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# Meyer Rabban

PSYCHOLOGY FACULTY 1949 – 1988

A Sarah Lawrence student enters her teacher's office for the last conference of the semester and finds him seated behind an old manual typewriter. The teacher gestures for the student to sit opposite him.

The keys begin clacking, accompanied by a running narrative of what is being typed: "You have done exemplary work in this class. ..." This might seem an unusual approach to student evaluations, but for Meyer Rabban, it was a ritual that expressed his connection to each individual he taught during nearly 40 years at Sarah Lawrence.

From 1949 through 1988, Rabban's students were privileged to experience his quirky, lively approach to teaching. This much-beloved psychology faculty member, who passed away June 8 at the age of 90, was a passionate believer in the College's approach to education. He loved donning, which he described as "this ongoing involvement with the student ... enhancing, in every way you can, their becoming a better and better person."

A psychologist who earned his doctorate from Columbia and lived most of his adult life in New York City and Westchester County, Rabban came from a mining and steel town in West Virginia, where he was one of very few Jews in a community populated by immigrants from a variety of European countries. In a 1999 interview, Rabban identified this pluralistic neighborhood experience as one of the most important factors in the formation of his character. Throughout his years as a teacher at both Sarah Lawrence and Bank Street College of Education, as well as director of the Windward School in White Plains and of the therapeutic Camp Rainbow, he maintained a strong conviction that environment powerfully shapes the individual.

Rabban's students conducted fieldwork at the Early Childhood Center; in conferences, he reviewed their observations of child behavior, prodding them to explore the meaning and motivations behind children's actions. A strong proponent of free painting, Rabban thought early childhood teachers should provide bright colors and a judgment-free atmosphere so every child could openly

express her feelings on paper. In this way, painting became both a developmental process and a therapeutic exercise, and the teacher became a facilitator in the child's efforts to work through emotions which might otherwise overwhelm her. In "When a Child Paints," Rabban wrote that free painting "helps the child recognize that creativity is potential in everyone. He experiences the fact of this potential and then realizes that within himself lies power for choice and individual formulation." In the same article, Rabban also stated, "Anyone can convey feeling—his own feeling—through color, space, and form."

Conveying feeling was something Rabban himself did well. Throughout the years, he transmitted his compassion for and fascination with the individual child's emotional process to his own students, inspiring many to pursue careers in education. Kiyoshi Najita '88, a K-12 teacher for 20 years, says, "His class and the work I did at the Early Childhood Center laid the foundations for my becoming a teacher. He taught that by understanding how children think, you could grow to love them and want to work with children as a career."

Indeed, Rabban cared about all of his students. Speaking of his aptitude for teaching first-year studies, Rabban said in 1999, "I really became immersed in the importance Sarah Lawrence [placed] on dealing with the live human being in front of you, who was very complicated and special, and [relating to them] accordingly."

Rabban nurtured generations of Sarah Lawrence students, helping them to understand the processes at work in personality development and to respect and cherish young children's expression as an essential component in their evolution. The teachers and psychologists Meyer Rabban inspired will no doubt make their own marks on the lives of young children for years to come. ☺

by Gillian Gilman Cluff '88

RABBAN AND A STUDENT IN 1927. PHOTO BY SVEN MARTSEN, COURTESY OF THE SARAH LAWRENCE COLLEGE ARCHIVES