

A biography of Harry Lustig

by Virginia Trimble

Harry Lustig was treasurer of the American Physical Society from 1985 to 1996 and in 1993-94 simultaneously its Acting Executive Secretary. He was also an early member and stalwart supporter of the Forum (originally Division) on History of Physics. He deserves much of the credit for putting APS on a sound financial footing during his term as treasurer, and established a generous policy that the lowest-paid employee should earn at least 1/7th as much as the highest paid (himself). He played a major role in establishing the endowments for both the Apker and the Pais Prizes of the APS.

Lustig was born on the 23rd of September, 1925 to Viennese parents, and grandparents who had come from Prague. He was called to the Torah at 13, and the family celebrated that event at the only Viennese cafe still open to Jews. Parents and children departed Austria **soon** thereafter (via Italy) and never saw the Faltichek or Lustig grandparents again (1). Harry had been close to his grandparents, partly because the Viennese primary school day then permitted him to have lunch with them frequently. Within the physics community, Gerald Holton, Walter Kohn, and the late Edwin E. Salpeter had similar backgrounds. Indeed Harry and Ed appear to have started secondary education at the same and only Gymnasium open to Jews within a year of each other, but were never acquainted.

Upon the family's arrival in New York, Harry was the first to master English (though his sister, four years younger, eventually spoke with no accent). He thus became the family shopper, learning how to bargain for Grade C eggs and the like. For a couple of summers, he worked as a waiter and tumbler in the Catskills, learning that you could add a bit of orange pulp to bottled juice and persuade folks that it was fresh-squeezed. At 18, Lustig was drafted into the US Army and took part in the invasion of continental Europe, acting as the translator for a small group as they passed through France and into Germany. The US Army is perhaps less wise today about such matters than it was in 1945.

Post-war, Lustig earned a BS in 1948 from the City College of New York, to which his attachment and loyalty rarely wavered. They awarded him an Alumni Medal in 1985 and an honorary degree in about 2009. Lustig went on to an MS (1949) and PhD (1953) from the University of Illinois, presenting a thesis in nuclear physics completed under the guidance of John M. Blatt, who immediately departed for the most distant place he could find, Sydney, Australia. We are not sure whether this was causal. Incidentally, Blatt was also born in Vienna, in 1921, only 4 years before Lustig, but went promptly from a 1942 BA at Cincinnati to a 1945 PhD at Cornell, after which the assistant/associate professorship at Illinois was already his fifth position.

Harry and Judy (who had a smile that a toothpaste salesman would have died for) married in 1953 and returned to New York and CCNY, where he progressed through a ladder of titles until his official retirement in 1993. He was Vice President for Academic Affairs and Provost for the 1982-85 period and had reasonably expected to succeed to the presidency, just when CCNY decided that, given their student demographics, the next president should be black. Lustig took on the APS treasurer position at this time.

Judy and Harry took some real summer vacations, including one in the American southwest, his love for which led to eventual relocation in New Mexico after retirement. He said that doing this was probably a sign that he was not meant to be a traditional 24/7 physicist, as is also suggested by his spotty, early publication record (2). There is an APS meeting abstract and a 1955 paper with Blatt derived from his thesis work (Phase-shift analysis of single-channel reactions, in case anybody should ever ask you) and a pair of 1960 papers on resonant reactions and such, soon after which he was writing pedagogical papers on the Mossbauer effect and relativity (gravitational and inertial mass). On-line publication lists are somewhat polluted by physicist H.J. Lustig. Our Harry never had a middle name and said that Harry was not short for anything, having been a fairly common given name then and there (confirmed by **H.L.** Mencken in *The American Language*, who also notes that the name was essentially monopolized by Jews). His mother called him Harrerl, which only the Viennese-born should attempt to pronounce.

The Lustigs debated the issue of children at some length, because Judy had already lost her mother and several other female relatives to breast and ovarian cancer. Eventually there were three, before Judy herself died (between the 1972 and 1976 editions of *American Men and Women of Science*), indeed of cancer. The youngest, Valerie Jean, died at age two, and the elder son, Nicholas Daniel survived his mother, but succumbed to cancer soon after his 19th birthday. The second son, Lawrence J. survived both his parents and had two daughters (Nicola and Eleanore, at the time of his father's death. Lustig married Rosalind Wells, a widow, in 1980, and she also survived him, having been the one to dance with son Larry at his bar mitzvah, though she was not fond of Jewish ceremony. Harry described himself as "assimilated," which has to be regarded as a technical term!

Lustig, early on, listed his areas of interest in *AM&WofS* as nuclear physics, Mossbauer effect, solar energy, science education, economics of science publishing, and history of physics. Solar energy still came first in 2010. His expertise in science education was the product of varied experience, not just at CCNY but also as a consultant at the New York Department of Higher Education, about half a dozen universities, and in Paris, seconded, (meaning that he was still employed by the home institution but on loan) to UNESCO (1970-1972, consultant 1972-75), where he learned something about Science Education in Sub-Saharan Africa and China. As ever, he brought back unexpected bits of wisdom, like the use of Red River Valley for after-dinner singing at gatherings in China. During the UNESCO period, he was deeply involved with a European woman named Eugenia Wolfowitz, and some little glitch in their intention to marry led to permanent estrangement.

Lustig's knowledge of the economics of science publishing was the product of his years as APS treasurer, especially one exceedingly unhappy period, when *Physics Today* and everybody and everything around it had been sued for making public some numbers concerning the subscription costs per paper, page, and citation for APS journals vs. commercial ones (3). Former editor Harry Barschall bore the burden of this until his death, when most of the weight descended upon Lustig's shoulders. Eventually the good guys won, but the extended drama darkened many days and delayed the settlement of Barschall's estate, to the distress of his family.

Lustig maintained a remarkably open mind to the end. He faced his first sushi/sashimi at age 77, and proclaimed it at least edible. Unlike some 70% of the Austrian Jewish children and adolescents who came to the United States (4), he remained fluent in both spoken and written German and used them as needed. Near the end of his life, he led a tour of surviving family members that started where his grandparents had lived in Prague and continued to Vienna and out of Austria through Italy, retracing the family history.

He loved much of music, particularly Schubert (played at the funerals of both his parents, his first wife, and two children) but also both Johann and Richard Strauss and much else. He had quite a decent voice, with a sort of Jan-Perce-ish, chazzanish timbre, but claimed to have forgotten what his torah portion had been (and even his Hebrew name). He was the only holocaust survivor I ever met who knew the words of the Horst Wessel song and was prepared to sing it. He claimed his fingers were too wide for piano.

In addition to Lustig's primary professional associations with CCNY and APS, he was a member, generally an active one, of at least AAAS, the NY Academy of Science (vice president 1984), AAPT, the American Association of University Professors, and Sigma Xi. He spent a Fulbright term (1964-65) as lecturer in Dublin.

Lustig's post-retirement research dealt with the interplay of science and the theatre, particularly the play Copenhagen, but more extensively with the issues of why Germany did not achieve an atomic bomb (incomplete at his death) and on if, and when, the UK and US realized that German work on nuclear weapons had largely been abandoned. His preliminary answer was yes, 1942, and the secret name was Paul Rosbaud. Skilled web-crawlers can find a 30 minute talk he gave on this last subject after he had already let his beard grow gray (the hair really never did).

In his last decade or so, Harry lost the 40 lb gradually gained in the years at APS and was rather proud of it. He continued, however, to be an expert and enthusiastic cook with firm views: tomatoes and strawberries must never be refrigerated, and asparagus requires sauce ("what is onion salt?").

Harry and Rosalind spent some of their summers at her home on Long Island, making the New Mexico house available to visiting singers of the Santa Fe Opera. Harry absolutely adored Natalie Dessay. He fell to metastacized prostate cancer on 17 March 2011, more than a decade after the initial diagnosis, and following a series of hard-bought remissions.

NOTES 1

1 H. Lustig 2004 "Glücklich ist, wer nicht vergisst" in F. Stadler et al. Eds. Oesterreichs Umgang mit dem Nationalsozialismus, Springer-Verlag-Wien, pp 51-54, the proceedings of a June, 2003 conference has additional information about childhood etc.

2 Publications of Lustig: The technical ones appeared in Phys. Rev. with Blatt (PR 91, 453; PR 100, 777)

and in Nuclear Physics (17, 317 and earlier in that volume). If you are having only one, "To advance and diffuse the knowledge of Physics" 2000 American J. Physics 68, 595 (his history of APS) is the one to read, though the multiauthored, 1996 Physics Today "Once More into the Gordon and Breach" reveals the lion's claw (a phrase he once used about something I wrote).

3 A conflict of interest statement: I was editor-in-chief of a publication owned and operated by the Enemy Company through the 1990s, and still think it had a place to fill in astrophysics publishing.

4 G. Holton & G. Sonnet, "What happened to the Austrian Refugee Children in America? A Report from Research Project 'Second Wave'" p. 171-192 in Stadler et al., note 1.