

1: LION HEART

ALLOW ME TO INTRODUCE to you my father Lonek (or Lonia) Lew: *a survivor!* His particular brand of intelligence was based on a positive mental approach, an ability to continue to extract mental pleasure from life despite its physical hindrances. This enabled him to continuously re-adapt to the relentless process of corporal decline, which we all know and suffer as ageing. His later years demonstrated how a healthy mind can overcome the sufferings of physical debility, and actively prolong the existence of a diseased organism. The converse is equally true. A diseased mind, particularly one allowed to fester, can significantly shorten the existence of an otherwise healthy body.

The purpose of this book is to share his remarkable approach with you, and to hope your life might be enriched by it.



My father's unbridled enthusiasm for life, which I sometimes found optimistically unrealistic, interestingly had no religious basis to it. He did not believe in God. He never sought solace in religion.

I remember a particular conversation with him shortly after his ninetieth birthday. I mentioned that many 90-year-old Jewish patients of mine had started re-attending Sabbath services in the synagogue after many years of abstinence; yet Lonek was showing no signs of doing the same.

He smiled at me. ‘That’s an easy one to answer, Harry. That’s because there’s no God, no Heaven, and no Hell. Don’t ask how I know it. I can’t provide you with a logical answer. I just know it. Despite this, however, I feel extremely Jewish. I guess that’s because my father, my mother and my siblings were Jewish, and I was brought up in a Jewish milieu. I like a lot of the Jewish festivals. *Pesach* (Passover) has always been my favourite, and I also like to go to synagogue for *Rosh Hashanah* (New Year) and *Yom Kippur* (Day of Atonement). I suppose that is how I assert my position as a member of a tribe. People need to belong to a tribe. We are tribal animals. But I believe I have learnt over many years that there is really only one truth in life. The truth is that no matter whether you live twenty years or a hundred years, you live a short time and you’re dead a long time. So, Harry, my advice to you is never to be in a hurry. Hang around and hang in there for as long as you can. You’re never going to get a second chance.’

Lonek’s religious attitudes were also revealed about three years later, when he was admitted to Masada Hospital with severe pulmonary oedema – very breathless, overtly cyanotic! He was placed in a two-bed ward, together with a deeply religious young Jewish man who was recovering from a spider bite. The young man, sensing Lonek was critically ill, came over to his bedside and asked permission to pray for him.

My father became quite angry and agitated. ‘Can’t you see how sick I am?’ he exclaimed. ‘The doctors and nurses need to be able to approach me. I don’t need anyone else getting in their way. Anyway, I’m an atheist! I don’t believe in any of that stuff.’

So, imagine my surprise twenty-four hours later when visiting my father (who now looked remarkably well) to find him sitting at a table with the same young man, the two of them, seemingly,

the best of friends. The young man greeted me with enthusiasm. ‘Your father is a most amazing man,’ he said. ‘All morning we were speaking Hebrew and Yiddish, and his Hebrew and Yiddish are far superior to mine. All afternoon we have been discussing Torah and Talmud, and his knowledge of those subjects is far superior to mine. I can’t understand how such a learned man is a non-believer.’

This was simply more than Lonek could take. The old fox could not contain himself; his eyes twinkled and his lips burst into a broad grin. ‘And what I can’t explain to him is that it’s because I know so much that I’m a non-believer!’ The young man did not take Lonek’s remarks badly. He even paid him a home visit after they were both discharged from hospital.

My father’s philosophy of life was written on a small piece of parchment. Everyone who visited him could read it. It sat under protective glass atop a small Chippendale-replica writing table against the right wall of his entrance hall – three paces through his front door.

A NEW DAY

*This is the beginning of a new day.
I have been given this day to use as I will.
I can waste it or use it for good.
What I do today is important because
I am exchanging a day of my life for it.
When tomorrow comes,
This day will be gone forever,
Leaving in its place whatever I have traded for it.
I pledge to myself that it shall be
Gain, not loss; good not evil;
Success, not failure; in order that I*

Shall not regret the price I paid for this day.

Anonymous

In the vein of *each new day* I clearly remember how I spent the evening of 3 September 1990. I popped into my parents' home to see how they were. My father greeted me in his usual fashion, inviting me to sit down and share a cup of tea with him. He always wanted to share something with me. 'Did you see that most important headline on the front page of *The Age* this morning?' he asked me. 'The sort of headline you see perhaps once a decade – a headline, which, if you're clever enough to take it on board – offers you a lesson, forever! It teaches you how to plan each day for the rest of your life.'

'I glanced at the paper this morning,' I told him, 'but have no recollection of such a shattering headline.'

He smiled back at me as he often did, a very warm and friendly smile. (I once did a pencil portrait of him in an attempt to capture it.) 'It was right there in large letters at the top of the front page, Harry! I find it hard to believe that you didn't notice it. It said:

'Robert Holmes à Court dies at the age of 53'

(For those of you who do not remember; Robert Holmes à Court was Australia's first entrepreneurial businessman to achieve billionaire status.) 'I saw the headline,' I told him, 'but failed to understand the importance you place on it.'

He chuckled. 'It's the message that's important, my boy, it's the message. Always remember, it's no good to be the richest man in the cemetery!'



In 1993, the year after my mother died, my 86-year-old father embarked on a solo trip around the world. In particular, he wished to visit Bialystok, the city of his birth, to attend ceremonies

there commemorating the fiftieth anniversary of the destruction of the Bialystoker Ghetto. While there, he would arrange for a tombstone to be erected in memory of his younger brother, Naum (known as Monia), who lay buried in an unmarked grave in the Jewish cemetery at Bielsk Podlaski, a neighbouring town. He also arranged to visit cousins in Moscow en route. His itinerary therefore had him flying Qantas from Melbourne to Bangkok; Aeroflot from Bangkok to Moscow; and Lot Airlines from Moscow to Warsaw. He would then travel from Warsaw to Bialystok by train.

‘Why are you flying Aeroflot?’ I admonished him. ‘Don’t you know they crash all the time? Couldn’t you have booked Air Thai or some other safer airline?’ Years later, I realise, I must have sounded a bit paranoid, a touch like Woody Allen!

My father responded like a true Woody Allen fan. He laughed aloud at my comments. ‘I chose Aeroflot because it was my cheapest option. When you’re my age, Harry, there is only one certainty left in life. Soon you will be dead! Whether that occurs in bed in Melbourne, or thirty thousand feet up in Aeroflot, is really of little significance. And believe me, my son, even if my plane crashes, it won’t be my problem! It may well be your problem, but it certainly won’t be mine.’ He then went on to explain to me that I should be chuffed that he bought the cheapest ticket. ‘When you get to my age you no longer get to spend your own money, you spend your kids’ *yerushe* [Yiddish for inheritance] instead.’



My father was the recipient of a most interesting and regal name. It was well known from London to Jerusalem during the last decade of the twelfth century. To fully understand how it came

about, a brief discussion of Bialystoker history is required.

Bialystok is the name which a north-eastern Polish province shares with its capital city. Bialystok was under Czarist Russian jurisdiction from 1815 to 1914; under German occupation 1914–18; under Polish jurisdiction 1918–39 (apart from a brief three-week period after the Russians temporarily recaptured it on 29 July 1920); under alternating German and Russian occupation 1939–45; and back under Polish jurisdiction after 1945.

My father Lonek, or Lonia, Lew, given his birth date of Sunday, 11 August 1907, was therefore born in the Czarist Russian city of Bialystok, and not the Polish city of Bialystok. As was the custom with all Jewish boys, he was circumcised eight days later and given his Hebrew name of Arieh ben Zvi. *Arieh* (Lion) was his given name; *ben* means the son of; and *Zvi* (Deer) was his father's given name. This is the way Jews have traditionally named their children.

But Jews were required, under earlier Russian laws, to also adopt surnames. My father's adopted surname was the Hebrew word *Lev*. If you translate *Arieh Lev* from Hebrew into English, it becomes 'Lion Heart'. This confirms that my father was aptly named.

The Russians translated the Hebrew given name *Arieh* into *Lev*, (Russian for Lion), but omitted to translate the Hebrew surname *Lev*. My father's Russian name therefore became *Lev Lev*, or 'Lion Lion'. The Poles wrote *Lev Lev* as *Lew Lew*, because the Polish alphabet does not contain the letter 'V'. Instead 'W', which it does contain, is pronounced as a 'V'. *Lew Lew* again translates from Polish into English as 'Lion Lion.' But in Polish the given name (as distinct from the surname) is usually written Leo or Leon – or, as his friends called him, Lonek or Lonia. So in Australia, as

a result of these various translations and transformations, my father's official name became Leo or Leon Lew; and not his real name, Lion Heart.



A person is, to a large extent, the product of the people he meets and the experiences he accumulates throughout his lifetime. No biography can be truly representative without considering these factors and taking them into account. To substantiate this, I will tell my father's story through other stories – the stories of friends and acquaintances. In some of these, Lonek appears as only a minor or subsidiary character but, after all, that is what life is all about. So when you read this book, it will not read as a single biography, but rather as a route through history from the 1860s onwards.

And, as I reflect and reminisce about these stories of my father's friends and acquaintances, I realise that what they all have in common with Lonek is that they were all Lion Hearts. *Lion Hearts* therefore appeals as a suitable title for the book.

As I dwell more and more on the stories of my Lion Hearts I realise – for the very first time, at more than sixty years of age – that my life's journey has not been ordinary and mundane, as I always thought it was, but rather a highly privileged passage through the lives of many extraordinary people.

I hope you enjoy reading this book – despite much of its sadness – as much as I have enjoyed the privilege of writing it. A journey that passes through the history of the Holocaust is never easy to negotiate. I did not write my father an obituary when he died. It was simply too painful for me to do so, and I knew it would be hopelessly inadequate. This book is an attempt to rectify that omission.