

How Close Did Kurt Gödel Get to the University of Wyoming?

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When Kurt Gödel died, in 1978, I was mildly impressed, in the way that a young person is lightly touched by the passing of someone of importance and influence, wondering casually how he could allow himself to make such an unprepossessing move as wasting away. A good portion of the previous two years of my life had been devoted to the study of his results in mathematical logic, in a master's degree program at the University of East Anglia, in Britain. Despite due gratitude and admiration, the fact that I had found an area of inquiry that enraptured me brought no sense of personal tragedy at this event. I was back in my home town of Laramie, Wyoming, considering future options, peacefully insulated from Old World intellectualism.

Eighteen years later found me again at the University of Wyoming, with a Ph.D in computer science, as a member of the faculty. My colleague in the office next door, John Cowles (from Cody, Wyoming) turned out to have been a student, in a distant sense, of Kurt Gödel. When Cowles finished his Ph.D. at Pennsylvania State University in 1975 and set off on his job search, he submitted an application for a one-year fellowship at the Institute for Advanced Study. One day he received a telephone call from Gödel, who presumably had the task of reviewing the applications related to the field of logic. "If you were invited, would you come?" was the cautious question. "I'm waiting for a permanent offer" was the hedged answer—to be revised to "Yes!" when he came to his senses.

During his year at Princeton, Cowles had no face-to-face contact with his benefactor except upon one evening when he came across Gödel, already frail, waiting on the street for a cab. Cowles introduced himself and offered assistance, but his offer was declined and his name apparently not recognized. When his year's term was up, Gödel unexpectedly phoned again, perhaps to probe Cowles's worthiness for a year's extension. Every member of the young Cowles family was ill with the swine flu, and he's quite sure that he did not cover himself with glory in that dimly-remembered conversation.

In the year 2000, when Time Magazine declared Gödel to be one of the 100 most influential people of the 20th century (and, with Alan Turing, one of only two mathematicians), I was proud, proud to be an insider, proud to know what the fuss was about, and happy to explain it to my friends and family. And sorry that not more people understood and pondered the theorems in all their gorgeous profundity. Later—in fact, just a year or two ago—having taken up Rebecca Goldstein's biography of Gödel, my attention was riveted by her reference to the "Grandjean questionnaire," the only written record of Gödel's intellectual development by the man himself. A young graduate student named Burke Grandjean had sent him some questions to which Gödel wrote answers, but then never dispatched; they were to be found, later, in his papers. Burke Grandjean is a Professor of Statistics and Sociology at the University of Wyoming. Surely, I thought, there can't be two unrelated people in the country with that name.

An inquiry revealed that yes, Dr. Grandjean is indeed the source of the questionnaire, sent to Gödel in 1974 when Grandjean was studying at the University of Texas. For a course in the sociology of knowledge, he had become intrigued enough by Gödel's work to choose him as a subject for term paper. But he hit a snag—no reply. After a series of pleading letters, each with a copy of the questionnaire enclosed, Gödel responded unexpectedly with a call to his work telephone number from the letterhead, possibly to probe his

motives. Caught by surprise, Grandjean did his best to persuade him to return the questionnaire or to agree to a personal interview in Princeton, but to no avail—although anyone who has read a biography knows that Gödel’s files contained notes and answers on more than one of the copies sent. Grandjean had to take a grade of “X” (the University of Texas “Incomplete”) in the course. When he came across the Hao Wang biography, years later, and found his questionnaire serving as the title of Section 1.2, he was nonplussed. A humorous appeal to his UT professor for removal of the dubious grade, on the grounds of ultimate scholarly benefit far beyond the original plan, was received and dismissed in the spirit in which it was offered. (Burke and I having fallen short, the reader is invited to formulate a clever pun about the unalterable “Incomplete” with regard both to the grade and to formal systems.)

Even my own abiding interest in the theoretical limits of computation had never particularly moved me to delve more deeply into the life of its greatest theorist. On the issue of influence, in either direction, between personality and productions, agnosticism seems the only reasonable stance. But either these local coincidences, or just sufficient time, finally led me into the modern comprehensive biography of Gödel by John Dawson. Intrigued by the interplay between Gödel’s accomplishments and eccentricities, and caught up in the account of the period when Princeton was willing to let him go to some other appointment and his case was taken up by the Emergency Committee in Aid of Displaced Foreign Scholars, my eyes fell on a footnote (page 159), “See correspondence with University of Wyoming.” Holy smoke! What could this be? It turned out to be a set of letters between my institution and the Emergency Committee, a group that sought American academic jobs for refugees from Nazi purges in Europe. Dr. Dawson kindly provided me with the reference to the Committee’s archives at the New York Public Library.

Several letters between the Emergency Committee, in the persons of Lauren Seelye and Betty Drury, Assistant Director and Executive Secretary, respectively, and a few departments at UW, Classical and Romance Languages, Chemistry, and Mathematics, discuss possible placements of available scholars in various fields. President Morrill invited Mr. Seelye to visit in person, and, in February of 1942, he stopped in Laramie during a cross-country rail journey and met with several UW faculty. At least one instructor, the Russian teacher Yakov Malkiel, was hired, but his job was later lost to budget cuts, and Chairman Dickman helped him to secure a different position. As a further coincidence so shrunken in scope that it affects only me (Gödel, not at all), I found, in a reply to Lauren Seelye from the UW President’s office, regarding not foreign scholar placement but an idea for a university consortium, a reference to “Dean Hill, Chairman of the Executive Board of Deans.” John A. Hill, Dean of Agriculture, was my grandfather. The Committee correspondence is fascinating, not only for its reflection of dedicated efforts to provide the safety and security under which these esteemed thinkers could continue their work, but for the unstuffy elegance of the writing and the unfussy tact of the placement discussions.

The Committee letter from Betty Drury to Ottis Rechar, the Chairman of the Mathematics Department, in response to a solicitation for help in filling a faculty position, first proposes other mathematicians, Alfred Brauer and Alfred Basch, and then suggests Carl Siegel, Kurt Gödel, and George Jaffe, with reference to the enclosed list, dated September 4, 1940, of scholars recommended by the Institute for Advanced Study for financial support. The reply from Dr. Rechar asks that Brauer, Basch, and Siegel, and also Max Dehn (apparently mentioned during Seelye’s visit), please contact him directly. No interest was expressed in Kurt Gödel. The full list of fourteen scholars has salary figures attached, about \$2000 for most of them, but Gödel is listed at twice that amount. The brief note on his listing says, “...universally conceded to be the most brilliant mathematical logician in the world.” Adequate justification for the price, it may be, but still too hard a bargain for a state university under a wartime budget.

So no job offer was forthcoming from the University of Wyoming; the Mathematics job was finally offered to Hans Samelson. No job offer came to fruition from anywhere else, either. The two final notes in the Emergency Committee file for Gödel read this way:

7-9-42 B. Drury suggested to Dr. Rechar, Univ. of Wyoming

Oct. 15, 43 No action with us. See no reason to keep open. Close.

As we know, Gödel remained at the Institute for Advanced Study until his death 35 years later.

Scraping acquaintance does not make a relationship more than unilateral. It exceeds my understanding to do the accounting for Kurt Gödel's powerful contributions—what to attribute to the man, what to attribute to luck, his education, his surroundings, his compatriots—but I can say with certainty that none is attributable to the University of Wyoming. We can safely conclude that not one of these quirks of fate drew Gödel's attention to this university for even the briefest moment. But inspiration is where you find it. Let those of us who sometimes feel far removed from the ancient capitals of academe carry his work forward in our own ways, to our own abilities.

References

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- [5] Hao Wang. *Reflections on Kurt Gödel*. The MIT Press, 1990.