

Gideon Rosenbluth 1921-2011

It is with great sadness that we report that Gideon Rosenbluth passed away in August of this year. Gideon was a highly respected member of this department, the Canadian economics community and, more broadly, of the larger community of economists around the world.

A recent obituary posted in various newspapers described the start of Gideon's life as follows, "Born in Berlin, Germany, Gideon was the second of three children. The family fled Nazi Germany in 1933, moving to England where he went to school. When the war started, he was part of the group of Jewish refugees interned and shipped to camps in Canada. That experience made him self-sufficient, strong and to some degree shaped his politics. He always was on the left, supporting progressive causes, writing and actively working for social change."

The details behind his experiences at the time of the War are more interesting than that short description lets on. When war broke out in 1939 Gideon was already taking his first year at the London School of Economics. But in June 1940 his studies were rudely interrupted when he, like many other young Jewish refugees, was suddenly forced interned as "enemy aliens". A month later he was shipped to Canada and placed in an internment camp in Sherbrooke, Quebec. Conditions were deplorable, and the sense of injustice all the greater since these young men all wanted to fight Hitler not suffer imprisonment and be forced to work in locomotive repair shops or forestry camps. It was only two years later after the British Government acknowledged its error that these inmates could secure their freedom if they were able to find a sponsor in Canada who would guarantee their good behaviour. Luckily for Gideon he was sponsored by a benefactor in Montreal, and was allowed to enter the University of Toronto to read economics.

Gideon received a BA from the University of Toronto and his PhD from Columbia. He held jobs Wartime Prices and Trade Board and the National Bureau of Economic Research in New York and academic positions at Princeton and Stanford before taking up a position at Queen's University as part of a generation that revitalized economics in Canada.

In 1962, Gideon left Queen's to join UBC and his impact here was immediate. Anthony Scott, a friend and colleague recalls Gideon's arrival and participation in the department as follows,

“Unlike the department’s other recruiting at the time, Gideon's arrival was of an already experienced, mature, recognised researcher. In initial correspondence with the Head, he had rejected the idea of spending time with freshmen in the introductory course. He felt he had done that already in his three earlier appointments. He now looked forward to plunging into the development of UBC’s senior and graduate courses and programs.

This he did. At various times he lectured, gave seminars and wrote papers in econometrics, mathematical economics and industrial organization. He had warm relationships with his best students, a few of them going on to become co-author with him.

Within the department, Gideon was a popular colleague. He made a point of befriending new arrivals, especially those who shared his progressive views in politics, and/or his passion for skiing. (He was an enthusiastic skier, making regular trips to Mount Baker. Old friends and new were invited to drive down and join him on the slopes. Eventually he and Mimi acquired a cabin there.) “

Others among his colleagues agree with this assessment of Gideon’s role, emphasizing his support of new department members and his willingness to help them and senior colleagues with problems of exposition in math, econometrics, theory, etc.

Gideon was highly regarded in the wider Canadian and world economic community as well. He served both as the President of the Canadian Economics Association and the editor of the Canadian Journal of Economics. He was also a Fellow of the Royal Society of Canada. In a 1968 assessment of the top work in economics done in Canada after WWII, Harry Johnson singled out Gideon’s book Concentration in Canadian Manufacturing Industries as having “attained a classic status in its field”. Gideon continued to contribute to economics at a high level in the decades that followed, publishing his last article quite recently.

Gideon’s contributions outside of economics were also substantial. He was an elected member of the UBC Senate and was very active in faculty affairs. Speaking of this part of Gideon’s activities, Tony Scott says,

“Within the department, his attitude to the allocation of duties and courses reminded one of European universities: each professor “owning” the field in which he/she specialized. But this would have been a very limited view of his outlook, for Gideon took an almost collectivist view of university management. Because universities, like any organization, threatened to infringe on the contractual rights of their faculties, the faculties must organize to protect these rights, and to make other changes and improvements. Thus, although his suggestions about departmental affairs were made on an individual basis, mostly in argument with the Head, his concerns about the University’s actions and policies led to his vigorously participating in UBC’s faculty association. At a national level, he was the president of the Canadian Association of University Teachers (CAUT) in 1966/67 and served on the CAUT salaries committee.

His greatest campaign was pointed at the university's compulsory retirement policy. It was waged around the time of his own retirement. Both as an individual and as a faculty-association member he criticized the policy as inefficient. Furthermore it infringed on the "rights" of professors - this at a time when the Trudeau government had made individual rights more explicit. Finally, as his own retirement took effect, he took his objections to court. After a noteworthy hearing, he lost and his retirement was final. Nevertheless, in a matter of a few years, Canadian universities had abolished compulsory retirement."

He was also very active in the progressive economics movement. He was involved in the founding of the BC office of the Canadian Centre for Policy Alternatives and served on their research advisory committee for years. His social conscience was an animating force for him and served to frame his approach to economics. As Tony Scott says,

"His progressive views led to reports and articles, some with others in the department. In 1986 he and Bob Allen edited *Restraining the Economy*, a collection of economic chapters analysing and criticising B.C.'s then Social-Credit government's economic policies. Apart from Allen, the authors included Chris Archibald, Chuck Blackorby, David Donaldson, Angela Redish and Bill Schworm. It was an unfamiliar project, for many of the usual economic-policy topics come under national, not provincial, jurisdiction."

As a person, Gideon's intense interest in life, his passion, and his sense of humour came through as soon as you met him. In the many realms in which he operated one could see that he set high, firm standards but also that he was a generous spirit who was genuinely interested in other people. His many friends inside and outside of economics will miss him.

*Dr. David Green
Department of Economics
Professor and Department Head
The University of British Columbia*

(Author's title given as of the time of writing)