

Lars Onsager Remembered

Joan Penrose¹

Received November 29, 1993

It was our first visit to the U.S. in September 1955, and Lars and Gretl very kindly gave us shelter until we found a basement flat on Bradley Street, New Haven. It was not a smart flat and Gretl was rueful about our move: "You can live in my basement for free" she said. But we cleaned it up a bit, stuck a few posters to the walls, and eventually felt confident enough to invite our benefactors for an evening meal. Dessert was to be ice cream with fudge sauce, a novel idea to me. *The Joy of Cooking* was my new-found Bible and I gleaned the recipe from its pages. Apparently a hot fudge sauce, which would harden on contact with the ice cream "to form a malleable consistency," needed to be boiled "fairly fast" for exactly eight minutes. Eight minutes seemed a long time to me, and I was innocently unaware of the dangerous ambiguity hidden in those two words "fairly fast." Gretl cheerfully sustained the conversation whilst my sauce bubbled on the flame for exactly eight minutes, from whence it was poured, with totally misplaced bravado, onto four servings of Best Ice Cream. It hardened. Maybe for the first fifteen seconds it hardened to a "malleable consistency," but after that it rapidly acquired the texture of newly tapped gum. It actually looked delicious, but it continued to harden. Gallantly we wielded our spoons, as though our dessert was edible. Conversation ebbed and gradually died as we endeavored to keep our teeth from sticking together for all time. The depths of my embarrassment were profound, as we wrestled politely with the inside of our mouths.

Lars had been preoccupied, probably with some details of the chess game he and Oliver had interrupted for the meal, for I had noticed him gazing over at the abandoned board with wistful affection. Now suddenly he regarded us all with fine dispassion, seized on his spoon, too, grinned

¹ Fir Trees, Doctor's Commons Road, Berkhamsted, Herts, HP4 3DW, U.K.

fiendishly, and remarked in his inimitable Norwegian lilt, "This is a particularly fine example of the effect of temperature on viscosity."

The Onsager country retreat, in Tilton, New Hampshire. Lars and Gretl; Chris Onsager, aged about six years, and Hans, in his early teens. The eldest sibling, Inga, was visiting friends in Texas. But she was very much on our minds because her eighteenth birthday fast approached. Gretl proudly discussed this landmark and planned a shopping expedition, to buy presents. We all piled into the car; Gretl always did the driving. On the way we passed a boatyard where Hans persuaded his father to examine various models. Hans speculated considerably on which boat might most agreeably add to the quality of Onsager family life, post Nobel Prize. Lars, a tall Norseman with amiable sea eyes and a locked-away mind, contemplated the boats, as required. "Well..." Long silence. "Well, yes." He batted an imaginary gnat from his tall dome. "Yes. No doubt about it. They are all very fine boats. Very fine indeed." Energetic prompting could move him no further. We drove on into town, found the department store, and transferred our attention from boats to birthdays: more precisely, to the lingerie department. Briskly Gretl summoned the best merchandise on offer and we crowded around a counter festooned with quantities of pale silk, lace, and ribbons. Gretl commanded her husband's attention "Come Lars! Which of these will you choose for your daughter's eighteenth birthday: look, you must choose something very special; our firstborn is to be eighteen years..." From his Olympian heights Lars grimaced down, wordlessly. He gazed on us, on the lingerie, on the spell-bound shop assistants. He passed his hand wonderingly over his brow, batted gently at the invisible gnat, then actually saw us all, probably for the first time. The grimace slid into a grin and thence to a radiant smile. He glanced at the counter. "I think she would like them all. Yes. No doubt about it, Inga would like them all." He turned away, thinking probably of his garden where he would dig, alone, until it was dusk.