his wife read them for the past several decades.

- 9:19 Problems for the book included the lack of information on early history of La Salle because early Brothers did not keep records. Calls Brother Joe Grabenstein the "first true archivist." After 1950s the "best source of all: me." Favorite part of making the book was the writing process. Needs to be writing something to stay occupied. "Wasn't real comfortable writing about the sports." Discusses basketball team's success. Said it was the "most upbeat" he's ever seen it on campus. Did not want to have anything to do with publishing or distribution of book. Wanted cover of book to show four La Salle campuses. Pleased with the layout and design of book. Discusses student population of early La Salle college, including Irish and Germans. Did not have to do any traveling for the book. La Salle archives and Temple's archives main research places.
- 23:00 Asked how La Salle shaped him and individuals. [Looks for a copy of *Tales of Lower Olney*] La Salle had a good reputation when he decided to go there. Liked the image of the school. Claims that he was a "very bad student" in high school. Did well in the courses that he liked and not so well in the courses that he did not. "Barely graduated" high school. David Albert encouraged Rossi to go to college. John Lukhch mentor at La Salle. Cost of La Salle around \$465 a year in 1950s. "The high school didn't mean much to me but the college did." Religion was not a crucial factor in determining where he went to school.
- 30:00 Father Macvoy gave encouragement. Felt that he could compete with students at Penn "with no problem at all." WASP students in history department at Penn with a sense of entitlement. Briefly talks about contrast in social status between himself and the environment at Penn.
- 33:24 Did research for doctoral dissertation in Great Britain during summer of 1963. Describes life in London while doing research. Did not have a lot of money, but the cost of living was 2/3 of the US. The research experience was "intense." Went to movie theaters occasionally during free time.
- 37:17 "Victorian Genre Painting" exhibit experience. Didn't buy Victorian paintings that turned out to be extremely valuable over time.
- 39:42 Asked what attracted him to British history in the first place. Cannot pinpoint a reason but was always fascinated by it. Discusses topic and experience writing doctoral dissertation at Penn. Wanted to do senior thesis at Notre Dame on the Munich Pact of 1938, but a professor told him there was not enough primary material. Professor at Penn tried to organize key diplomatic figures in Franco-Italian relations from 1850-1914 to be studied. Rossi and professor did not get along. Rossi then went to another professor, Holden Furber, to work on Lord Rosebery's domestic policy—this became his dissertation. Talks about his "outdated" dissertation. He published his dissertation in 1978, but new material became available in the 1980s that added to his research. Dissertation

interpretation challenged in late 80s. Now, interpretation gets a more “sympathetic hearing.”

- 46:47 Is a more traditional historian. Likes analysis within narratives and chronological framework. Is not a “big idea man.” Not concerned to write history from the bottom-up. It is difficult to know what the masses thought, except in certain circumstances. Stylistic influences included college professors and George Orwell. In particular, *Shooting an Elephant* was influential to him. “When I think of Orwell, I think of the essays.” Rossi tried to model writing off of Orwell's. Subconsciously adopted this writing style.
- 50:00 Associate editor of literary magazine *Four Quarters* at La Salle. Worked under John Keenan in English Department.
- 51:00 Asked what he would have been if he were not an historian. Probably would have joined the police department.
- 51:18 Asked what his reaction to technology in the classroom. “Kind of surprised” when he got a paper in class citing a website. Reaction to tablets. In classroom, students will unconsciously pull out phones or other devices. “It drives me crazy.” Believes that it is ignorant and disrespectful.
- 53:29 Asked how he has implemented technology in the classroom. “Here I am 77 years old, and I'm going to try to make sense out of this [technology in the classroom]. “I came to grips with this (motions to computer), and it has turned out to be a great tool.” Reference librarians extremely helpful for his research. Technology has made the writing process easier and more fun. Used to do hand drafts before the typewriter. Taught himself to write on a typewriter.
- 57:45 Comments on George Orwell one draft. “Someday I want to write something, a publishable work, in one draft.”

End of Interview Session

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## Interview Session 2

- 0:10 He informally retired in 2001 because he needed surgery for an artery. Missed a month of teaching in the fall of 2001. Decided to retire because of age (65) and the Five Year Plan. Five Year Plan—one could teach any amount of courses, and La Salle would still continue to pay into retirement. Officially retired in 2006 with a ceremony. Taught two courses after receiving *professor emeritus* distinction. “I got cut down to two [courses], and I said my God this is easy.”
- 3:12 Taught a world civilizations class when he first came to La Salle. Began teaching British history a few years later. Taught Irish history a few years after that. Developed specialty courses such as World War II, Imperialism, and Nationalism

- 4:45 Describes earning *professor emeritus* status. The history department requests to the university a distinguished member upon retirement. University council made decision. Office space, secretarial access, and ability to teach are part of attaining status.
- 5:57 Reaction to *professor emeritus*: “I was happy to get it...it makes me feel good.” Does not have to attend department meeting because he can't vote. Not involved directly in faculty business or senate but gives advice to those that are in situations he is familiar with.
- 8:12 “The person who influenced me the most was one of my former teachers, John Lukhcs.” At La Salle, Robert Courtney, Joseph Mooney, Howard Hannum, and Dennis McCarthy. Courtney's advice to Rossi: “If you really want to be part of this faculty, you better start to eat lunch at the faculty cafeteria.”
- 12:00 Asked what his main hobbies are since retirement. Enjoys writing and collaborating with other writers. Briefly discusses collaborations with John Rodden. Skeptical Hemingway and Orwell 'meeting'. Writes op-eds and articles for journals. Other leisurely activities include walking the dog, going to gym. “I don't have that kind of drive and energy that I used to have.”
- 19:00 Rossi discusses friendships that he's had at La Salle. “Some have been broken by death.” George Stow in the history department is a good friend, Stuart Leibiger, Jack Reardon, John Rooney (who is 90 years old), Jon Caroulis. Neighbors in Jenkintown include a chemist, teacher at La Salle, and two retired people.
- 21:51 Asked if he still goes to baseball games. He and his brother had season tickets at Veteran's Stadium. First became a baseball fan in 1946. His uncle was looking for a “baseball buddy.” Didn't care for it at first, but it grew on him. Was never an A's fan but a Phillies fan. Goes to games a few times a season at Citizen's Bank Park. Notable games that he attended included the 1980 World Series. Remembers “Black Friday” in 1977. Saw Sandy Koufax pitch a no-hitter vs. Phillies in 1964. Yankees came to town in August 1950. Was a huge DiMaggio fan.
- 26:14 Asked whether he was most proud of professional work or his life in general. “One of the things you'll find out, if you make a good marriage, you don't know how lucky you are.” Briefly explains when he and wife first met. A good marriage is key to success. “Never had an argument with my brothers or sisters in my entire life.” Had close relationship with brothers and sisters. Good marriage and family laid groundwork for success at La Salle.
- 29:05 Rossi believes his important achievements include promotion to full professor, position as the department chair, *Living the Promise*. Is satisfied when work is accepted by someone. 1998 Macmillan Award for best historical piece on baseball. Lindback Award for distinguished teaching in 1977. “That's the

work of what your students think of you, and what your colleagues think of you.”

- 32:15 Discusses the emotional impact of losing family members. Asked if he had any regrets. “Sometimes I was a little too passive.” Says he is lucky for such a great life. Says he has a pretty good sense of humor, according to people on campus. Likes to joke around with friends.
- 36:14 Rejection? Requested a leave one summer at La Salle and was “peeved” he did not get it. Was irked that he did not get promoted at one time—believes it was a personal matter. He appealed decision with another professor. School generally backed him when he wanted to do some academic activity.
- 40:00 Does not travel much anymore. Has been to England and Ireland several times. Travelled extensively in the United States for conferences. He did not care for the conferences on the East Coast because it seemed that “everyone was trying to one-up each other.” Enjoyed the West Coast conferences significantly more. “I couldn't get over the difference.” Regional conference on British studies. Never really wanted to leave Philadelphia area even if he got a job offer elsewhere.
- 44:00 Discusses current home in Jenkintown vs. growing up in Philadelphia. It was a close neighborhood growing up, but it began to go down-hill in the late 70s. “The neighborhood became rougher.” Views on the current state of Philadelphia. “The city can't just survive on a vibrant downtown.”
- 47:00 Considered becoming a substitute teacher in 1962. It paid \$95 a week. If one was a substitute for two years, they would get a full-time job and have the equivalent of tenure.
- 48:52 Asked if he does interviews. Did one last week for a local television station about Jackie Robinson. Discusses several local interviews dealing with baseball. The French public television channel interview was a fun experience for him, and he had to address remember he was addressing a French audience that is not too familiar with baseball.
- 53:35 Course evaluations are important to Rossi's teaching. Looks for evaluations that might indicate that it is time to retire. Current class is not very enthusiastic about learning compared to some previous classes. Some classes don't have any reaction. Recognizes the fact that one day there will be a time to retire. “Hopefully I'll be the first one to realize it.” Never considered moving from Philadelphia. Did not start publishing seriously until 1970.
- 1:02:52 Closing remarks. I thank Dr. Rossi for his time.

