

Remembering a Remarkable Ham: Dr Leslie (Laci) Radnay, W1PL

An extraordinary man was born in May 1912 in Szolnok, a regional center town in Hungary. Early in his youth, he had shown interest in science, learned Morse code with the Boy Scouts and became acquainted with short wave amateur radio. At the tender age of 15, he was listed among the founding members of the newly formed Hungarian Radio Amateur Association (Ser. No. H-053). He did not have a license; but as it was customary in those days, he just got on the air with a homebrewed rig using the self-assigned call of HAF3HI in 1928, and later as HAF3RL, his initials.



Among his vividly told stories was that his single-tube receiver and transmitter sets shared a common valve, requiring it to be unplugged and re-plugged when switching from transmit to receive, thereby often missing the first part of the response.

He wanted to pursue a career in engineering; but at the insistence of his father, he enrolled in law school and received a Doctorate in 1935. It did not curtail his enthusiasm for his hobby, making thousands of QSOs and acquiring many friends all over the world. However, he did not have much time to enjoy his hobby—he was soon called into the service of the Hungarian Army; first as an officer but later on, being of Jewish ancestry, in a forced-labor brigade. When the war broke out in 1941, he was sent to serve under some brutal condition the eastern front, where he was severely wounded – both of his legs were broken. Even then he offered constant encouragement to his fellows, most of whom did not survive the ordeal of the Russian front. Eventually, he managed to escape and went into hiding until the early spring of 1945, when the advancing Russian Army liberated Hungary from German occupation.

His fiancée, Olga, also miraculously survived a year in a concentration camp in Austria; and upon her return to Hungary they were reunited and got married in June 1945.

In the chaotic postwar years in Hungary under Russian occupation there were no ham licenses issued. It was thus customary again to get on the air with a self-assigned call-sign. His call, HA4EA, became widely known around the world.

One day in early 1947, however, his home in Budapest was raided by a horde of Russian soldiers. The apartment was ransacked, confiscating all his radio equipment and every piece of paper (including his log of the 1947 ARRL DX CW Contest). He was incarcerated for 3 months, leaving no clue to Olga and their infant daughter as to what happened to him. He was accused, but never charged with espionage spying for the Americans and sending secret coded messages. At one point, after a brutal day of investigation, he was told that he would be executed. With a great deal of luck, however, he was released to the custody of Hungarians, and was eventually freed. He returned to his wife and child and soon the family made the decision to return to Szolnok.

Once again he became heavily involved with ham radio activities. Commuting three days a week to Budapest, he became the organizing force for the MRRE, the newly formed HA Shortwave Radio Amateur League, serving as its first secretary. He established P.O. Box 185 as its QSL Bureau (still in existence), organized courses in theory and Morse code, and became an “Elmer” to a whole generation of young hams. During this short period of democratic rule in Hungary he was quite active on the air with his first officially licensed call HA4SA.

In 1949, a new totalitarian Communist regime came to power. In a short period of time, the MRRE was disbanded and all licenses were summarily revoked (except for those who were serving in the party establishment). Citing the Cold War and fearing clandestine activities, all transmitting apparatus were confiscated. Laci found himself persecuted for the third time; he and his family (which by this time included a second daughter) were evicted from their home and were given forty-eight hours to leave the city. The children and Laci's father took refuge with Olga's aunt in a small village in western Hungary; and Laci and Olga went to Budapest to find a new home and a job. Eventually, they made their home in a small mountain village north of Budapest; and Laci got a job at the “Red Spark” Radio Transmitter factory, formerly Phillips of Hungary, as a technician. A short time later, he became a section manager for the test department, earning the respect of not just his colleagues, but the Communist bosses as well.

In the mid 1950s, the pressure of Communism began to fade. The new amateur radio society was clearly in need of the older, experienced hams. Everyone knew Laci – it was just a matter of time before he was, grudgingly, rehabilitated and got his license as HA7PD. Following the 1956 revolt in Hungary, which was crushed by the Russians, the Communists regained control of the government; and Laci was once more arrested as a spy for the British. All his papers, records, and equipment were confiscated. He returned to the family the next morning but never discussed what had taken place while he was in captivity. The family settled down to their life, daily planning to escape to Yugoslavia. Finally, on the cold morning of February 2, 1957, with the help of a member of the underground, Laci packed up his family and left his home and father behind and, after four days and nights, found himself in Austria. He arrived in Canada a few months later, penniless, but with untamed

energy and enthusiasm to start life anew. Again, he started to work as a technician, and even got a license as VE2AZQ – no political questions asked.

In 1959, he moved to the States, to Great Neck, Long Island. For the fifth time in his life, he started from scratch, establishing himself in a new environment. As a testament to his incredible talent and diligence, in two years he became the managing director of a high-power radio transmitter factory. Three years later, he moved his family to Stamford, CT. In the United States at that time, no one could receive a ham license who was not a citizen. Thus, Laci was off the air until in 1966 he became a citizen. (psst...he was guest operator at my Long Island QTH a few times). Eventually, his call came through as WA1FHU. When two-letter call signs became available, we were able to get affidavits attesting to his 25 plus years of ham experience and his call was changed to W1PL.

The National Radio Co. offered him a job the same year and he moved his family to Melrose, MA. Sometime later, he accepted a position as senior RF engineer at Raytheon of Bedford, and stayed there until his retirement in 1977. He remained active professionally for many years after that until his wife's medical problems made it necessary for him to stay at home. All the while, he was still totally committed to ham radio.

He was an active and supportive member of the FOC, along with many other organizations: HSC (#13), OTC, OOTC, QCWA, and NMARK--the association of Hungarian émigré amateurs worldwide (of which he was a founding member and president emeritus).

His seemingly inexhaustible energy and his talent for organizing, improving and improvising should be an example to us all. After the death of his wife, Olga, in 1992, he remained in the house that he was able to call home for twenty-six years. A few years ago, his eyesight began to fail, yet he staunchly maintained his independence, proudly refusing reliance on others. And he was always there whenever someone needed a helping hand. His motto, which he would say with a mischievous gleam in his fading eyes, was: "Take your time, and take mine too."

Dear friend, hope you find final peace where the sun always shines brightly and the sunspots are always plentiful.

- Andrew Bodony K2LE

I saw Laci a couple of months ago when I gave him a hand getting his Omni back on the air. A well meaning relative had been "helping", and had done more harm than good. After I managed to get everything working, and Laci insisted on paying me for the service. I declined money, but did accept a few books he had on his shelf. Laci's eyesight had degraded to the point where he could no longer read them. Dean, you probably saw "Modulation Theory" by Black on the shelf during your interview.

I especially enjoyed Laci's story about the one tube he could afford as a teenager in pre-war Hungary. He'd call CQ, stand on a chair, pull the tube out of the transmitter at the top of his equipment rack then reach down and plug it into the receiver to see if he got an answer!

-Joe KM1P

With considerable sadness I hear that Laci Radnay, W1PL, passed away last night at the age of 96. Laci and I go back at least 40 years, for he was the man who hired me at National Radio Company after I graduated from college in 1967. By the time I finally arrived in Melrose, MA, as a junior engineer, Laci had moved on to work at Raytheon. So I never actually directly worked under his tutelage.

However, I did get to know him well as a person, a friend and a contest mentor because we lived nearby and we were both active members of the Quannapowitt Radio Association (QRA) in Wakefield, MA. I remember getting my clock cleaned numerous times by WA1FHU (he was then WA1FHU, while I was WA1IRG) in contests in the late 1960s and early 1970s.

Forgive me if you've heard this story before — I'm invoking my "old codger" privilege. This is a how Laci taught me about contesting "iron pants." My memory is a little foggy about the exact date, but I think it was June 1970 when the QRA was doing a big-time Field Day. I was operating 40 CW in the mid afternoon and I was making a lousy 10 QSOs/hour, a rate a hotshot young operator like myself, ahem, found to be demeaning, even worthless. I got up, threw down the headphones in disdain and said loudly that I was thoroughly bored. Laci sat down in front of the radio and started operating, while I marched off to get some coffee.

Some time later, maybe a half hour or so, I wandered back, rather curious to see how Laci was doing. Lo and behold, he was making 10 QSOs/hour. As I watched him patiently call CQ after CQ, it suddenly dawned on me why WA1FHU kept beating me so thoroughly in contests where we went head-to-head. Laci was sitting there actually making QSOs, while I was bored silly, but making NO QSOs... "Duh," they say nowadays.

Laci taught me the lesson that he who has on his "iron pants," sitting there grinding and grinding away, has a far better chance of winning the contest. Keep on grinding away. That's a valuable life lesson, not only a strategy about how to operate radio contests.

I last saw Laci at the Dayton Airport, about five years ago. There he was, distinctive bushy mustache and a gray sports coat, slacks and tie, smiling broadly and enthusiastically relating in his thick Hungarian accent how he had worked some choice DX recently — on CW, of course. That's what I remember about Laci Radnay, W1PL — his old-world courtliness, seasoned with overflowing enthusiasm for Ham Radio, this hobby we all love so well.

Rest in Peace, old friend. You were one of a kind. We'll miss you.

-Dean, N6BV

Former YCCC member K2VUI posted another moving eulogy to W1PL on the FOC reflector:

Although I knew Laci wasn't doing well, this news hits very hard.? He was indeed and in many ways a remarkable fellow.

I first met Laci (pronounced "Lot-see", emphasis on the first syllable, short for his original Hungarian name of Laszlo, which he later Americanized to Leslie or Les) in 1990 when I was a new member of FOC.? He was then very active, both socially and on the air.? He always made a point of attending the annual luncheons we had in suburban Boston for Maud Slater when she visited each year in October, until his eyesight started failing and he could no longer drive home in the dusk.? He was also present when Per LA3FL invited a number of Boston-area members to visit him on his ship, the Crystal Symphony, when she put into port in Boston (Per was then chief radio operator).? In those pre-9/11 days you could actually board a cruise ship in port without being a passenger.? I also remember seeing Laci at Lords one year, and at Maud's party in West Sussex on the Sunday of that weekend.? He told me that he'd been spending three weeks in Hungary and was now heading home.? Since I knew he had no responsibilities at home and lots of friends in Hungary, I asked him why he was spending only three weeks, to which he replied that that was as much clean clothing as he could carry around with him at one time.? I decided not to ask him about the availability of laundries in Hungary.

His wife Olga died in the early to mid-1990s and Laci was pretty lonely after that, but he was always on the air and that seemed to help.? He always kept busy with a variety of activities, many related to ham radio, including serving for a time as editor of a Hungarian-language amateur radio newsletter.? I recall during a visit to his shack asking him what he did to keep busy and I'll never forget his answer: "Joe" (pronounced "Cho"), he said, "I work 14 hours a day, seven days a week; if you want to be as busy as I am, you have to retire." I don't know how many times I've repeated that to others, because it was so true.

Those of you who met Laci in person will remember his very thick accent when he spoke English.? I recall joking with him that I actually understood him better on CW - which was absolutely perfect, right up until the end - than in person.? He had no accent on CW.

Part of the reason for his accent, of course, was that he learned English so late in life.? He was about 45 when he left Hungary in early 1957, walking through the woods for four nights with Olga and their two little girls and hiding during the daytime, before reaching safety in Austria.? Those of us old enough to remember the Hungarian Revolution (some of us actually don't!) will remember that in late 1956 it was relatively easy to leave Hungary for Austria, with borders which, if not open, were pretty porous for that short period of time.? But when the Russians cracked down, the border slammed shut again and escape from Hungary became difficult.? When I asked Laci why he waited so long to leave, he explained that they lived in a small town outside of Budapest and that communication was cut off, that they didn't know in their little town what was happening in the rest of the country.?

Then he said that he got a communication from his brother in either Canada or the US telling him to expect a message from someone soon and that he should be prepared to go with that person immediately and he and his family would be guided "underground" out of the country, which is what finally happened.

Laci was born around 1912 and educated in Hungary in engineering and law, with University degrees in both disciplines.? He told me that he had served as a lawyer for his town for a while, but I'm not sure when.? He was fluent in German and he credited that fluency with getting him through World War II relatively safely.? The Germans invaded Hungary in April, 1944 and for the next nine months it was deadly to be a Hungarian Jew, which Laci was, but with his ability to translate for the Germans (who not surprisingly couldn't speak a word of Hungarian) he was able to survive when many others did not.? Notwithstanding his educational qualifications and his practical experience and the fact that he had relatives in the US, he was unable to gain entry to the United States after leaving Hungary.? He went first to Canada and after some time there (I don't know how long) he was able to emigrate with his family to the US.? He settled in the Boston area and worked as an engineer for Raytheon for many years.

Laci talked a little about his early radio experiences, starting before the Second World War.? After the war he went back on the air for a while, but was tossed into jail by the Communist authorities around 1948 (or maybe 1952, I'm not sure).? It had something to do with his radio activities as I recall and he was off the air for several years as a result, but then he was able to get back on and was very active once again in the pre-Revolution days.? When he came to the US he was once again forced to QRT, because we had rules at that time that permitted only US citizens to hold amateur radio licenses and it took Laci the prescribed five years to gain citizenship.? With his citizenship papers in hand, he quickly obtained his US license and the rest is history as we know it.? He had one of the best fists I've ever heard and that never changed, even as he got older.

But as he got older things did get more difficult, especially after Olga died.? He had two daughters, one married to a physician in New Haven, CT (about three hours away by car) and another who lived closer by.? They looked after him as best they could (as best he would let them), but he remained in the same house in Melrose where he and Olga had lived for many years and entertained many FOC friends, both local and visitors from abroad.? There were always problems in recent years - a flood in his basement shack which wreaked havoc with his equipment and QSL files, difficulties with his antennas which some of our local members were sometimes able to help with, especially K1AJ and N1BB, who would climb his tower and try to figure why the SWR on his beam was astronomically high.? There was no way he could do even the most elementary antenna work anymore.? But one way or another, he managed to stay on the air most of the time.

A few years ago I learned that he was off the air because he'd sent his Omni VI back to Ten-Tec for some work.? With his infirmities, being off the air just about cut him off from the world, and when I learned of this I arranged to lend him my Omni VI (which I wasn't using at the time), the theory being that he could operate it literally blindfolded - which was about his physical condition at the time.? His eyesight was so bad he was practically blind, but I figured that he already knew all the controls of the Omni VI by heart and therefore would have a fighting chance of being on the air again until his rig was fixed.? As it happened, the Omni VI stayed there a long time, and one day he called me and told me that he'd "somehow" blown out the speaker and was sending it to Ten-Tec for repair at his expense.? I spoke to the people at Ten-Tec and learned that the entire speaker circuit had been blown out and that they'd replaced it, but I had them send me the bill.? I knew that Laci's finances weren't in the greatest shape at that point.? When I next visited him, I discovered what the speaker problem had been.? When we went down to his shack he had the audio turned up all the way, with the result that the internal speaker (his rig, this time) was thumping and distorting terribly, making it hard to understand anything.? But with his hearing (or lack thereof) at the time, this was the only way he could hear anything.? I couldn't resist asking the obvious question: Laci, why don't you use headphones? You'd certainly be able to hear better.? His response? "Joe (Cho), I've never used headphones in my life and I don't intend to start now."? So much for that.

Several years ago, hoping to solve some of his antenna problems, Laci ordered a SteppIR yagi.? He was a little disconcerted when they told him that the antennas were on backlog and that he would have to go on a long waiting list.? He told them (and this was confirmed to me by the people at SteppIR) that he was 91 years old so he hoped the waiting list wouldn't be too long.? That took them aback and they told him that they were instituting a new rule then and there: Anyone 90 years or older would go to the top of the wait list.? Sure enough, a few weeks later his new SteppIR arrived; I don't know who put it up for him, but it did work and he was once again back on the air, as active as his hearing and eyesight and propagation would permit.

Laci was a true gentleman in an era when there are very few true gentlemen still around.? He had a difficult life but always made the best of it, even in his last years, although I think he was depressed much of the time during the last few years.? He told me something else a year or so ago which was really heart-rending, but clearly true.? He said, "the reward for leading a decent life is living too long" and I think he really believed that.? I'm glad that his suffering is ended, but can't help feeling the big void that he has left.

Laci was a terrific radio operator and a great friend; he will be missed by a lot of people all around the world who were pleased to count themselves among his friends.

RIP, Laci,
Joe K2VUI