

IN MEMORIAM

George Jaszi
(1915-1992)

George Jaszi died in December 1992, leaving a strong imprint on the U.S. statistical agency with which he was associated for 43 years and on economic accounting throughout the world.

George was born in Hungary, but came to the United States when he was only 16. He attended Oberlin College, where his father was a professor of political science, from 1931 to 1933; the London School of Economics from 1933 to 1936; and Harvard University from 1938 to 1940. He received a Ph.D. from Harvard in 1946. His dissertation, "The Concept of National Income and Product with Special Reference to Government Transactions," was one of the first in the field of economic accounting. Its review of the history of national income estimates is still good reading.

After a brief time on the staff of the U.S. Federal Reserve Board, George began a career centered on economic accounts. In 1942 he joined the National Income Division of U.S. Commerce Department's Bureau of Foreign and Domestic Commerce. His contributions go back to the very beginning of GNP, when it was placed as the cornerstone of the U.S. national income and product accounts. He was one of a team of four—the others were the late Edward F. Denison, the late Milton Gilbert, and Charles F. Schwartz—who roughed out a sketch of the two-sided economic accounts that were prepared during World War II to provide information needed for economic mobilization. The same team prepared the first precise formulation of the accounting system in 1947 and wrote the first detailed explanation of its conceptual framework in 1951. On his retirement, George's own "Audit" listed the work on the accounting framework as one of his two principal contributions as an economic accountant. (The other was resisting the will-o-the-wisp of forging national output into a measure of economic welfare.)

Shortly after the accounting framework was in place, George worked on the first official measures of constant-dollar GNP and on the extension of the accounts to show the distribution of income by size class. Meanwhile, he moved up the managerial ladder.

In 1963, George became director of the Office of Business Economics, the agency that was renamed the Bureau of Economic Analysis (BEA) in 1972. Over the years until his retirement in 1985, George directed the enhancement of BEA's economic accounts and related tools of analysis with the goal of providing a more sharply focused and more comprehensive picture of the U.S. economy. Highlights of these efforts span the range of BEA's programs: More timely and more detailed national income and product accounts, estimates of tangible wealth, input-output tables statistically and conceptually integrated with BEA's other economic accounts, expanded regional measures, enhanced balance of payments

accounts, a survey-based system of information about multinational corporations, pioneering estimates of pollution abatement and control expenditures, and forward-looking analyses and tools that supplement the BEA's work on economic accounts.

George's influence on the BEA was not, however, fully reflected in a list of substantive enhancements of its output. His influence was less tangible, but not less real, in other ways. He demanded excellence because he viewed it as the shield behind which politically sensitive statistics, such as GNP, could be prepared without partisan interference. Further, he viewed the provision of direct policy advice as the sure way to invite such interference. Accordingly, he pursued the former and scrupulously avoided the latter, and insisted that BEA staff do the same.

Throughout most of his career George taught university courses on a part-time basis. He introduced students at American University, George Washington University, and Georgetown University, among others, to economic accounting, and sought to recruit his best students for BEA.

Outside the United States, George is recognized as one of the architects of the System of National Accounts (SNA). As one of a group of experts convened in 1945 by the League of Nations, he worked on the first set of international guidelines for the construction of economic accounts. Subsequently, under the auspices of the United Nations, he participated in drafting the 1953 SNA and in the revision of the SNA adopted in 1968. He participated in many international meetings and served as a consultant in setting up or upgrading economic accounts in several countries.

George was a long-standing member in the professional associations in his specialty. He was an early member of the International Association for Research in Income and Wealth, a member of its council, and the Council's Chairman in 1973-75. He was also a member of the Association's North American counterpart, the Conference for Research in Income and Wealth. He served several terms on its Executive Committee and served as the Executive Committee's chairman in 1955-57.

His honors were numerous. Three help suggest the range of his accomplishments: the Rockefeller Public Service Award for professional accomplishment in 1974, the Presidential Distinguished Executive Rank Award in 1980, the highest Federal Government award that can be earned by a career civil servant, and the position of honorary fellow conferred upon him by the London School of Economics in 1980.

George wrote for BEA publications, perhaps most notably the methodological statements of the 1940s and 1950s. He labored over papers for professional meetings and journals throughout his career, and he provided his students with written versions of his lectures, which he hoped to elaborate into a textbook. His written contributions document the evolution of the U.S. economic accounts.

Those who knew George will remember him as well in other ways: For his wide reading and fondness for a good discussion of art or literature; for his insistence on writing that was stripped of "inelegant variation" and that was precise (those whose work he edited will recognize why I used "that" as the

relative pronoun, not “which”); and for his sketches of archetype animals, prized by some of us as mementos of a creative mind.

For there is no doubt that George had a creative mind, a powerful intellect, and a colorful personality. He will be missed.

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