ANIL AGGRAWAL'S
Internet Journal of
Forensic Medicine and Toxicology
The world's first online journal devoted entirely to forensic medicine and toxicology · Published 1 January and 1 July

VOL. 3, NO. 1
Downloaded from www.anilaggrawal.com · ISSN 0972-8074 (Online) · https://www.anilaggrawal.com/ij/vol_003_no_001/interview/001_jay.html

Interview with Jay Levinson

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An Interview with Jay Levinson. *Anil Aggrawal's Internet Journal of Forensic Medicine and Toxicology, 2002*; Vol. 3, No. 1 (January - June 2002):

(*Jay Levinson is one of the foremost experts in questioned documents. An author of three books, and more than hundred erudite papers in various reputed journals, he commands unparalleled respect among forensic scientists of the world. Naturally we couldn't contain our desire to know more about him. We at the "Anil Aggrawal's Internet Journal of Forensic Medicine and Toxicology" approached him for an online interview and he graciously agreed. The interview was conducted for well over a month. Some excerpts.. ..*)

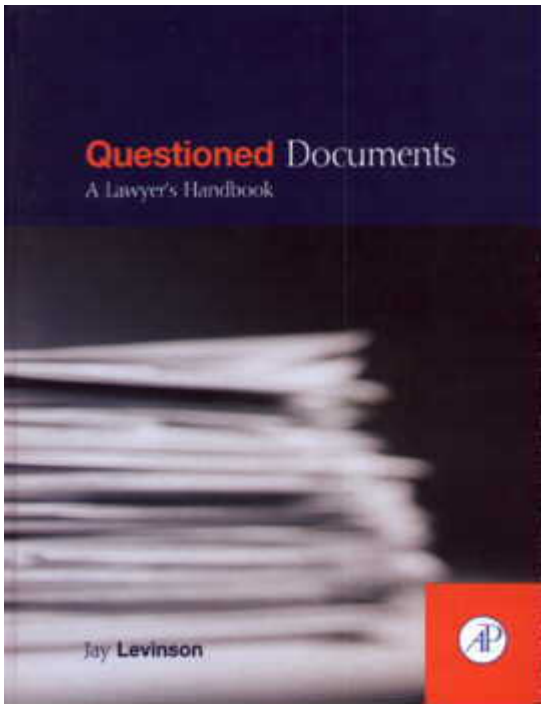
Jay Levinson



Qu. 1. How did you become interested in document examination? Did you want to make this your profession from childhood?

Ans. In college I majored in Near Eastern Studies, and I wrote my doctoral dissertation on the grammar and lexicography of Nabatean Aramaic. (The Nabatean civilization was centered in Petra [modern Jordan], which was conquered / destroyed by the Romans.) After my studies I decided to enter government service --- CIA in Washington --- where I used several of the foreign languages that I had learnt. Modern languages, of course. Not Nabatean. I did not care for my first assignment, and when the head of the Questioned Documents (QD) Lab heard of my dissatisfaction, he offered me a position. "Okay, I'll try it. If I like the job, I'll stay." I did like it. I stayed in the QD Lab for nine years, until I moved from the United States to Israel. I then continued in Questioned Documents in the Israel Police.

The book "Questioned Documents - A Lawyer's Handbook" by Jay Levinson, published by Academic Press. Click on the book to go to its review.



Qu. 2. Handwriting analyst? Examiner of Questioned Documents? What is the proper term?

Ans. Examiner of Questioned Documents covers the entire gamut of examinations. This means everything from staples to computer printers, handwriting to perforators. Once you say "handwriting," you are limiting yourself to one specific area of document examination. I should add at this point that Questioned Documents is forever changing. In years past, most documents were handwritten. Then the typewriter dominated at least business correspondence. Today the computer printer has become the primary means of business correspondence (if not personal correspondence as well) in many countries. The obvious implication is that a document examiner must keep updating himself, learning new techniques. He cannot afford the luxury of handwriting only. In my book I tried to keep abreast of change. There are chapters devoted to printers and even changes in United States currency (important even abroad where there is less familiarity with the security features of the banknotes).

Qu. 3. You must be knowing we reviewed your book "Questioned Documents - A Lawyer's Handbook" (Academic Press, 2001), in our last issue, and you got a rave review. Is this your first book? Why did you write it?

Ans. I have written numerous journal articles and conference papers, but this is my first book. A number of years ago a Nazi war crimes case was tried here in Israel. I attended the proceedings, watched testimony on television. (Yes, "watched," and not just "listened to." We have to remember that part of every verbal message is the accompanying nonverbal "language" of the speaker.) It became clear to me that some of the attorneys involved knew all too little about Questioned Documents. They did not know what questions to ask. So, I decided to write a book, Questioned Documents: A Lawyer's Handbook. There are numerous other Questioned Documents books on the market, but I wanted this one to be different. I did not want to write another "how to" guide for document examiners. I wanted this book to be short and to the point --- give a lawyer a basic understanding of the subject, and primary source material for further reading.

In this lottery ticket three identical numbers constitute a winning card. In the lower card (b) the owner appears to have won 400 Shekels. The upper card (a), photographed in infra-red,

reveals how "100" was altered to "400". (photograph from Jay Levinson's book "Questioned Documents - A Lawyer's Handbook" published by Academic Press, page 140)



Qu. 4. What is your next book about? Is it also on Questioned Documents?

Ans. My next book, *Transportation Disaster Response Handbook*, will be published by Academic Press in January, 2002. In 1985 I was invited to start a disaster victim identification (DVI) program for the Israel Police (though I have still kept current with Questioned Documents). Since then I have been to the responses of ten air crashes, numerous bus bombings, and various road accidents. I enjoy writing, and I thought that I would share my experiences with others. For me a very important issue is how forensic science is an essential part of a disaster response. Too many people think of ambulance and fire. They forget that there is a police investigation. There is scientific evidence regarding cause of damage. The evidence can relate to explosives in a bombing, or substandard construction materials used in a building collapse following an earthquake. Explaining this point was one of my motives in writing the book. I am also publishing another volume on terror bombing.

Qu. 5. Could you tell us about your educational background?

Ans. I am originally from Newark, New Jersey (USA), where both of my parents were born. I attended high school in Newark. Even then I enjoyed foreign languages and creative writing, as well as world history. Another reason that my QD book is different --- I discuss both handwriting and technical examinations in foreign languages. In New York University I continued in the direction of language and history, specializing in the Near East. After finishing my graduate studies

I started my CIA employment, where I eventually learnt Questioned Documents on-the-job, supplemented by training experience at the FBI and selected courses in two local universities.

Qu. 6. What do you like most? And what is your second favorite activity?

Ans. What do I like most? That's an easy question. Travel. I have been to more than fifty countries. I enjoy seeing the world. I try to see what interests me --- selected museums and other "standard" tourist sites, but also theater and life-style. Even when I travel, QD fascinates me. I have been to factories relating to document examination --- ink, pens, markers, pencils, paper, envelopes, typewriters, tape. I have visited QD labs from Buenos Aires to Budapest to Lagos to Kathmandu. Wherever I can, I try to drop into the local lab. I have also seen numerous police museums. The museum in Cairo, for example, has several display frames that deal with document and currency forgery.

My second favorite activity is teaching and lecturing. I like to stand up in front of a group, look at them, and see if I can interest them in what I have to say. It is a challenge --- to make them laugh when I want, to keep them serious when that is important. Sometimes I use slides or PowerPoint. Sometimes I prefer merely to stand up and speak without props. It all depends on who is my audience, and what is my objective. Several months ago I was invited to address a prestigious conference in Europe. One of the speakers went over his allotted time, and at the last moment I was asked to compensate by cutting down my speech by seven minutes. Many speakers make the mistake of trying to say too much for the time given to them. It is an art to fit the message to the time available.

Qu. 7. What do you consider as your most interesting questioned documents case? Would you like to share experiences of this case with our readers?

...I have been to more than fifty countries. I enjoy seeing the world. I try to see what interests me --- selected museums and other "standard" tourist sites, but also theater and life-style. Even when I travel, QD fascinates me. I have been to factories relating to document examination --- ink, pens, markers, pencils, paper, envelopes, typewriters, tape. I have visited QD labs from Buenos Aires to Budapest to Lagos to Kathmandu...

Ans. Today there is a strong emphasis on counter-terrorism. Back in the 1970's I was part of an effort to identify terrorists by the counterfeit passports that they presented at border control. Due to security I still cannot provide full details, but I can say that the program was very successful. I took great satisfaction from it. It was teamwork. A co-worker and I made an all-out effort to teach border inspectors how to find forgeries in passports and identification papers. It was important to instruct inspectors also on the night shift, so I remember lecturing in Detroit at 2 a.m. On another occasion my co-worker and I traveled with another person from the office. The three of us arrived at a small border station at 1 a.m. The third person went off to bed; my co-worker and I said good night to him then headed directly to the nearest inspection station. When you give instruction at that hour, the trainee senses that the subject is important and that you really care.

Qu. 8. And your most unusual documents case?

Ans. When someone mentions document examination, the first thought it criminal cases. Forgery. Attempts to deceive. On several occasions I have been asked to examine documents of historical value. In one case a rabbi came into possession of a Torah scroll that he thought dated to the early Renaissance period. In another case I compared the known handwriting of an 18th century sage

with notes in the margin of a Talmudic text to ascertain authorship. I have also looked at numerous Underground forgeries produced during the Nazi Occupation of Europe. I even found a "forgery kit" used by the French Resistance. This is why QD is so fascinating --- the types of cases, the materials examined, are so varied.

Qu. 9. If you were able to choose your profession again, what would it be, and why?

Ans. I enjoyed working in Questioned Documents. I still do. I took great satisfaction from disaster victim identification, although the sights were hard and took their psychological toll. It was an opportunity to help people in their greatest hour of need. Recently I have been writing articles for newspapers --- some articles drawn from my professional experience, others not. For example, I have a travel column in a London weekly newspaper. This gives me a very needed break from certain professional pressures. Let me answer your question. I enjoy the challenge of Questioned Documents. Yes, I would certainly join the profession again if I had the choice.

...I don't mind working late hours. Back in the 1970's I was part of an effort to identify terrorists by the counterfeit passports that they presented at border control. A co-worker and I made an all-out effort to teach border inspectors how to find forgeries in passports and identification papers. It was important to instruct inspectors also on the night shift, so I remember lecturing in Detroit at 2 a.m. When you give instruction at that hour, the trainee senses that the subject is important and that you really care...

Qu. 10. Have you ever traveled to India, or to Indian subcontinent? Would you like to visit, if such an opportunity arose? Have you ever attended the Conference of the Indian Academy of Forensic Medicine (IAFM)? Are you aware that this Conference is to be held in the month of January 2002?

Ans. I have not been to India since 1977, and then I spent only a short time in New Delhi. I was also in Sri Lanka for ten days in 1986. I would very much like to visit India again and see the country. I would like to see document laboratories in India. Document libraries in India. After all, Questioned Documents has a long tradition in the Sub-Continent . going back to Hardless & Hardless, a QD classic published in Cunnar in 1919, and Brewster published in Calcutta in 1932. Incidentally, both of these titles are mentioned in my book --- it is important to know the history of QD. Now that I have retired, travel to India is a distinct possibility. Don't get me wrong. It seems that in "retirement" I am busier than when I was regularly employed. Unfortunately, though, I shall not make the January conference.

Qu. 11. What was one of your biggest disappointments?

Ans. In 1999 I was part of an effort to hold the next International Association of Forensic Science (IAFS 2002) conference in Jerusalem. I felt that Israel put in a very strong bid. We could have run a first rate conference. My approach is simple. Forensic science is international. In Questioned Documents, for example, we have to talk about handwriting in Arabic, Hindi, and Nepalese. Not only English. I tried to express this in my book. We wanted this to be part of the spirit of the conference. But, the political atmosphere worked against us. It was felt that people would be afraid to come to the area. The conference was awarded to Montpelier. I wish the French the best. But, yes, I was disappointed that we could not hold the conference in Jerusalem.

Qu. 12. What do you do in your spare time? Your hobbies?

Ans. Since age seven I have been a stamp collector. I have an extensive collection, and I am always looking for collectors abroad with whom I can trade. This past summer, for example, I spent time in

Havana, Cuba. I made certain to meet with the head of the national philatelic society and arrange to trade stamps. Don't be surprised. My interest in Questioned Documents can be seen even in my stamp collection. I have several forged stamps from the World War I era (British forgeries of German stamps). I have also used my philatelic knowledge in QD cases. In one examination I showed that the tax stamp on a supposed bill of sale had not yet been issued on the date of the transaction.

Photocopied forgery of Jordinian 10 Dinar note. The forgery lacks detail and appropriate color. The watermark was printed. (photograph from Jay Levinson's book "Questioned Documents - A Lawyer's Handbook" published by Academic Press, page 166)



Qu. 13. Any interesting court experience?

Ans. I remember one case in a Jerusalem court. I was called to testify on counterfeit currency. After relating my qualifications, I described certain security features in genuine banknotes, then the lack of those features in the counterfeit notes under discussion. Quite technical. Then I played a game using the two serial numbers repetitively found on the twelve or so banknotes that I had examined. By the time I was finished, I had the judge laughing --- which of the two numbers would appear on the next banknote that I would pick. Remember the rule --- involve the judge in your thought process, and convince him of your findings.

Qu. 14. What do you dislike most in court?

Ans. I enjoy dealing with good questions from the judge or opposition attorney. This is the legal system at its best. What I dislike is the uniformed question --- when the person asking doesn't understand what he is talking about. That is the most difficult question to answer. You cannot tell a layer or a judge that he is uninformed. These kinds of questions also do not further justice. There is another phenomenon that annoys me. I hate to see an expert advise an attorney how to trip up a witness, even though the expert knows that the testimony is correct. Experts should not take sides in a case. Their role is to make sure that the court is provided with accurate information.

Qu. 15. Are you religious? If yes, how do you reconcile religion with science, which is your profession?

Ans. Yes, I am a religious Jew. No, I have no problem with science. There is nothing to reconcile. There are no contradictions. Science is merely a description of the same reality that religion explains. Science just uses a different set of terms. By the way, the identification of handwriting and the phenomenon of forgery are mentioned in the Talmud, a Jewish compendium of laws going back some two thousand years.

Qu. 16. If a youngster of about 12-13 years wanted to become a handwriting expert, how should he proceed?

Ans. That is really a young age to decide upon such a specific profession. At age 13 I did not have the vaguest idea what I wanted to do professionally. When I entered college I also had no specific profession in mind. Many people are like that. They chose a profession only after they have been exposed to broad learning. I would tell the child that he should pursue a solid general education. Learning language and proper expression are important. So is an extensive grounding in both liberal arts and natural sciences. Then he will have "all options open," when he enters the job market. Call it a good foundation, if you will. If he still wants to be a document examiner, then he should seek employment in a laboratory that can offer solid training.

...My advice to people who want to take up "Qustioned Documents" as a career? Well, there are several institutions that offer specialized courses in aspects of Questioned Documents --- some good, some not. This, however, is not the way to learn the profession. There is no substitute for on-the-job training supplemented by extensive reading and selected course work...

Qu. 17. Can you give the names and addresses of some famous institutions, which run recognized courses in *Questioned Documents*?

Ans. I would really not like to answer that question. There are several institutions that offer specialized courses in aspects of Questioned Documents --- some good, some not. This, however, is not the way to learn the profession. There is no substitute for on-the-job training supplemented by extensive reading and selected course work. The person providing the on-the-job training can recommend those specific courses that the trainee might want to take. Let me make one point most emphatically --- Questioned Documents by correspondence course is absolutely not the way to learn the profession.

Qu. 18. How many children do you have? Would you be happy if they took up the profession of Document Examination? What are they doing now?

Ans. I have eight children, four of whom are married. None of them has shown great interest in document examination. Basic curiosity, yes. But, nothing more than that. Of the married children, one son designs computer web pages, and another son works in a high-tech position. One daughter runs a nursery school, and another is a housewife. I do have a son in twelfth grade, who apparently has inherited my desire to write; he is a regular contributor to a local weekly newspaper. But, none of the eight seems interested in pursuing document examination as a profession.

Qu. 19. What changes do you see in Questioned Documents in the next 10 or 20 years?

Ans. Document examination is a dynamic field. I foresee major changes. We have to prepare ourselves for computer-generated documents where an "original" as we understand the concept simply never exists. There will be more sophisticated security features --- and more equipment available to forgers. Color photocopiers will improve and become more widely available --- for better and for worse. There will always be signatures, but less handwriting. There will be much more digital photography, raising new questions of photograph authenticity. Better faxes. Document scanners. The conclusion is obvious --- examiners must keep up-to-date. They have no choice.

Qu. 20. What message do you have to people reading your book?

Ans. Today science is moving so fast that by the time the book was published, there were new subjects not covered. But, I think the book makes a strong contribution for someone looking to

acquire a basic understanding of Questioned Documents. Most important for me --- I want feedback. I want to know if something is unclear. If something should be covered in greater detail.

Jay Levinson can be approached via E-mail at DrJayLevinson@aol.com. The review of his book Questioned Documents - A Lawyer's Handbook *appears in the last issue of this journal. Readers wanting to visit this review may want to the linked page (page001).*

Interview appearing in the previous issue
Interview appearing in the next issue