

A Committed Life: An Interview with Chandler Davis

MARY GRAY

Chandler Davis, emeritus professor of mathematics, University of Toronto, and formerly Editor and co-Editor-in-Chief of *The Mathematical Intelligencer* and now its Honorary Editor, has been a guide and inspiration for many generations of mathematicians and activists. I present here an edited transcript of our conversations of March 15 and 16, 2013.

Long committed to the principles of social justice and antiwar/antinuclear activism, Chandler was caught up in the purge of academic leftists in the United States in the 1960s, eventually leaving for Canada. He has written vividly of his experiences, and I will not recapitulate those accounts. Here are two recommended sources:

Chandler Davis (2010). *It Walks in Beauty: Selected Prose of Chandler Davis*, Aqueduct Press (reviewed in this issue), and

Chandler Davis (1988). "The Purge," in *A Century in Mathematics, Part I*, Peter Duren (ed.), American Mathematical Society, pp. 413-428.

Chandler's science-fiction is also not discussed here. (One of his stories, "The Statistomat Pitch", is reprinted in this issue.)

MG: You have written that you "grew up subversive," but who were your mentors?

CD: First of all, my father. I grew up in a home of activists who at that time were of the view that society would eventually become better through socialism followed by communism. My father and I both became disillusioned with communism in the early fifties, but I never gave up working on behalf of antiwar and human rights causes.

Dirk Struik and later Lee Lorch were mentors both politically and as mathematicians. In my adult years, I admired and often allied myself with Lipman Bers and Laurent Schwartz.

From my own age group, there were Ed Moise, Steve Smale, yourself, and all our band of would-be world-savers.

But you asked about mentors. In mathematics, I didn't have a single scientific mentor in the old sense. In addition to my thesis director Garrett Birkhoff, I took the lead of others, in operator theory and matrix theory, such as Paul Halmos and Olga Taussky-Todd.

MG: You have also written about a period of "exile." How did that come about?

CD: After I got my Ph.D. from Harvard, I took a position at the University of Michigan. In the 1950s the United States was suffering from the "Red scare." Many academics lost their jobs because they were caught up in the dragnet of the House Committee on Un-American Activities (HUAC) or similar efforts to remove those with leftist political views from campuses. One goal of HUAC was to investigate the alleged communist influence at the University of Michigan. I came to the attention of the Committee, because I had paid for duplicating an anti-HUAC leaflet, and I was subpoenaed to testify.

I refused to answer questions about political actions or opinions, on the First Amendment grounds that the Committee was illegitimate because it attempted to usurp the superior power of the electorate. This wasn't a dodge to avoid indictment; it was inviting indictment, to get standing so I could challenge the legality of the HUAC hearings in the Supreme Court. This occurred to my wife and myself independently, right away when I got my subpoena, as the position I should take. As expected, I was indicted and convicted of contempt of Congress and fired from the University of Michigan. The Supreme Court refused to hear an appeal of my lower court conviction, so I spent 6 months in federal prison.

When I speak of my period of "exile" I mean my marginal existence 1954-1962, from my firing at Michigan until I gave up on the U.S. and went to Canada. In Canada I had no further

problems. There was a lull between my immigration and my engagement in political issues here, but it was not very lengthy.

MG: What was the reaction of the mathematical community?

CD: Most disheartening were the two faculty committees at the University of Michigan upholding my firing; but they included no mathematicians. My mathematics colleagues at Michigan came out in my support, particularly Ed Moïse, Wilfred Kaplan, and Bill LeVeque, and of course my fellow activist Nate Coburn who was also subpoenaed.

Some in the larger mathematical community cooperated with the activities of HUAC, some even incriminating others by “naming names.” It is still painful to read the testimony of Norman Levinson and W. Ted Martin. But on the whole mathematicians were friendly and concerned during the period between my firing and going to prison and again after my release. People who didn’t necessarily agree with my political views still felt strongly that I had a right to express them and to do mathematics.

Not that they offered me regular academic appointments. (Some did try.) I worked for a few years at *Mathematical Reviews*, and I had welcome temporary appointments at the Institute for Advanced Study and the Courant Institute. I proved one of my best results holed up in a Courant Institute office in a former hat factory in Greenwich Village.

MG: Do you have any regrets?

CD: Too many to mention. There are things in my life that I wish I had done differently. I do not regret my free speech case (“standing on the First,” we called it then), in fact I’m still proud of it, but I could have done it better tactically. I had a lawyer who understood my position and would have argued it ably, William Robert Ming, Jr., and instead, for extraneous reasons, I ended with a lawyer who didn’t really make the point. Would it have mattered had I had better

representation? It wouldn’t have been likely to keep me out of prison, but it would have been cleaner.

I also regret giving support for so long to the Soviet leaders: I stayed in the U.S. Communist Party until 1953. We didn’t know. Subsequently my father would mutter darkly about those like Eugene Dennis who must have known about Soviet repression but lied to us comrades who trusted him. We took his word (and Anna Louise Strong’s, and Paul Robeson’s...) above the word of the Hearst press, and in that we were right. But we ought to have given more weight to the word of Bertrand Russell and John Dewey.

I did not slip into the role of the repentant ex-Communist. I never wanted to break solidarity with the Paul Robesons and Dirk Struiks and Pete Seegers (Party and non-Party), and for years I mostly avoided public criticism of the Soviet Union lest I seem to be currying favor with the thought police. At the time, the Right found it expedient to portray every leftist as an apologist for the Soviet government, and that made it humiliating to disavow CP ties. False, too. Whatever differences I might have with Angela Davis, I was always closer to her than to Arthur M. Schlesinger, Jr., let’s face it.

Early in my collaboration with Lipman Bers on human rights agitation, we had a case of repression in Soviet-allied East Germany. “Aha!” said Bers, “maybe we are more forgiving of denial of liberties by our side?” I.e., he wondered whether I was too pro-Soviet to protest East German misdeeds. I said, “A government which claims to be socialist should be held to higher standards.” After a moment’s thought, he said, “When was your Kronstadt?” I saw he was referring to the Kronstadt Rebellion of 1921 against Soviet rule, a moment when many of the Bolsheviks’ supporters turned against them. After several moments’ thought, I said the crucial thing was in 1952 Ed Moïse showing me an article by Sartre, arguing that the Left must oppose Soviet repression and still work with the pro-Soviets as fellow leftists—but this is feasible only if one is far enough away from the U.S.S.R.

And you know, however much I regret I ever supported the regime that ran the gulag, I also feel bad that I supported the Democratic regime that went on to bomb Dresden, Tokyo, Hiroshima, and Nagasaki; I feel bad that I voted for the President who went on to escalate the Vietnam War. Regrets a-plenty!

MG: You’ve taken part in a variety of activities throughout your career. What do you consider the most memorable?

CD: Of course, my First Amendment legal case and the resulting imprisonment, but equally memorable was my visit to North Vietnam in 1971. The mathematical community, and society at large, had come to realize the War was a monstrous injustice. I leapt at the chance to express my support—“put my body on the line,” we used to say in those days—but it was a revelation in another way: to find that in spite of everything there existed a vibrant mathematical community in North Vietnam. My visits there and to the China of the Cultural Revolution were full of half-understood meanings, and I tried to get this across in talks and in several articles in mathematical journals and in *Science for the People*. I also felt fortunate to establish long-term contacts with mathematicians there, many of whom I saw again over the years. In a small way these efforts may have contributed to antiwar sentiment in the United States and Canada.



MARY GRAY was originally an algebraist but chooses instead to work on applications of statistics, where she sees a more immediate impact of her research. A member of Mathematics Action Group and a founder and first president of the Association for Women in Mathematics, she has been a colleague of Chandler Davis engaging in activism in a variety of human and civil rights causes. As one of many who have been encouraged and inspired by Chandler’s commitment, she is grateful for the opportunity to share this aspect of his story with a larger community.

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MG: How did you happen to get invited to Hanoi?

CD: At the International Congress of Mathematicians (ICM) in Moscow in 1966, there were a variety of anti-Vietnam-War actions. I was active in circulating a petition that eventually got more than 3000 signatures from mathematicians around the world (including Soviet-bloc mathematicians, some of whom, in spite of agreeing with the sentiments, were initially reluctant to sign anything). This was an initiative of S. Iyanaga, Laurent Schwartz, and Steve Smale. Several of us were invited to dinner with some of the North Vietnamese mathematicians, who also lent a hand in getting our petition duplicated. Smale was awarded a Fields Medal at that Congress, after experiencing some difficulty getting there. Knowing of him as an outstanding protester of the U.S. war, the North Vietnamese asked Smale for an interview with the *Vietnam Courier*. Steve was reluctant merely to condemn U.S. policy while in Moscow, ignoring the Soviet government's repression of its own dissidents and its actions in Eastern Europe, so he granted the interview—at a press conference with both Vietnamese and Western media—and made balanced criticisms of both sides. The contacts made at this time led to the Hanoi invitations to Schwartz and Alexander Grothendieck, and later to me and some others.

In 1968 there was a great deal of antiwar protest at the Democratic National Convention in Chicago. Along with Steve Smale, Jim Donaldson, and Mel Rothenberg, I helped organize the “Bourbaki Brigade” of mathematicians who marched on the Convention. So far as I know, the Chicago police did not beat up any mathematicians, but their brutality toward the protesters in the days following was notorious. Indignant members at the next annual meeting of the American Mathematical Society (AMS) in New Orleans took up this issue. The demand was for the next annual meeting of the Society, scheduled for Chicago, to be moved to Cincinnati, as an expression of outrage at the behavior of the Chicago police. This move succeeded, and the group that advocated it coalesced into a continuing organization, Mathematicians Action Group (MAG), of which I was a standard-bearer for several years. In addition to its opposition to the Vietnam War and to the engagement of mathematicians in military work, MAG was close to allied groups that sprang up within the mathematical community, the Association for Women in Mathematics (AWM), and the National Association of Mathematicians (NAM), an organization dedicated to the encouragement and advancement of underrepresented minorities in mathematics. Both AWM and NAM, although vigorous in their advocacy, were less radical than MAG, but much more organized. All three were open to all, and included a mixture of well-known mathematicians and those just starting in the profession.

At the 1970 International Congress of Mathematicians (ICM) in Nice, when a small group of us (mostly French) set up a table to promote the antiwar cause, Jean Dieudonné, the Congress's chief host, insisted that we shut it down. The foreign activists might have resisted being silenced, but the French young people were too vulnerable. However, at a special session (where I was both chair and translator) Laurent Schwartz reported at length on his visit to Vietnam and called for support for the DRVN; at another session



Two committed lives. Chandler talks with long-time activist Lee Lorch, who also found Canada more hospitable. June, 2013 Photograph by Niurka Barroso (www.niurkaphotography.com).

Grothendieck made an impassioned appeal to conscience, whose influence on his listeners continues to this day.

By the time of the Vancouver ICM in 1974, the sentiment against the War had grown, especially as a result of the bombing of Hanoi in December 1973. MAG called for contributions to support the visit of a Vietnamese mathematician to the ICM. Joan Hutchinson, then a new Penn Ph.D., responded to the appeal with a large contribution to fund the participation of a Vietnamese woman mathematician! I welcomed Joan's initiative. Contributions were healthy, and we were able to pay for the expenses of two delegates: Le Van Thiem, one of the senior figures we knew from earlier contacts, and.... Was there a woman mathematician in that struggling community qualified for this role?

Indeed there was: Hoang Xuan Sinh. She had met Alexander Grothendieck in the temporary university in the jungle in 1967, and in the years following, while teaching large classes under deplorable war conditions, she had obtained an important result on a problem he had given her. It was a pleasure to host the two of them in Vancouver.

MG: Were there other human rights initiatives in which you were involved?

CD: When the military took over the government of Uruguay in the 1970s, José Luis Massera, an internationally known mathematician, was imprisoned and badly beaten. I wrote a letter that more than a thousand mathematicians signed, and the support for him was worldwide. Laurent Schwartz even enlisted his conservative friend Jean Dieudonné. But it was years before Massera was released.

The AMS establishment, distressed by my leafletting for Massera at the San Antonio annual meeting, made the constructive response of forming a Committee on Human Rights of Mathematicians. I didn't insist on my outsider status, but accepted membership on the Committee. Many of the cases were in defense of freedom of Soviet mathematicians. Lipman Bers, past president of the AMS, and himself a native of Riga (then in the Soviet Union), was a vigorous spokesman. I already quoted his challenge to me early in our collaboration. Let me recount one other incident. At the 1974 ICM he was making a plea for support for

victimized Leonid Plyushch, with me among the many sympathetic listeners. I listened in growing discontent as he went on about the nobility of Andrei Sakharov, as if Plyushch deserved support just because Sakharov said so. Come on, Lipa, I said to myself—we can decide ourselves whether a cause is just, we don't need a famous hero to tell us! This was at a time when Amnesty International had not yet persuaded Sakharov to speak for any victims outside the Soviet Union. When Bers enthused that Sakharov defended victims of oppression, I burst out, "But not in Chile!" There was a stir in the hall. But Bers and I amicably met with the Vietnamese delegation for dinner the same day.

Unfortunately, not all the beneficiaries of the work of committees like ours have been defenders of the human rights of others. You have to defend them anyway. Bers and I never regretted our motion at an AMS meeting calling for Anatoly Shcharansky's release from a Soviet prison, even when later, as Natan Shcharansky, he led an illiberal movement in Israel.

I have been much involved in working for the human rights of Palestinian mathematicians, through the AMS Committee and otherwise. Many years ago, while a visitor at Ben Gurion University in Be'er Sheva, I took a day trip to give a math colloquium at Birzeit in the West Bank. Because the University had been closed by the Occupation authorities, my talk had to be moved off campus. This made it news, my Be'er Sheva hosts heard about it on TV, and the bitterness some of them felt against me was hard to bear.

MG: One of your long-standing causes has been opposition to engagement of mathematicians in military work. What impact did that have on your relations with other mathematicians?

CD: One of my first efforts was an ad in the *Notices* of the AMS. I was never a total pacifist. In fact as an undergraduate during World War II, I volunteered, and I ended my time in the War as a naval officer assigned to military research. In the Cold War the U.S. military lost all legitimacy in my eyes (even before the aggression against Vietnam). It agonized me to see colleagues, including some I greatly admired, continuing to work on military contracts even after 1964.

My first drafts of the ad were plain sarcastic, but George Piranian persuaded me to tone it down to this: "Mathematicians! We urge you to take responsibility for the uses to which your work is put. We believe this responsibility forbids putting mathematics in the service of this cruel war." Henry

Helson gently demurred: "All wars are cruel." But we kept the wording. The ad appeared several times and by the end had 400 signatures.

Very few mathematicians dropped out of war work, but some did.

The issue remained alive, and collaboration of the AMS establishment with the Pentagon grew. Our efforts, revitalized by the adherence of Bill Thurston, went into two motions, again with 400 sponsors, which in 1987 passed by a large majority in referenda of the Society's entire membership. So far as I noticed, no President of the Society paid any attention to these statements at all, though they were by far the clearest expression of members' opinion on any policy question in AMS history. My friend Peter Lax wrote me after one of the meetings on the referendum, reminding me that Galileo had worked for the Venetian Arsenal. True.

MG: How did you get involved in *The Mathematical Intelligencer*?

CD: Sheldon Axler as editor asked me to manage a column, which I was pleased to do, but I also had my eye on everything in the magazine. When Sheldon wanted to quit the editorial position, there was to be a search for a replacement. He thought I was the most suitable candidate, but the publisher Springer thought I was too old at the time. In the end I was appointed and have enjoyed it thoroughly for more than 20 years.

MG: Do you see any changes in mathematics over your career?

CD: Most mathematicians now agree that mathematics is something for everyone, not just the preserve of white males or of a single country. Mathematics is no longer seen as the preserve of a committee of experts; rather, many are now as willing as I have always been to proselytize for mathematics. And of course, mathematics itself is in a constant state of change.

MG: Finally, do you have any advice for young mathematicians?

CD: It's important to be able to use mathematics to help understand the world and how mathematics fits into it—in particular to recognize whether or not an argument is logical. Taking responsibility for your work needs to be learned and passed on to students. In mathematics and in life it is not okay to give up on a problem or a cause just because the struggle is difficult.