

Judith Ruth Ginsburg

October 18, 1944 — December 28, 2002

Judith Ruth Ginsburg, Associate Professor of Classics, died at home on December 28, 2002, with Miri Amihai, her partner of twenty-four years, at her side. Born on October 18, 1944 and raised in Omaha, Nebraska, Judy had been, since her appointment in 1976, one of Cornell's most beloved teachers and colleagues.

From family through those who knew her only in recent years, a consistent picture emerges. Her cousin Liz remembers her "gentle ways," her "subtle and surprisingly wicked sense of humor," and her "loving generous soul." An early baseball fan whose arm is remembered fondly by intramural teammates, Judy was recently photographed in a Giants uniform at Cooperstown's Baseball Hall of Fame. Her brother Jim—who says Judy taught him to throw and defended him from neighborhood bullies—credits his life today to her "tough love." As a child, he was amazed at Judy's ability to say, simply, "I don't know" (surely a source of her students' respect for her). But what inspires him now is the fact that "in her entire life [he] never knew one time she ever caused harm to anyone."

Judy quickly won the respect of her own teachers: Ralph Johnson at Berkeley—where she earned an A.B. degree in Classics, an M.A. degree in Latin, and a Ph.D. degree in Ancient History—describes his experience:

Berkeley, in the late 60s: Outside, as usual, all hell is breaking loose. Here inside where the blinds are drawn and the noise is muffled, the students in my Latin Prose Composition...are staring at their Ciceronian versions of a passage from Henry Clay. I ask the shyest member (having carefully refrained from calling on her till now) to put her translation 'on the board.' As the chalk begins to click and Judy's clauses begin to flower beneath her hand, my astonishment gives way to sullen envy, which dissolves into admiration and joy. It is now no longer clear here who is teaching whom - or rather, it is suddenly all too clear.

But "the shyest member of the class" also went outside. She protested the war in Vietnam and participated in the free-speech movement, landing in jail alongside Mario Savio, who took the spotlight while Judy did her homework. These are early examples of her constant quiet but courageous activism. While still untenured, she protested the Israeli incursion into Lebanon; and her support for the Jewish-Arab Center for Peace at Givat-Haviva never flagged. As with people she loved, so with countries she loved, Judy did not shy away from frank but always fair and good-willed criticism.

Judy generously served both Cornell and her discipline. She was elected to Cornell's Humanities Council; served for sixteen formative years on the Executive Board of Women's Studies; for twenty-two years as Cornell's representative to the American Academy at Rome (where she also spent several semesters as a Visiting Fellow);

and was, at the time of her death, co-chair of the American Philological Association's Nominating Committee. But Judy was especially involved in committees devoted to the interests of vulnerable peoples: for example, the APA's Committee on the Status of Women and Minority Groups (which she chaired from 1985-87). At Cornell, she helped write procedures for handling charges of Sexual Harassment; served on the AIDS advisory Committee; the Committee on Professional Ethics; and the University Benefits Committee (which, during her term, extended benefits to partners of gay and lesbian employees). But Judy did not just serve on committees: she is, for example, remembered as one whom, in the early days of AIDS paranoia, was not afraid literally to extend a loving hand to those afflicted.

Throughout her service, Judy excelled as a teacher and made important contributions to Roman historiography. Her dissertation—published in 1981 as *Tradition and Theme in the Annals of Tacitus*—asked and answered a fruitful question: how did Tacitus adapt the traditional annalistic format, associated primarily with Roman Republican historiography, to shape and add meaning to his narrative of a transformed political system, the principate? Erich Gruen wrote:

She demonstrated brilliantly and convincingly that Tacitus utilized the annalistic form of composition to his own ends, remaining within its framework to give the illusion of conventionality, while manipulating it so as to provide a vehicle for his idiosyncratic reconstruction.

When Judy's book appeared, Tacitean studies were strongly historical in emphasis; since then readings of Tacitus as a historiographer have blossomed, thanks largely to the seeds sown by her.

Judy followed up with several historical and literary studies, steadily developing skills that afforded sharper and more nuanced readings drawing not only on the tools of the historian—epigraphy, numismatics, portraiture—but also on critical insights from her work in Women's Studies. She worked increasingly on figures marginalized by dominant historical traditions and was, at the time of her death, completing an imaginative and methodologically sophisticated reading of Tacitus' depiction of Agrippina. (In her weakened state, she discussed the changes she intended with former Cornell colleague Elizabeth Asmis, who is helping to prepare the manuscript for publication.) Agrippina—the daughter of Germanicus, wife of Claudius and mother of Nero—is the flashiest and most alluring of Roman women, most often discussed with a sensationalism that might have embarrassed even Tacitus. She is thus all the more suited to Judy's approach: a skeptical examination not only of Tacitus' narrative, but also of depictions of Agrippina in sculpture and oratory. Like Judy's first book, this one aims not to uncover lies but to reveal patterns of cultural and social understanding; but unlike the first, which opened up an exciting new field,

this book shows how a frequently read —and misread—historical narrative can be revisited with greater depth, subtlety and insight.

Judy's positive impact on her students was enduring: from the high-school students in Telluride's Summer Program; through undergraduates in History, Classics, and Women's Studies; to the advanced graduate students who wrote outstanding dissertations under her loving but always tough direction. Her goals were to teach the skills students needed to enrich their own readings of ancient texts and to relate those texts to their present personal and political lives. Former graduate student Leslie Collins Edwards said:

As she approached Sallust and Tacitus, so Judy read the texts we produced for her. Of course...our texts not quite so worthy; her efforts caught our errors and extraneous tangents. But Judy's criticism was always positive, always contributing to the healthy delivery of a new argument.

Judy treated her undergraduates with the same respect. Lauren Donovan ('03) said:

[Judy] never provided me with her own answers to my questions...Instead, she asked more questions, listened to my concerns and ultimately showed me how to find my own answers. She helped me learn to trust myself.

Adam Cooper ('03) added:

Her courses...remained mutable and thus drew strength from the interests and talents of her students, and so became personally engaging for each. Every student felt as if the class had been personally designed for him or her, and that each in turn had something unique to contribute.

Judy's career was in some sense the fruition of her characteristically modest high-school ambition – “to teach Latin”. But, according to former student Don McGuire, “to say Judy taught Latin is like saying Bernini built buildings.”

Pietro Pucci traces Judy's success as a teacher largely to her ability to admire her students:

Most teachers try to win the admiration of their students...I think Judy tried to find a student to admire. She knew that the talents of students do not appear...as flashing things, but are hidden, sometimes covered. So she looked hard; she would not trust bureaucratic papers...she would like to see deeper; and when she would find that student, she would be helpful, helpful, helpful, because she knew how precious this student is, and what a chance this student gives to us the teacher and the values which we want to transmit to the younger generations, values of scholarship and understanding, of passion for research, passion for understanding the world.

Pucci also traces Judy's lifelong reserve, together with her ability to laugh, to deep wisdom.

Throughout her life, Judy had a keen sense of what really mattered. She was, according to her friend Patti Jacobson, a deeply observant Jew, not in terms of following rituals but in the sense that “her life was defined by the observance of the ethical mitzvot: she believed strongly in performing acts of tikkun olam (repair of the world) and tzedakah (justice).” This sensibility contributed to controversy surrounding the ritual of her burial; she is thus buried in the part of Lakeview Cemetery where her sympathies no doubt lie, with various marginalized members of her faith. But Judy—whose career was dedicated to the lives and memories of marginalized peoples—would surely be among the first to appreciate this little irony. We shall miss her laughter and the deep wisdom that informed it.

Lynne Abel, Jennifer Whiting, Jeffrey Rusten