Coming Off the Bench

By Mark Francis Cohen

When Judge Lawrence F. Rodowsky authors opinions, the label "retired" is almost always affixed—a bit of legal irony.

Throughout his twenty-six-year judicial career, Judge Rodowsky earned a reputation as a man with a mighty intellect who can dissect complex cases and hew to the precise wording of statutes and the exact meaning of precedent. "All you can do is call it under the law," he says in his fulsome Baltimore accent.

Still, in 2000, the judge turned seventy and was legally required to step down from the seven-member Maryland Court of Appeals. So he convinced Chief Judge Robert Bell to let him keep working, and hang onto his office, secretary, and staff—something no retired judge got. His plan: He and retiring Judge Charles Moylan would split the responsibilities of a full-time judge.

"Actually, this was probably a good thing for my marriage," Judge Rodowsky jokes of his fifty-plus-year union with Colby, his wife and children's book author. "Otherwise, I'd be home trying to undertake handyman projects, and my wife doesn't consider me much of a handyman." Sometimes he'll still haul casework back to the house, and, he says, "That's when I hear Colby say, 'I thought you were supposed to be retired.'"

Indeed, at seventy-six, Judge Rodowsky is as active as ever. He's written forty-plus reported opinions since retirement, more than 150 unreported. Some hit close to home, like the decision granting an elderly couple visitation rights to their grandchildren after the parents had ended all contact. (Rodowsky has six children and fourteen grandchildren of his own.)

The judge, who received this year's Benjamin L. Cardin Public Service Award, has a long legacy at the Law School.

"Judge Rodowsky had a great impact on the court, especially on commercial law, and his common sense was an important factor," says Prof. William Reynolds. "He was the court's expert on business matters, and he could always get to the nub of the matter."

Rodowsky, who has lived in the Baltimore area all his life, graduated magna cum laude from Loyola College in 1952. He knew he wanted to be a lawyer as early as the eighth grade. Once he got to UMLaw, he worked during the day, taking on various jobs—as a legal secretary, courthouse messenger, bailiff, clerk—and attended classes at night.

Rodowsky says, "I had outstanding teachers. They were adjunct faculty, what you get at night school; which, in my view, made for a much better education because you really had the combination of the academic and the practical." (He later became an adjunct himself, teaching civil procedure and practice court.)

One of his favorites was Judge Emory Niles, Baltimore chief judge. "He'd come in with problems he'd have in court during the preceding week. He'd point at somebody and say, 'Do you object—and on what grounds?' And he'd go around the room. It made for a very lively class."

After he graduated in 1956 with honors, Rodowsky joined Frank, Bernstein, Conway & Goldman, taking a two-year leave to work as assistant attorney general for the state of Maryland in 1960. In the seventies, he became known as one of the state's best trial lawyers.

Gov. Harry Hughes selected Judge Rodowsky for Maryland's highest court in December 1979. Judge Rodowsky was the first chair of the Judicial Institute of Maryland's board of directors, a position he held for almost twenty years; he served on the on Rules of Practice and Procedure committee and chaired the Maryland Bar Association's Section of Litigation. He pushed for gender equality in the judicial system—he was the first chair of Maryland's Select Committee on Gender Equality—and oversaw a groundbreaking survey of gender bias.

Over the years, Rodowsky has come to be viewed as a conservative on the bench—although he waves away any attempt to categorize himself ideologically. He responds with a laugh, saying, "Well, my father-in-law thought I was a bomb-throwing Communist lefty."

Mark Francis Cohen is a longtime newspaper and magazine journalist living in Chevy Chase, Md.