

**Interview with Jonathan G. Lebedoff**

**Interviewed by Ann Pflaum**

**Interviewed on July 25, 1998**

Jonathan Lebedoff - JGL  
Ann Pflaum - AP

AP: Today is the 25th of July. The person being interviewed for the history project is the Honorable Jonathan Lebedoff, who will describe his years at the University [of Minnesota] in the 1950's.

John, could you describe first, if you remember, when you first thought about going to the university, and describe some of your early times there? Thank you very much.

JGL: All right. Thank you, Ann. That was over forty years ago. I don't remember any specific moment when I first decided to go to the university. At this moment, some forty-two years later, I've got almost college-aged kids, who are, years in advance, reading over brochures and receiving computer solicitations from institutions and so on. I think that, back in the mid 1950s, when I was a student at North High School in Minneapolis, it just was assumed that the peer group, of which I was a part, would go from high school to college. College, for my group, meant what we referred to as the "U." I don't think I ever gave any thought, any conscience thought, and perhaps—I realize now with some astonishment—had no understanding of institutions other than the University of Minnesota. I think I can say that I gravitated to it just by the fact that that's where you went after high school.

AP: Did you enter in 1956?

JGL: Yes, I entered in the fall of 1956, at the University of Minnesota. I think I was eighteen years old. I was what we referred to as a commuter student, in that I lived at home with my parents throughout the four years of my undergraduate experience, which was 1956 to 1960. I went to the "U" for an uninterrupted four years of undergraduate, and upon getting my degree, I, then, went to law school for three years. But, that's the 1960s and that's a different story.

AP: Can you remember some of the courses you took?

JGL: Yes, I remember—it may well have been the first course I ever took at the university—a humanities course at Folwell Hall. There was a professor named Joseph Kwiat, K-w-i-a-t, who taught the course. It was a tremendous eye-opener to me. It turned out to be what I might refer to as a great books course. When I think back to how even less sophisticated I was then than now, it's astonishing that these young high school graduates are thrown into *War and Peace* and *Brothers Karamazov* when, perhaps, the students, certainly including myself, had not had enough life experiences to fully appreciate the depth of some of those books. I remember that class.

AP: Did you actually read *War and Peace* or *Brothers Karamazov* . . . ?

JGL: I read them all. I read *War and Peace* and *Brothers Karamazov*.

[break in the interview]

JGL: Joe Kwiat, in my opinion, was a tremendous teacher and he excited the interest of the students. He selected a number of students, one of which was myself, who would meet informally in the evenings and discuss these books. It got to be a club that today would be like a book club where the books would be classics. Those were wonderful moments. If I remember correctly, my brother and my sister were also in that but were not in the study group. I found it very rewarding.

AP: Where did you meet? Where did the study group meet?

JGL: We met in various homes of the students. Sometimes, in my home, some other student's homes.

AP: Did you have cars? How did people get around at night to different homes?

JGL: That's a good question. You're talking about a long time ago. Almost everybody drove. I may not have been a driver when I entered the "U." I was eighteen. If memory serves me, I didn't get my drivers license until I was nineteen, but most of the people in the group drove. I never had any trouble getting a ride.

AP: Would you meet after supper at eight o'clock, eight to ten?

JGL: Yes, after supper, exactly.

AP: Was Professor Kwiat in the group?

JGL: Yes, he was in the group and, sometimes, he hosted the group.

AP: Do you remember where he lived?

JGL: I think he lived over in the area where a lot of faculty live. What was that called?

AP: On the St. Paul campus maybe?

JGL: No, not on the St. Paul Campus. It's off of River Road. It's kind of a heavily frequented . . .

AP: I know where you mean, Prospect Park?

JGL: Yes, Prospect Park, exactly. This is stretching my memory.

AP: Let's go back, if you can, to the first fall of your freshman year. Do you remember what you wore? Did you wear saddle shoes? Did you wear tennis shoes? Did you wear loafers?

JGL: I have to tell you that I don't remember what I wore. My father—even though we were going to a public high school—was the type of person who thought the students should all wear jackets and ties, even in high school. Though I certainly didn't wear jackets and ties in high school, it wasn't for lack of effort on my father's part. I don't believe I ever wore a jacket and tie in class—maybe in the very beginning, not knowing what to expect. If memory serves me, I wore loafers and khakis and things of that sort. It was not, what today would be called, grunge. It was, at least by my standings, a sport shirt and slacks and sweaters.

AP: Can you tell me some of the names of some of the other people in your study group and what they have done?

JGL: As you know and some of those reading this will know, I'm a triplet and my triplet siblings, my brother and sister, attended with me. I think they were both in the group. For sure my brother was; I don't remember if my sister was. There was a man named Jeremy Berman, B-e-r-m-a-n. He had been a classmate of mine at North High School. He is presently living in the Minneapolis area. He has a very nice wife, an Israeli women, and he's got three lovely children. I'm not sure what his job is. He has an extraordinarily high intelligence. I really thought of him as brilliant. There was a fellow, who later became a law school classmate of mine, named Robert Minish, M-i-n-i-s-h, who was also in that group. Bob Minish was from Robbinsdale and he was highly intelligent. One of the early memories I have at the university is that I got to meet a lot of people who I thought, really, were very gifted. I hadn't met that high a number of individuals that I felt possessed that high of intellect at North High School. I'm not suggesting that I possessed it, but I could see it in others. Both Bob Minish and Jeremy Berman were highly intelligent. There was a man named Ed Hamilton in the group who was really brilliant. Ed Hamilton later became head of some think tank somewhere. My brother, David, knows what he is doing. He's not living in this part of the country. I think he has had a great measure of success in academia. It was a very interesting group and it gave me a sense of . . .

[break in the interview]

JGL: . . . leaving my parents home in the morning, and as soon as the classes were over, going home at night. I didn't have close ties as students who lived on campus in dorms and were in fraternities might have had; so, a group like this was very important to me.

AP: Tell me about some more classes, if you can remember some.

JGL: There were two classes that made a big impression on me. One was, as I said, Professor Kwiat's humanities class. I had a professor named David Noble who taught a course called History of the South. I took that class from him. I ended up being a history major at the university, and I think I was even a history major at the time I took this class from him. I had never really understood history, at that time. It was the first moment in time that I began to appreciate that history was more than dates and battles, that there was a [unclear], that there were times in human conduct that led to [unclear] as much as any specific great battle. David Noble's lectures, I still remember, were magnificent and I really thought he provided what a university was suppose to provide for its young students.

I had some negative experiences, too, with early classes. I took a freshman sociology class at the university that shocked me, because there were, literally, 2,000 students in the class. We sat in row after row in some giant . . . I'm trying to remember where it was, it may have been Shevlin Hall. There were 2,000 of us. Every few rows there were television screens and, basically, it was hard for me with my bad eyesight to even see the teacher in the front of the room. Basically, we were all watching the course on television. I thought it was too large. It was like a parody of what somebody would fear a large university would be. That was a negative experience.

The history and humanities courses were positive experiences. It may also be because I had a much greater interest and affection for history and humanities than I do for sociology that I retain those memories.

AP: Do you remember if you had morning classes? Would you, generally, stay over at the university over the noon hour or would you be home by noon? When would you get home?

JGL: I don't really remember.

[break in the interview]

AP: Do you remember where you had lunch?

JGL: I can tell you where I had lunch. You see what happened is, I wasn't a member of a fraternity, but the center of the my social life, for at least the first two years, was the Hillel Foundation, which is the Jewish student organization on the campus. It's right on University Avenue and it's in the same location now as then. I grew up on the North Side of Minneapolis

and the little community of which I was a part was an almost all Jewish community. Many of the Jewish kids from my senior class at high school were at the "U" with me. They, and others I knew, would congregate—no pun intended—at the Hillel Foundation on a daily basis. That was, at least for the first couple of years before I expanded my interests, the center of my social life on the campus.

AP: Did you go to football games?

JGL: Yes, I was then, as now, a big Gopher sports fan. Not only did I go to football games, but in order to ensure better seats, I became a member of the Rooter Club. I remember holding up cards that they would furnish the students with—there was a special section for the students—various cards that were numbered and we would be told to hold up number three in your sequence and we'd all hold up the cards. You may have seen on television these funny things that are done at UCLA and USC and so on. I blush to say that I think the standard here was a little lower. I've seen films of what we were producing and it was not perfection. [laughter] But, it was great for us because we got to see the games. I saw the Gopher basketball games and football games and I loved Memorial Stadium. My father had graduated from the University of Minnesota before me and Minnesota football played a big role in his life. He had seen, basically, every Gopher game ever seen in Memorial Stadium. I think the inaugural game was in 1924 and from that moment, until the game when they tore down the stadium, he probably didn't miss ten games in all those years. I got that from him and I saw the Gopher games.

[break in the interview]

AP: Was it you or your brother that was in the Quiz Bowl?

JGL: We were all in the Quiz Bowl. At that time, there was a popular college program called the College Bowl. What would happen is various colleges would compete and they'd ask questions. There would be four members of the team and, then, they would ask a question and at anytime before the question was completed, you could buzz and interrupt and state what you hoped was the answer. The University of Minnesota ended up doing extremely well in that competition. If memory serves me, they won for several consecutive weeks. I was not on that team. There was a four member team with one alternate. My brother, David, was the alternate.

However, before they reached the national competition, they had a competition within the Arts College. The Arts College, at that time, was SLA [Science, Literature, and the Arts]. I don't know how many students were in SLA at that time, but I think it was at least 10,000 and many teams entered. They had a bit competition for the SLA championship. The championship was ultimately won by a team of three Lebedoff's and a fellow named James Thompson, who was an absolute genius and who, I think, was the key to our success. The Lebedoff's were my sister, Judy, and my brother, David, and myself. We won all of our matches and the final match was televised on Channel 2 and certainly was watched by my parents.

AP: Do you remember the year that it was televised?

JGL: I think it was probably 1958 or 1959.

AP: Do you remember the time of year, fall, winter or spring?,

JGL: I don't. I'm sorry, but probably the winter.

AP: Your sister, Judy, mentioned somebody named McDiarmid, who was a friend of hers.

JGL: Emily McDiarmid was a friend of all of ours and a very close friend of my sister, Judy. Her father was the dean of the Arts College, SLA and a very fine gentleman. I became active in that, and so did my brother. We were both members of the SLA Board, which was this governing student board for the Arts College. I mentioned that my social life the first couple years I was on the campus was the Hillel Foundation over on University Avenue. The SLA Board had Room 101 in Johnson Hall. There's a line in Orwell's *1984*, when Winston Smith is dragged off on the stretcher, "What's in Room 101?" You know what's in Room 101; it's the worst thing that ever was and that's where we were, in Room 101. That's where I would have my lunches and a lot of my social life in the last two years or so as an undergraduate—and I loved it.

AP: What did you do after college?

JGL: After undergraduate, I immediately went to law school at the University of Minnesota. I was still living at home; so, my routine really hadn't changed from the time I was in kindergarten to the time I graduated from law school. In those days, matriculation to the University of Minnesota found the place by rote. When I graduated from the University, it was not clear to me what I was going to do with my life. I more or less drifted into law school and I applied to the University of Minnesota. I certainly had a good academic record at the University and it never occurred to me that I would not be admitted to the Law School. I think admission was far easier in those days. In those days, there were only two law schools in Minnesota: the University of Minnesota and the William Mitchell College of Law. Today, there is a third: Hamline School of Law. I went to law school for three years and graduated in 1963. The three years of my law school attendance, almost exactly corresponded to President Kennedy's administration.

AP: Do you have any memories . . .

[break in the interview]

JGL: I didn't like law school. Now, I'm a judge. I've had a very active career in the law. As you may know, I was a state court judge for twenty years.

AP: Could you give us the date that you were a state court judge?

JGL: I became a Hennepin County Municipal Court Judge in December of 1971. That was eight years after I graduated from law school. At the time, I was one of the youngest judges, if not the youngest judge, in the history of the state. I was only thirty-three. In April of 1974, less than two and one-half years later, I became a state District Court judge. I served as a state District Court judge from April of 1974 until September 20, 1991, when I was appointed a United States magistrate judge. Now, I'm a United States magistrate judge in the Federal Court system. I have served since September of 1991 in that position.

AP: As you look back on the university, is this a choice you would make again or would you make another choice?

JGL: I've never thought about that. I was kind of young for my age and I drifted into all these things. The way things have turned out in my life, I would say I would be foolish to do it any other way, because—I should knock on wood when I say this—I think I have had a charmed life. Certainly, my career has gone well. I suppose it could have been better somewhere else. If I were living today . . . I married relatively late in my life, so I now have kids who are eighteen and about to be sixteen who are looking at college. I juxtapose what they are going through—I think I mentioned this earlier—with how I kind of drifted into these things. I didn't weigh options or consider other schools. For instance, I'm certain I never considered any law school but the University of Minnesota Law School. It was such a casual decision to go to law school and here I am and it's changed my whole life. I'm pleased with the university. Maybe today—the pressure kids are under . . . some schools become the hot tickets and some people want to go to whatever is the *in* school—I would consider places outside of Minnesota; but, I was the type of person who, I think, benefited from staying close to home in those years. I know a lot of kids want to go away to school; I was not in that category. My son, who's about to make the same choice, is certainly considering schools close to home and he's certainly considering the university, the University in Morris, particularly, as options. So, to the extent that [unclear] to my kids, I guess the answer is I would consider going to the "U."

AP: I have two final questions for you, John. Is there anybody that you would think of who had served as a mentor for you, around your university years?

JGL: There was a man named Roger Page who was the kind of the mentor of the SLA Board and he was a person I could turn to. I had a lot of friends. This is my community and I came from a close-knit family and, of course, my siblings were there, too, so, I didn't have a particular mentor outside of the peer group that I was a part of; but, I'd say that Roger Page is a person I should probably look to as a mentor. I had a lot of other good professors I could name. I had a history professor . . .

[break in the interview]

JGL: I just remember Harold Deutsch. Harold Deutsch was a history professor and I loved, just loved history. I remember his classes. He was a real student of German history. He went to Germany during the time of the [Adolph] Hitler years. Deutsch traveled to Germany every year

during the Hitler Era. He interviewed Hitler and [Hermann] Goering and [Paul] Goebbels [unclear] and I must say Deutsch was appalled and horrified by the excesses of the Third Reich, but he loved Germany. His history of the First World War was a very moving experience for me, and that is the period of that still entrances me, in no small part, because of him.

I should mention that as a young student, I had a teaching assistant in history, in my first year, named Joseph Murphy. There were two teaching assistants here, Joe Murphy and Diana Kuske, and I got to know them both, at the time. They married each other and Diana Kuske, then, became Diana Murphy. She has become a very close lifetime friend of mine. Joe is, too. She is a judge and she's now a Federal judge, a Circuit Court of Appeals judge. She and I have been judges together for the last twenty-some years.

AP: Can you spell Kuske for us? Thank you very much.

JGL: I think it's K-u-s-k-e.

AP: Thank you very much.

JGL: She's very deeply committed to the university.

AP: I have one final question. Are there books that you remember reading that shaped your life and what are you reading now?

JGL: The answer to the first question is that I don't remember any books at the university that shaped my life. I always have loved to read. I had read a lot before I got to the "U." I came to gain a lot of insights into what I had previously read from some of the courses I took. My passion for reading preceded my entrance into the university.

What I'm reading now . . . I'm reading a three-volume set on the life of Andrew Jackson by Robert Remini, R-e-m-i-n-i, that was given to me for my birthday by my wife. It's outstanding. I love to read history.

I'll tell you a memory—maybe we should conclude with this—that is kind of poignant and sad for me. When I was taking the class from Joseph Kwiat, he read a survey to the Humanities class in which the average college graduate, ten years after being out of school, admitted to reading an average of one and one-half books a year. I still remember the class roaring with laughter at such nonsense, since the class was all a bunch of students who were being, literally, assigned ten, twelve books a week to read. It seemed so amusing . . . one and on-half books a year. How could people be that way? Now, as a father of two active teen-agers, and working a full hard day and having a variety of commitments in the community outside of work, that I think that I while I read quite a bit more than one and one-half books a year, I have a different perspective on that statistic than I did at the time.

AP: Thank you, John, this was very helpful. Take care. Bye.

[End of Tape 1, Side 1]

[End of the Interview]

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