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Meyer Jerison, 1922-1995

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Meyer Jerison 1922–1995

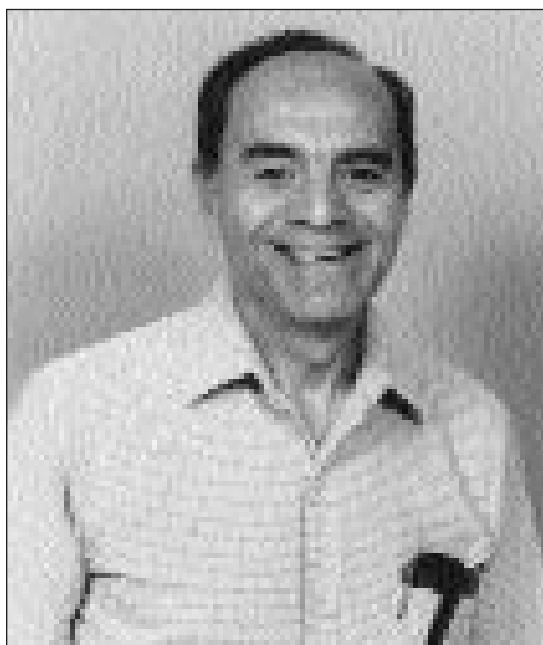
Leonard Gillman and Melvin Henriksen

Meyer Jerison, our close friend for forty-some years and long-time collaborator, died on March 13, 1995, after battling cancer for several years.

Jerry, as he was known to almost everyone, including his wife, was born in Bialystok, Poland, on November 28, 1922, but came to the U.S. in 1929 and was naturalized in 1933. His early education was in Jewish parochial schools in New York City, where he mastered Hebrew and the Torah along with the standard academic subjects. He earned a bachelor's degree and Phi Beta Kappa key at City College in 1943; a master's in applied mathematics from Brown in 1947; and in 1950 his Ph.D. in Mathematics at Michigan, under the direction of Sumner Myers. Along the way, he worked as a physicist at NACA (now NASA) in Cleveland (1944–1946) and as a research engineer at Lockheed Aircraft (1952) and taught at Case Institute (1945–1946) and later as a research associate at Illinois (1949–1951). While in Cleveland he met Miriam Schwartz, whom he married in 1945. (He died just before their fiftieth wedding anniversary.) In 1951 he joined the faculty of Purdue University, where he remained until his retirement in 1991. He was chair of the Division of Mathematical Sciences from 1969 to 1975. Over the years, he was an active member of AMS and MAA, notably as Book Reviews edi-

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tor of the *Bulletin of the AMS*, 1980–1985; governor of the Indiana Section of MAA, 1981–1984; and more recently as a member of the MAA Publications Committee. In addition he served MAA as a member of CUPM and its panels and as an MAA Lecturer. At Purdue he coached the Putnam team both before and after retiring. He was respected by every person he interacted with and was loved by many.

Jerry was an author or coauthor of twenty-odd research papers and at least four times as many reviews, but his memory will live on longest for his collaboration with Leonard Gillman on the

book *Rings of continuous functions*. (I was initially a coauthor, but foolishly dropped out.—MH)

Jerry had nine Ph.D. students. One of them, John Mack, now at Kentucky, singles out Jerry's demands for excellence in exposition as initially frustrating for him, though later he came to appreciate Jerry's concern that his students be properly trained in writing mathematics. Mack also describes Jerry's genuine interest in his doctoral students as people: "At mathematics meetings and conferences, he always took time to chat and to catch up on the personal details of my life, often over dinner." Joe Kist, another of Jerry's students, now at New Mexico State, expected to be handed a thesis problem and was taken aback when Jerry insisted he find his own. Later he realized that Jerry had introduced him to mathematical independence, for which he remained forever grateful.

Meyer Jerison is survived by his wife; two sons, Michael (professor of economics at SUNY Albany), and David (professor of mathematics at MIT); a brother, Harry (professor of psychology at UCLA); a sister, Jean Blum; and three grandchildren. Long well established in his own right for his work in functional analysis as well as in rings of continuous functions, he became even better known as David Jerison's father. (John Mack recalls a conversation with a young colleague who told him that Jerison could not have been his advisor because he was too old. Mack recounted the exchange to Jerry, who "fairly burst with pride".)

The two of us (LG and MH) joined the Purdue faculty in fall 1952, where we met Jerry as well as one another. During that academic year, the new trio participated in seminars together and embarked on joint research. Our different mathematical backgrounds meshed nicely and led during the next few years to several papers, including joint papers by each of the three pairs and one triple paper, as well as to the book. These collaborations laid the foundations for the rest of our careers and formed the basis for lifelong friendships.

Meyer Jerison was an exemplary citizen of the mathematical world: a superb lecturer and a dedicated and enthusiastic teacher, revered by his students. His commitment to excellence was inspiring. He was a calm, steady influence, and a bundle of good judgment. He stood up for important matters of principle without letting annoyances distract him. His passing leaves a void in the mathematical community and especially in the lives of the authors of this article.

There is no more appropriate way to close this account than with the following eloquent letter from David Jerison:

My father loved mathematics; he was a mathematics maven. He liked a good math lecture the way one might enjoy a good concert or sports event. He took pleasure in those performances largely because he liked mathematical people, and he liked to watch them succeed. He also complimented mathematicians behind their backs, a welcome inversion of the usual gossip.

Mathematical parents might be interested to know that I don't remember him as ever intervening in my mathematical training. He did not encourage me to become a mathematician. In particular, I got the message that doing well in school, at least through college, gave no guarantee that one could be creative in mathematics. Nevertheless, his enthusiasm for mathematics was hard to disguise. He reminded me much later that he did intervene once when he discovered that after one year of algebra in 8th grade, I only knew how to solve quadratic equations using the quadratic formula, rather than by factorization or completing the square. He gave me an old "college algebra" text that summer, and I worked a few hundred problems. That summer I also found some MAA contest problem books on his bookshelf.

My brother remarked at the funeral that my father taught us almost exclusively by example. His example was one of energetic devotion to work and professional service and to our family. The command "Be careful" was banished by my father as redundant or absurd. In retrospect, as a parent, I am amazed at my parents' forbearance concerning this and many other injunctions.