Interview with Judith Lebedoff

Interviewed by Associate Dean Ann M. Pflaum
University of Minnesota

Interviewed on July 23, 1998

Judith Lebedoff - JL
Ann Pflaum - AP

AP: This is Ann Pflaum. It is July 23, 1998. This is an interview for the University of Minnesota History Project with Judith Lebedoff who will describe her time at the University of Minnesota. I will ask that she introduce herself by what she's doing now and, then, go back to the decision that led to her coming to the university and her memories of being a student in that era.

Thank you very much, Judy.

Judy, you also might mention your siblings as well.

JL: In 1956, my brothers, David and Jonathan, and I entered the University of Minnesota. We were, still are, triplets; so, my parents were faced with three children going to college all at once. My father's business was almost non-existent, at that point. He was in the middle of a career change, in his late fifties. We really didn't think about going elsewhere. Even then, the university was relatively inexpensive. As I recall, tuition for each quarter was sixty-one dollars. Now, of course, it sounds ridiculous; but even then, it wasn't a terrible thing. We lived at home and commuted to the university. We were sort of the classic profile of a student, in that sense. Often, we got rides from people. We had a friend who would drive—quite recklessly, as I recall. I think we always got a ride to school and, sometimes, at least I, would take a bus home. That was certainly doable. I didn't drive a car, at that point, so those were the alternatives left to me.

The university wasn't frightening in the sense of coming from a small town and seeing this large setting, because we had always lived in Minneapolis. But there was an energy there. I quickly learned never to schedule a fourth hour class because that was lunch time. The social activities were a big part of it, too. I don't know if the faculty would want to know that. There were a couple of very, very popular cafes, "The V," the Varsity Cafe, just off the corner of Fifteenth [Avenue Southeast] and University [Avenue], and then behind it, on Fifteenth and Fourth Street [Southeast], The Bridge. I met a lot of people there. There was also very active Hillel

[Foundation] House right on University and Fifteenth, right across from Folwell Hall. I spent a lot of time there.

I think that the most important thing about my first two years at the university was that I had grown up feeling a little like a Martian, that no one I knew really was somebody that I could relate to, that my world was very small. At the university, I very quickly met graduate students from different countries. There were Israelis and a number of them from India. I can't remember from where else, but from many countries. It was just a wonderful, wonderful thing that just expanded my world. I sort of view those years, freshman and sophomore years, as when my life really started. That was my real sense of myself as an individual and in the world that I now consider my world. I'm not sure that a small private college would have given me that.

[break in the interview]

JL: I didn't have a clue as to what I was going to study. It was just understood that we would go to college. I had gone to a high school that was really a very, very poor high school; so, there was a lot that I needed to know. Getting into humanities, for instance, was one of the most important courses, largely due to Professor Joe Kwiat, who was the most exciting person any of us had every heard about. There was also—this was the late 1950s—so, there was a great respect for professors. I don't know to what extent that still exists, and I hope I'm not making myself sound too ancient. We found them very, very exciting and he, especially, was from the east coast and had a little bit of an accent and we hadn't heard that before in our sheltered lives. He made a lot of things become alive and relevant for us.

AP: Can I interject? What did and does humanities mean? What is humanities?

JL: I'm a little bit at a loss to answer that question. It was sort of a cross cultural sort of an adjunct to English literature, but it was just literature from all over. I suppose, it was just world culture. Back then, we didn't concentrate on Third World countries and weren't as sensitive as academia seems to be today—for better or for worse. We were studying the classics of *War and Peace*, for instance. What other course would that fit into, except for humanities? It was sort of exploring the universality of people and lives through the classics of literature.

AP: Was there an introduction course to the humanities that you would have taken?

JL: No, no, it was just Humanities I, II, III, as I recall. Maybe it was 51, 52, 53. It was an introductory course. We made some friendships. My brothers and I happened to be in the same course together, which wasn't always the case. I think we were all seated alphabetically and became life long friends with people in those courses, particularly Steve Lee next to Lebedoff and Emily McDiarmid, who's father, Errett W. McDiarmid, was the Dean of the College of [College of] Liberal Arts—as it was called then—C.L.A. These are friendships that continue today.

I became an English major. I think again, with no career in mind, it seemed in some ways easy to me. Languages were not an option for me. I had no talent for them. This was sort of, in the 1950s particularly, what a well bred, young female, did. There was no emphasis on career, because women didn't really have options for careers then, other then education or library school.

Just skipping ahead, after we got our bachelor's degrees, my father successfully steered my brothers into the law school, although my brother David had a scholarship to Harvard and John went to Minnesota. He tried to get me to go into education, but I had enough backbone to resist that, knowing it would just have been deadly for me. In fact, I ended up working at WCCO Radio, for most of my career, as a producer; but, I did have to start as a secretary. That was the only way around it for women, and I did. One of the producers left, and I thought it was a wonderful title. I had no idea what a producer did, but I had visions of big cigars, and calling people "baby" and "sweetheart." I thought that sounded very glamorous, and in fact it was. That's how I came to be a producer. Really, the most general education is the best preparation for that. Today, you couldn't get a job with a degree as an English major, couldn't get that kind of a job. You would have gone through the School of Journalism with a specific major in radio and television. You would have ended up as another talking head, I guess. The other option was that with a BA in English, I could have taught at a private school. Certainly, English majors had more credits in the subject than did education majors who took quite a few courses in education methods. So, we always felt a little superior to those people.

AP: Could I ask you, Judy, to go back to one point? What did your brothers major in? Did they major in English as well?

JL: No, they didn't. They may have been humanities majors. There wasn't that much difference, except that humanities reached out to other cultures as well. But, it involved literature.

AP: You're an interesting case, because there are probably few people where you had three siblings in the institution at the same time. Did your family discuss what you were taking at school when you came back for family dinner?

JL: I'm sure we did, because that was part of our growing up. We always had dinner together, at an oval dining room table, and discussed world events, certainly, all the time.

AP: Do you remember anything that struck the family, that characterized those discussions, whether it was the university or not, in your college years?

JL: No, no. it was always lively.

AP: Did your family feel, or did you feel, that as you were going through education, there were things that were distancing you from the family? Sometimes students go off to school and they reject their families . . .

JL: Well, they should have probably, but they never voiced that. First of all, we were very well behaved—I mean that seriously. Again, it was a time when you simply never did speak back to parents. There were no drugs. None of us drank. If they saw that we were branching out a little bit and meeting people, they were excited for us. I remember that, that they always seemed to have smiles on their faces. It was exciting for them, too.

One thing I'll say, is that when I found my high school education was lacking, is when I took [Geoffrey] Chaucer. Really, it's like learning a foreign language. I was very ill-prepared for it and went to the professor—I can't think of his name—and said I was having a big problem with it. He asked me where I went to high school and I said Minneapolis North. He said, "Oh, we have a lot of problems with people from that school." So, in that sense, I had a problem, but that was the only course that gave me any problem whatsoever. I didn't have particularly good grades because I was like a prisoner let out of jail, in a way. I was so busy exploring the social aspects of school, as well, that . . .

AP: Can you tell me more about the social aspects of school? You mentioned the Bridge and Varsity cafes. Were there dances, for example, that you remember or were there football weekends?

JL: Yes, I came from a Gopher football family, so we always went to every game. Outdoors, I can remember when you got to the Wisconsin game—always the last game of the season—feeling that there was no feeling in my feet it was so cold. We participated in that, but we didn't belong to fraternities and sororities. We had no desire to, and I think sort of thought that they were a little inferior, that they were silly and certainly not intellectual. We really were interested in ideas and learning, meeting exciting people, and having good conversation.

For myself, another very formative time came, I think in maybe my junior year, when I saw a small blurb in the *Minnesota Daily* that said that the University of Minnesota chorus was looking for singers to perform with the, then, Minneapolis Symphony in *Beethoven's Ninth.* I had just expanded my music listening at the Hillel House. They had a music room and my parents had always had classical music at home, so this sort of furthered that. That was like the dream come true for me. I went and auditioned at the music building. Incredibly enough, they let me in. I've never been so shocked at anything in my life. We got credit for Chorus—it was a course—a very nominal credit. We rehearsed at Nicholson Hall. It was the most thrilling thing that I think I've ever done. The orchestra performed at Northrop Auditorium, then, and rehearsed at Northrop. So, we were all part of it together. Following that performance, I stayed in the chorus for, probably, three years and got to perform all the great classical masses: Beethoven and Mozart, and Haydn's *Creation,* just on and on and on with various conductors. It was one of the most exciting things, I think, I've ever done in my life. It introduced me to the Verdi *Requiem* [*Mass*], which, then, led me to a life-long involvement with opera. None of this would have happened at a small school. It may sound a little bit far afield, but it was an opportunity that was presented to me that simply would have been unavailable at virtually any other school in the country, with the possible exception of a UCLA, or possibly the University of Chicago. I don't

know, but it would have to be in a large city with an orchestra. Then later, I think as a senior, I found a couple of music appreciation courses taught by a wonderful professor named George Houle, H-o-u-l-e. I remember getting the highest *A* in the class in both courses. It was something that was the perfect time and the perfect place. It made learning such a joy and started me out with what continues today to be a great involvement and personal satisfaction with music.

AP: Could you describe the university, in this period, to someone who has moved here from Australia and, doesn't understand anything about American universities? How would have you described the University of Minnesota, in that period, to this person?

JL: It was large. It wasn't daunting to me, but it would have been large. It was like a mini-city, and a very pretty one, because there was the Mall looking across from Northrop Auditorium to Coffman Union. The Liberal Arts colleges were sort of ringing the Mall and nearby. The Journalism School was at Murphy Hall at one end. The library was next to, and still is, Northrop Auditorium . . . very pretty. Between classes, of course, there was a great deal of movement. People were racing from one end of campus to the other for the next course, carrying their loads of books. The book store, on the corner of Fifteenth and University, was a major meeting place where we bought our books. You could buy second-hand ones if you wanted to save some money, and there were times when I did. I still have my university books, or many of them, not all of them. I have my Chaucer. Why I would have kept the one in which I did so badly, I don't know. Certainly my Shakespeare is something that I use a lot.

AP: You mentioned, I think earlier when we were talking, John Berryman.

JL: Yes, that's another great thing. Maybe, this would have happened at a small school too—a noted professor. In summer school one year, I decided—I think this was right after I had graduated and I stayed around for another year, so this was 1960, 1961—in the summer of 1960, to take a course in Stephen Crane and Henry James from John Berryman. I can remember now—and I still blush—that I turned in a paper, very full of myself, on Stephen Crane, only to find out, after I turned it in, that John Berryman was one of the world's leading experts on Stephen Crane. It must have been all right, because we became good friends. He was a terrible drunk. That has to be said. [laughter] Of course, I didn't understand what a drunk really was, because I didn't drink and my parents drank very little. It was a very hot summer. I can remember watching beads of perspiration collect on his chin and drop off. He took a liking to me and a couple of other people in the course, and used to call us. He'd call me, in the middle of the night and read his poetry to me, which I took as the ultimate signet honor that such a great man would deign to think me worthy of listening to his poetry. The truth is, I understood none of it. I very cleverly would pick out a word in the second sentence or third sentence, and when he would pause long enough so that I figured the poem was done, I would say, "Oh, that's such an interesting use of the word . . . " whatever. That seemed to get me by, but he was terribly drunk.

Years later, a man named John Heffernon came to interview me at WCCO—he was writing a biography of John Berryman—and I gave him my recollections. He, evidently, knew that I had been a friend; he approached me. Years later, the book came out. My brother, David, bought it for me. I had forgotten about this, completely. I remember the thrill of turning to the index and seeing Lebedoff, comma, Judy, [page] 243, or whatever it was. Those were very, very exciting days.

After John Berryman won the Pulitzer Prize for *Homage to Mistress Bradstreet*, I was working at WCCO and called up and went over to his house at his invitation for a celebratory party, which is another long story. The connections continued. Our connection with Joe Kwiat continued over the years, too.

AP: Are there other impressions as you look back now at the university? You described how big it was and, yet, how personal it was. Would you recommend a child go to the university now? What is your reading for the future? Do you have suggestions for it?

JL: I absolutely would recommend it. I don't know what the level of education is at a large university compared to a small university. Harvard, I would assume, is a better school for its undergraduates and, perhaps, for its graduates than the University of Minnesota, but we are talking about a school that is arguably the best anywhere. I can tell you that my brothers and I did not suffer one wit by having gone to the university. I think we all consider ourselves fortunate in our careers. I ended up as a radio producer and, then, the marketing director for Minnesota Opera. I've also done free-lance work with the Guthrie [Theater] as a writer. My brother, John, is a federal magistrate judge. My brother, David, is an attorney, and author, and former chairman of the Board of Regents of the university . . . former <u>many</u> things. We have a younger sister who is almost ten years younger than we. She went to Northrop Collegiate High School, before the merge with Blake, and then went to Smith College. I know that she is very involved with the Smith Club, and has very warm feelings about it, but certainly no more so than our feelings about the U of M. Nor, has she done anything that we ever felt was closed to us because of it. Nor, do we think she knows anymore than we do. I think that we all had exciting college experiences. I would do it all over again exactly the same way. I think that the things that meant the most to me were available at a large urban campus. I think I would have found a small school much too precious for me.

As far as the way things have changed . . . At that time, in the late 1950s and early 1960s, there was less emphasis on colleges training for a future career. It was truly a liberal arts school, unless you were an engineering student or a pre-med student, or whatever. If one wanted to get a liberal arts education, it was there. The whole concept of simply higher learning for self-enhancement was there. This was before there was an emphasis on courses that, I think, are marginal: trans-gender studies, Third World studies, whatever. They have their places, but I don't think they can ever replace the core curriculum. If that makes me a dinosaur, so be it. I would absolutely recommend for my nieces and nephews to go to the university. I think it's just a wonderful, wonderful experience.

AP: Let me ask you one other question before we end the interview. The 1950s were a time of things like the McCarthy hearings. Did that influence you in any way. Do you recall any instances . . .

JL: No, that was actually earlier 1950s, so that had no influence. I stayed around campus and lived in a small apartment near the university, on University Avenue, for many years, until 1971. I became involved in the Anti-War Movement, which was a very strong movement. It was very exciting. Now that, you would have had on any campus and we certainly had it here. We were all very earnest and passed around materials.

AP: Do you remember how you first began to be involved in that? Do you remember a sequence, at all, that you can describe?

JL: No, I don't. I think I was just so much a part of that community. I really can't tell you how it happened. It was no secret and it was easy enough to join.

AP: Do you remember any of the leaders?

JL: Marv Davidov was the leader. Marv was very young and . . .

AP: Was he a university graduate?

JL: I don't know that he ever graduated. I would put money on the fact that he never has.

AP: But, he was a university student, sort of around the scene?

JL: Yes.

AP: Were the Bridge and the Varsity still the cafes where you met or was there a different group of cafes, at this time?

JL: There must have been. I can't imagine Marv going into any place, an establishment like those. I recall just being around Fourth Street and, then, the open Washington [Avenue] area.

Another thing I forgot, is that two theaters then, the Varsity and Campus Theater, played a lot of foreign films. I was particularly impressed by the Satyajit Ray [Apu] Trilogy of *Pather Penchali*, *World of Apu*, and *Aparijito*. That was like a turning point for me. I can remember going to the University Film Society and seeing Russian ballet, [*unclear*], *Romeo and Juliet* with Galena Elanova [?] as the ballerina. All of these things just opened doors to my mind. They're as thrilling now to me, in remembering them, as they were then.

AP: That is terrific. Do you have any other comments that you would like to make before we conclude?

JL: I think that if you are open to experiences you truly can get as fine an education in many, many schools around the country. Certainly, the university . . . I'm not sure how I want to say this. I'm not sure that I have a good answer. I just regret that universities today have become vocational schools. I'm old enough to look back wistfully at a time when really we were more carefree. We weren't so concerned about the job market. It was a more innocent time. I think that we grew culturally more than I imagine students today have the opportunity to do.

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Transcribed by:
Hermes Transcribing and Research Service
12617 Fairgreen Avenue, Apple Valley, MN 55124
(612) 953-0730