NOTES de la SMC

Activist U of T math professor Chandler Davis devoted himself to progressive causes

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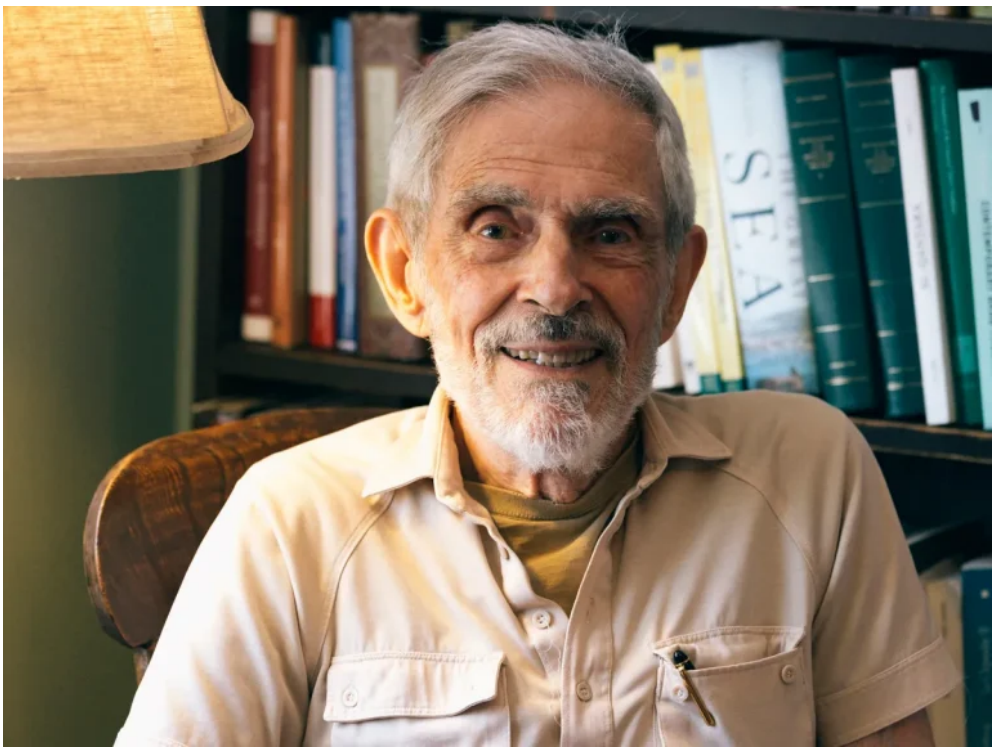

Chandler Davis, *Photo provided to the Globe and Mail courtesy of the family.*

Mathematician and activist Chandler Davis refused to answer questions in 1953 when called before the House Un-American Activities Committee (HUAC), which was investigating allegations of communist activity in the United States. Unlike most of the "uncooperative" witnesses, he invoked the First Amendment of the U.S. Constitution, which guarantees free speech, rather than using the Fifth Amendment's protection against self-incrimination.

Deeply committed to his beliefs, Professor Davis wanted to establish a precedent that HUAC had no right to question witnesses about their political affiliations. He knew that he risked being cited for contempt of Congress and jailed, but he wanted to raise awareness of the dangers of HUAC.

Prof. Davis was consequently fired from his job teaching mathematics at the University of Michigan.

On Dec. 3, 1959, the Supreme Court refused to hear his case and he surrendered to serve six months in prison.

He continued his research before, during and after his incarceration, and retained his sense of humour throughout. A footnote to a mathematics paper that he wrote while incarcerated reads: "Research supported in part by the Federal Prison System. Opinions expressed in this paper are the author's and are not necessarily those of the Bureau of Prisons."

During the years between his dismissal from Michigan and his imprisonment, he applied for many different positions but was consistently declined. It became apparent that he was blacklisted; the blacklisting continued even after he got out of jail in 1960.

In 1962, with support from the renowned Canadian mathematician H.S.M. Coxeter, Prof. Davis accepted a position as professor of mathematics at the University of Toronto. He lived in Canada for the following six decades, distinguishing himself as an unusually inspiring and principled man.

On Sept. 24, Prof. Davis died in Toronto at the age of 96 from a probable stroke.

Prof. Davis was a devoted husband, father and grandfather, a noted mathematician, an extremely dedicated political activist, an author of science fiction stories, a staunch feminist and a fine poet and composer. He never seemed defeated by or bitter about the obstacles he encountered. He worked tirelessly toward a more egalitarian world, participating in many progressive activities throughout his long life.

Horace Chandler Davis was born on Aug. 12, 1926, in Ithaca, N.Y., the eldest of five children of Marian R. Davis and Horace Bancroft Davis. His parents were economists whose political views were very left-wing. Like Chandler, his father was fired from his position at a university because he refused to answer questions asked by HUAC.

Chandler (also known as Chan) received his PhD in mathematics from Harvard University in 1950 prior to joining the University of Michigan's Department of Mathematics.

When he finally arrived at the University of Toronto, after being incarcerated and blacklisted in the United States, he flourished. He was an excellent teacher, supervised 15 doctoral theses and continued to make significant research contributions to mathematics.

"Chandler Davis was a very respected mathematician whose research included important contributions to linear algebra and to operator theory, two areas that I have also worked in," Dalhousie University professor emeritus Heydar Radjavi says. "His work is often cited and relied upon by researchers across the world."

Prof. Davis's teaching inspired many students to become mathematicians.

"I admired him greatly," writes James Arthur, University Professor and Mossman Chair at the University of Toronto who served a term as president of the American Mathematical Society. "His course in real and complex analysis, which I took as a third-year undergraduate at Toronto, was a transformative experience for me, and, I would say, for every other student in the course."

Prof. Davis was a left-wing radical who participated in a huge number of progressive causes, both on campus and off. One such initiative was co-founding the Faculty Reform Caucus (FRC), a group of progressive U of T professors who engaged in several forms of protest, including rallying support for striking teaching assistants and other workers.

"When former U.S. president George [H.W.] Bush was being awarded a U of T honorary degree," recalled U of T professor emeritus Richard Lee, "Chandler co-organized a protest where 18 FRC faculty, led by him and Ursula Franklin, stood up and ostentatiously walked out at a key moment in the ceremony."

Prof. Davis also opposed the Vietnam War and was chairman of the Toronto Anti-Draft Program. He was active in Science for Peace and often participated in the Toronto Vigil against the Occupation of the Territories. He regularly attended the Davis-Markert-Nickerson Lecture on Academic and Intellectual Freedom, established in the 1990s by the University of Michigan Faculty Senate in answer to the university's treatment of faculty who had been attacked by HUAC, including Prof. Davis himself.

Prof. Lee also recalls "Chandler's tireless efforts to support persecuted academics around the world; local, national, U.S.-based or overseas. He was a key link in an international network of protest and truth-telling; he brought many U of T colleagues on board."

Prof. Davis's last such effort took place about 11 weeks before his death. From his hospital bed, he co-organized and spoke at an online event in support of imprisoned dissident Russian mathematician Azat Miftakhov.

Prof. Davis began his talk, "It's a pleasure to welcome you to this panel in support of our young colleague Azat Miftakhov and other political prisoners; in support, in particular, of Russians courageously speaking out against the war, and, more generally, in support of freedom of conscience and peace. It means a lot to me to be opening this session because I have a special bond to Azat Miftakhov. I was a political prisoner myself, years ago, not in Russia but in the USA. I was not much older than he is now; like him I had a wife standing by me outside; and like him I tried to go ahead doing mathematics while in prison. It was hard, but not as hard as Azat's imprisonment, and it was only half a year."

He often raised political issues within the community of mathematicians. Many mathematicians resented such activities, arguing that it was wrong to "politicize" mathematics.

But he also had ardent supporters, including Mary Gray, Distinguished Professor of Mathematics and Statistics at American University, who in 1971 became the founding president of the Association for Women in Mathematics. She called Prof. Davis's death "a great loss."

"Many mathematicians came to recognize the inequities in the mathematics community reflecting those in the world abroad, but Chandler was one who worked to do something about it and understood that it is necessary to engage others," Prof. Gray said. "When women mathematicians came to understand that organizing was essential were the situation ever to improve, it was Chandler who joined and, in some cases, inspired the movement that led to the Association for Women in Mathematics."

As implied by Prof. Gray, Prof. Davis was a very staunch feminist. He and his wife, the distinguished historian Natalie Zemon Davis, agreed that their marriage would be based on gender equality. They shared the care of their three children, even during periods of their lives when they held professorships at universities on opposite sides of North America, he at Toronto and she at the University of California, Berkeley and then Princeton.

When Chan turned 65, he was mandatorily retired and became professor emeritus. That did not change his life very much. He still maintained his research, taught some courses, and supervised PhD students. He continued to serve as editor of the Mathematical Intelligencer, a scholarly journal.

In 2010, Josh Lukin compiled and edited *It Walks in Beauty*, a compilation of some of Chan's essays and stories. This book is in the Aqueduct Press series of Heirloom Books, which aims to bring back into print and preserve work that has helped make feminist science fiction what it is today.

"Chan retained his love of and interest in life right up to his last day," his son, Aaron Davis, said. "He thought about his passing and of the passing of ideas and creativity between the generations and he expressed these beautifully in his poetry and songs. He also spoke through his actions – by example."

His daughter Simone Davis recalls his insatiable curiosity about the world and all manner of natural phenomena, creative expressions and human struggles. "To me, the reason Chandler was so stalwart about supporting struggles for justice, freedom and equity was his love for the world," she said. "His political life, including when he found himself an outlier or offered a hand to outliers, was as brave as it was because he loved the hell out of this world, and was ready to stand up on the basis of that love. Others felt invited by him to do likewise, I've been learning since he's passed. I'm so grateful he was my father."

Prof. Davis leaves his wife, Natalie Zemon Davis; son, Aaron Davis; daughters, Hannah Davis Taieb and Simone Davis; four grandchildren and one great-grandchild; and his sisters, Mina Caulfield and Terry Davis.

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