

# IRVING J. LEE

October 27, 1909 - - May 23, 1955

## BIOGRAPHICAL SUMMARY

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IT is with deepest regret that the Editors announce the death, on May 23, 1955, of Irving J. Lee, professor of public speaking in the School of Speech, Northwestern University, and long a leader in general semantics. The regret is shared by hundreds of his students, his teaching colleagues, the readers of his books, the men in labor and management whom he taught to understand each other better, and police officers from all parts of the United States who had been his students in the Northwestern Traffic Safety Institute.

Irving Lee was born in New York on October 27, 1909. He attended New York University, where he majored in English and received his bachelor's degree in 1931. In 1932 he attended the Breadloaf School of English at Middlebury, Vermont. After three years of teaching the social sciences at Boonton (N.J.) High School, he went to Northwestern University as instructor in public speaking in the School of Speech. He received his M.A. degree at Northwestern in 1935, his Ph.D. in 1938. He became assistant professor in 1942, associate professor in 1947, and professor of public speaking in 1950.

It was during his early years in Evanston that Dr. Lee first became interested in general semantics. In the autumn of 1939 he took his first intensive training seminar under Alfred Korzybski at the Institute of General Semantics (then in Chicago). He early became convinced of the value of general semantics in the improvement of public speaking, discussion, and debate, and in giving insight into the problems of communication which underlie human relations. It was in February, 1940, under the direct influence of general semantics, that he introduced his famous undergraduate course, "Language and Thought," which increased steadily in popularity, so that in recent years as many as 275 students have been enrolled in it at one time. In 1940 he also wrote his first book, *Language Habits in Human Affairs: An Introduction to General Semantics*, (1941) in which he undertook to explain in simple language the fundamental principles of general semantics, with an abundance of narrative and literary illustrations. This book continues to be the clearest and best introduction to Korzybski's basic ideas.

Irving Lee was both interested and active in civic and national affairs. In

1937, for example, he became consultant and lecturer for the National Safety Council and the Northwestern University Traffic Safety Institute, assignments that he continued to fill during the rest of his life. He became a member of the psychological warfare committee of the Office of Civilian Defense. Both his civic concern and his command of general semantics are reflected in a pamphlet published in 1939 which he wrote for the National Safety Council, *How to Make the Safety Speech*. His use of general semantics for the purposes of political insight is shown in an article, "General Semantics and Public Speaking: Perspectives on Rhetoric Compared—Aristotle, Hitler, and Korzybski," published in *The Quarterly Journal of Speech* in December, 1940. He also wrote at about this time the pamphlet, *A Way with Prejudice*, for the Social Action Pamphlet Series (1941).

IN JUNE, 1942, Dr. Lee was appointed chairman of the department of public speaking in the School of Speech at Northwestern, but by July of that year the Pentagon had summoned him to help solve an embarrassing problem, one that was later—in Africa, Sicily, and Italy—to loom in tragic proportions. How could American pilots learn to distinguish enemy aircraft from, say, C-47's?

In 1942 the standard system for recognizing aircraft was known as the WEFT system. The letters stood for "wings," "engines," "fusilage," and "tail." The theory was that if American pilots or anti-aircraft gunners were to find aircraft near enough to constitute either a target or a threat, the pilots or gunners were first calmly to analyze silhouettes of these aircraft, taking due note of the sweep and dihedral of the wings, the number of engines, and the shape of the fusilage and tail. Reliable decisions about friend or foe were to rest on such analysis. Someone in the Pentagon got to thinking that such analysis, in a pinch, just might take up too much time.

The Renshaw System of recognition, by contrast, was psychologically sound in that it availed itself of the findings of gestalt psychology. It was semantically sound as well in that it did not assume that a person would have to be able to *say* what he saw in order simply to *recognize* what he saw. Moreover, a person trained in this system could make these recognitions in as little as one-hundredth of a second. But the Renshaw System was still largely on paper. There was urgent need of a school where the Renshaw technique could be taught to young intelligence officers who would then return to their units and, by benefit of slides, slide-projectors, and variable-speed shutters, train the men behind the guns. Lee's initial assignment was, in part, to help organize such a school.

The assignment was shortly realized in the Army Air Forces School of Applied Tactics at Orlando, Florida, where Dr. Lee, now a 1st Lieutenant acting the role of a dean, took on the task of teaching intelligence officers to be teachers. It was not easy. Lieutenant Lee and his young wife, Laura Louise, would, on occasion, greatly ameliorate the morale of some lonely student by inviting him

to a home-cooked steak dinner, but the technical problem could be solved neither so easily nor convivially—the technical problem lay in teaching intelligence officers to talk.

For untying the tongues, Lieutenant Lee launched a series of daily lectures on lecturing. He gave no rules. Indeed, he broke all the rules that a student might have supposed would apply to the lecture situation. Sometimes he would stand still, sometimes he would gesture. Sometimes he would turn his back on his audience, and sometimes he would pace the floor of the stage from which he spoke. On one occasion he roved the aisles of the auditorium. Not a single stereotype of the "proper platform manner" would he permit to crystallize. And yet, he remained at all times fascinating, forceful, in complete command of attention without either ordering or beseeching it. So challenging was all this to the student that—safely back in his own bailiwick—each must have felt compelled to try it for himself. Only the topic would be different. Instead of a talk about lectures, a talk about airplanes.

But though Lee *mentioned* no rules, he *used* them; they were the principles of general semantics. Though he did not utter the name of Korzybski, his technique was Korzybskian. Had Lee's students known of general semantics, they would have recognized this. One of them did—in March, 1943—and, toting a copy of *Science and Sanity*, told Lee so. The audacious student, a 2nd Lieutenant at the time, was graciously offered the steak dinner and the hospitality of the Lee home; and there occurred a spark of friendship that spanned a decade—even though communication was actively resumed only after the student, by a sequence of fortuitous steps, became an assistant editor of *ETC.*

There were, of course, other matters than identifying aircraft that the school dealt with. Lee remained with the U.S. Army Air Forces until 1946, attaining the rank of Major. When Dr. Lee returned to civilian life and to his duties at Northwestern, the Headquarters of the U.S. Air Force in Washington retained him as consultant on communication problems, and he was recently appointed Lecturer to the Air War College.

**D**URING recent years, Dr. Lee's concern, in addition to his teaching duties at Northwestern University, was the improvement of communication in administration and in industry. This concern is reflected, of course, in his principal writings: *How to Talk With People* (1952), *Customs and Crises in Communication* (1954), and "Procedures for 'Coercing' Agreement," published both in the *Harvard Business Review* and in *ETC.* in 1954. These interests resulted in his being called in as consultant or lecturer in such organizations as the Naval Gun Factory; National Safety Council; American Maize; Commonwealth Edison; G. D. Searle; People's Gas, Light and Coke Company; Wallace Supplies Manufacturing Company. At the time of his death, Dr. Lee had just completed a course of instruction in general semantics to supervisors and manage-

ment personnel over eight weeks at the Illinois Bell Telephone Company. The results of this course, given in co-operation with personnel representatives from American Telephone and Telegraph Company, were to be carefully assessed through interviews not only with those who took the course, but *also with those who work under those who took the course*. Early reports of the results of these interviews appear to indicate, the Editors learn, that people under the supervision of those who studied with Dr. Lee have noticed marked improvement in recent weeks in their supervisors' communicative abilities and comprehension of employees' problems.

Dr. Lee was widely known, too, for his activities as lecturer. He gave individual lectures or lecture series at Dartmouth, University of Denver, Harvard, University of Minnesota, University of Pittsburgh, Purdue University, the University of Wisconsin, as well as before numerous clubs and civic forums. In the summer of 1952, he was visiting professor at the University of Hawaii in Honolulu. He was past president and member of the executive council, and trustee of the Institute of General Semantics; charter member, member of the board of directors, and president (1947-48) of the International Society for General Semantics; member of the executive council, National Society for the Study of Communication; associate editor, *The Quarterly Journal of Speech*.

Family funeral services were held for Dr. Lee in Irvington, New Jersey; a memorial service was held at Lutkin Hall, Northwestern University, on June 2, presided over by Dean James McLeod and Rabbi Edgar E. Siskin, and attended by students, colleagues, and a delegation of uniformed police officers from many parts of the U.S. attending the Traffic Institute of Northwestern University. At a meeting of the Chicago Chapter, International Society for General Semantics, held at International House, University of Chicago, on May 27, S. I. Hayakawa gave a review of Dr. Lee's career and read the telegrams and letters commemorative of the occasion which had been received by the editorial office of *ETC.*

**T**HE COMMUNICATIONS occasioned by Dr. Lee's death, including the letters received by *ETC.*, the statements read at the memorial service at Northwestern University, and other documents, come from many quarters and serve at least partially to document the breadth of his influence in academic life and scholarship as well as in practical affairs. The following are selections from communications received up to date of publication:

From STUART CHASE, Georgetown, Connecticut (telegram):

"IRVING LEE WAS A BRILLIANT AND VERSATILE TEACHER HIS CLEAR THINKING AND IMAGINATIVE APPROACH TO PROBLEMS OF COMMUNICATION HIS DETERMINATION TO GET DOWN TO CASES CONTRIBUTED MUCH TO STRAIGHT THINKING WHEN

IT WAS BADLY NEEDED HE WAS MY FRIEND AND I SHALL MISS HIM DEEPLY BUT THE WORLD WILL MISS HIM MORE."

From WENDELL JOHNSON, Professor of Psychology, University of Iowa:

"In humanity's most exacting profession Irving Lee was eminently successful. He was one of the great teachers of his time. His ability to order knowledge and to clarify its significance was extraordinary. His capacity to inspire his students with a zeal for learning was remarkable. And as an agent of integrity and intellectual honesty his influence was and will continue to be tremendous. Irving Lee worked incessantly to discover the best, according to his lights, that had been thought and created by his predecessors and his fellows, and to improve upon it for the benefit of those whose lives he touched. Among his particular achievements one of the most significant is to be seen in the pervasive effect his writing and teaching have had on the field of speech education and public address. He has played a major role in bringing about a greatly heightened sensitivity to the semantic dimension of human discourse. The world is better because of what Irving Lee did and encouraged others to do. As a great teacher he will be remembered, and our memories of him will keep alive his teaching."

From DR. AND MRS. ANATOL RAPOPORT, Palo Alto, California (telegram):

"WE ARE SHOCKED BY THE NEWS OF IRVING'S DEATH HE WAS A KIND AND WISE MAN WHO DEVOTED THESE QUALITIES TO UNEXCELLED USE IN THE DEVELOPMENT OF GENERAL SEMANTICS ALL OF US WHO HAVE WORKED WITH HIM IN THE SOCIETY WILL SUFFER A FEELING OF LOSS BEYOND OUR PERSONAL SORROW PLEASE ADD OUR WORDS TO YOURS IN COMMEMORATION OF OUR FRIEND."

From DR. JAMES H. MCBURNEY, Dean of the School of Speech, Northwestern University:

"Irving Lee was a brilliant man, one of the most skillful I have known in the art of human relations. His passing is a grave loss to the University and to man."

From M. KENDIG, Institute of General Semantics, Lakeville, Connecticut (telegram):

BEYOND MY FEELING OF DEEP PERSONAL LOSS OF IRVING AS FRIEND AND COUNSELOR AND YET SO MUCH OF IT I MOURN THE LOSS OF LEE'S GREAT CREATIVITY—HIS GREATER CREATIVE POTENTIAL—HIS INTEGRITY AND INDEPENDENCE AND HIS SENSE

OF DEMOCRATIC PROCESSES DEMANDING DISCIPLINE NOT SENTIMENTALITY. HE KNEW HOW TO LEARN FROM KORZYBSKI AND HOW TO USE WHAT HE LEARNED. I CANNOT RECALL A SINGLE INSTANCE WHEN ALFRED DID NOT APPROVE WHAT IRVING WROTE, SAID OR DID WITH GENERAL SEMANTICS. LEE'S WAS A RARE DETERMINATION TO DOCUMENT BY PRACTICE AND RESEARCH WHAT HE SAID ABOUT THE DISCIPLINE. HE HAD A GIFT FOR LEADERSHIP AND TRAINING OTHERS TO FOLLOW HIS HARD PATH. HIS DEATH IS A MOST GRIEVOUS INCOMPREHENSIBLE WASTE FOR MANKIND."

From RUSSELL MEYERS, M.D., Professor of Neurosurgery, University of Iowa:

"I join in mourning one whose energy and skill will be gravely missed. Irv was at the height of his productivity, was highly respected as a teacher by his colleagues and students, and was implementing with vigor unusual socio-psychologic experiments in the orienting effects of general semantics on a variety of groups. That he should have been so soon cut down must inevitably affect all of us."

From DR. MELVILLE J. HERSKOVITS, professor of anthropology, Northwestern University:

"The quality in Irving Lee that, more than any other, struck me when I knew him as a student in 1933, was his ability to grasp new ideas and his enthusiasm for them. As I came to know him better, I realized that his thinking was disciplined by a profound intellectual humility, and his enthusiasms tempered by a lively sense of humor. It was these qualities that, developing out of a powerful mind, made of him the figure in American intellectual life that he came to be, and supported him in his struggle to establish the approach to the study of language processes and the nature of communication that came to be his major contribution and is identified with his name. . . . The efforts of Irving Lee were continuously directed toward alleviating conflict, misunderstanding, prejudice; toward encouraging clarity of thought and communication. The depth of his convictions, the honesty of his purpose, yet withal the humor he brought to his teaching carried over to those in the military, in administration, in business not less than to his students in the University. For to him, no one could be overlooked in a world where, through communication, men had not only contrived modes of living with one another, but had given form and meaning to the very universe in which they lived."

From DR. PAUL SCHILPP, professor of philosophy, Northwestern University:

"Dr. Irving J. Lee was a hard-working student, and unusually superior mind, a fine scholar, and one of the greatest teachers Northwestern University ever had. He was the great teacher precisely because he never ceased learning, because he loved students and believed in them, and because—better than most of us—his success in communicating with them was phenomenal."

From ROBERT CHIARAMONTE, Sergeant, Ohio State Highway Patrol:

"Any time you are dealing with the public, you are dealing with the possibility of misunderstanding. Dr. Lee taught us to look for the intentions of people's words rather than react to the words themselves. He also analyzed for us problems of interrogation. But most of all he taught us to watch for our own misevaluations: allness, absence of dating, identification reactions, etc.

"Dr. Lee made a terrific impact on me as well as on the other officers who were privileged to take his course. He used examples from daily life to illustrate the principles he taught, so that we could recognize in them the people and situations we had known in our own experience. I came to have the profoundest confidence in Dr. Lee as a man who would understand one's problems, whatever they might be. I am sorry I did not know about general semantics earlier; I would have majored in the subject had I known of it when I was a student. On my return to Ohio, I am going to be teaching in some in-service training courses, and I am going to try to introduce some general semantics into that training."

From GERALD O'CONNELL, Director of Training, Traffic Institute, Northwestern University, and formerly of the Connecticut State Police:

"We have really cherished the contribution Irving Lee has made to our program. We have had measurable results from it. We have seen changes in personality; we have had evidence of changes in methods of work when our officers returned home from the Traffic Institute. We could see in the course of training changes in their vocabulary, language habits, and their approaches to their problems. Dr. Lee produced tolerance where there was none in many of our fellows. When our fellows have had the opportunity to influence training programs in their own departments, we have often seen them trying to bring semantics into their in-service and supervisory and command programs.

From JAMES MCLEOD, Dean of Students, Northwestern University:

"Here was a man whose gifts were great and whose spirit was humble. He was a true scholar, a genuine seeker after truth. He had a persistent and deep hunger for answers to the questions life posed. But he always sensed that, being

human, he was part of the problem of life, hence sought to be part of the answer."

THE SOCIETY joins the foregoing and many others who mourn the loss of Dr. Irving J. Lee. As a member of the Governing Board and an editorial advisor of *ETC.*, his searching inquiry into the reasons for decisions and his wise insistence on referring problems of policy to the membership sometimes resulted in delays in action—delays that resulted in decisions which ultimately proved to be wiser than those originally proposed. We shall miss his speech. We shall learn to punctuate ours with the effective stillnesses he taught us.

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