

Uncle Len In My Memory

By Wenyan Wu

2020, what a year it has been! Not only has the world been rampaged by COVID-19 but I have lost two very important people in my life—my maternal grandfather and my uncle-in-law. This essay is in memory of Uncle Leonard Moss.

My First Meeting with Uncle Len in China

It was in July 1987 when I met Uncle Len for the first time in my hometown Qingdao in China. I was 7 years old. We were living in temporary housing consisting of 7 or 8 flats, waiting for our new apartments to be built on the location where an old Japanese-style stone house used to stand. There were no kitchens or bathrooms inside the flats. Everyone used a small stove to burn coal or wood chips for cooking and heating. The public toilets were nothing more than a trench in the ground. It was a whole different world from where Uncle Len came from—the United States of America.

Then Uncle Len came to visit my Grandma and our extended Wu family in Qingdao. He had just married my dad's second sister, Aunt Shaoping, after a monstrous ordeal against the bureaucrats comparable to the Red Army Long March. They met in Beijing where Uncle Len was a Fulbright Professor at the Foreign Studies University, while Aunt Shaoping was an English Lecturer at a neighboring university. Uncle Len could have stayed in the Friendship Hotel that was the designated accommodation for foreigners. However, he insisted on staying with our family in the temporary housing in order to experience the living conditions of his new extended family in China.

Apart from what I can recall or see from old photos of Uncle Len spending time together with our family on the beaches of Qingdao, the one thing I remember clearly was that he had trouble using the public toilets since he could not squat. To this day, I don't know how he solved that problem.

Uncle Len's Second Homecoming

The second time I met Uncle Len I was already in junior high school. It was in July 1993 when Uncle Len got another Fulbright Scholar teaching position at Beijing Foreign Studies University. He and Aunt Shaoping returned home to Qingdao with their son Eli. My cousin Eli was 4 years old and it was his first time visiting his Grandma and the extended family. This time, our living conditions had improved significantly, as we had already moved into our new apartments, where there were modern kitchens and bathrooms.

We had several family parties with a lot of food, as anyone who understands Chinese culture can imagine. Two memories stood out during this time. The first one was that Uncle Len went to the Miss Qingdao Finale, a big deal at the time, together with the extended family. (My Dad got the tickets for everyone.) I carried Eli up the long steep street lined by the cedar trees in the Big Temple Mountain Park where the Finale was held. With the red lanterns hanging from the cedar trees, it made me feel like almost Chinese New Year. At the show, I was so proud to have something to show off to Uncle Len, who was an American from a rich country in the world where everyone could get anything they desired (at least that was what I thought). But Uncle Len's comments shocked me. He said that the girls looked pretty, but they were too skinny, like skeletons, not sexy. That was probably my first encounter with the clash of the different values that the two cultures held.

The second memory was not one I experienced, but rather one my mother told me. The event was actually related to my cousin Eli. I had a hobby of raising small animals at the time. In the backyard of my parents' ground floor apartment, I built a little rabbit house, raising 3 or 4 rabbits. One day, while I was out, Eli came to my mum. With Aunt Shaoping's help, he asked her if he could play with the rabbits. My mum said, "of course, they are your cousin Wenwen's pets, just go, pet them. You don't need to ask for permissions." Eli, at age 4, replied seriously, "No, I shouldn't do it myself. They belong to Wenwen. Since she is not home and you are her mother, I have to ask your permission to play with them." Such a little gentlemen; like father like son. After my mum told me what had happened, I felt again a cultural shock. I began to realize the huge differences in people's behavior in different cultures.

However, I did not know then that the next time I saw Uncle Len, it would be 25 years later.

My Reunions with Uncle Len in America

In June 2018, I was attending a conference in the US. At that time Uncle Len and Aunt Shaoping had already moved to the West Coast to enjoy the California sun after their retirement. They were living at Rossmoor, a senior community in Walnut Creek. It was an excellent opportunity for me to visit them. So I went to spend the weekend in their home after the conference. Unfortunately, Uncle Len's hearing aids were broken so our communication was difficult.

Then in April 2019, I had the opportunity to visit Stanford University during a business trip. At this time, cousin Eli was in the final year of his PhD in the genetics program of the university. So I went to visit him and his wife Sara afterward. That was the second time I met Eli, and it was 26 year after our first meeting in 1993. The next day, Eli and Sara drove me to

Walnut Creek to visit their parents. This time, Uncle Len had a new pair of hearing aids and he was very happy to see me. We talked about the academic careers both of us had chosen and the books and articles we had published. “All of the people in the family who can publish are in the same room,” Uncle Len remarked. That made us all laugh. We also talked about Eli and Sara’s plans after his graduation, which would happen in one month (what a pity that I would just miss it!)

The following day was a lovely spring day. The sun was up, casting warm lights over the trees, shrubs and flowers in the courtyard. I accompanied Uncle Len during his regular walk. We chatted about English literature, his marriage to Aunt Shaoping, Uncle Jianshe’s divorce, as well as the troubles in the US. Towards the end of our walk, Uncle Len sat down on a bench in the middle of a beautiful garden. I sat next to him. Uncle Len adjusted his baseball cap, blocking the bright sunlight shining into his eyes. Then he started to ask me about the history of Australia, the new home country I had adopted. We discussed the colonial history of Australia, the persecution of Aboriginal people during the early days, the white Australian policy which lasted until 1973 when it was legally ended, and the different waves of immigration. We talked about the similarity between the histories of the two countries and the different approaches the two governments adopted in terms of multiculturalism. I said that Australia was one of the most successful countries in the world in implementing multiculturalism, and one proof was that as a Chinese immigrant and also a woman I felt quite at home in Australia. It was the first time that I had discovered how similar our thoughts were—we both agreed that in order for different people with different ethnic backgrounds to live in harmony, we need to look forward and move forward, rather than engaging in hateful discussions of the past.

Sadly, Uncle Len passed away on May 28, 2020 at the age of 88. He lived a remarkable life. He had had a tough childhood but managed to be the first person in his family to attend college and later earn a PhD. He created one of the most beautiful families anyone could dream of. He was so gentle and kind. Until two weeks before his passing, he was still helping me to polish my academic promotion application. Even though I only met him a few times in my life, he was a very important mentor to me—starting the very spark of change in my heart when I was only a little girl, which has set me up for the path I am on now.

Rest in peace, Uncle Len.

Melbourne, Australia

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