

Historical Commission of Schuylkill Township
Oral History Project

Dr. John Lukacs



Summary. John Lukacs, one of Schuylkill Township's most illustrious residents, is the author of more than 25 books. He has been called a "historian who has the literary talents of a novelist." In this interview Dr. Lukacs focuses on development in Schuylkill Township and the history of Anderson Place and Old Pickering School. We are also allowed a peek into the family Guest Book.

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Interviewed by Nancy Loane
Transcribed by Nancy Loane
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NL: Can you tell me about converting the old schoolhouse into your home?

JL: Some of this is described in a book that is still in print, and is a kind of autobiography. I cannot give you a copy; you can get it somewhere. I wrote the book twenty years ago. It is called *Confessions of an Original Sinner*. (The Historical Commission has a copy of *Confessions of an Original Sinner* as well as Dr. Lukacs' *Philadelphia Patricians and Philistines: 1900-1950*.)

NL: I love the title – *Confessions of an Original Sinner*.

JL: It is not really an autobiography. It includes how I came to live in Schuylkill Township. As you know, I was born in Europe. I came to this country when I was 22. I was born in a city, but for some odd reason I often wanted to live in the country. I achieved this because my first wife who died – I had two wives who died here in Phoenixville - they are buried together.

My first wife was the daughter of a prominent Philadelphia lawyer. His family were the first settlers, first white settlers, in Schuylkill Township, then Charlestown Township. Her ancestor, James Anderson - he came from Scotland in 1707, he came here in 1713 – he married a preacher's daughter. They eloped.

NL: There's a scandal for you!

JL: They eloped. He built a log cabin on what is still called Anderson Place. It is now called Anderson Farm. There are several buildings on Anderson Farm, apart from the newer buildings (houses). There are about 15 acres which cannot be changed. Anyhow, the Anderson Farm, Anderson Place, remained in the property of my first father-in-law until 1955.

I married my wife in 1954. Both of us worked. My father-in-law, a very generous person, gave us the old school house (135 Valley Park Road) as a wedding present. It was in ruins. My father-in-law would have rebuilt it for us. My wife didn't want that for two reasons. My father-in-law and my mother-in-law had been separated for a long time. The more important reason was that my father-in-law loved to build. If he would have rebuilt it, it would have been his way. So we got the mortgage and we rebuilt it. We were lucky in this. I'll tell you in a moment why.

I hope this is not boring.

NL: Not at all.

JL: My father-in-law had a brother who was a rear admiral in the Navy and had multiple sclerosis. My father-in-law's original idea was to rebuild the house for him to live here. But this never came about because his brother, Albert, decided to stay in Washington in Bethesda Naval Hospital.

There was a new roof on the house, although the house was in ruins.

Now my father-in-law had a lady friend. Many people criticized her; I am very grateful to her because she introduced me to my wife. And, you see, Anderson Place was a farm – but it was always in the family. They used to come out in the summer, several times. In 1947, he began to rebuild Anderson Place.

He made a gentleman's farm out of it, which, as you know, qualifies for a large tax deduction. He had so much interest in farming that the farm broke even. He put very much money into it. This he began to do in 1947. I met him and my future wife in late 1952; she and I were married in May 1954. We too came out on weekends

At that time there was no zoning in Schuylkill Township. They started zoning about that time. The first zoning said "five acres, minimum." (My father-in-law suggested "ten acres, minimum.") There were no road signs.

NL: No road signs?

JL: Local people knew it was Valley Park Road, but there were no road signs.

We took out a mortgage and began, with a little money, to rebuild the school house, to make it habitable. That it was close to the road didn't bother us, because there was hardly any traffic then. This was a one-room school house that functioned as a school until 1930. The original bell is still up there. It was a practical house to plan because it was square.

There was nothing outside, only grass, weeds, shrubs, trees. We moved in May 1955. It took about a year to rebuild. The cost, \$15,000, involved the furnace, hot and cold running water, electricity, everything.

Before we moved there was a murder. Have you heard about the murder?

NL: I have heard about the murder.

JL: There have been several murders on this road (Valley Park Road). This one is still not resolved. A girl in Phoenixville was brought out here, and murdered here, and her body put in the outhouse. The outhouse was down the field from the school house, and that is where they found the murdered girl. For weeks afterward, people drove out to see where she was murdered. The police had found her body, but no one found who killed her.

Anyway, that is when we started to rebuild the house. We moved in at the end of May 1955. There was still very much work to be done.

On the second of July – it was very hot, it was over 90 degrees – the July 4th weekend, my father-in-law suddenly died. He was only 62.

NL: 62!

JL: He had a stroke, in his sleep.

Because of the family tradition, but also because of law, the farm really belonged to his oldest son after he died. He was, however – this sounds worse than it was – the son was in part incompetent because of mental problems, though not very serious ones. He was in hospital for a long time. But he also lived here.

But then it was discovered, a few weeks after he died, that my father-in-law, with a large income, had income tax debts. The person who discovered this was the owner of *The Philadelphia Inquirer* – Annenberg. Annenberg disliked – to say the least - my father-in-law because my father-in-law, when he had been the Director of Public Safety in

Philadelphia, had Annenberg's father jailed. Annenberg's father had threatened people with a gun. My father-in-law put him in jail. But this was about 20 years before 1955.

Annenberg who owned *The Philadelphia Inquirer* started a campaign against my father-in-law when someone squealed about this income tax thing. This involved the magnificent herd that made the farm self-sufficient, and tractors and everything, but not the real estate, nor the houses. My mother-in-law could have bought it – she had money – Helen and I could have run the farm and Joe, her brother, could have lived there.

So the farm had to be sold for about \$1,000 an acre. \$156,000, with all the buildings. Fortunately, the mortgage was in our name. So, we didn't lose the house. The house was a typical one room school house plot, one acre. I was able to buy seven more acres. \$300.00 an acre, or something like that. We added to it. There my children were born. I will show you a guest book going back to 1952.

Mr. Leonard Sasso bought the farm. He had children. I think he was divorced from his first wife. He seldom came out here. Then he re-married and he had five children from his second wife. His widow is still alive and a friend of ours. This place was only one of his properties. He gave it to his six children.

A few years later the six children decided to sell it. I was on the Township Planning Commission, and I knew the history of it. (I can show you pictures and all that.) Developers came; 136 acres, make a lot of money. Well, we told them that you can do that, but it will take you 15 years to break the zoning, because we will fight it, and your money will go to lawyers. But you have the right to develop it, if you fulfill the township requirements, use the minimum 2.3 acres. They agreed. And eventually this was happening. There are 36 houses on 135 acres, which is the best we could get. That is the story of Anderson Farm.

NL: Fabulous.

Can you tell me a little bit more about the schoolhouse itself? Did you have an architect who came in?

JL: Practically not. We did it ourselves.

There is a plaque on the schoolhouse, which is wrong.

NL: It says "Sunday School" or something like that...

JL: It was a township school – the township was small - and the school house was built in 1840. The original bell is still in the belfry. It worked as a one room school until 1930,

when the Schuylkill Elementary School was built. In 1973 there was a house tour in Chester County and people came to see the house. We had three ladies who had gone to that school. They signed my guest book.

We rebuilt it ourselves. We took some pieces of furniture; if we had known what was going on we could have taken lots more. This was before the government started the suit. This is in the *Confessions...*

NL: I'll have to get that book...

JL: We cleared and cleared and cleared and added to the house. We added a fine screened porch where we used to have dinner in the summers outside. We added and added and added and then in 1968, I added a library, which a friend of mine, an architect, also in the township, designed. I needed a library; I needed to work there.

Two years later my wife died of lung cancer. I had a daughter who was two years old.

NL: A daughter two years old?

JL: At that time, yes. Fortunately I found a very good housekeeper. Four years later I married my second wife, who had four children. We still added a room for one of her children, but the traffic was getting worse and worse. There is a stone wall around the road. A stonemason built it in 1956, and I was the helper. But the road was too close to the house. My children grew up, her children grew up, and they moved away. The house was too big for us.

I had these six acres. I convinced my wife - it wasn't easy - to build a house here. That took us four or five years. We had to have a driveway and all of that work over the creek. The house was three acres, the house that you pass when you come in is three acres. I sold that. And then we built this house between 1981 and 1984 and moved in; so I have been here 28 years.

NL: Who designed this house? Did you design it yourself?

JL: Yes. I had help because my wife was very good about this, and her father was also an architect. We made a few mistakes; you can see one of them right here. (We are in Dr. Lukacs' library.) You see that I had planned a stove here, but I forgot that there was a great beam coming up. So you see that the big pipe has to go crooked.

One interesting thing is the reservoir here. This is one of the reasons that we built here; we have a view of the water. It seems that the Anderson property is where the British crossed and where Washington's army left for Philadelphia. It seems that in the middle

colonies this was the western-most point where the British were. They defeated Washington at Brandywine, they came up, much where Route 202 is today, and they went through what is now Phoenixville, crossed the creek, went down where Conshohocken would be today, fought another battle, and occupied Philadelphia.

So that is briefly the story of Anderson Farm.

NL: On another topic: You mentioned that you were on the Planning Commission. Were you active in other groups, too?

JL: No, I am not a political person. My first wife came from here. In my book there is a chapter called "Dwelling."

One September in 1968 she came home dejected from a township meeting. They wanted to change the name of the township to "Valley Forge Township" because they thought it would bring in more money, more development. Now a lot of people are against development – but not then! A referendum is required to change the name of the township. We decided to fight it. I knew something of the history of the township, so I spoke up occasionally. We spent less than \$100.00. There was no Xerox, so I mimeographed flyers. The most important thing was that we started – my wife started – telephoning people. She said, "Listen, come out and vote, this is important. They want to change the name of the township. You may know why they want that. They want to bring in this and that, and so forth."

"Oh, we didn't know we had a chance!" people would say.

We won by 58%. Then the township asked me to join the Planning Commission. I served for 32 years. I resigned two years ago for three reasons. One: I am too old. Second: when I resigned it seemed as though I would be away a lot. Third: the work of the Planning Commission has changed. The Planning Commission is an advisory body. Their recommendations go to the supervisors. In 32 years we have had few conflicts with the Supervisors. Sometimes the supervisors themselves were divided. There were some who wanted development. Now we have a township engineer who is an excellent man, he does a lot of the job, and in meetings we often only have to deal with small technical things. They gave me a very nice farewell party and a beautiful plaque.

NL: What projects were you particularly involved in over the years?

JL: We fought the big Fernleigh project, which we lost by one vote. The Fernleys bought this big property around 1932, about 265 acres, but they did not live there. They had it for investment. The Fernley children inherited much money. Their lawyer came to them

in 1975 and said that you can make a lot of money on this if you break the zoning. They wanted to put in 1200 houses. Legally they could have put in about 130.

So after many years we compromised. They put in 360 houses. And who got rich – the lawyers! We might have beaten them down to the 160.

I was bitter about that. We formed a committee, fought it, delayed it. So with this Fernleigh story as my ammunition, I talked to the Sasso children. I said that you can have more houses, but it will take you 15 years, and it will take you a lot of money.

NL: I think Herman John was involved with the Fernleigh project.

JL: Yes, Herman John was very good. We worked hand in hand. There are some people there still - Norman Vutz, who was chairman of the supervisors, an excellent man. Ted Ryan was my age. We were in all of these things together. And since I was older, and outspoken, some people thought that I had more influence than I had. It took them some time to find out that I did not have that much influence at all.

NL: Your reputation preceded you.

JL: Well, is that a bad thing? But there always were people who wanted to get on the Board of Supervisors who were for developments. So we had to think and think who should run.

But after 32 years...

NL: That's a long time...

JL: Yes.

NL: You have been very dedicated to the township.

JL: Well, it was not difficult. The Planning Commission meets only once a month. But a lot of things happen during that month...

NL: It has to be that way...

JL: Yes, yes. Remember, we had to defeat a few people who were in cahoots with the big developers and their attorneys. In many cases it worked. In this township we won a few battles but we lost the war.

NL: Lost the war?

JL: Well, we do have all this development.

NL: But was that not inevitable?

JL: Almost. But look what I just told you about Fernleigh. When zoning began in 1955, nobody was interested in this area. The Clothiers were out here because of fox hunting. They bought beautiful land. The Pickering Hunt, originally, was where the Ledbetters live. (125 Valley Park Road) There was still hunting here in the 1950s. And then the Pickering Hunt had a good place on Creek Road that was the club house. Now it is farther west.

There was Joseph Ewing, he lived in the house where Mr. Pasquale lives. That house has an interesting history.

NL: Which house is this?

JL: Where Mr. Pasquale lives (Valley Park Road). There was a man, why he lived here, I don't know. His name was Professor Lowe, and he was a balloonist with captive balloons. Observatory balloons. He sold the idea to Lincoln and to the Union Army to have a U.S. Army Balloon Corps, so they could go up and see where the Confederate gun placements were. They were high enough so they could not be shot at. But the Confederates fooled them. They put out on the fields tilted logs that looked liked cannon. So they dismissed the balloon corps. The newspapers called them Quaker guns, because they were not real guns.

NL: What a wonderful story!

JL: There was fox hunting, too, in this township until 1957 or 1958.

Let me tell you another thing. It became a bit fashionable when we moved out here. Many people commuted into Philadelphia; they worked there. They either drove there or they took the train. You could take the Paoli train, or you could take the Reading train. I would say now that only a few people work in Philadelphia. It was much easier to go to Philadelphia then. People went to the orchestra. On the expressway you could be in Philadelphia in 45 minutes. I seldom go to Philadelphia now.

The township did not get suburbanized until about 30 years ago. Partly because we have a good government. Partly because Valley Forge Park was like a green cushion. What I mean is that all the development was on the other side of Valley Forge Park. Many people were stupid and snobbish, as they still are, and they thought that, oh, Phoenixville is a mill town, who wants to live near Phoenixville?

So it did not get suburbanized until about 30 years ago. You see, there are these planning commissions – not only the Schuylkill Township Planning Commission, not the Chester County Planning Commission, but the Delaware Valley Planning Commission. They were founded by the government, by the state...I remember about 1975 they produced a big thing about what's going to happen in this neighborhood, with Mylar maps asserting that by 2005 the population will be 100,000. All these experts, they predict what to them seems to be going on. None of this has happened. But, we did become suburbanized. And that probably was inevitable, but it came somewhat slower.

NL: There are so few large properties left.

JL: Two or three. Three large properties. One of them is owned by children of a good friend of mine. One is about 62 acres. One is about 170. The third is the golf course.

NL: Let's see....I know that you are a historian. Do you specialize in any particular area of history?

JL: I specialize in different areas. The township history and all of this is an amateur interest of mine.

Here we are in the library. Behind you – a row of about 400 books – they are all about Philadelphia and Chester County. I also wrote a history of Philadelphia from 1900 to 1950. Somebody gave me once an offprint of my works from Google. But there were a lot missing...wrong....so in other words, don't take it for granted what's in Google.

NL: And do you teach also?

JL: No, I am retired.

NL: Where were you teaching?

JL: Mostly I taught – almost for 47 years – in a Catholic girls' college – Chestnut Hill - in Philadelphia. I had many visiting professorships. I taught elsewhere, too, but never moving away. My last job, my last teaching position, was at the University of Pennsylvania. I was forced to retire in 1994. But I was writing books.

NL: Anything else you would like to share for the record?

JL: No, this sums up what I know.

NL: Are you optimistic about the future of the township?

JL: I am a very strange combination....I am pessimistic about everything...but I enjoy life in the short run.

It is interesting about what is happening in Phoenixville. Phoenixville is having a little re-birth. Now...I am skeptical about it because what counts is how many people come and will actually live and settle there. Just because you have a cheese shop and so forth....that is not enough. Pennsylvania is relatively a conservative state but the average Pennsylvanian moves every 47 months.

NL: 47 months?

JL: That is the average. Look at Anderson Farm. I don't know a single person who lives there. I know my two neighbors in the neighborhood and now that's practically all. I used to know everybody. Well, almost everybody. But I guess that also comes when you get old. People die or move away.

Well, I could show you a lot of things. I have photographs in albums from way back, the way things looked.

But I can show you the guest book. That may be of some interest.

NL: I would love to see that book.

(Looking at guest book)

JL: You see Anderson Place, 1713, on the cover.

My father-in-law started this guest book when he started to live out here, in 1947. You see, someone drew a picture...

NL: That's a picture of your father-in law?

JL: Yes.

And then, as I told you, in 1955, we built the schoolhouse.

NL: There it is, "Old Pickering Schoolhouse."

JL: You see the first entry...well, you see, somebody came....Here is my son's christening. A lot of these people are dead. It goes on and on and on and on and on....I had some famous people visit me, and they are all in here.

NL: What a wonderful record!

JL: On my 40th birthday – my wife was often ill, but she was better that year – and we owed a lot of people. I gave a big 40th birthday party at the Pickering Hunt.

NL: Look at this! “Request the presence of your company on Friday, the 31 of January, at the Pickering Hunt Club.”

JL: My 40th birthday. These were the people who came. Most of them are dead now.

NL: Don’t you have images in your mind of the events as you look through this?

JL: Oh, yes. And some of the people – I can hardly read their names!
And then my wife died, and these were the people who came to the funeral.

NL: Oh, look. The page is edged in black. “A great privilege to have known and loved her.”

JL: One of her school friends wrote that. It goes on and on and on....After that there was a house tour, I told you... people visited the school house. This included all kinds of people. There were three old ladies who actually had gone to that school.

NL: Three ladies who had gone to that school came to the open house. That was 1973. A lot of people came through here. Look at this!

JL: It was hard to know what to do with all those people.

NL: Where did all those people park?

JL: On the road.
And this was my wedding to my second wife. My second wedding.

NL: I love the way you have the pages outlined in colors. This is beautiful.

JL: This is my second wedding. My daughter was 6 years old then...

NL: Look at this....Annemarie....

JL: Yes. There are more and more things...
Hilary and Bill – that is my step-daughter – they were married in that house. Here is their wedding.
Other things....book parties or whatever it is, you know....

NL: Something happened here - publication party of *Philadelphia: 1900-1950*. I must get that book.

JL: These people came...a famous pianist....

NL: Look! He wrote, "O what a beautiful morning, O what a beautiful day"

JL: Yes, yes. Here is another book signing party I had....

And then in 1984 we moved into this house. (Located at 129 Valley Park Road)

NL: Here we are, "Pickering Close."

JL: This is the first party we had there, in 1985. This goes on and on and on and on and on and on....The musician came again!

Oh, and I took this to New York when I published a book, and these were people in New York.

NL: And this was your publisher? Do you use the same publisher for all of your books?

JL: No, he's gone. This publisher is gone; those firms merge and all that. Do you know the Getty family? Well, this was Ann Getty who gave a party in her apartment, because she knew the publisher. I hardly knew her, but she said she had an apartment on Fifth Avenue and that was where the party was.

And now my daughter was married in this house – well, the reception was in this house. We had tents outside. There were so many people that we didn't take signatures, but we have their names.

NL: Now here she is – Annemarie – and she is the one who signed way back.

JL: Yes.

NL: She was married in St. Peter's Church in the Great Valley.

JL: Here is another book party, for *Confessions...*, I told you about that. Somebody wrote poems....

And here is another book party...*The End of the Twentieth Century*...another book party...another book party.

NL: (reading) "...And a really superb meal, too!"

JL: And then I had a big party on my 73rd birthday. It was supposed to be on my 70th birthday, but there was a big snowstorm, so we had to cancel at the last minute. But again, this was the list; they didn't sign. And then I went back to my native city in Hungary on my 75th birthday, and brought the book with me. People signed it...

NL: And this in Hungary. ...Government House?

JL: We stayed at Government House.

NL: Very impressive.

JL: And now comes the next sad thing. Stephanie's death.

NL: Oh, my.

JL: Yes, yes. She lived here, and 300 people came to her funeral.

NL: She must have been a very special woman. Very kind, maybe?

JL: She was a beautiful and thoughtful woman. These people came back to the house. Again there is the black border.

...We had other guests, and other guests.

NL: You have entertained all kinds!

JL: Conrad Black is in the paper, he is now Lord Black, he is being sued for 5 billion dollars! But he is friend of mine. He's Canadian.

NL: OK! He has serious money. Five billion! Why is he being sued for so much money?

JL: Actually, he's sued for only 52 million.

NL: That's so much better!

JL: He had this corporation and he was accused of taking a lot of money for himself and his wife.

JL: This is my recent wedding. A smaller wedding.

NL: We have all kinds of sad times and happy times represented here...

JL: Yes. The sad thing is that there are not many pages left.

NL: There are not many pages left. What a wonderful way to chronicle a life...

JL: Isn't it nice?

NL: Isn't it nice? And the cover says "Anderson Place, Old Pickering School, and then Pickering Place."

JL: I need to have it rebound. It is falling apart.

NL: A beautiful tribute....

JL: Yes. I can show our pictures...But this interview is not about me, it is about the house and the township.

NL: But it is about you, too....

JL: I have the plaque here.....

NL: (reads) "In appreciation of 35 years of outstanding service...Dr. John Lukacs... Sincere dedication and spirit of volunteerism....Saving what is left of the old..." And it is signed....that is nice.

JL: That was very nice...Yes.

NL: Nice and weighty, too! Substantial!

JL: Now they have to do something like this for Ted Ryan. He served on the township for 31 years.

NL: That is a sizable commitment on his part, too, that's for sure.

Thank you, so much, Dr. Lukacs! It was been a real pleasure to spend this time with you.