

Arthur Loon by Gail Loon Lustig

The time has come for me to write Arthur Loon's story. He is the only Arthur I have encountered in our family, the eldest son of Elias Loon and Sora Riva Benjamin.

He was born Isser in 1893 and passed away in 1941 at the age of 48. Arthur is probably the least remembered member of the family who immigrated to South Africa from Ponevezh, Lithuania. This wasn't his choice I believe, but the reflection of the times he lived in, a world that discriminated against anyone who was considered different.

Arthur was my late grandfather David's eldest brother, my father, Donny Loon's uncle. He suffered from epilepsy from a young age which could only be addressed when he actually had an attack. His brother, David, was the one who had been assigned to helping him when he fell on the floor convulsing.



Arthur standing with younger brother David sitting next to him

Because of the social stigma that Arthur suffered, his life was severely affected. At the time, there was no effective treatment for epilepsy; it was regarded as a psychiatric disease, and in the Jewish communities, accompanied by the stigma that an individual suffering from the condition, would surely not marry, have children and needed to be 'put away' rather than live in the family unit. There were many who

believed that epilepsy was actually a demon that invaded the affected person's psyche.

I first heard about him from my late father, who told us that Arthur was indeed sent away to a psychiatric hospital in Natal in his twenties after a brief period in the Mental Home in Pretoria and that the family had not been in touch with him ever since.

Donny once asked his grandmother, Sora Riva why no one talked about Arthur and she whispered 'shh shh... *los, los-* don't think about him.' Sora Riva was the true matriarch of the family, a kind soul whose treats of biltong and *bulkalach*, endeared her to the memories of her loving grandchildren. It is difficult today to imagine a loving mother feeling she had to speak those words.

And then some years ago, I guess retirement encourages researching stories with many unresolved outcomes, I put out feelers to learn about Dad's uncle Arthur. It felt as though I had been entrusted with bringing Arthur back into the family. I knew I wouldn't rest until I achieved this. Our family is one with countless stories; Arthur's needed to be written.

My search began online. I discovered that Arthur was transferred to the Fort Napier Institution in Pietermaritzburg in 1927 and that for the next 14 years he lived there until at the age of 48 he passed away. He was buried in the Jewish section of the Town Hill Cemetery (Roberts Road) which was ultimately closed in 1948.

I found it astonishing that my father's uncle had been institutionalized at Fort Napier for so long. I never did determine whether anyone from the family visited Arthur during those fourteen years, or whether he was ever allowed home. I soon learnt that there wasn't even a tombstone showing his burial site in the cemetery.

By then my father had passed away. I spoke to some of his younger cousins, but no one could shed further light on Arthur's life. Living on another continent only strengthened my determination to set the record straight.

I put out feelers to learn more and was given the name of Julie Parle who, I discovered was a well-known historian of health, mental illness, medicine and social histories of Southern Africa especially Kwazulu, Natal. I wrote to Julie who was amazingly helpful. She told me about the fate of those suffering from epilepsy in the early 20th Century, how the illness was regarded as a psychiatric problem and sent me several published articles to this regard from the local academic literature.

It turns out that 1 in 5 patients in mental institutions in 1939 were epileptics! The law at the time permitted institutionalization when a person was considered incapable of managing his own affairs or thought to present a danger to himself or others.

At the time fear and misunderstanding shrouded the illness. It was accepted and legitimate for families to institutionalize their loved ones in homes of the sort that Arthur found himself.

I also learnt from Julie that there just might be more information regarding Arthur's stay and events leading to his hospitalization at Fort Napier in the Reception Orders from 1927 kept in the Pietermaritzburg Archive Repository. Despite attempts at searching for a free-lance researcher, I haven't been successful.

For all that, I was extremely fortunate to hear of the efforts of a devoted member of the Jewish Community and *Chevra Kadisha* in Pietermaritzburg, Ben Lurie, who for decades has been visiting Town Hill caring for the cemetery. Ben told me that in the past, the Pietermaritzburg Jewish Community had regularly visited the Jewish patients in the institution, taking them sweets and cigarettes and other necessities which were in many cases, often funded by their families.

Ben regretted that Arthur's grave was not identifiable and had through neglect been damaged over the years. He kindly spent a morning photographing the cemetery and the memorial board which lists all those buried in the cemetery. I received a photo of the board with Arthur's name on it, the correct birth and death dates. The only problem was that Arthur's name was spelt Lewin and not Loon.

And now for a brighter end to this tale. Ben managed to get a new sign made in town which was recently pinned onto Arthur's surname, correcting the spelling issue. Arthur Loon appears instead of Arthur Lewin.

So yes, at last, Arthur's name now bears the family surname. Though it is only a small correction on a memorial board, it represents something much more meaningful for us, the family. After decades of disappearing almost surreptitiously, Arthur has found his way back into our family tree. May his memory be for a blessing.

I dedicate this brief account to all those who were unfortunate to suffer from epilepsy and were as a result, ostracized by their communities and sometimes their own families. It is but a small consolation that today's medical knowledge and practice has saved millions from a similar fate.

~~~~~  
**Arthur Loon**

**Written by Gail Loon Lustig, 2026**

**Posted on the CHOL 'Share Your Stories' site in July, 2026**

# FORM OF INFORMATION OF A DEATH. AANGIFTE VAN 'N STERFGEVAL.

(Act No. 17 of 1923.—Wet No. 17 van 1923.)

**WARNING.**—The penalties for false statements wilfully made are the same as those for perjury.  
**WAARSKUWING.**—Die straf vir valse verklarings met opset, is dieselfde as in die geval van meened.

## DECEASED.—OORLEDENE.

- Christian names and surname  
Voornaam en familienaam Arthur Loos
- (a) Name of parent or guardian (if deceased was under the age of ten)  
(a) Naam van ouer of voog (indien oorledene onder die ouderdom van tien jaar was)
- (b) Place of residence of mother\*  
(b) Woonplek van moeder\*
- Sex Male 4. Age 48 years 5. Race European  
Geslag Ouderdom Ras
- Birthplace Russia 7. Whether single, married, divorced, widower, or widow Single  
Geboorteplek Ongetroud, getroud, geskeie, wewenaar of weduwee
- Occupation General Dealer  
Beroep
- Pensioner or dependent of pensioner  
Gepensioeneerde of afhanklik van gepensioeneerde
- Date of death Tenteenth November 1941  
Datum van afsterwe
- Place of death Fort Chapin Institution P.M. Burg  
Plek waar oorlede
- Usual place of residence Johannesburg Transvaal  
Gewone woonplek
- Intended place of burial Town Hill Cemetery P.M. Burg  
Voorgenome begraafplek
- Causes of death Epilepsy  
(In the case of the death of a mother when giving birth to a child, the words "first child" or "not first child" must be inserted).  
Oorsaake van dood (In die geval van die dood van 'n moeder by die geboorte van 'n kind, moet die woorde "eerste kind" of "nie eerste kind nie" ingevoeg word).
- Duration of disease or of last illness 14 years  
Duur van kwaal of laaste siekte
- Name of medical practitioner Dr. K. B. Wright  
Naam van geneeskundige praktijner

## INFORMANT.—BERIGGEWER.

- Original signature (or mark) G. H. Chatton  
Eie handtekening (of merk)
- Qualification Person Causing Burial  
Bevoegdheid
- Residence 120 Chapel Street P.M. Burg  
Woonplek

To be filled in when the form is signed before a Justice of the Peace or Police Officer.  
Moet ingevul word wanneer die vorm geteken word voor 'n Vredereger of Polisiebeampte.

Signed before me at \_\_\_\_\_ on this the \_\_\_\_\_  
Geteken voor my te \_\_\_\_\_ op hede die \_\_\_\_\_

day of \_\_\_\_\_ 19\_\_\_\_  
dag van \_\_\_\_\_

Justice of the Peace or Police Officer.—Vredereger of Polisiebeampte.

The following spaces are reserved for the use of an Assistant District Registrar and of the District Registrar.  
Die volgende ruimtes is vir die gebruik van die Assistent-distriksregistrateur en van die Distriksregistrateur.

|                                                                |                                |                                                                  |
|----------------------------------------------------------------|--------------------------------|------------------------------------------------------------------|
| When registered or received<br>Wanneer geregistreer of ontvang | 19____                         | Station<br>Standplaas                                            |
| (Signature)<br>(Handtekening)                                  |                                | Assistant District Registrar.<br>Assistent-distriksregistrateur. |
| When registered<br>Wanneer geregistreer                        | 17 <sup>th</sup> November 1941 | District<br>Distrik                                              |
| (Signature)<br>(Handtekening)                                  | <u>Ambedkar</u>                | District Registrar.<br>Distriksregistrateur.                     |
| No. of entry<br>No. van inskrywing                             | 1024                           |                                                                  |

- To be given in the case of an infant less than 1 year who dies in the institution where it was born.
- Moet aangegee word in die geval van 'n kind onder 1 jaar wat sterf in die inrigting waar dit gebore is.

For instructions see reverse of form.  
Vir instruksies sien agterkant.

This margin must be left blank for binding purposes.—Hierdie ruimte moet oopgelaat word vir inbinding.

Arthur's Death Certificate – 17<sup>th</sup> November, 1941



*Roberts Road Jewish Cemetery 2026*



*The graves in the cemetery*



*The Memorial Board at the Cemetery, with Arthur Lewin*



*The name corrected to Arthur Loon, June ,2026*