Professor Leopold Gruenfeld, a member of the ILR School faculty from 1962-1998 and emeritus professor, died at Cayuga Medical Center in Ithaca on July 24, 2017. He was 90 years old.

Leo was born in Berlin, Germany in 1927. In response to the rise of the Nazi Party, his family moved to China, and later to the United States, settling in Chicago, Illinois. Beginning in 1948, he spent several years working in the Production Control Unit at Revere Camera Company, and did a two year stint in the U.S. Army Infantry, before pursuing an undergraduate degree at Roosevelt University in Chicago. There, he became interested in psychological research, receiving his baccalaureate in social psychology in 1956. He then applied to the graduate program in psychology at Purdue University, receiving both his Master’s degree in industrial organizational psychology (1957), and Ph.D. degree (1960) in the same field, with minors in statistics and social psychology.

He served as an assistant professor in the Department of Psychology at Wabash College in Crawfordsville, Indiana from 1958-1962. Two years after completing his Ph.D., he joined the Department of
Organizational Behavior in the ILR School, and played key roles in the School for the next 35 years. He served as the Director of research for the school from 1972-1975, and as the OB Department Chair from 1979-1981. He also served as ILR’s director of the Associate Degree Program (Adult Education Program) for a year.

Over time, he grew increasingly interested in Freudian psychology and was a founder (1984) of the International Society for the Study of Psychoanalysis in Organizations, holding a position as a member of the board of directors for many years. In line with his growing interest in personality studies, he also took a position as a Visiting Research Scientist at the Tavistock Institute in London in 1984. From 1990 until his retirement, he served as a consulting editor for the Journal of Applied Behavioral Science. Throughout his career, he periodically worked as a consultant for a variety of corporations.

Leo’s research and teaching were primarily focused on three main topics: personality, small group processes and leadership. He published over 30 journal articles in these areas, many co-authored with graduate students, along with a variety of book chapters and funded reports for major research foundations.

He was a dedicated teacher, whose classes attracted hundreds of students and, as his colleagues can attest, there were regular queues of students waiting to talk to him during his office hours. His influence on many students is represented in comments from a former ILR undergraduate, who went on to obtain a Ph.D. in Psychology at the University of Illinois and is now on the faculty at London Business School: “Put simply, he had a profound impact on my experience of Cornell, my intellectual interests and the direction of my post-Cornell life…Given my academic interests, he suggested I consider a Ph.D. in Psychology. Of course, given Leo’s candid and gruff manner, he also offered that I was unlikely to be admitted as an ILR undergrad. I took the encouragement part to heart and switched course, dropped my LSAT studies and bought a GRE prep book.” She also makes note of his distinctive classroom manner. “As a junior, I took my first OB elective with Leo and was, by turns, fascinated and provoked and, sometimes, offended…Leo not only
enjoyed his topic and enjoyed sharing it, but also took some pleasure in provoking and teasing the kids in the room.”

Leo retired from the ILR School in 1998 and became an emeritus faculty member in 1999. He is survived by his wife, Irit Gruenfeld, who resides in both Ithaca and Tel Aviv, and two daughters, Deborah Gruenfeld of Palo Alto California, and Dina Gruenfeld of Portland Oregon.

*Written by Pamela S. Tolbert and Samuel B. Bacharach*