Mathematician Lee Lorch fought tirelessly against racism


Civil rights activist Lee Lorch, who was barred from teaching mathematics in the U.S. for his battles against racism, has died at age 98.

Colin McConnell / Toronto Star file photo

Lee Lorch, who died in February at the age of 98, was a lifelong champion of civil rights.

By: Joel Eastwood Staff Reporter, Tue Mar 11 2014

Though he was a mathematician by profession, Lee Lorch made an enduring contribution to the civil rights cause with his tireless campaigns against racial discrimination which repeatedly cost him his job and forced him to make Toronto his home.

The lifelong activist, who was effectively barred from teaching mathematics in the United States for his battles against racism and segregation in the 1950s, died of natural causes in a Toronto hospital on Feb. 28. He was 98.

Born in New York City, Lorch’s sense of social justice was fostered by the anti-Semitism he experienced in the run-up to the Second World War.

“It wasn’t something that was just outside of his own personal experience, it was something that he experienced and could therefore see how horrible it was,” said Alice Lorch Bartels, his daughter.

Lorch studied mathematics at Cornell University at a time when American universities placed rigid quotas on the number of Jewish students admitted.

As a military cartographer in the South Pacific in the Second World War, Lorch was keenly aware of the army’s treatment of black soldiers.

“On the troop transport overseas, it was always the black company on board that had to clean the ship and do the dirty work, and I felt very uncomfortable with that,” Lorch told the Star in 2007.
When the war ended, Lorch's lifelong fight against injustice began.

His first battle was against the “No Negros” policy of Stuyvesant Town, the housing project in Manhattan where he moved after the war with his wife, Grace Lorch.

Lorch organized petitions pressuring the housing complex to allow black tenants. His campaign cost him his job at New York City College.

Rather than give up his New York apartment when he moved to take a new job at Penn State University, he invited a black family to live there as his permanent guests.

Lorch’s name was still on the lease, and he was still paying the rent, but the landlord moved to evict the family anyway. The community rallied, the landlord backed down, and the incident was eventually the catalyst for state legislation banning discriminatory housing policies.

But the act of defiance cost Lorch his post at Penn State, so he moved his wife and daughter to Nashville, Tenn., to work at one of America's few black universities.

In 1954, in the wake of the U.S. Supreme Court ruling declaring public school segregation unconstitutional, the Lorches took on the cause of racial segregation in the education system by fighting to send their 10-year-old daughter to a nearby black public school.

For his crusades, Lorch was hauled before the House Committee on Un-American Activities, which was ostensibly investigating communist activity.

Citing his First Amendment right to his own opinions, Lorch refused to answer most of the committee’s questions and was indicted for contempt of Congress.

“He was threatened with going to jail,” his daughter recalled.

While the indictment was eventually thrown out, Lorch found himself unemployed once more, and moved to teach in Little Rock, Ark.

In the fall of 1957, as southern school boards were ordered to allow black students to enroll, Lorch’s wife, Grace, stepped into the centre of a vivid scene in U.S. racial history.

On the opening day of the newly desegregated Little Rock Central High School, when a hate-spewing mob surrounded one of the 15-year-old black students, Grace took the girl by the hand and led her to safety, even as the crowd jeered and blocked her path.

For her compassion, Grace, like her husband, was called before a U.S. senate subcommittee. The family was harassed and threatened, a stick of dynamite left in their garage.

Effectively blacklisted from teaching anywhere in the United States, Lorch and his family moved to Canada in 1959, where he was hired by the University of Alberta and then York University in 1968.

As a Canadian citizen, Lorch’s sense of social justice never wavered.

Martin Muldoon, one of Lorch’s graduate students in Edmonton in 1961 and later a colleague at York, remembers him marching against nuclear weapons in the 1960s.

“People thought of him loosely as a gadfly, or as a maverick. But he actually believed in working through the system,” Muldoon said.
For Lorch, this involved writing letters to friends, newspapers, and the countless organizations of which he was a member. Among his many causes, Lorch pushed for more blacks to become mathematicians, and mentored minority students,Muldoon said.

Though he officially retired in 1985, Lorch remained a diligent mathematician, publishing his final academic article in 2008.

“He kind of embodied the idea of no mandatory retirement,” said Dawn Bazely, a biology professor at York, who recalled Lorch urging faculty members to support activist causes well into his 90s.

His lifetime of lobbying earned Lorch awards from a number of mathematical associations, as well as an honorary doctorate of letters from the first university to fire him.

For Lorch, the honours were unnecessary.

As he told the Star in 1990: “I never felt the need for vindication.”

Lorch’s wife died in 1974. In addition to his daughter, he leaves two granddaughters and a sister, Judith Brooks.

Lee Lorch, Desegregation Activist Who Led Stuyvesant Town Effort, Dies at 98

By DAVID MARGOLICK MARCH 1, 2014

Lee Lorch, 95, a leader of an effort 60 years ago to desegregate Stuyvesant Town, at his home in Toronto. Credit Steve Payne for The New York Times

Lee Lorch, a soft-spoken mathematician whose leadership in the campaign to desegregate Stuyvesant Town, the gargantuan housing development on the Lower East Side of Manhattan, helped make housing discrimination illegal nationwide, died on Friday hospital in Toronto. He was 98.

His daughter, Alice Lorch Bartels, confirmed the death, at a hospital. Mr. Lorch had taught at York University in Toronto, and had lived in Toronto since 1968.
By helping to organize tenants in a newly built housing complex — and then inviting a black family to live in his own vacant apartment — Mr. Lorch played a crucial role in forcing the Metropolitan Life Insurance Company, which owned the development, to abandon its whites-only admissions policy. His campaign anticipated the sit-ins and other civil rights protests to come.

But Mr. Lorch’s lifelong agitation for racial equality, not just in New York but later in Tennessee and Arkansas, led him into a life of professional turmoil and, ultimately, exile.

In the spring of 1946, Mr. Lorch — a graduate of Townsend Harris High School in Manhattan, Cornell University and the University of Cincinnati, where he earned a doctorate in mathematics — returned from wartime service in the Pacific with the Army Air Corps to teach math at City College. Like millions of veterans, he could not find a place to live. After a two-year search, having lived much of the time in a Quonset hut overlooking Jamaica Bay in Brooklyn, he, along with his wife and young daughter, moved into Stuyvesant Town. So did 25,000 other people.

As he later put it, he had all the credentials: “a steady job, college teacher and all that. And not black.”

In 1943, Frederick H. Ecker, the president of Metropolitan Life at the time, told The New York Post: “Negroes and whites don’t mix.” If black residents were allowed in the development, he added, “it would be to the detriment of the city, too, because it would depress all surrounding property.”

A lawsuit against Metropolitan brought in 1947 by three black veterans, and co-sponsored by the American Civil Liberties Union, the American Jewish Congress and the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People, had failed in the state courts, and no local laws prohibited such discrimination; the city had not only supplied the land, and tax breaks, to the insurance company, but let it select tenants as it saw fit.

With 100,000 people vying for the 8,759 apartments on the 72-acre tract, no boycott could possibly work. Any successful protest had to come from inside: Polls showed that two-thirds of those admitted favored integration. Mr. Lorch’s wartime experiences — like seeing black soldiers forced to do the dirty work on his troop transport overseas — had intensified his resolve.

Mr. Lorch became vice chairman of a group of 12 tenants calling themselves the Town and Village Tenants Committee to End Discrimination in Stuyvesant Town.

“When you got into Stuyvesant Town, there was a serious moral dilemma,” he recalled in a 2010 interview with William Kelly of the Stuyvesant Town-Peter Cooper Village Video Project. “In the concentration camps of Nazi Germany, people had seen the end results of racism.”

Some 1,800 tenants eventually joined the group. “Stuyvesant Town is a grand old town; but you can’t get in if your skin is brown,” went one of their chants, Charles V. Bagli of The New York Times wrote in a book about Stuyvesant Town’s history. A group of 3,500 residents petitioned Mayor William O’Dwyer to help eliminate the “No Negroes Allowed” policy, and supported antidiscrimination legislation before the City Council.

But Metropolitan Life held firm. And in early 1949, Mr. Lorch paid the price. Despite the backing of a majority of colleagues in his department, the appointments committee at City College blocked his promotion, effectively forcing him to leave.
Mr. Lorch was “unquestionably a fine scholar and a promising teacher,” an alumni committee later concluded, but some colleagues “regarded him, rightly or wrongly, as an irritant and a potential troublemaker.” Mr. Lorch himself charged that the college “protects bigots and fires those who fight bigotry.”

The New York branch of the N.A.A.C.P. and other groups protested the decision to the Board of Higher Education to no avail. In September 1949, Mr. Lorch found a teaching job at Pennsylvania State University, but his reputation preceded him: Upon arriving at the campus, he was taken directly to the university’s acting president.

“He wanted me to explain this stuff about Stuyvesant Town — that they’d been getting phone calls from wealthy alumni essentially wanting to know why I had been hired and how quickly I could be fired,” he recalled in the 2010 interview.

But Mr. Lorch’s wife and daughter had remained in the Stuyvesant Town apartment, at 651 East 14th St., and he and his wife soon invited a black family, Hardine and Raphael Hendrix and their young son, to live there for the entire academic year.

Quickly, Metropolitan Life refused to accept the Lorches’ $76 rent check, and began devising ways to get them out. At Penn State, Mr. Lorch was denied reappointment. Accommodating the Hendrixes, a college official told him, was “extreme, illegal and immoral, and damaging to the public relations of the college.”

The decision brought protests from Penn State students, Albert Einstein, the American Association of University Professors and the American Mathematical Society, as well as from The Times and The Daily Worker, the paper of the Communist Party U.S.A.

The Worker argued that Mr. Lorch, who was often linked to the Communist Party, was “an all too rare sort of bird among academic circles these days. He actually believes in the U.S. Constitution which guarantees the Negro people equality! And he not only believes in it, but stands up and fights for what he believes. Amazing!”

In June 1950, the United States Supreme Court declined to review the insurance company’s exclusionary policy. Succumbing to political and economic pressure, Metropolitan Life admitted three black families that year.

But it also moved to evict Mr. Lorch and 34 other protesting tenants. They dug in.

“We had decided — and this was the general feeling on the committee — we weren’t going to go quietly, that we would resist, they’d have to throw us out by force,” Mr. Lorch recalled.

Meantime, in September 1950, he accepted a new academic post, becoming one of two white professors at Fisk University, the historically black institution in Nashville, Tenn. His wife, Grace, a longtime activist herself — she had led the Boston School Committee in its effort to stop women from being fired as teachers the moment they married, as she had been — returned to Stuyvesant Town, where the Teamsters union supplied protection for protesting tenants.

In January 1952, as tenants barricaded themselves in their apartment and picketed outside City Hall and Metropolitan Life’s own headquarters, the company compromised: Mr. Lorch and two other organizers would move out, but the Hendrixes got to stay.
Seven years later, only 47 blacks lived in Stuyvesant Town. But the frustration the campaign helped unleash culminated in the Fair Housing Act of 1968, which prohibited discrimination in the sale, rental, or financing of housing.

At Fisk, Mr. Lorch taught three of the first blacks ever to earn doctorates in mathematics. But there, too, his activism, like attempting to enroll his daughter in an all-black school and refusing to answer questions before the House Un-American Activities Committee about his Communist ties, got him in trouble. In 1955, he was again let go. Only tiny Philander Smith College, an all-black institution in Little Rock, Ark., would hire him, and only when it could find no one else.

“Because he believed in the principles of decency and justice, and the equality of men under God, Lee Lorch and his family have been hounded through four states from the North to the South like refugees in displaced camps,” one of the nation’s most important black journalists, Ethel Payne of The Chicago Defender, wrote in May 1956. “And in the process of punishing Lee Lorch for his views, three proud institutions of learning have been made to grovel in the dust and bow the knee to bigotry.”

It was Grace Lorch who made the headlines the following year, for comforting Elizabeth Eckford of the Little Rock Nine after Ms. Eckford’s walk through a group of angry hecklers outside Little Rock Central High School, a moment captured in a famous photograph. Mr. Lorch, who had become an official with the Arkansas chapter of the N.A.A.C.P., was working behind the scenes, accompanying the black students to school, then tutoring them as they awaited admission.

Once more whites abused the Lorches for their activities, evicting them from their apartment, harassing their young daughter, burning a cross on their lawn and placing dynamite in their garage. And black leaders, mindful of Mr. Lorch’s Communist associations, kept their distance.

“Thurgood Marshall has been busy poisoning as many people as he can against us,” Mr. Lorch complained in October 1957, referring to the lawyer leading the N.A.A.C.P.’s desegregation campaign in the courts and, later, a justice of the United States Supreme Court. The group’s field secretary, Clarence Laws, wrote Mr. Lorch: “The best contribution you could make to the cause of full citizenship for Negroes in Arkansas at this time would be to terminate, in writing, your affiliation with the Little Rock Branch, N.A.A.C.P.”

When, at the end of the school year, Philander Smith declined to renew Mr. Lorch’s appointment, it was official: No American college would have him. So in 1959, he moved his family to Canada — first to the University of Alberta and then, in 1968, to York University, from which he retired in 1985.

Lee Lorch was born on Sept. 20, 1915 at his home on 149th Street and Broadway in Manhattan to Adolph Lorch and Florence Mayer Lorch. His wife, the former Grace Lonergan, died in 1974. Mr. Lorch is survived by his daughter, Ms. Bartels; two granddaughters; and a sister, Judith Brooks.

Mr. Lorch was often honored by his fellow mathematicians. In 1990, he received an honorary degree from the City University of New York.

In his 2010 interview with Mr. Kelly, Mr. Lorch insisted that it was his wife and daughter, and not he, who had paid the greatest price for his principles. Asked if he would do anything any differently, he paused. “More and better of the same,” he replied.
Lee Lorch

From Wikipedia, the free encyclopedia

http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Lee_Lorch

Lee Lorch (September 20, 1915 – February 28, 2014) was a mathematician and an early civil rights activist. He taught at several Black colleges encouraging black students to pursue studies in mathematics and supervising several of the first black men and women to earn PhDs in mathematics in the United States before moving to Canada. He ended his career as Professor Emeritus of Mathematics at York University in Toronto, Canada.

Contents

[hide]

- 1 Background
- 2 Stuyvesant Town
- 3 Moving South
- 4 House Un-American Activities Committee
- 5 Little Rock Nine
- 6 Move to Canada
- 7 Academic work and recognition
- 8 Legacy
- 9 See also
- 10 References
- 11 External links

References


5. Jump up to: MAA citation for Yuch-Gin Gung and Dr. Charles Y. Hu Distinguished Service to Mathematics Award.
External links

- "A New Light on a Fight to Integrate Stuyvesant Town", *New York Times*, November 21, 2010 (interview with Lee Lorch)
- A Conversation with Lee Lorch
- Conversations with Lee Lorch, a film by Rachel Deutsch
- "A Life in Sum", profile of Lee Lorch published in *Cornell Alumni*, July 9, 2009
- CBC Metro Morning interview with Lee Lorch, January 9, 2006
- Black History Month featured fonds: Lee and Grace Lorch News from the Clara Thomas Archives & Special Collections, York University
- Lee Lorch at the Mathematics Genealogy Project

-----Original Message-----

From: Douglas Roche [mailto:douglas.roche@gmail.com] On Behalf Of Douglas Roche
Sent: March-02-14 11:26 AM
To: Sergei Plekhanov
Cc: Walter Dorn
Subject: Re: FYI from Canadian Pugwash: Lee Lorch, R.I.P.

To all in the Pugwash Movement:

I wish to express my heartfelt condolences to Lee Lorch's family and friends on his death. How I loved that man. His wisdom, his humour, his humility were all endearing traits. When I was a much younger man, I met Lee and I was blessed that he became a sort of mentor. His passion for social justice was infectious, but I never heard him raise his voice or make an applause-seeking statement. You just knew that Lee was the genuine article, with no posturing, and when he made me laugh I felt better about myself and the world. There would be more common sense in one sentence from Lee than a whole conference of speakers. Thank you, Lee, for caring so deeply about humanity. Rest in peace. Douglas Roche

Hon. Douglas Roche, O.C.
http://douglasroche.ca

On Mar 2, 2014, at 8:37 AM, Sergei Plekhanov <splekhan@yorku.ca> wrote:

From: Discussion of YUFA Issues [mailto:YUFADEMOCRACY@YORKU.CA] On Behalf Of Walter Whiteley
Sent: March-02-14 6:50 AM
To: YUFADEMOCRACY@YORKU.CA
Subject: [YUFADEMOCRACY] Fwd: Lee Lorch: NYT Obituary
Lee Lorch, a long time activist and retired faculty member in Mathematics and Statistics from York University died this week. The biography below describes some of his many contributions to racial equality. What the article below does not mention is that later Fisk University awarded Lee an honorary degree, as a form of apology for their earlier actions.

Lee was equally active around the rights of women, and received an honorary life membership in the Association for Women in Mathematics. Lee once described to a meeting of the Canadian Mathematics Education Study Group (at York) having academically capable final year black women in mathematics come to his office and fill out applications for Graduate School. He then mailed the applications, afraid the women would not actually send them in. When they were accepted - they would then make the choice, with the knowledge they had a choice.

At York, Lee helped lead an effort to eliminate forced retirement (then in place at age 70). Lee was a consistent critic of actions and statements that represented discrimination of any form - and consistently prodded those of us around him to do more, including to have YUFA do more!

Walter Whiteley
Mathematics and Statistics