

Resolution on the Retirement of

Professor Zella Luria

With this resolution, the faculty of the Psychology Department and other programs at Tufts University intend to honor a special professor and a one-of-a-kind lady on the occasion of her retirement. Zella Luria is currently the longest-standing professor amongst us. She took her position at Tufts in 1959, after teaching elsewhere as a graduate TA and post-doctoral lecturer for nearly ten years. Thus, Zella has been professor to World War II soldiers taking advantage of the GI Bill, to the baby-boomers spawned by those soldiers, to flower children of the 60's, members of the "me" decade, Gen-Xer's, and now Dot.Comers. For all of these generations, throughout her long career, there have been two constants that epitomize Zella. These are her unusual, voracious appetite for learning and her commitment to speaking out against every kind of social inequity.

These essences of Zella were already formed and apparent in her childhood. She grew up in the Bronx, the daughter of Jewish immigrants from Eastern Europe and Russia. Her father was a house-painter with a 5th grade education; her mother worked in a sweat-shop and could not read or write. Both parents glorified America as the proverbial land of opportunity and a place of freedom from the hunger and persecution they knew in their homelands. But neither parent settled for the US as it was. Her father was active in union and socialist movements, and her mother bristled out loud about unequal pay for equal work. These were the dinner conversations Zella grew up with, that shaped her ambitions and political leanings. Meanwhile, her escape and joy as a child was school and especially reading. On her behalf, the local librarian made a special exception to the rule that only 6 books could be checked out at a time; otherwise little Zella was in and out too many times each week. She read anything and everything. She was the archetype for Roald Dahl's character Matilda, a small bespectacled girl staggering under loads of books and drinking in every fact and fancy they offered. Her grade-school teachers recognized this unique self-initiative and left her alone to read what she chose; one of them extracted a promise from her parents that they would permit Zella to go to college.

And so she did. Zella entered Brooklyn College at age 16, and attended during the war years, commuting an hour-and-a-half from home and

doing all her reading on the New York City subway. She recalls college as a “marvelous time, with so much to learn and so many good teachers.” Distribution and World Civilization requirements would not have phased her; she declared a chemistry major in her freshmen year, was named Outstanding Undergraduate in German as a sophomore, and ultimately found her intellectual home in psychology, which she loved for its breadth of topics and its mix of theoretical debate sharpened by empirical evidence. She studied with several leading psychologists of the time -- Solomon Asch, TC Schnierla, Heinz Werner, Daniel Katz -- and like her grade school teachers before them, they recognized her special gifts and began steering her towards graduate school. Schnierla offered Zella a post in his animal learning lab at NYU, but Zella did not want to stick around New York living with her parents, so she accepted an offer at Indiana University instead. Zella, a Hoosier!

She started graduate school at Indiana University in 1947, when the dominant approach of American psychology was learning theory. IU's Psychology Department was a hotbed of this focus, and Zella studied with such notables as Bill Estes, Hi Witkin, and B.F. Skinner. She continued, however, to cut a wide swath in her interests; she minored in genetics and took courses in sociology and biochemistry as well as in psychology. In one of her interdepartmental forays, she happened across a brilliant and rising molecular biologist, and an instantaneous chemical reaction took place. Zella's long romance with Salva Luria began that first fall semester, and by the end of the spring semester they were married. A year later their son Danny was born. Zella was now a faculty wife and a young mother, but she also persisted with her graduate studies. This was an unusual path to follow at the time, and we might say that Zella's identity as a feminist was established then, a decade before Gloria Steinum, the NOW, and Title IX. Graduate seminars were shifted to evening time slots so that Zella could participate, and she was given special permission to continue teaching during her pregnancy, so long as students didn't notice that she showed. It's probably not coincidental that the Hawaiian mumu came into fashion at about that time.

In 1950, Salva moved to a position at the University of Illinois, and Zella actually completed her Ph.D. there in 1951. For the next 6 or 7 years, compromised by nepotism rules at Illinois, Zella pieced together an assortment of research fellowships and part-time teaching arrangements, several of them now in the area of personality and clinical psychology. Publications from this first decade of Zella's career include an article in the Reports of the American Philosophical Society, an article on chromosome

rearrangements in fruit flies, her thesis on the effects of dietary deficiencies in rats, and a piece on psychological assessment in cases of multiple personality, based on the patient known as the “Three Faces of Eve”.

Then Tufts got lucky, and Zella allows that she did, too. In 1958 she accompanied Salva to Boston for his sabbatical at MIT, where in the middle of the year he was offered a permanent position. Zella was teaching at BU then, but shopped herself around to other places, including to Tufts. As it happened, a recent faculty death had left an opening in the Education and Psychology Departments, and Zella was offered the job. She had other options as well, but favored Tufts because it valued teaching, which she enjoyed, because it offered her a real job despite her status as a wife and mother, and because it came across as a place where people were encouraged and unafraid to speak their minds. In the news, a Tufts administrator had recently stood opposed to the loyalty oaths the government was then asking of students it supported, and this action earned Tufts Zella’s respect and her services. She took their offer and joined the faculty at Tufts in January, 1959.

Zella’s career was further shaped later that same year, as Salva continued his sabbatical in Paris while Zella stayed in Boston to start her post at Tufts. She recalls a particular moment then, in the midst of helping 5th grade son Danny build an entry for the soap box derby, when he asked, “Mom, what do mothers do who don’t work?”. You can see from this scenario that Zella was one of the very first “supermoms”, in an era when other smart women were being dutiful corporate wives or maybe even Stepford wives. Always juggling her multiple roles, Zella took Danny’s innocent question seriously, and it planted the seed for the scholarship she is best known for, on how children formulate their gender identities, gender stereotypes, and sexuality. The prevailing answers of the day centered on pure biology, as in instincts and hormones, or on standard learning theory, as in patterns of rewards and punishments from parents. Zella countered these simplistic ideas by speculating that children develop their notions about gender categories the same way they develop their notions about categories of furniture, food, or zoo animals -- from perceptually scanning and cognitively organizing the information made available to them. She broadened the scope of this information too, noting that it came from how parents treated and spoke to their children, yes, but also from the media and real-life examples children were exposed to, and especially from the examples and experiences children had within groups of other children. In her work over the next several

decades, Zella documented these ideas with almost anthropological methods -- transcribing the comments of parents about their newborn sons versus daughters, observing children as they interacted on the playground and on school outings, interviewing individuals with unusual gender situations such as tomboys, transsexuals, prostitutes, and children exposed to pornography. These methodological and theoretical contributions are well-known in developmental psychology, where they formed part of a paradigm shift in the field at large, with children now seen to play a very active role in their own socialization.

In the microcosm at Tufts, though, we know Zella best for her impassioned teaching and her political activism. In the classroom, she used a sort of Socratic method to rock students' boats and expand their thinking. With garden-path questions and outrageous counter-examples, she challenged especially women students to think and work for themselves, to get a life of their own, not a life for their parents or for their boyfriends and husbands. She exposed students to realities beyond those they had experienced within their often-sheltered childhoods, bringing transvestites, prostitutes, and victims of domestic violence into her courses to speak and answer questions. The Psychology Department always rather enjoyed shocking the Bursar's Office, with its request for checks cut to the Association of Boston Prostitutes, to pay for Zella's guest lecturers. To acknowledge her unique brand of teaching, Zella was given the Jackson College Teaching Award in 1969, before the Leibner teaching award was instituted, and likewise, to acknowledge the lasting influence she has had on generations of students, she was honored with the Seymour Simches Award for Teaching and Advising in 1995.

Outside the classroom at Tufts, Zella always served as a sort of political conscience and as an important role model and advocate for younger women faculty members. She was president of the AAUP chapter for several years and instigated its on-going fight for equal pay for equal work on behalf of women and also part-time faculty. She was a charter member of the Women's Studies program and actively supported the Women's Center's educational programs on birth control, abortion, date-rape, and gay and lesbian issues. She spoke vehemently on the faculty floor against the fraternity system and the sexual violence she felt it promulgated. She lobbied behind the scenes for maternity leave, accommodations for faculty with children in day care, and for expanding the number of women professors. Women were 14% of the Tufts faculty when Zella started here, and she claims

that they were expected to pour tea at faculty meetings in those days -- she has brought us a long way, baby, since then!

As Zella began slowly moving towards retirement 4 or 5 years ago, the two themes of her working life remained as apparent as ever. Even as she phased out of teaching courses, she began taking them again, to satisfy her chronic need to learn. She took a history course on the Industrial Revolution, a philosophy course on animal minds, and joined a reading group on the Chinese Diaspora. Don't be surprised if Zella shows up in your Art History or Astronomy course next year! Indeed, Zella is not here today because she is undergoing cataract surgery -- it was the earliest the doctor could schedule it, and being able to read is Zella's first priority. In retirement, Zella will also continue her long-standing social-political work. She currently consults for the Massachusetts chapter of Planned Parenthood, working towards effective and comprehensive sex education in the schools, and she is working with Physicians for Human Rights, doing clinical assessments of individuals seeking political asylum in the US. For our reception honoring Zella last week, we had a hard time coming up with gift ideas for her, because although she's retiring, we all know that she is not going to spend much time sitting in a rocking chair. The best gift we can extend to Zella, to allow her to retire from Tufts with ease, is to offer assurance that we have learned from her, and will continue ourselves to challenge ideas, to challenge students, and to challenge institutional inequities.

On behalf of her colleagues and students, I move that this resolution on the retirement of Professor Zella Luria be spread on the minutes of the faculty and that a copy of the resolution be sent to her.