

## # Robert Sonn  Cohen (1923-2017)

On June 19<sup>th</sup> 2017, Robert Sonn  Cohen passed away at age 94. Bob Cohen, as he was universally known, studied physics at Wesleyan University, and completed his PhD at Yale. From 1959 he was professor of physics and philosophy at Boston University; and at different times he was chair of each department. An obituary penned by Don Howard (Philosophy, Notre Dame) and Alisa Bokulich (Philosophy, Boston University) is available, with pics, on Boston University's Centre for Philosophy and History of Science web site: <http://www.bu.edu/cphs/about/robert-cohen/>.



**Opening of the Robert S. Cohen Philosophy Library, Tsinghua University, Beijing, 2010. Established by the gift of Bob's 23,000-book library to the university.**

The seventeenth century philosopher-theologian-priest Marin Mersenne was the great ‘networker’ of his age. With a mail list of about 140, and by constant letter writing and exchanging communications he kept the diverse and scattered community of natural philosophers, astronomers, theologians, and mathematicians in contact with each other, and informed about the progress of each other’s work. He defended Galileo and a number of other ‘progressive’ thinkers of the time. This informal grouping of scholars led, soon after his death, to the more formal Académie des Sciences in Paris and the Royal Society in London. Four hundred years later, in a transformed world, Bob Cohen might be thought of as a latter-day Mersenne. His authorship of so many papers and books, his editorship of 100s of collections, his convening of countless small and large meetings, his unfailing generosity and support of progressive and humanistic causes are all Mersenne-like.

Bob’s address at the 50<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the BU Centre for HPS is on Youtube at: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=tvd8YoPiL88>. Along with so much else, it nicely catches his unrivalled modern-age Mersenne role in HPS studies.

Bob had a long interest in education, both broadly as a vehicle for social and cultural enhancement, and more specifically in supporting a more informed, authentic, and responsible science education. The former concern is elaborated in his:

Cohen, R.S.: 1955, ‘On the Marxist Philosophy of Education’. In N.B. Henry (ed.) *Modern Philosophies and Education: The 54<sup>th</sup> Yearbook of the National Association for the Study of Education*, NSSE, Chicago, pp.175-214.

The latter concern in his:

Cohen, R.S.: 1964, ‘Individuality and Common Purpose: The Philosophy of Science’, *The Science Teacher* 31(4).

This paper was initially given as a plenary address to a meeting of the US Science Teachers Association. ‘The largest audience I have ever had in my life’, is how he described the occasion. The paper was published as the third of the ‘Golden Oldies’ series in *Science & Education*, 1994, 3(4), 393-407.

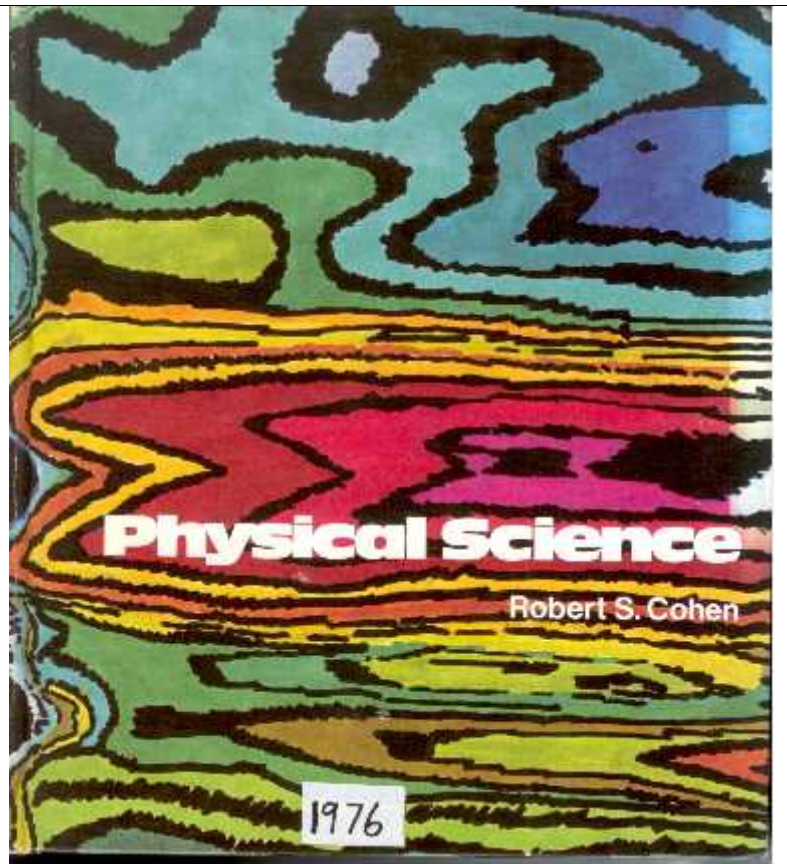
Understandably his education concerns and location in Boston led him, with his life-long friend, and fellow Wesleyan student, Gerald Holton, to engagement in the writing and trialling of the *Harvard Project Physics* course. Both Bob and Gerald Holton, a teenage refugee from Nazi Austria, later served as Trustees of Wesleyan University. Bob never forgot that Wesleyan, a former Methodist-controlled university, hired him, a Marxist, during the height of the disgraceful McCarthyist purges of US universities. Countless universities, including the biggest names, rolled over and abnegated their primary commitment to academic freedom and pursuit of knowledge.

Bob also published an excellent textbook for General Science: *Physical Science*, Holt, Rinehart & Winston, New York (1975). Something of Bob’s own approach to science can be read in the book’s Introduction:

*Modern science developed along with the modern European and American world of nations, exploration, international commerce, great cities, widespread education, religious tolerance, factory production, massive warfare, and political democracy.*

*Science has all the marks of Western civilization: a great potential for good and also for evil and destruction. And yet, within itself, science can offer to men and women a model for understanding, modesty and independence.*

*Newton once wrote: 'if I have seen farther than others, it has been by standing on the shoulders of giants'. And later, Thomas Young: "Much as I venerate the name of Newton, I am not therefore obliged to believe he was infallible'.*



These educational endeavours manifest Bob's basic Enlightenment commitment that science and philosophy need to be conducted together and learn from each other; and both need engage and dialogue with cultural beliefs and worldviews.

I went to Boston University forty years ago, in 1978 on my first sabbatical leave from UNSW. Bob, as Dean, then oversaw with Marx Wartofsky as Chairperson, one of the most dynamic and impressive Philosophy Departments in the USA, and perhaps a good deal beyond the USA. Among its faculty were Abner Shimony, Marx Wartofsky, Alasdair McIntyre, Michael Martin, Thomas McCarthy, John Findlay, Milic Capek, Peter Bertocci, John Lavelly, Joseph Agassi, Erazim Kohak, George Berry, Paul Sagal, Judson Webb, and younger faculty such as Elizabeth Rapaport and Jay Hullett. The full spectrum of philosophical positions, from Absolute Idealism to Christian Personalism, to Marxist Materialism were represented but mutual respect and appreciation was obvious in the department. There were political and philosophical differences aplenty, but all were united in a common commitment to decency, respect, and pursuit of the academic vocation. Undoubtedly staff brought these commitments to the department, but Bob fostered them, and set the example from the top.

His approach to general philosophy was mirrored in his approach to philosophy of science. For Bob, and his scholarly partner and close friend Marx Wartofsky, philosophy of science needs to be informed by the best scientific practice, by close attention to the history of science, and by input from whatever other academic disciplines are willing to contribute, including Music, Art, Theology, Mathematics, and from cultural and social movements more broadly. Bob's commitment to 'catholic' philosophy of science can be seen in the diverse authors and the Tables of Contents of the 300+ volumes of *Boston Studies in Philosophy of Science* of which he was general editor.

When I went to Boston University I had no reputation, no publications, and no PhD. The only point of contact was a letter of recommendation written by my philosophy teacher, Wallis Suchting, who Bob knew. Bob typed and posted long and detailed letters to me in Australia about how to organise housing, banking and everything else to make my arrival and early days easy. I had no profile at all, but was invited to Centre dinners and functions; Bob went out of his way to introduce me to guest speakers and visitors to the Centre. This hospitality extended to being invited to visit his wife Robyn and himself at their summer house on Cape

Cod. Needless to say, in doing all this there was absolutely nothing in it for him. As many have pointed out, this was not special behaviour; Bob supported most people with whom he had contact in the same manner; and did so for decade after decade after decade. Bob was a mentor, an exemplar, and friend for hundreds of scholars around the world.

Michael R. Matthews

### **Gerald Holton: *Bob Cohen: At the Beginning***

As other contributors to the Obituary Notices on Bob Cohen have correctly and amply recorded, Bob was a unique and altogether admirable person, as thinker, scholar, writer, teacher, mentor, educator, organizer, leader, family man, friend, and more. He was learned, wise, and fundamentally optimistic in the face of some cruel and undeserved setbacks. His contributions during his long life, in writings and institution building, will live far beyond those who knew him personally.

Yet there is one more aspect of Bob to celebrate—his early beginnings and the formation of his characteristic later aims and achievements. At it happened, I was lucky to get a glimpse of it. In fact, in the Fall of 1940, just a few months after having arrived in the USA as a refugee from war-torn Europe, I came to know Bob as my first (and longest) American friend, as fellow student and co-conspirator—while both of us were still teen-agers, all those nearly 80 years ago.

So, let's open the time capsule.

Bob was at that point a sophomore student at Wesleyan University in Middletown, Connecticut, his major studies being physics and philosophy. I had arrived that year as a senior, interested in physics and the humanities. We both enjoyed life at the College, and eventually came to love that institution (so much so that decades later both he and I served on its Board of Trustees for many terms).

But in fact, during those student days, we both were in essential ways strangers in that little paradise. Wesleyan had only recently severed its ties to the Methodist Church that had founded it in the 1830s. The College's Christian Association still had a high standing. Attendance at chapel was encouraged. The dozen or so Fraternities (and of course sports) largely set the main tone of social life. As to politics, the great majority of students went to rallies for Wendell Willkie, who was running that year against FDR. As to World War II in Europe--which would spill over to America and expand in the following year, causing most of the students to be drafted—that was then still at most the subject of puzzled ignorance.

The saving side for Bob and me, however, was the very good liberal arts education available from excellent teachers. We may have first met in one of the physics courses, offered by the superb teacher/researcher/mentor Walter G. Cady, chair of his three-person physics department faculty. Or we may have first seen each other at the Physics Club, with its dozen undergrads and grad students.

Either way, on first meeting young Bob, he essentially looked and felt as he did later, throughout his life: bright, with a welcoming expression, eager to learn, open to anything serious (with a reserve of skepticism) or funny, and full of ideas and curiosity. I think it would have taken hard work for someone not to like Bob on first encounter, then and later.

More hidden than was in Bob a certain degree of adventurousness and shrewdness, which I came to admire as I caught some signals of it. Take one of the great puzzles for me at Wesleyan at that time: *Where were the women?* Wesleyan students were all boys. Not one woman in the faculty of the 20 or so departments. None among the heads of the administration, or on the Board of Trustees. "Girls" came to the Campus only briefly, on special occasions such as the expensive Big Band dances (all well dressed, mostly well behaved). Or as special treats, such as the unforgettable meeting that year of the Wesleyan Debating Club; its opponents had come from Mount Holyoke College. On the docket: "Resolved: A Woman's Place is in the Home".

Of course I could not afford a “date” while at Wesleyan. But Bob, by some miracle, had frequent visits from a bright and endearing young lady, named Robin. The two seemed happy and much attracted to each other. Moreover, Bob knew how, for their meetings, to get away from Wesleyan, an institution that from its beginning by design was for “rustication” and isolation. *For Bob had a car!* A sweet little open one, with a rumble seat in back. As the two lovebirds sat in front while we were roaming through the countryside, by invitation I sat in back, amazed at my luck to be with them, and aware that nothing like it could have happened to me back in Vienna.

At some point that year, Bob and I discovered the mere beginnings of our common life-long passions: to write and publish books. Somehow we were contacted by the Schaum Publishing Company. It asked us to write for them an *Outline of Physics*. That joint book actually happened, as did our much desired pay-off from the publisher: \$ 50.- each! Not bad at the time, at least for me, who never before in America had such riches at hand.

Finally: with Bob’s passing just at this disturbing political turn in our Nation’s history, his type of person, so precious for all who knew him and benefitted from him, has been, for so many, receding as an indisputable role model: an intellectual who got great things done, and who was also a dedicated fighter for justice and dignity for all.

It is that much more important for all of us to celebrate Bob’s life.