

Interview with John Lukacs

Narrator: John Lukacs

Interviewer: Leo Wong

Date: February 14, 2013

Location: 129 Valley Park Road, Phoenixville, Pennsylvania

Topic: This oral history details the life of Dr. John Lukacs from 1946 to the present day. He began the interview with an overview of his time at both LaSalle University and Chestnut Hill College. He discussed how he devoted his time to both schools, and writing. He also talked about how he helped his students make it to graduate school. He also discusses the details about his retirement from both institutions. Dr. Lukacs touches on the changes, both social and demographic, that occurred among the student body at both LaSalle and Chestnut Hill. He spoke about his marriages as well as his children during the course of the interview. He details his interests in history as well as how they changed overtime during his writing career. He also goes into describing his philosophy of history. Dr. Lukacs also talks about the process he undertakes when writing, as well as how he dealt with criticism in the past as compared to the present day. He concludes the interview by stating how at this current point in time, his writing career is effectively done.

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Time Stamp	Topic
00:0	Introduction for both myself and Dr. Lukacs.
01:02	Mentions the length of time he spent at LaSalle. Talks about how he came to LaSalle following the Second World War. He mentions when he began teaching at Chestnut Hill College.
01:58	In order to support family that was still in Hungary with the creation of the “Iron Curtain,” he taught part-time at both Chestnut Hill and La Salle. The head nun of Chestnut Hill helped him get the position at that institution.
02:48	He enjoyed his time at LaSalle. He states how his background and approach to history was different from his contemporaries. His students enjoyed him so much that presidents of LaSalle asked if he could teach full time. He did not because he felt his existing schedule was adequate enough for himself.
04:00	Most of his students at both schools were the first of their families to go to college. For a number of his LaSalle better performing students (and to a lesser

extent for Chestnut Hill), he encouraged them to go onto graduate school and become historians. He contributes this to his different approach to history and extensive reading lists. After publishing his first book in the 1950s, he had the attention of several Catholic universities with graduate programs including Notre Dame and Catholic University. He told his better students that he could get them free scholarships at Notre Dame. Some even went onto get their doctorates and went onto to teaching at LaSalle. He cannot remember most of the names of those who became teachers.

- 07:21 For many of his female students, their main goals were to get college degrees and marriage. Not many of them wanted to go to graduate school, possibly six or seven from Chestnut Hill. He felt closer to his LaSalle students even though he was there two days a week. He chose not to become a full time professor for a variety of reasons.
- 08:20 He helped build up the library, had many friends in the English Department. Overall, he enjoyed his years at LaSalle.
- 08:45 During the 1980s, both the number of history students and budget of the history department dropped. The faculty decided that in order to reduce the budget, they would dismiss Dr. Lukacs since he only worked part-time despite his reputation and influence. His retirement allowed him to pour more time into writing. By the age of 70, Chestnut Hill also asked suggested that he retire. Near the end of his time at Chestnut Hill, he was also devoting more time to writing and cutting back on his teaching hours. He was approached by a number of other institutions to teach, but he turned them down because he did not want to leave where he lived and wrote, nor did he want to move up the “academic stepladder.”
- 13:05 He began teaching at Chestnut Hill in September of 1947. He was unclear whether or not he began teaching at LaSalle in 1948 or 1949. He retired from LaSalle in 1982.
- 13:43 He was born in Budapest Hungary in January 1924. He very briefly mentioned his parents, the Second World War, the Soviet occupation following the war, and his education in Britain. He did not want to go into detail about these things because he had written about them and felt they were not relevant to an interview about his experiences with LaSalle.
- 15:50 Dr. Lukacs chose the United States over Britain because he had made more connections with the Americans than the British during his time in post-war Hungary. He says that he was lucky to come to the United States during October of 1946 because of his fluency in English, and the GI Bill, which allowed veterans to go to college for free thanks to government funding. Because of the demand

for teachers, he was hired to teach a part time course on 19th century European History at Columbia University. He speaks of how his fast transition from new immigrant to professor was great for his resume.

- 18:33 Although he greatly admired British authors and scholars, it was more beneficial to come to the United States because of the availability of teaching positions. The US was much freer than Hungary, which was then falling under a communist regime.
- 19:50 Dr. Lukacs lived in New York City when he first arrived in the US. He worked two jobs to support himself: a French translator for a shipping company, and a teaching position at Columbia University.
- 22:29 He taught a course in 19th Century European history two days a week. Although he only taught for one semester, he enjoyed his time there and got along with the students. After 65 years, one student still remains in touch with him. Many intellectuals and colleagues in the late 1940s were still pro-Russian. Since he himself was the only anti-communist he knew, he felt isolated early on.
- 24:18 He left New York for Philadelphia because of his job at Chestnut Hill College. He admits he would have taken any full time position had he got it.
- 24:58 When he got the job at Chestnut Hill, he did not live in the city. He commuted by bus for four or five years before getting a car. He had a furnished room for about five years.
- 25:59 He never noticed many dramatic changes in the neighborhoods where Chestnut Hill and LaSalle were located respectively. LaSalle was located in a lower middle class neighborhood compared to Chestnut Hill.
- 26:48 He was always open to discussion with any of his students. What surprised him was that many (though not all) of his female students had a lack of curiosity in terms of academics.
- 27:21 He had friends who were fellow professors, and a social life beyond the academic world. Six years after he moved to the United States, he was married. They lived in an apartment, then in the country, not far from where he currently lives now. They had two children. She passed away at 44 from lung cancer.
- 28:31 One child lives in a close neighborhood. The other son is a professor of English at Loyola in Maryland. He is also one of the best wine writers in the country.
- 29:30 He remarried four years after the death of his first wife. They built the house he currently lives at 35 years ago. Although he did not have any children with her,

his stepson (her son from a previous marriage) lives with him. His second wife died at the age of 77, ten years ago. He and his third wife are currently separated.

- 31:17 At both LaSalle and Chestnut Hill, the student body changed in terms of its composition. It became less predominantly Irish American, and more groups such as Italian Americans came in. Attitudes became more liberal. Changes were greater in Chestnut Hill than LaSalle. In 1968, the Archdiocese of Philadelphia decided that these schools could be coeducational. He believes that at this point, there were fewer men in Chestnut Hill percentagewise, than women at LaSalle.
- 32:45 During his time at LaSalle, there were few minority students including African Americans and Asians. It was not until the 1980s when more minority students began coming to the school.
- 34:07 The faculty grew in size when LaSalle became a university. Chestnut Hill also went through a similar change in terms of an increase in faculty.
- 35:06 He says that the student body became more liberal over time. Students became more lax in terms of religious adherence, clothing, and how professors addressed students (by Mr. or Ms.). He personally retained that practice.
- 37:21 In terms of political events, Dr. Lukacs says that students during his era, as well as students today, did not show much awareness. He believes that his students during the 1950s were at least aware of Sen. Joseph McCarthy and his anti-communist campaign. He also believes that some of his students likely shared his negative opinion against the senator. The Cuban Missile Crisis had no observable affect amongst the student body according to him. In terms of Vietnam-era protests, he notes that LaSalle was no different from other colleges and universities in the country. He himself was never concerned about the Soviet Union based on these events. Based on his studies and what he knew about the Soviets, he said that they never wanted a direct confrontation with the United States.
- 40:58 As the years progress, there are fewer faculty members that he is able to keep in touch with. He has also kept in touch with personnel, including those not involved in academics, from other institutions.
- 41:36 His lifelong dream was to be a writer. Teaching helped his writing in the long run. At LaSalle, his usage of language and teaching helped his writing. He felt that if he had only taught graduate courses, it would not have helped his writing skills as much.

- 42:48 Early on, he two had two major interests in writing: Eastern European history and 20th century history. As time went on, he became interested in questions involving the way how history is written, what history is, and whether or not there is historical objectivity. His book *Historical Consciousness*, which took him thirty years to write, deals these subjects. Now, his main interest is “how do we know what we know.” He explains that all knowledge is participatory. Knowledge involves both “the act of seeing, and what we want to see.” History is much more than what professionals have written down.
- 47:49 He continues describing his philosophy of history. According to Dr. Lukacs, you can describe something that is factually accurate, but the description is wrong. Facts do not exist without context. All history is revisionist to an extent. We constantly rethink the past without negating it.
- 50:38 Dr. Lukacs says that he has summed up everything that he had wanted to say and asked me if there was anything else that was of interest to me that I wanted to ask.
- 51:09 He explains the process on which he goes through when writing a book. He states that he first finds a topic he is greatly interested in, and then he thinks about what will go into the work. He writes down notes on a yellow pad and creates a table of contents. Extensive research then follows. He also goes on to discuss how literature, music, and art are representations of a particular time and thus, can be considered historical elements.
- 55:18 He cannot remember the most challenging book or article he has ever written. He agrees that they all had their share of challenges though.
- 55:39 He also cannot recall the work that he is the most proud of.
- 55:49 When he began writing, he was interested in reviews. He states that overtime, he has stopped worrying about criticism. He states that throughout his extensive writing career, he believes himself to be less interested in the reception of works than others. To describe his own attitude towards writing, he quotes an English writer by saying “He doesn’t write for money, he doesn’t write for reputation. He writes because he cannot help it.” Dr. Lukacs gave a recent example where the New York Times had asked him to write an article about past popes that had resigned. In the end, they only used half of what he had originally wrote when they published the article. He said that if this had happened when he was younger, he would have been upset. Now, it does not bother him much.
- 1:00:33 Leisure is not as easy to do since he cannot drive. He has a lot of empty time. Although he is a fast reader, he does not read as much as he used to.

- 1:01:35 He asks me if the project will be transcribed or not. I explain that I will have to create field notes and a log. I tell him that the audio recording, field notes, and log will be on LaSalle's website. I then talk to him about the release forms which he signs.
- 1:03:08 Interview ends