In memoriam: Gustav Ranis, international expert in development economics

Wednesday, October 16, 2013

Gustav Ranis, the Frank Altschul Professor Emeritus of International Economics at Yale, died Oct. 15 at age 83.

Ranis was former director of the Yale Center for International and Area Studies (YCIAS — now the Whitney and Betty MacMillan Center for International and Area Studies) and of the Economic Growth Center.

A leading development economist, Ranis has more than 20 books and 300 articles on theoretical and policy-related issues of development to his credit. He is the author of “Development of the Labor Surplus Economy,” “En Route to Modern Economic Growth: Latin America in the 1990s,” “Growth and Development from an Evolutionary Perspective,” and “Japan and the U.S. in the Developing World.”

He was born in Darmstadt, Germany to Max and Bettina Ranis. He left his native land for Cuba in October 1941, traveling with his mother and younger brother, Peter, as the borders closed behind them. In 1952 Ranis was valedictorian of Brandeis University’s first graduating class, and earned his M.A. and Ph.D. from Yale (1956) in economics. He was awarded an L.H.D. from Brandeis in 1982.

Ranis served as an economist for the Ford Foundation’s Overseas Development Program and as joint director of the Pakistan Institute of Developmental Economics before joining the Yale faculty in 1960 as an assistant professor in the Department of Economics. He was named the Frank Altschul Professor of International Economics in 1982.

“Gus was a most thoughtful academic, an energetic and always welcoming university citizen, and director with many initiatives and programs to his credit, and — perhaps most importantly — always a very supportive and caring friend as well as trusted and spirited adviser to his students and colleagues,” said Dirk Bergemann, chair of the economics department.

As the Henry R. Luce Director of YCIAS 1995–2004, Ranis headed Yale’s focal point for encouraging and coordinating teaching and research on international affairs, societies, and cultures around the world. There, he established a number of new programs emphasizing interdisciplinary studies. Today, the MacMillan Center presents an annual award in his honor: the Gustav Ranis International Book Prize, given for the best book on an international topic by a Yale faculty member.

“Gus will be greatly missed at the MacMillan Center, and as a mentor and friend by me,” said Ian Shapiro, the current Henry R. Luce Director of the MacMillan Center. “When he took the helm, he really grew the depth and breath of our
programs, providing the solid foundation on which we have been building ever since. Everyone at MacMillan, and everyone with international interests at Yale, will always be in his debt.”

Ranis served as director of the Economic Growth Center, 1967–1975 and 1992–1993. The center’s current direct, Mark Rosenzweig, said of his predecessor: “Gus Ranis was an important scholar who not only substantially influenced the field of development economics but who had a profound impact on the success of Yale’s Economic Growth Center by both seeing to it that academic standards were maintained and by actively supporting a variety of research agendas and perspectives even if they were quite different from his own.”

Ranis retired from the Yale faculty in 2005.

The Yale scholar was the personal economic adviser to the president of Ghana in 1980, and served as a consultant to UNDP, FAO, ILO, World Bank, IDB, ADB, Brookings Institution, Pearson Commission, Ford Foundation, Rockefeller Foundation, and AID.

A Carnegie Scholar 2004–2006, Ranis was a visiting professor at Osaka Gakuin University in Osaka, Japan in 1995; University de los Andes, Bogota, Colombia, 1976–1977; and Colegio de Mexico, Mexico City 1971–1972; He was also a fellow at the Institute for Advanced Study, Berlin, Germany, 1993–1994, and a Social Science Research Council Fellow of Japan, 1955–1956.


Ranis is survived by his wife of 55 years, Rachel Ranis; his children, Michael and Jonathan Ranis and Bettina Altschuler; and his grandchildren, Benjamin and Daniel Altschuler, Hanna and Sasha Ranis.

Services will be at Congregation Or Shalom at 205 Old Grassy Hill Road, Orange, CT on Thursday, Oct. 17, at 10:30 a.m. Shiva times are Thursday evening until 8 p.m., Friday 11 a.m.–2 p.m., Saturday 7-9 p.m., and Sunday 11 a.m–8 p.m. Memorial donations in Ranis’ name may be made to Brandeis University.

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