THE R H 7 HISTORY GROUP

LESLIE QUIE

Leslie Quie was a long-time resident of Dormansland. He had a remarkable early life. This is a transcript of an interview with Leslie recorded by Ian Jones in December 2021.

My full name is Joseph Leslie Quie. I was born on November 8,1932 in Hong Kong. I come from a family of six; I'm number 4 - Clive, Ronald, Malcolm, me, Bruce and Patricia,

My father – also Joseph Leslie Quie - was born in Liverpool, the son of a Chinese laundryman who came to England in the late 1800s/early 1900s. His mother was English.

My mother was born in Malaysia. Her ethnic background was mixed – more Chinese than European. As she got older, she was more Chinese; her hair was done differently. Her maiden name was Waller and her grandmother's maiden name was McDougal – all Scottish: I've been told by a Scottish authority that I'm entitled to wear two clan kilts, the Waller and the McDougal.

At the age of 17 my father took a ship as a cabin boy and went to Hong Kong. He arrived in Hong Kong with nothing but the fact that he spoke English perfectly. This was a tremendous advantage, so he managed to get a job as an office boy. He realised also that if he learnt to type, he could become a clerk. So, he rented a typewriter and joined a company called Humphreys Estate and Finance.

That company owned most of the land at Star Ferry Kowloon side: it's a property company. There's Humphreys Avenue, Humphreys Road in Kowloon, as you come up Nathan Road all that area was owned by Humphreys Estate and Finance, and a lot of the property in the Peak. It also owned the Peak tram and Watsons a large pharmaceutical company similar to Boots. By the time he was twenty one he was Company Secretary of the group and just before the war he became Chairman. [He seems to have been Company Secretary of Hutchinsons in 1941]

In 1938 the war was imminent in the far east, and my father started to talk about sending us away from Hong Kong because it was expected that the Japanese would come down. We went to Penang just before the Japanese joined the war. My mother was born in Penang.

I have photographs of my father when he was the army. When the war broke out he was in Hong Kong in the army. They were all volunteers. He was captured. He was sent to a camp in Hong Kong. Somehow, he escaped and the next thing we knew – this was after the war – he ended up in Burma and then India. How he got there from Hong Kong nobody knows and he would never, never talk about it.

There's a picture of him when he first arrived in Hong Kong and him when he was Chairman of the whole group. That's a typical Chinese thing of father and mother at home in Hong Kong at the house with a ceremonial dress. For some reason they decided they needed a photograph.

He was a captain in the British army, acting major when he left in army intelligence in India. He was a sergeant in Burma; he was with the Chindits and then the next thing he's Captain, then acting Major. I don't know what he did.

My earliest memory really was in Hong Kong. It was a very easy life because we had an enormous house and were an extremely well off family at that time. There were six servants, one was in charge – the equivalent of a butler today. Only two were allowed in the house –

one that served at the table and one that cleaned. The others' duties were outside: the chef, the cook - the kitchen was outside. It was attached but it was outside. And the laundry was outside; there was a big laundry room. And the one who was inside would take all the cleaning outside to her.

I left Hong Kong when I was about six. We travelled to Penang by boat, which took about a month to six weeks. And by the time my mum found a small house, the Japanese came. So, from the age of six until I was fifteen and a half, I had no schooling. None whatsoever. I could speak and read but my writing was very bad. When the Japanese took Malaysia, we had the choice of going to a Japanese school or becoming a water boy at the railway. So obviously mum said you go to school.

We were lucky that when we arrived in Penang my mother found a dentist who was Japanese. Highly educated Japanese from Harvard - spoke broad American English. Liked us enormously, he used to say 'Hi kids, now open your mouth and don't scream' that sort of thing. Lovely guy. When the Japanese took over, it was difficult: food, everything was scarce to find. My mother had to look after six children ranging from fifteen down to Patsy, the young girl, who was probably three - I always wondered how she did it,

One day we were at the house, and two Japanese outriders came into the drive. We were very nervous and then this staff car followed through, flying a flag. We wondered what was going to happen and who came out, wearing Japanese boots and a big samurai sword, but the Japanese dentist. He was a real big shot; he was a general. One of the highest ranking generals. 'Hi kids, you alright?' And from then onwards he kept an eye on us.

If you were caught listening to the BBC or if you had a radio, you would get thrown into gaol and never come out, and you weren't allowed to celebrate Christmas. But he used to bring us a Christmas tree, of some sort, and he'd bring his ukulele and sing carols with us, with two armed officers at the gate. But that's just by the by, for amusement.

If it wasn't for him, half the family wouldn't be here. One day I woke up and obviously the others woke up, and I had a bayonet here [points to chest]. I must have been twelve by then and with a kick we were ordered out - no reason given. You've seen the Japanese films how they usher you out. We were dressed in little shorts because of the weather, and we were marched down the road barefoot to the gaol in Penang.

There was my mother, Ron, my sister and me; just marched along and taken into this gaol down there and thrown in – couldn't understand why. We were chucked in a room about eight feet by fifteen feet. But something I'll always remember, there were three other people already in there. We were given numbers, and this door shut behind you with a clang. There was a little slot at the bottom of the door and on one side was a pail of water and on the other side a pail, empty, for sanitation. And that was it.

It was terrifying. I was separated from my mother because she was with her daughter, Patsy, at the other end of the gaol. Food would be slipped through on a tin plate and at other times the door would open, and they would shout a number in Japanese (I used to speak fluent Japanese, but I forgot it on purpose) and the person they called never came back.

We were there for nearly a week and one day the door opened and the senior commandant was there - you met him when you first came in, screaming, shouting and ordering his staff about. On this day he was very nice 'come, come, come, no worry, come, come, come'.

We went out to the office and who was there but the dentist! He had come to see the family and found the house empty; asked the neighbours where the family was and they said 'gaol!'. So, he came to the gaol. In the Japanese army officers could beat their subordinates and there was this commandant, probably a major or colonel, whatever, he had the biggest hiding I've ever seen, in front of us.

The general said in Japanese – 'if you ever, any of you, lay a finger on this family' he said, and he drew his sword 'your head will be at the other end of it.' And he took us back; he apologised to my mother.

My mother took a job as a catering manager in a Japanese officers' club. I think it may have been arranged through our friend - our chap who looked after us. She knew about cooking and so she managed the officer's club mess and was possibly paid quite well, and that's how we survived.

The eldest brother Clive who was now fourteen/fifteen got a job as an inspector going out to check on dead water for mosquitoes because malaria was very prominent. If he found any, he had to spray it and make a report, so that it could be drained. Now he came up with the idea of, not wanting to go out early to get them because once the sun came up. they flew off. So, he then dug ponds at home and bred his own mosquitoes to submit!

Then, to help supplement the food, he managed to get a pair of rabbits and, like they say, rabbits breed. He bred the rabbits to sell as food. But he had a wheeze. He realized that people would buy rabbits from him for food and do some breeding themselves. It is, though, very hard to sex rabbits. But Clive knew how to sex rabbits very quickly and made sure that all the rabbits he provided for sale were males!

Clive was the eldest son. The second one, Ron, was at Christ's College, read law and became a barrister, then chief executive of Hong Kong and Shanghai Bank. He was called to the bar at Lincoln's Inn years ago.

Ron then got a job – I think he was sixteen – as an orderly in a hospital so that we could get medicine. So, one side we had food, and on the other we had medicine.

As for myself, it was in Penang that I took up boxing. As a boy of 6, 7, 8 I heard from a neighbour next door this constant thudding; thumping, thumping. I crept round and had a look and there was this chap there – he was Indian – tremendous physique, about six feet tall

at a punch bag. So, I used to go and watch him do this. One day he said would you like to try? So, I started to use a punch bag. His name was Valoo, known in the boxing trade as Cyclone Kid because he was terribly fast .

And although I'm right-handed, I've always fought southpaw because he was left-handed and I copied him. So, I learnt boxing from him. And Ron, the second brother, also did, because he was very competitive like my father.

When our friend the general heard that we did some boxing, we used to entertain Japanese officers with boxing matches. Our competitors were just anybody that they got hold of - other children - so we used to beat them and got money for it. You know, the Japanese officers used to watch and just throw money so that was another source of funds. I was eight years old when I started and continued right up to the end of the war. That's how I learned my boxing skills. After the war, when my father realised we did this type of boxing, he built us a full blown gym, ring, bars, everything back in Hong Kong.

Our time in Penang was hard, but we had this Japanese chap turning up every now and then seeing that we were safe, untouched. My mother was working; Clive was operating his rabbit trade. And we all did something. We grew vegetables and things.

There was then a horrific incident that left me with the stutter that I had for years. It was my job to go out and get the bread from the bread shop. I went out one afternoon to the big square where the shops were and there was a large crowd. I was eight or nine or whatever it was, and typical, when you see a crowd as a young boy you want go and want to look. I rummaged my way to the front there and there were two Chinese chaps on their knees, hands bound behind them and a Japanese officer. He was obviously from a high ranking family – a samurai type - he had long black hair, very long, which indicates his background and sword with the gilt.

These two chaps must have been stealing or whatever and they were knelt in front of him. He drew his sword and one after another their heads came off, with one stroke. I saw this and ran home, dropped

the bread and mum said, ‘where’s the bread?’ and I stuttered from then onwards, so badly I couldn’t form a sentence without starting off a, a, a, ah. And this continued when I was back in Hong Kong at school. Normally you would be teased for that by other boys, but nobody would dare tease me because at that time I was fighting semi-professional in the ring. It was not wise at all to try anything with me.

When the War ended in 1945 I was thirteen. My father had an officer friend of his who was going to Malaysia/Penang. He found us and he said your dad’s alive, he’s well and he’s trying to get back to Hong Kong. As soon as he does, he’s going to arrange to bring you all back home. It took us two years to get transport back to Hong Kong because there was no transport around. No boats, and passenger planes didn’t exist. Everybody today thinks it’s so easy, you just travel but it was nothing like that at all.

Once the war ended, things in Hong Kong were very quickly restored, certainly within two years because when we came back it was as if nothing had happened. But it all meant that my formal schooling didn’t start till I was about sixteen – between sixteen, seventeen. The effect on me was profound: maths was alright; and there was no problem speaking the English language; it was writing. I can express myself speaking but I can’t express myself in writing and that persists to this day. People ask me how I ran an architect’s practice with an office in London, Fitzroy Square, an office in Wakefield, an office in Beirut and an office in Abu Dhabi. The answer is I paid a very good secretary who took notes on what I said and wrote all of my letters.

Anyway, my father got in touch with Hong Kong naval base, HMS Tamar, and passed the word around that anyone who knew boxing could come and train his sons and they would get all the beer they want, all the food they wanted and there was a full blown gym. I was taught by ABA champions and professionals; there was a chap from Australia who was bantam weight champion of the far east in the services and others like that. Every weekend dad used to get people

from the army, navy and air force to come, and I had to spar with them. I was what sixteen, seventeen and I was sparring against people twenty-two, twenty-eight. But it so happened, I was good – I must have been good because I used to knock them out. And then I became lightweight champion of Hong Kong and south China and I was, what, only eighteen.

There is a picture of me with an able seaman. Priest, I always remember the name Priest, he was the inter-services bantamweight champion of the far east. I was a schoolboy then and I knocked him out and then collected my prize wearing my school blazer. So, he was twenty-two and I was sixteen or so.

When it became time to consider a career, my father, because he was involved in property, took me over to Hong Kong where the big office was and to the company architect, who was a Portuguese guy. My father simply said here is my son and I think he should be an architect. He had planned careers for all of us.

My mother's elder brother was a stockbroker prior to the war, so he had his own stockbroking company in Hong Kong. He started that up again as everybody else did so my father said to Clive right, you go to Uncle Prosper and you train to become a stockbroker. Ron, who was old enough was then coached with Malcolm, the next brother, who was called Paddy, the two of them were crammed by tutors and then both were sent to England. They got to Southampton and went into technical colleges. Ron started off wanting to be a doctor but switched to law. Malcolm, Paddy as we called him, read accountancy and became a chartered accountant and ended up in a company in Singapore called Singapore Cold Storage, which is equivalent of our Sainsburys. He became chairman of the group.

When I left school, I went to Southampton, where my brothers were. My brother Ron secured a place at Christ's College Cambridge – he was a paying student, but he had good exam results throughout. My problem was the opposite: I had poor results, but I was good at sport, and I approached Christ's on the basis that my brother was already there. My brother had told the senior tutor, Dr Pratt, "if you want a

boxing blue, admit my brother" so I secured an interview. (According to his obituary, Lucan Clarence Pratt was frequently suspected of deliberately going out to recruit likely Blues.)

At the interview, the first question I was asked was "Can you guarantee me a boxing blue?" I said it should be fairly simple – I had had about 30 fights by then and was already lightweight boxing champion of Hong Kong and South Asia.

The next problem was qualifications. None of my Hong Kong qualifications were recognised so, after great thought, he said, "If you can pass the college entrance exam, I can accept you, but you need a classical language." He asked "Greek?" I said no. Latin? No. Sanskrit? No. What about classical Chinese? I explained I could write my name in Chinese but that was it.

The next day Dr Pratt told me he had arranged for me to have classical Chinese lessons with the professor of classical Chinese at Cambridge – and it turned out he set the paper and examined it, so I passed. And that is how I got into Christ's College Cambridge.

What was it like when you got in? I found it strange: nobody cared whether you attended lectures or not; nobody queried it if you didn't submit any work. So, I didn't – I just went to the pictures in the afternoon, and in the evening I went to the theatre. I had been in a very controlled environment at home but now nobody told you what to do so I didn't do anything. And, no surprise, I failed my exam at the end of the first year. But by that time I had become a boxing blue.

I was called to see Dr Pratt, and he said to me, "Leslie, never in the history of Christ's College has a blue been sent down." But the rules are the rules. so he told me to leave Cambridge the next day and to come back next year and start again.

When I started again at Cambridge the next year, I changed completely. I attended every lecture, did all the course work – and I enjoyed it. But, when the time came, I failed again – this time, my finals. I failed because of the need for writing. To this day, I cannot

write things down and, here again, Dr Pratt intervened. He just said, “come back and take it again next year.” And I did, and I passed.

After I left Cambridge, I went to live in Notting Hill Gate in London and started working for a firm in Lamb’s Conduit Street. Eventually, I was working for Ian Fraser Associates. I was being paid £15 per week and one day I went to see Ian Fraser to say I wanted a rise to £20 per week. He said “Not at the moment” so I left and found another job at £20 per week. And after that I found a job advertised in Aden, £2000 per year, tax free, all found. That was a very rewarding period, after which I returned to London and eventually set up a practice – Robinson, Quie - with interests in London and Wakefield but also in Beirut, working in Sudan, Abu Dhabi and Dubai. We were very successful.

In 1972, I moved to Dormansland, to a house next door to my brother Clive’s house and I’ve been here ever since, with my wife, Nora.

Ian Jones 2026