

Guest Editorial

Remembering Len Jossem

by Tony French

It is hard to accept that Len Jossem is no longer with us. For me it is especially painful because we had known each other for so long. I last met him on the evening of Saturday, July 25, 2009, just before the beginning of the 2009 AAPT Summer Meeting in Ann Arbor, MI. It was only the briefest of encounters. I had almost finished my dinner at the Campus Inn when I saw Len enter the other side of the dining room. He did not see me, but I called out a greeting to him and we exchanged a few words; he looked quite unwell, but I did not make much of it, and since he had someone with him I did not go to his table to talk further. His last words to me were “See you around,” and I expected that to happen the next morning because I knew that Len made a ritual of sitting in at the Executive Board meetings. That was something I myself almost never did, but planned to do this year in order to catch up with AAPT affairs after missing several national meetings. The alarm bells went off when Len failed to appear. We learned the next day that Len had gone home, and then, only a few days later, that he had passed away. It was an enormous loss to AAPT, but at least Len himself was spared a transition into a possibly lengthy period of illness and declining powers.

To jump to the other end of our relationship, it was in 1945 that Len and I first met. It was at Los Alamos, shortly before the end of World War II. I was a very junior member of the British atomic bomb project. A number of us were moved to North America in 1943-44 as members of a British mission to Los Alamos. Len was attached to the very small research group on thermonuclear reactions in which I worked; I think he came from a different group within the Manhattan Project whose work had been completed. Len’s job was to help develop a better ion source for our low-energy nuclear accelerator. He was a meticulous worker in the lab. I particularly remember that he had a personal set of dentist’s drills, etc., that he used to polish up components of the apparatus. But not long after that he left Los Alamos, as many did, once the war was over, to pursue his graduate studies. People may have noticed, in the admirable memoir produced so promptly at AAPT headquarters, that Len was a very precocious student. A master’s degree from Cornell at age 20 was a mark of very special talent. Of course Len would never have paraded such knowledge about his career; he was far too modest. For him the important thing was to share his interests.

He took a particular pleasure in intriguing his colleagues by attending AAPT meetings with a handful of gadgets or physics toys that he had found in a local store. Solving mathematical sorts of problems was not his style; he loved real phenomena that challenged our intuitions.

It is 35 years since Len served as AAPT President. I myself was not much involved in AAPT affairs until well after that time, but one can recognize it as a kind of golden age for the Association. Among Len’s precursors as president were Dick Crane, Melba Phillips, Arnold Arons, Ron Geballe, and Ken Ford—and after him came Robert Karplus, Al Bartlett and John Layman. (Others might come up with a somewhat different list, but this was a particularly rich period for innovation in physics education.)

As for Len Jossem himself, he was deeply involved in projects to strengthen our profession, serving as the head of a major department with an emphasis on more effective teaching. It was always impressive to me that Len, with his remarkably low-key manner, exerted so much influence for change. It was because he thought deeply about situations, and when he expressed an opinion, people listened. And the central factor was his enormous dedication to the cause of physics education in general and to AAPT in particular. Most of us are pulled this way and that. But Len, the committed bachelor, had a life that was dominated by his devotion to education.

Although Len and I shared this basic commitment, we did not collaborate much. Len was very interested in entering fresh fields of education, especially in Eastern countries. I was much more preoccupied with the actual subject matter of physics. But we counted on getting together at AAPT meetings. Len was a vastly well-read man, and a conversation with him was always an education. We shall miss him terribly.



Len Jossem