

## ***George J. Mitchell Oral History Project***

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**Juris Ubans**

*(Interviewer: Andrea L'Hommedieu)*

**GMOH# 060**

January 27, 2009

**Andrea L'Hommedieu:** This is an interview for the George J. Mitchell Oral History Project at Bowdoin College. The date is January 27, 2009. I'm at the home of Juris Ubans – did I pronounce that correctly?

**Juris Ubans:** That's correct.

**AL:** - in Portland, Maine, and this is Andrea L'Hommedieu. Juris, could you start just by giving me your full name and spelling it?

**JU:** Okay, Juris Ubans, and it's spelled J-U-R-I-S, and the last name is spelled U-B-A-N-S.

**AL:** And where and when were you born?

**JU:** I was born on July 12th in 1938, in Riga, Latvia. It's a small Baltic country, relatively recently having regained its independence, it was under the Russian Bear until '91. So that's where I was born.

**AL:** Did you grow up there?

**JU:** I grew up there 'til I was six years old, and at that point – we had been occupied by the Russians and then we were occupied by the Germans, and the Russians were coming back – and then we fled. It was part of the Second World War, chaos, that a lot of people got displaced from their original homes. And we started a fairly long journey which ended, let's say, in the United States in 1950. So it was '45 was when we left or '44 rather, but '45 when the war ended, and we wound up here in the United States in 1950.

**AL:** And so you were other places in the -

**JU:** Yeah, that is a fairly complicated thing, but immediately, when the war was still going on, we were fleeing through Germany and Poland, and we were trying to get to Switzerland because I had an aunt, one of my father's sisters [Gertrude Ubans], who had married an American [John Lehrs] who was the consul in Switzerland. We were trying to get there, see, the Swiss didn't let anybody in and stuff like that, so we got close but no cigar, so to speak. And that's where, close to the border in a town called Murnau in Germany, we were liberated by the American forces.

And then what happened was, I think these are the United Nations kind of programs, and at that time – I think it still exists – was an international relief organization, IRO, and there was UNRRA, which dealt with the refugee problem and stuff like that. They organized camps for ethnic groups to pass the time while they were being sent out to different places. They emigrated to all over the world, like Australia, and in Europe to England, other countries, South America, and America and Canada.

**AL:** And so when you got to the U.S. in 1950, where did you land?

**JU:** We were supposed to land in New York City, but we landed in Boston. So we lived there for a short while, and then we went to New York City. There were three boys and my mother – it's a complicated story. My father was left behind because he had typhoid fever at the time, and it was sort of a small tragedy in the context of the larger stuff. And because my mother was interested in thinking about the education of the boys, we wound up in Syracuse, New York, where she became a teacher of languages at the university, and then we were able to go to school there, all three of us, completed Syracuse University there. My brothers are quite a bit older, and one has died and the other one is, I think, seventy-seven. I'm a spring chicken.

**AL:** And so your mother, did she teach where you came from earlier, or, how did she get into teaching?

**JU:** She was quite good at languages, and the two languages that the Latvians spoke out of necessity were Russian and German, so she was very fluent in those languages. She spoke other languages too, like French, but I remember that being around her was interesting because whenever she didn't want me to know something she would change languages, and it really frustrated me, and I couldn't say it, because I really wanted to know. So maybe it propelled me on to higher education, to see if I could find out what's going on here.

**AL:** Did either you or your brothers have a propensity for foreign languages as well?

**JU:** No, I don't think so. Except my wife is a teacher of German, and so maybe it's – but no, we were all in the arts, because my father was a painter, and my mother was an aspiring singer, although she married very young, but she always retained the real kind of interest and honored the arts. So I had the bad gene, you know. I tried to be an engineer, architect kind of thing, and I was good at math but I couldn't sustain it, it got me.

All of us, my elder brother used to be in theater, and my second oldest brother is an artist, more like philosophical, he writes and stuff like that, and I'm a teacher, I just finished my stint here after forty-one years.

**AL:** Forty-one.

**JU:** Yeah, so, and I'm having a big show over there at USM.

**AL:** I heard that it's going to be a retrospective on your life and career?

**JU:** Yeah, kind of, like my connection to USM in a sense, I've done a lot of things here so we figured out this thing. It's been a complicated – that's why I was dropping the ball on this, because I'm quite tired from just doing all that, and it's all that intense deadline stuff. We just put the catalogue to bed for the last time, because we had it proofed and now it's ready to go so hopefully that'll come out before the show's over.

**AL:** Yes. Well tell me, so you went to Syracuse University, you studied art?

**JU:** Well, I started in engineering, and then I was dissatisfied with that and I started to take time off, I started going to California. I went in the army, I was in the army for a couple years, from '57 to '59. And then when I came back then it was hard for me to live with my mother in that situation, I wanted a little more freedom, so I started going to California, and coming back and slowly changing over to the arts. From engineering I went to math, I thought, well, I'll just do a pure thing here. And then I started noticing that I was not well read, because people would talk about books and I'd have no idea, so I thought, well, I've got to do that. So I became an English major for a while and did all this literature stuff, and then finally, I took a year off and just painted, just to see if I wanted to, if I could sustain this for a longer period of time.

**AL:** Right.

**JU:** It seemed to be okay, so then I became an art major. I think I started seriously going back to school, although I was going to school all the time a little bit, in '65 I think, and then I graduated in '66 and then I went on to graduate school after that.

**AL:** And where did you do your graduate work?

**JU:** At Pennsylvania State University, and that's also painting, my major.

**AL:** Now if you're celebrating forty-one years, it must have not been long after that, that you came to USM?

**JU:** Yeah, I came directly from there, that was the revelation. I didn't really know what you did with your education, and I found out, everybody said, "Did you mail in your resumes to so-and-so?" so that's when I started. And at that time, jobs were relatively plentiful, so, and I had three contracts on my desk and I was supposed to sign one because, they kept calling and saying, "We need - ." And I didn't like any of them, and I didn't know what to do. One was in Florida, one was in the Midwest, and I forget, I think the third one was also in the Midwest, and I didn't want to be in the Midwest, I thought, because I like the water. And I'd been to the other coast, so I thought the other coast would be okay too, but Florida, I don't think I'd been there, but I thought of it, I went for an interview but it reminded me of California except it was very humid, so I thought, 'No,' I didn't like that kind of stuff.

So anyway I got, belatedly, a call from here and they said, “Well, we have an opening, would you like to come up for an interview?” So I did, from Pennsylvania, I thought, ‘Well, it would be like an all day drive and I can do it,’ but I remember driving about, I was in Portsmouth about midnight, and I remember filling up with gas and then getting back on the road and all the lights kind of went out, so I thought, ‘Oh my God, this is like Alaska or something.’

But I got here about two or three o’clock in the morning, I was trying to find the place and – like you – I found it, and in Gorham, there, I don’t think there was a motel or anything and I thought, I mean I was pretty tired, too, so I just parked right in the parking lot there, where I thought I was supposed to be, and I was woken up by the students the next morning: “Ha-ha, this guy is sleeping in the car.” And I was just in time, because my appointment was at nine o’clock so I went in to what was the art building then and shaved and washed up and slid out my tie and went for my interview.

And I remember being pretty casual about it because I thought, ‘I have all these jobs,’ so I said, “No, that’s not enough, no,” so I was negotiating pretty well. I didn’t know how to do that, but I did okay I think. And so that’s how I came to be here, and I stayed for a very long time.

This is climate-wise very similar to Latvia, although Latvia’s quite a bit farther north, it’s mitigated, the temperature’s mitigated by the Gulf Stream, so similar, it’s maybe a little longer, the winter. This is plenty long, so I think that’s probably one of the things, because I’d been to California and I remember California was quite hot, and I remember, the time I decided to leave California, it was a very hot day in Pasadena, where I was living and working, and I looked up and that sun was so oppressive, that I thought, ‘I got to get out of it.’ I think I’d just read the *L’Étranger*, that novel by [Albert Camus], it’s a French writer.

**AL:** Yeah, I know what you’re talking about.

**JU:** I was reading him heavily, and so I think that there’s a little episode there toward the end, like ‘the sun made me do it’ kind of thing, so I thought, ‘All right, the sun made me.’ I said, “I got to get out of here,” because it was wonderful when I was younger, all that good weather and going everywhere fast and stuff like that.

**AL:** So tell me, when was it that George Mitchell first made a connection with you, or you were aware of him?

**JU:** Well I think the first time, I became aware of him when he ran for governor, and then he was supposed to win.

**AL:** Hmm-hmm.

**JU:** But then Longley won, but I didn’t know him so I wasn’t very involved in any way in politics then, I was just an observer, but I think shortly thereafter, I was thinking about when that

might have been but I -

**AL:** So the gubernatorial campaign was '74.

**JU:** Okay.

**AL:** So shortly after that?

**JU:** Shortly after, I would say maybe, because then I think George was in private practice after that, right?

**AL:** Yes.

**JU:** And therefore I think he was in Portland.

**AL:** Hmm-hmm.

**JU:** And then we started playing tennis together, there was a Monday night tennis group which included a lot of his cronies and I joined it sometime at that point. It included Hal Pachios, and Joe Angelone was one of his big advisors, and Tommy Allen was part of that at one point, Dick Hewes, who was, so it was very bipartisan in a sense, Dick was a big Republican, I think he was a speaker of the house or something like that. And let's see, Walter Corey and several other people, we had maybe six people in the group and we played four at a time, doubles, and we always had a really good time. And the group changed a little bit, new people would arrive, somebody would leave, so that's how I started to know George.

We usually went out to dinner after the tennis, which was probably like from six to seven-thirty or something like that, and we would go to various places, but mostly Italian, and George would always eat very sparsely, because he would have a half a meal, so he would share a meal with somebody, like that. He kept his figure, so to speak. So that's how I got to know him, and he used to play a lot of tennis, he loved tennis and we played all the time when he was available.

Then he was appointed as a judge and he was up at Bangor a lot of the time so we played maybe less. But even when he went to the Senate, he would come here and we would play, or we would go to Washington and we would play; he would arrange tennis matches with senators and stuff like that.

**AL:** Were there any particular tennis matches that you recall standing out?

**JU:** Well, George was very intense and he always wanted to win, and we would be a little afraid because he would run into the wall to get at a ball, so we were always like, "Take it easy, it's only a game," and all that kind of - he was right on target, so to speak.

He had an assistant who was a very good tennis player, so we loved to play with him. I can't

remember his name, he was in the office. And one time – is it Senator Breaux from Louisiana?

**AL:** Yes.

**JU:** I think one match that he arranged, the two senators played against me and, there was a professional woman player and I can't remember her name either, but anyway, we had a terrific match. And she was in town looking for a job, and so this was part of the interview, which is interesting, because you can tell an awful lot about a person by the way they play tennis.

**AL:** Really? Explain that to me, I don't know the game that well.

**JU:** Well, all the sort of characteristics, how a person approaches. Some are defensive, some are very aggressive, some are kind of like, they'll take every advantage and some are the opposite and stuff like that, so it's very, very telling. It's a kind of a high-level gentleman's game in the way, everybody says, "Well you don't want to make a call or anything, because you want to give the advantage to the, evenness to the other party," and stuff like that. So I've always thought that that should be included in any kind of, anybody who plays tennis, it should be included in any kind of interview process.

**AL:** Right. Now, did you have connections to Senator Mitchell in other periods, in other settings?

**JU:** Well, when we were doing the tennis stuff he was always, well he ran for office, right, and then I think we had a reception for him, so we would see him. He was always quite busy; he kept a schedule that didn't allow a lot of like down time, so maybe we'd go over, or I'd go over, we'd play tennis or we'd have breakfast together, or go to his house or something like that when he lived over in South Portland with Sally there, and Andrea.

So that would be mostly what it was about. In other words, when he was running for office, when he was *in* office. He – I was an immigrant so – and he was always championing the United States, he'd say, "What a great country it is," and then he would recall his own beginnings and he'd say, "What -." And then other people would sort of question him and, "Yeah, but what about this?" And he said, "Well, this is a great country because for hundreds of years, we've had this transition which is, nobody gets excited about it to the point where there are wars or something." So he was always pointing that out, that it's the only country really that has that kind of civilized kind of transition in political power, which we just saw, everybody was shaking hands rather than shooting guns and stuff like that.

And he was always keen on trying to show that to me. When I'd visit him in Washington, I went to his inauguration, a bunch of us went down, and he would take us to lunch at the Senate and introduce us to the senators, so he was always trying to show us the inner workings of this great country, in a sense. He was very adamant about that, very proud of that, so he wanted everybody to know that he really did believe this and this is really great. So that's what I remember most.

One of the first things I remember when he announced, I can't remember [when] he was appointed senator.

**AL:** And he had to run for reelection right away. He was appointed in mid '80 and had the election in '82.

**JU:** Eighty-two, and that may have been when he announced, because I don't remember anything else, but that one must have been for the '82 race and he had an announcement party, so to speak, and I was always impressed with the clarity with which he was able to present himself. In preparing for this I was thinking it would be nice if I could, because I wrote it down, I had a little address book, and I wrote his, he said, "I have three principles," and as best as I can remember is like, "I'll always do what's in the best interest of the people of Maine; and I'll always do what's in the best interests of the people of the United States; and I'll always follow my conscience," like that, and I thought that was so brilliant and so simple.

And the other thing he said, he was very experienced, he had been the AA for Muskie so that he was very politically astute. So he must have seen that there was a lot of people come to, when you're senator, to various kinds of shady schemes. So he also said, "I've been in law enforcement all my life, and I'm not going to entertain any ideas that are contrary to that." So I thought nobody would then come to him and say, "Well why don't you do this for me?" and stuff like that. So it was just really nice and he set himself up and he said, "That's it, this is what I like and this is what I do," and so on, like that.

Of course we used to talk politics and stuff, and I'm no politician but I have a kind of an insight and I always used to be trying to teach George and Harold and everybody else to try to understand the Russian mentality, because they were always like, "Eh -" you know. But that was an interesting point for us, because I would tell them various kinds of anecdotes that tried to explain the Russian mentality.

**AL:** And so you could see the American politics but have your own perspective from the Russian viewpoint?

**JU:** Well, Americans are very naïve about, for instance – less so now maybe – but they were certainly about Russia. Quite recently there's all this stuff that's, people are writing books now, the archives and stuff; the Soviet Union was a criminal enterprise. And then of course America was allied with them for a while, and then they pulled back and stuff, it was the lesser of two evils at the time maybe. But they continue, I mean Americans are well intentioned and good hearted, and I think the Russians basically took advantage of that. And in the context of the Second [World] War, the Russians got a lot of stuff, including all of Eastern Europe, for nothing.

So anyway, we would have these conversations, and they would have a different point of view on that and I was always telling them, because then in '91, when Latvia became free I started going there quite a lot. And I had been there in 1973, to visit my father, which was a kind of a problematic situation because I was thirty-five, and my fear was that the Russians, who did not

recognize my American citizenship, would draft me into the army, Russian army. I don't know how real the fear was, but anyway, it was something that you'd consider.

So I traveled with a group, and I was the only one of that age and all the other people were old. And because my father had survived his illness, which was a miracle actually, I wanted very much to go see him, but there were all kinds of problems. The fact that he had a son or people in the West would maybe be bad for him, but I went and I met him and all that, and I talked with him a lot about all this stuff, and I got kind of an insight into his life and the life under the commies. And also I could feel it. I was there, and I had just given up smoking I remember but I took a carton of cigarettes, that was a good trade thing. You could have a taxi ride for two cigarettes. And three or four days later I started smoking, because one of the guys that was, we shared a room, and the guy was always pumping me about something, and I think he was a plant, you know, kind of thing.

And when I went around – my father was quite a well-known artist there, so he was like a big shot, and so I participated in those, it was quite a long two-week kind of thing where, it was his eightieth birthday, and so we had to go to the opera and then the literary club, and then we had a show at the museum, all these events, and he was a pretty old guy and he had to deal with it all and I was sort of in tow. And we got a chance to talk a little bit about his experience. It was funny because -

**AL:** So he was an older gentleman when you were born, he was in his forties already?

**JU:** Let's see, yeah he would have been, right.

**AL:** Forty-five about?

**JU:** Yeah, when I was born, he was born in 1893 so he would have been forty-five, yeah. My mother was younger; when I was born she would have been thirty-one. So yeah, I never thought about that, right.

**AL:** So, I'm sorry, I interrupted you, you were -

**JU:** No-no, no, that's okay. Anyway, the central issue with George was that I would always be telling him these things that he was not really ready to believe. The American politic, in a sense, was this large country, but I was this guy from this small country which was under the hoof of the big Russian Bear there so I had a different perspective on the things. I would always tell him that, but mostly like in a funny way, you know.

One of the things in dealing with Russia, there's a tremendous amount of subversive humor that is, and they have these censors so you find these tremendously creative ways of saying stuff that people who are censoring you don't really recognize but others do. So there was this whole kind of area of conversation that was very interesting, to me at first, and then I tried to pass it on to these guys, who were loath to believe it, but anyway. Maybe nowadays they probably have a

better perspective. That was back in, let's see, when was Reagan? That was '80s.

**AL:** Eighties, yes.

**JU:** So it would have been maybe a little before Reagan, because Reagan called a spade a spade, and that was kind of, 'Whoa,' a revelation.

**AL:** Well that does give a deeper understanding of the relationship there.

**JU:** Yeah. Right, right, so he was trying to tell me what a great country America was, and I was trying to tell him how bad the Russians were, so that was what our conversation was on politics.

We had other major plans, and this was in, not so much George but Harold, we were trying to go to Latvia and bring some of the work out, my father's work. So we had all these schemes with Armand Hammer and all that kind of thing, but those are just things that we talked about.

**AL:** Did you, were you able to get any of your father's work?

**JU:** Subsequently, I started, when he was still alive, the way I went the first time in '73 was to accompany my mother-in-law, who was my wife's mother. We thought she was pretty old, she was seventy-one I think, and so I went the first time and Mara, my wife, went the second time, and her brother Martin went the third time with her. And she would go every two years, and this was under the Russians. But then she started going every, '73, '75, '77, so in '79 she went on her own, because even though she'd gotten older it was a tough thing to do in terms of emotionally, because you were there and you really could see the suppression, and it's not something pleasant. And I was busy with stuff, and so I didn't go again, and I regret that because my father died I think in '81, yeah, in '81 I think, so it was shortly after I, well, eight years after I saw him.

I never saw him again, but accompanying my mother, my mother-in-law, he would always give me a painting, because it was difficult to get them out of the country, because you first had to pay some tremendous tax, okay? But that was only after the painting was certified by the National Museum that it was one that they didn't want. There's no free market kind of thing there, or at that time there wasn't. So we had to do all this stuff, and it's all very corrupt and very bureaucratic. I would carry out a painting when I was there, and Mara would carry one out, and then subsequently he always sent a painting with my mother-in-law, so those, these are the things that you see here.

**AL:** Oh.

**JU:** They're all my father's works. Except those, those are different, okay, but the rest of them are my father's work.

So I had a start, and then I inherited some from my aunts. My father had six sisters, two of them I knew and so I got some from them, and then when, in '91, when it opened up, then I started buying up work that I could, because they were in desperate need of money so people would put stuff like paintings on the market. So I have maybe about fifty or so paintings now, that I've gotten all together from my father's work. I had a show here for him, at Westbrook [College, UNE].

**AL:** Oh, you did.

**JU:** Yeah, I'll show you, I'll give you a catalogue for that, which was a big project that I undertook, took me about ten years to do that. So that was all, it was [an] exciting kind of thing. And George was always helpful whenever I would be going back there. He went to Russia once or twice -

**AL:** Yes, in the '80s.

**JU:** Yeah.

**AL:** And probably in the '90s, too.

**JU:** Yeah. I also wanted to engage with – my father had been a teacher at the Latvian Academy of Art, and in his younger days he had also been a director of the museum or assistant director of the museum, the National Museum, so those were institutions that were in my focus and I tried to undertake various programs with them. One of the programs I started was an official exchange between USM and the Latvian Academy of Art, sent students back and forth, and the other was, I tried to get this big exhibition, which had been the first exhibition which had left the Iron Curtain and had gone to western Germany, and I tried to get that to come to the United States, so I was dealing with that.

George helped me found my foundation, which I call the foundation Fiore Verde, which is the instrument by which I try to finance a lot of this, the exchanges and stuff like that, so he was my honorary chairman and we had a gathering here and we launched this venture. Clinton once went to Latvia, and I was in Washington, I said, "Oh, I'm going to be there too, get me a pass," you know. And he said, "Oh sure, yeah," and so - But somebody in the office dropped the ball, so I had to look at Clinton from afar. Although Chelsea and her grandmother I think were going about town, being shown the museums and stuff like that, so I was introduced to them.

**AL:** Are there any things I haven't asked you about in terms of your connection with George Mitchell, or your perspective on him, or anything you've shared over the years that you want to add?

**JU:** George is very astute and I was always amazed at his very orderly mind, and so he was able to codify various things. And sometimes, I remember one issue which was, I don't think it was a big issue, but it was a fund-raiser at somebody's house somewhere. Somebody asked him

about education, and he did this twenty-minute talk on the whole educational system in the Second [World] War and all that kind of stuff. And it was just brilliant, because he had this historical grasp of that, one of the best things I've ever heard, with some people, and I wish my colleagues would have a better sense of that. So he had this ability to contextualize things, and so one issue like that, when he'd put it into the context of the society and how important it was.

And I saw that, although he was known as being pretty partisan, he was a Democrat for sure, but I think he had a lot of respect from other people for these kinds of reasons, that he was smart but able to, he's quite eloquent, too. I always admired him a great deal, and I felt honored, [that] I could play tennis with him or share a meal or tell him some Russian jokes, stuff like that.

On a personal level, I think I was less involved with that. I was on various occasions invited to, he has a fairly large family up north, but it was mostly through the political thing. And then after he left the Senate, then he kind of disappeared a little bit from our view here, he was here a lot less. And I hope he's still playing tennis, although I haven't played with him for some years now, so I don't know for sure. He was, I think, tied with Harold's law firm as counsel, but I'm not sure that's the case any more, because he now travels in different circles. He's always, like that California stuff and big New York City, so Portland is like probably a small thing now. He comes up, I think, summers up north.

**AL:** Yeah, Southwest Harbor [*sic*: Seal Harbor].

**JU:** Southwest Harbor, right, so. I see him occasionally, but not too much any more.

**AL:** Well great, thank you so much.

**JU:** Okay.

End of Interview

Addendum January 28, 2009, via e-mail exchange from Juris Ubans to Andrea L'Hommedieu:

After our talk, I remembered a couple of things that I should have mentioned. First, that when George was the federal judge here in Maine, he was overjoyed about one of his duties: that of swearing in the new citizens of this country. He said that it was one of his most pleasant duties. Second, he did have me appointed to the board of trustees of the American Folklife Center of the Library of Congress, in Washington, D.C. It was a very interesting experience from many perspectives, and he would always provide the time for ample time in his busy schedule to air our needs and plans. I think I served for about eight years, two as chairman of the board. We worked together with the State Arts Agencies and held a national conference On Folklife Topics in Portland.