



IN MEMORIAM

Leon Letwin
Professor Emeritus of Law
UC Los Angeles
1929- 2015

Leon Letwin was born on December 29, 1929 to Bessie and Lazar Letwin, who came from the Jewish town of Mogilev-Podolski in the Ukraine. His parents participated in the Russian Revolution of October 1917, and narrowly escaped an anti-Semitic pogrom during the ensuing civil war by fleeing across the frozen Dniester River into Romania.

Leon and his older brother, Willaim were raised during the Depression in a predominantly African American neighborhood on Milwaukee's West Side. Their parents imbued them with values of compassion and social justice, amidst such events as the Scottsboro Boys case, the rise of the Nazis, the Spanish Civil War, the Japanese invasion of China, and formation of the Congress of Industrial Organizations (CIO).

Letwin became a political activist in his own right during the Second World War, and in 1945, at age fifteen, a leader of American Youth for Democracy (AYD), successor to the Young Communist League, at the University of Chicago.

He organized support for the Allis-Chalmers strike in Milwaukee (1946) and Henry Wallace's Progressive Party presidential campaign (1948), and protested universal military training (1948-1949) and the Broyles Commission investigation of "seditious activities" at the University of Chicago (1949).

At the University of Wisconsin in Madison, Letwin was on law review, which published his article on Communist registration under the Internal Security (McCarran) Act of 1950. He joined the National Lawyers Guild, formed in 1937 as an alternative to the conservative and racially exclusionary American Bar Association, and remained a

member for the next sixty-five years. In 1952, he graduated second in his law school class.

Letwin lost little time bringing the issues of the day to academic life. In 1966, he joined the faculty of Harvard Law's Intensive Summer Studies Program for African American college students. Upon his return, he successfully pioneered the UCLA Law affirmative action program, the first of its kind at a public law school. In 1968, he became director of the Council on Legal Education (CLEO) at UCLA.

Letwin's political concerns were reflected in his legal scholarship, which examined such issues as affirmative action, representation of indigent criminal defendants, preliminary hearings in Los Angeles, free speech rights of high school students, evidence of "unchaste character" in rape cases; and impeachment of criminal defendants with their prior convictions.

Letwin produced two textbooks, *Assignments in Trial Practice* (Little, Brown: 1964), and *Evidence Law: Commentary, Problems and Cases* (Matthew Bender: 1986). His entry on evidentiary privilege appeared in the *Encyclopedia of the American Constitution* (Macmillan: 1986).

Among students and colleagues alike, Letwin was widely admired for his combination of enthusiasm, intellectual rigor, wit and humanity. Students elected him UCLA Law School Professor of the Year in 1975, and he received the Law School's prestigious Rutter Award for Excellence in Teaching in 1983.

From 1998-2002, he was UCLA Coordinator for implementation of the Native-American Graves Protection and Repatriation Act, which requires federally funded institutions to return cultural items to indigenous peoples.

Appreciated for his personal warmth, humor, wisdom, and humility, Letwin is survived by Alita, his wife of 63 years; his sons, Michael, Daniel, and David Letwin; their partners, Ellen Dichner, Eva Letwin, and Kristin Horton; and his grandchildren, Brian Letwin, Chau Nguyen, Andrew Letwin, Nicholas Letwin, and Timothy Letwin.