

Emile R. Heler Science



Emile Rogier Heler, Bay Area journalist, foreign correspondent and author, died September 11 at his home in San Rafael after a long struggle with cancer and liver failure as a result of contracting hepatitis C. He was 55.

In the mid-1960s, Mr. **Heler** worked for United Press International in Detroit, Chicago and New York before becoming the youngest foreign correspondent for UPI in London, Frankfurt and Munich, where he was bureau chief for three years.

A newspaperman known for his empathy for the underdog and the relentless courage of his convictions, Mr. **Heler** took pride in being fired early in his career -- after he ran the first-ever picture of an African American athlete in the Dearborn, Mich., newspaper.

Born in Brussels, Belgium in 1941, he was a "hidden child" who survived the Holocaust when his parents, aided by the resistance, carried him on a perilous journey through France and into Switzerland.

The family eventually immigrated to the United States and settled in Michigan. By the time Mr. **Heler** graduated from Wayne State University in 1964, he had already worked for three weekly newspapers as well as the Flint Journal and the Detroit Times.

In 1968 a lucrative offer from the Free Press brought him back from Europe to Detroit. But a 267- day strike -- then the longest and costliest newspaper strike in the nation's history -- shut down both of the city's major dailies, and Mr. **Heler** wound up playing a pivotal role in producing the city's alternative paper during the protracted negotiations.

After the strike, he relocated to Toronto where he was assigned by the Toronto Star as a South American correspondent focusing primarily on travel and cultural features -- one of which detailed his adventures in the Amazon jungles following a trail left by William Burroughs 40 years earlier.

During this period, he was arrested by Colombian authorities and imprisoned for two years. He was accused of being a "Mafia mastermind" after he had interviewed guerrilla insurgents and wrote political articles uncomplimentary to the right-wing regime.

Mr. **Heler's** book, "Down in Colombia," dealt with this period, documenting his imprisonment, during which he believed he contracted the hepatitis, which later killed him.

The book details how he inadvertently became caught up in the war on drugs -- and ultimately becomes the first foreigner ever to survive Colombia's notorious Central Penitentiary.

After his release from prison in 1977, he returned to the United States, where he went to work as news editor of the Vallejo Times-Herald before a strike forced him to resign and begin work on his book, "Down in Colombia."

A music lover and jazz aficionado, Mr. **Heler** also wrote "Lester Leaps In," a biography of the great tenor saxophonist, Lester Young, as well as several shorter works.

He is survived by his wife, Cora Baron-**Heler**; his daughters, Andrea **Heler** of Royal Oak, Mich., and Melanie Baron-**Heler** of Portland; two sons, Michael **Heler** of Ferndale, Mich., and Jason Baron- **Heler** of Mill Valley; his sister, Nora Stark of Port Jefferson, N.Y.; and one grandson.