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RECRUITMENT OF JOSHUA LEDERBERG

My single most important service as Chairman of the Department of Genetics (1939-1957) was aiding in the recruitment to our staff of Joshua Lederberg. Initially opinion was strongly divided within the departmental group concerning the desirability of inviting Lederberg to join us. Abandonment on my part of the effort to recruit Lederberg in the face of the strong opposition that existed among certain of my colleagues probably would have lost us the department's most brilliant member in its history from the founding in 1910 onwards.

It has been agreed earlier that in filling the position which had been made vacant by L.J. Cole's retirement, a person should be sought whose central research interest was in theoretical genetics. Lederberg, then a graduate student in E.L. Tatum's laboratory at Yale University had been brought to our attention as an exceptionally promising young man in this respect. Lederberg and Tatum had just published convincing evidence for the occurrence in bacteria of sexuality. The finding aroused wide interest among biologists, and it opened the way to genetic work with a major group of lower organisms. (Lederberg was awarded the Nobel Prize in Medicine and Physiology, jointly with E.L. Tatum and G.W. Beadle, in 1958, for this and subsequent discoveries. He was the first member of the Wisconsin faculty to become a Nobel laureate.)

Those who were outspoken in opposition to inviting Lederberg to Wisconsin argued that, even though promise in basic research should be a principal consideration in making the selection, the appointee also should be agriculturally oriented. Lederberg's background was metropolitan. He was born in Montclair, New Jersey, (5-23-25). He had taken the B.A. (with honors) at Columbia following a course that included two years of study in the College of Physicians and Surgeons and the Ph.D. at Yale University, in the Department of Botany and Microbiology. The view was expressed by certain of my departmental colleagues that with a background of this sort it was folly to expect that Lederberg could adapt to a College of Agriculture environment. Probably there also was opposition to Lederberg because he was Jewish, although this attitude did not become overt. Reports about him, however, were agreed that he was aggressive, and in some people's opinion, unpleasantly so.

For several weeks it appeared in staff meetings that the outspoken critics of Lederberg, plus others who were less vocal, but seemingly were also opposed, were in the majority, although a ballot had not been taken. M.R. Irwin and I kept the deliberations open with unwavering support for Lederberg's candidacy from Ira Baldwin, then Dean of the College of Agriculture.

Two letters strongly endorsing Lederberg for the Wisconsin post were especially effective in eventually winning the needed support within the Department of Genetics staff. One of these letters was from E.W. Sinnott (June 4, 1947) who was the Professor of Botany and also Dean of the Graduate School, at Yale. Sinnott had become personally acquainted with Lederberg at Yale, as a former member of the staff at the Connecticut Agricultural College at Storrs, Connecticut, Sinnott was familiar with the kind of academic environment Lederberg would enter in the Department of Genetics at the University of Wisconsin. I was personally acquainted with Sinnott and had deep respect for his judgement.

The other letter was from Ray D. Owen (August 13, 1947) Professor of Biology, California Institute Technology, Pasadena, and formerly Assistant Professor of Genetics and Zoology at the University of Wisconsin. Ray had taken his Ph.D. in the Genetics Department here, and was well known to, and highly regarded by all my colleagues. Although the views among Owen's colleagues at Cal.Tech. were not unaminously in his favor, Ray reported that the two persons who knew Lederberg best were enthusiastic supporters of his candidacy. One said, "If you want an all-round good fellow, who will do thorough work on small problems, don't take Josh. But if you want a brilliant investigator who may well have several people 'hating his guts' before long but who will be liked and respected by others, and who will enrich many discussions and produce over a long career, a large volume of distinguished research, he's your man." Another of Owen's associates considered Lederberg as "one of the most brilliant minds in biology today".

Owen's August 13, 1947 letter had much to do, in my opinion, with switching the position of Lederberg's less determined opponents in the departmental group. Eventually a vote was taken and a majority of the staff favored inviting Lederberg to join the Genetics group. Lederberg accepted the offer made him a little later, and was appointed assistant professor of Genetics, September 15, 1947.

A year or so after Lederberg arrived on the campus one of my departmental colleagues who had been unrelenting in his opposition to the appointment remarked to me casually that "Lederberg seems to be doing exceptionally well. His performances in fact, almost justifies the manner in which he was brought here." The dubious procedure implied was in deferring a departmental vote until the desired favorable majority was assured. I have stated elsewhere that "If this was a sin, it has rested lightly on my conscience," because of Lederberg's exceptionally distinguished and lasting service to the University of Wisconsin.

Lederberg's appointment here was an inflection point in the development of biological science on our campus. His brilliant pioneer work in bacterial genetics provided the foundation on which the extensive program in molecular biology has since been built.

A copy of the correspondence concerning Lederberg's recruitment to the Genetics Staff is appended.