

Leslie Lasker (RIP)

by Basil Rosenblatt, Brian Eisenberg, Shayne Straker

Leslie had a tough and sad life.

I first met him when we were 7 or 8 years old. His parents had financial difficulties, and the family had moved from Oaklands, where he attended Houghton primary school, to what was then the brand new suburb of Glenhazel. He then moved to Fairmount School. He had a much older brother who was a jockey and lived in Cape Town.

Leslie had some foibles, often appearing nervous and lacking in social skills. However, he had a brilliant mind, and sometimes surprised us with his knowledge and understanding of matters.

Some thoughts from our childhood and teenage years:

- Playing in my back yard one day (probably about 10 years old), he came up with a clever game of creating a series of dams and waterways, figuring out proper grading etc., so that the water would flow the right way when dam gates were opened. My parents and the gardener weren't too happy with the mess created.
- I would sometimes go to Leslie's house after school, and inevitably lunch would consist of huge delicious french fries made by their man servant.
- There wasn't much else to eat in the house, but some biscuits and other goodies were kept in a sideboard in the dining room behind locked doors. Leslie found a way of climbing through the dining room window from outside and helping himself to goodies.
- Leslie rode his bike everywhere and being very strong rider enjoyed it.
- As a teenager, Leslie had to find jobs to earn money. One of his jobs was at the Zoo Lake restaurant, where he worked some evenings – and rode his bike at night from Glenhazel to Parkview - quite a distance.
- His mother died while we were at high school.

Leslie attended Wits University and qualified with a BSc. He became quite political, and it was suggested that it would be best for him to leave the country. He went to the US, and sent for his future wife (Carrol Gafin) to join him from S.A. They had one daughter, Andrea and in New York lived in a professor's house, paid minimal rent and helped babysit their kids in return. He also delivered newspapers to help make ends meet.

Tragedy struck again when Carrol's sister, Denise Kavin, was murdered by her husband in their Houghton home. From the internet: *"On June 7, 1977, the husband shot and killed his wife, Denise, and two of their children, Adelle and Lance Jay; the third, Debbie-Ann, was shot through the head and blinded for life, but survived."*

On a trip to the United States in 1979, we met up with Leslie and Carrol. He was in quite a bad way – he had probably had a nervous breakdown, and was in a sanatorium, but was allowed out for the afternoon. We met up with them at a railway station in Long Island, and to our horror, Leslie got behind the wheel of their very big, very old, beaten up car. It was quite terrifying, but we all survived the afternoon. I think at that time, he was already heavily into gambling and smoking. Apparently, his poker playing skills were such that he got into trouble with the mob. He complained how little he earned, and he supplemented his income by gambling.

In the early 80's, Leslie and Carrol visited us in Toronto. When asked what sort of work he did, he looked at us, started to explain, and then just said "you wouldn't understand".

Apparently, it had something to do with checking the accuracy of the computers used for the space programme. He was also somehow involved in the early development of laser techniques.

A few years later, we got the devastating news that he had died of a heart attack – he was only in his 40s. We maintained contact with Carrol, and a few years later, she told us that she was living with a wonderful man. After a few years of living together, they got married. Within weeks, her new husband died. I don't think she ever got over this, and soon after, she died. We had very brief contact with their daughter Andrea, who found our contact information at their home. The last we heard was that she was married and living in the US.

Basil

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Leslie ('Les'), whose life was a very sad one filled with tragedy, was possibly the most brilliant (academic) person I have ever known. He was also a great friend, who I first met in Form I at Northview at the same time as I met Dennis Goldman and Basil Rosenblatt - the four of us forming a close bond and sharing many adventures during our school years.

Les lived in Glenhazel and as long as I knew him always lived in an environment where financial struggle was the norm. His parents were refugees* from Nazi-Germany and owned a small knitting factory (Knitter's Friend) somewhere on the east (or south)-side of central Johannesburg. I recall, fondly, going to the factory on some days to help his mother with some general chores and remember too the innovative designs on sweaters she used to make for me as I watched the knitting machines with fascination.

Les's great uncle, Emanuel Lasker, was world chess champion from 1894 to 1921- a 27 year-reign not repeated since and something Les was immensely proud of. Chess played a significant role in the Lasker household and one could never go there, for a weekend visit or during a sleepover, without being challenged to a game by his father (obviously Leslie and I played against each other incessantly) or seeing some of his father's friends playing chess in cigar-smoke-filled rooms. Naturally Leslie was a member of the Northview Chess Team where he regularly played one of the top Boards 1,2 or 3 depending on the latest prowess of newcomers from the lower forms.

We had many adventures together, each becoming increasingly more exciting as we got older. Possibly the most adventurous was a bike ride** we undertook (with Basil and Dennis) to Hartebeespoort Dam and Sterkfontein Caves in 1959 – a ride which we undertook without a map or any water and which adventure I believe haunts Basil to this day.

Les's mother died when he was 16 and her car was put on blocks in their garage, and when in Form 5, after I got my license, Les, Dennis and I 'stole' her mother's

car (a small basic Fiat) in order to travel to Greenside and visit some girls we knew there. On the way back we had some trouble – the car overheated – and only having the most rudimentary knowledge of the workings of cars we stopped somewhere, found water and poured it into what seemed an appropriate place.

This made no difference, the car would still not start so we ended up pushing it all the way from Houghton to Glenhazel and securing it in the garage. The next morning at school we shared this adventure with Basil, who being a ‘car junkie’ told us that that model was air-cooled and did not use water!

Money was always a problem for the Laskers and amongst other things Les had a job as cashier at the Zoo-Lake restaurant, which I job-shared with him later, and for which Martin stood in for on one-two occasions, something I only recalled recently when chatting to him (Martin) whilst putting this booklet together. Les and I also took on a job with a recording company, whilst at WITS, which entailed recording weddings on reel-to-reel tapes, which were then converted into 33rpm records and sold forming the basis on which we got paid a commission.

Leslie studied Maths and Physics at WITS and shortly after graduating, having received a scholarship went to Minneapolis to do his masters and subsequently his MSc in Theoretical Physics. During his stay in Minneapolis his school-time sweetheart, Carrol (Gafin) from Krugersdorp (then later Emmarentia), went out to join him and they got married. During this time their daughter, Andrea, was born. Les and family then moved to New York (Long Island) where he obtained an MA in Mathematics and a PhD in Theoretical Physics from the University of Stony Brook. Les then worked at Brookhaven Labs and Carrol obtained her PhD in Comparative Literature. In order to help make ends meet and supplement his meagre salary, Les and Carrol ‘kept house’ and baby-sat for a Professor of Psychology living in the area.

I arrived in New York City in 1973, with my wife, and Les was at JFK to meet and greet us, becoming instrumental in helping us settle into the USA and that exciting City. We spent quite a lot of time together, but it became increasingly difficult to have a conversation with Les as he slowly tended to be more and more reclusive exhibiting all the characteristics of an absent-minded professor.

He once tried to explain to me how he struggled to keep his mind and thoughts on ‘basic material and every-day-life-matters’ – and realising that I could not really grasp what that meant and did ‘not understand’ we slowly drifted apart – particularly after I moved away from NY in 1976.

Whilst we were both in NY, chess continued to play a role in our relationship and on one occasion we travelled into NYC (New York City) to meet his uncle, Edward Lasker, (son of Emanuel) also a Grand-Master. We both played a game against Edward (he took off both his rooks before starting against me and still won!) and it was during this visit that I was introduced to the Chinese game of GO, which at that time was getting more of Lasker’s attention than chess. I kept in touch with Les over the next years and when we were living in Toronto in the 80’s he and his family came up to meet us (Basil was there too), which was

the last time we all met. Money had continued to be a challenge for Les and his family and he had become a professional Poker player, using his incredible maths ability to track cards and calculate probabilities, earning some (occasionally significant) money that way.

Les died of a heart-attack, in 1993, at the age of 49; Carol was devastated but we all knew that Les had found peace.

* A few years ago when chairing a remembrance evening with Holocaust survivors, one of the panellist was Anita Lasker-Wallfisch, an Auschwitz survivor and cousin of Les' father.

** See photo taken during this adventure

Brian

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I most interested to read the fine tributes Brian and Basil wrote which brought me right up to speed on his journey post '62.

Leslie and I were neighbours in Glenhazel and good chums in our early primary school days at Fairmount. I recall climbing over our back garden fence to run across the veld and up to his house to play. Likewise he came down to play at our house.

I remember his mum and dad well. Mrs Lasker would laugh heartily at my efforts to pronounce the odd German word she was trying to teach me. I also met brother Herbie at one time.

We gradually drifted apart as I got more involved in my sea scouting activities and at Northview we were streamed separately for obvious intellectual reasons. I was always fond of Leslie and am happy that in the main Class '62 photo he and I can be seen standing together.

The difficulties he endured and his early passing after such a distinguished studying career is very saddening.

Shayne

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