

**In Memoriam:
Leonard Laser, 1913-2007**

By Lincoln Shlensky

I realized yesterday, when we were all together, that my nephews and niece, Jared and Eli Lux, and Solomon and Celia Goldfarb, had only been able to interact with Grandpa Lenny since his capacities became seriously diminished about five or so years ago. “Papa,” as they called him, had begun to hum incessantly, and he had lost much of his short-term memory. He didn’t lose his sense of humor, however, which remained as ribald and off-color as ever. *More* than ever, in fact, for in these final years Lenny lost much of his adult sense of restraint; he became childlike, and so, as my sister Sheba says, he was able to relate better to the children, to play with them and entertain them with games and, when they learned to read, with the oddly telegraphic notes he wrote in response to our written questions. We wrote notes to him because in his later years, as he became increasingly hard of hearing, writing to him was often easier than shouting our questions or comments. Surprisingly, Grandpa Lenny continued to be able to write notes in reply to us, up until the very final months, although the range of his responses was ever more narrow and—humorously, often perversely—eccentric.

All of this is very strange for me to contemplate, because my grandfather was, in so many respects throughout his adult life, an exemplary man: a *mensch* among *menschen*. He was not high-born, and like many other children of Jewish immigrants in his generation, he worked untiringly to create a good life for himself and his family. During the Second World War, he worked full-time in a munitions factory, while attending night school to finish his college degree. He had worked in the feather factory of their hard-driving father, William (Gabriel) Laser, until Lenny made the decision, after the War, that it was time for him and his older brother, Harold, to strike out on their own in real estate. They succeeded in the business by dint of hard bargaining, smart bets, endless hours of work, a refusal to leverage their assets, and, above all, the powerful ambition to make life better and easier for their children than it had been for them. Lenny and Harold slowly built a small real estate empire for themselves. I do not know very much about the creation of that empire, what it demanded of them, or what they demanded of others. Lenny never spoke much about his business with me, and by the

time I was old enough to ask questions, he was already winding the business down. I do know that he was unfailingly generous with me and his many, many family members and friends, distant and close.

Lenny also gave in other ways. He was a tremendous philanthropist and activist in Jewish causes. As far as I know, Technion University hasn't been contacted about Lenny's death, but had they kept track of him and his fate, I imagine they would have wanted to mark his passing. For this science university in Haifa was, by far, the biggest institutional beneficiary of my grandfather's largesse. Lenny donated a student dormitory and an aerospace lab to Technion because he felt that its vitality was the surest guarantee of the safety and security of the State of Israel, a cause for which he was the most dedicated of advocates. My grandfather was of a generation of Jews for whom Zionism was the highest moral cause because it represented the earthly redemption of all Jewry after the genocide and cultural destruction of the *Shoah*. And yet, like many diaspora Jews of his generation, he felt no compulsion to become an Israeli himself, and in some ways I think he always felt keenly the paradox of this form of Zionism. Because he became a notable *macher* in the United Jewish Appeal and the Joint Distribution Committee and many other Jewish organizations, Lenny had occasion to meet some of Israel's founding fathers and mothers. Among these was Ben Gurion, of whom I have a picture seated with my grandfather. He told me that Ben Gurion once asked him, "Lenny, if you're such an ardent Zionist, why don't you come live in Israel?" My grandfather then admitted to me that he knew Ben Gurion was more clever than he and would see through any false excuses, so he replied, "I don't make *Aliyah* because I love comfort." Ben Gurion let the matter drop.

I think that my grandfather's explanation was, however, a false excuse—or perhaps at once a true and false alibi. Lenny *did* like making money, and he *did* like the life he had built for himself and his family in the United States, but his real reason for not immigrating was probably more complex: he was an American, a hybrid and heterogeneous amalgam of immigrant Jewish *cheder* and *chutzpah* combined with Protestant restraint and Puritan work-ethic; a medley of Midwestern earthiness leavened with the Great American Dream of autonomy, self-reliance, and individuality; and a composite of religious identity as a Jew melded with cultural universality. None of this would have made sense in Israel, which was founded on a very different set of principles and commitments. Lenny knew this, but in his self-effacing way, he didn't want to get into an argument with

Ben Gurion, the Israeli prime minister and crusading Zionist ideologue. Lenny was an American, and that really was at the heart of it, and it was at the heart of much what he did during his life, from his great philanthropic spirit, to his business acumen, to his loving devotion to the children, grandchildren, and great-grandchildren whose many different life paths were always a source of tremendous pride for him.

When my aunt Doris Lewy, my cousins Reuben and Gary, and Evely, Sheba and I, along with his devoted caregivers, were at my grandfather's bedside on Friday afternoon (Aviva and Andrew Goldfarb had not yet arrived), I watched him with sadness, laboring for each breath. It was strange to see him there in that liminal state, eyes closed yet somehow still sentient, shrugging when touched in ways he didn't like, and smiling, or so it seemed, when we spoke gently into his ear. In an uncanny way, this culminating stage of life reminds me now of the linking and fusing aspect of my grandfather's relation to his identity. Unlike those of my generation, who often feel discomfited or unsettled in trying to occupy the hyphen between our Jewish and American identities, Grandpa Lenny, like my beloved Grandma Lois, whose passing preceded his, never seemed to be greatly bothered by the possible disjunctions of his identity. His bawdy and unrestrained relation to the world in these final years does not seem to have signaled any discomfort with himself, but rather the opposite: he remained *comfortable*, just as he had told Ben Gurion, with the person he was, the personality he had created, and he didn't feel much need to dissemble. When I think of the restricted way his great grandchildren knew him, I believe, all the same, that there is some justice in the way they experienced him as somehow available to them. He was able to cross the threshold between adult and child's world with seemingly the same ease that he crossed so many other divides. That was Lenny Laser's unique authenticity.

I shall miss him.

Chicago, September 30, 2007