

Dr. Jerome H. Rogoff, psychiatrist who fought for wrongfully convicted, dies at 78



Thomas James Hurst/Globe staff/File 1998

By J.M. Lawrence Globe Correspondent June 24, 2017

Dr. Rogoff, who had spent 19 years as chief of inpatient psychiatry at Faulkner Hospital and formerly was president of the Massachusetts Psychiatric Society, died of renal cancer June 1 in his Newton home. He was 78.

As a forensic psychiatrist, Dr. Jerome H. Rogoff became an expert on the effects of wrongful conviction. His knowledge of the mind and the soul came from more than a half-century of work in prisons, psychiatric wards, and private practice.

“I’m the guy in the courtroom mediocre lawyers don’t know what to do with, and smart lawyers make look like a cretin,” Dr. Rogoff quipped in 1985, for the 25th anniversary report of his Harvard College class.

An adviser to the Innocence Project, Dr. Rogoff testified in several high-profile cases, including on behalf of Kenneth Waters, whose estate was awarded more than \$10 million after he spent nearly 19 years behind bars for a murder he didn’t commit. His sister, Betty Anne, became a lawyer to aid him and helped free Waters through DNA evidence.

In 2009, Dr. Rogoff told a federal court that Waters suffered “psychological regression” in prison, which manifested in “a state of chronic rage, manipulateness, infantile behavior, and attention-seeking hypochondria.” Those behaviors made him a target for abuse by other inmates and caused a steady decline in mental health.

Waters was living in Ayer when he was convicted in 1983 of murdering a woman in town. When he was released, he was agoraphobic, suffered panic attacks, and had contracted hepatitis C, Dr. Rogoff reported. Six months after leaving prison in 2001, Waters died after falling from a 15-foot wall he scaled to get to his brother’s house.

Dr. Rogoff, who also was an American Psychiatric Association assembly member, devoted his life to the care of the mentally ill. He is credited with building up the psychiatric unit at Faulkner, which he helped turn into a highly regarded teaching hospital. But the encroaching dominance of managed care and too many battles with insurance companies led him to leave the hospital in the mid-1990s.

He was “a tireless and fearless fighter . . . for the rights of patients to have equitable care as determined by the best clinical judgment of their physicians, not insurance companies or the government,” said his friend Dr. Paul Summergrad, a past president of the American Psychiatric Association and chairman of psychiatry at Tufts University School of Medicine.

In 1995, Dr. Rogoff shared with his Harvard classmates his reasons for leaving Faulkner.

“I watched as insurers refused to pay for necessary and highly beneficial days in the hospital for the patients on the unit that I ran, and the average length of stay fell from 30 days to 20 to 10 and now to between six and eight. Our open unit had to be renovated in order to be locked, because the insurers decided that if one was not sick enough to need a lockup, one was not sick enough to be in the hospital at all, never mind how beneficial a short stay there might be,” he wrote.

“First the fun went out of the hospital work, then my own integrity began to be compromised,” he added.

Dr. John Reichard, who worked with Dr. Rogoff at Faulkner and left in 2000, said staff



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members were proud of what they had built at Faulkner under Dr. Rogoff’s leadership.

He said Dr. Rogoff was a quick study and a decisive manager. “By the time I got through with the first sentence, he’d say, ‘You have three options.’ And he was right,” Reichard said.

Robert O. Boorstin, a public advocate for mental health and former speechwriter for President Bill Clinton, received treatment from Dr. Rogoff after suffering a breakdown in 1987 while working on political campaigns.

“He saved my life. He combined this warmth and understanding with an ability to tell you to stop feeling sorry for yourself and get on with it,” said Boorstin, who was diagnosed with manic depression.

“I was led to the right guy, and he was so much more than a psychiatrist. He was almost a father figure in his faith that I would not only recover, but I would go on to do good things,” said Boorstin, whose resume includes seven years as director of public policy for Google.

Born in Detroit, Jerome Howard Rogoff was the son of immigrants. His father, Abraham, who was from Lithuania, worked at an auto body plant while learning English, and then became a general practice doctor. His mother, the former Sarah Epstein, was from Poland and was a bookkeeper.

After graduating cum laude with a Bachelor of Arts degree in History and Literature from Harvard in 1960, where he was a member of Dunster House, Dr. Rogoff lived on a kibbutz in Israel, where he met his first wife, Alison Cohen. They had two children and divorced after 20 years of marriage.

He graduated in 1965 from what then was Western Reserve University's medical school and served as a Peace Corps physician in Kathmandu, Nepal, from 1966 to 1968. "Two exciting, gratifying years in the Himalayas, in a country of extreme poverty and primitivity, unparalleled beauty, and warm, open friendliness," he told his Harvard classmates.

He married Erika Keller in 1983. They met when he was in medical school with her brother and reconnected by chance decades later. "He was fun and funny, a good friend and a great companion. I miss him in every breath," Erika said.

Dr. Rogoff enjoyed cooking with his wife, who tends a large garden at their old farmhouse in central Vermont. He usually prepared the meats while she made the vegetable dishes. His love of cooking was inspired by his mother's mastery of Jewish cuisine. He made chopped liver to bring to poker parties and knew how to make ptcha, a delicacy made from jellied calves' feet. "My father was one of the few people I know still rendering schmaltz," said his son, Adam of Roslindale.

"His Jewish identity was shaped by his parents' exodus from anti-Semitism in Europe and the opportunities in this country for religious freedom and personal success," Adam said in a eulogy. "Though not observant, he was very concerned about preserving our cultural and family history."

Dr. Rogoff enjoyed woodworking and taught the craft to his son. He built the kitchen cabinets for his farmhouse and also made fine furniture, including crafting a cradle for his grandchildren from cherry trees felled at the farm. "I never tire of being in the shop, where external time seems to stop and internal time flows," he wrote in his 45th anniversary Harvard report.

He was fluent in several languages and enjoyed long walks, wilderness camping, and classical music. "He couldn't play an instrument or carry a tune, but boy could he play the stereo," his son said.

His daughter, Erika, recalled how as children she and her brother would wait for the door to open after their father finished the last session of the day at his home office.

"We'd jump on him, almost knock him over, inhale his unmistakable comforting smell, and receive one of his all-encompassing bear hugs," Erika, who lives in Basalt, Colo., said in her eulogy. "As adults, we were still received by those warm hugs and his broad smile, and we have become a part of his multilingual, canoe-flipping, schmaltz-making, sushi-devouring, trivia-answering, woodworking, Jewish-celebrating legacy."

A service has been held for Dr. Rogoff, who in addition to his wife, daughter, and son leaves his stepson, Kevin Latner of Washington, D.C., and seven grandchildren. Donations in Jerry's

memory may be made to either Remembrances@www.Israel21c or the Nature Conservancy @ www.nature.org.

Amid his reports to classmates over the years, Dr. Rogoff sought to share what he had learned about life since graduation.

“What really matters in this life is neither money nor position, nor even success or glory, but the relationships we make — the true connectings — and the creativity we develop and exercise. I suppose that is my version of what Freud said: Love and Work.”