

## **Malcolm Gilbert, Obituary (short version)**

My father, Malcolm Martin Gilbert, who has died aged 88, always said that he hoped there was no reincarnation, as he could not imagine enjoying a second life as much as he had this one. Born in Cwm, a mining village in the Ebbw Vale, he recalled a halcyon Valleys childhood, sliding down mountains and slag heaps on tin tea trays, bunking off school, learning to improvise jazz piano and walking miles to play cricket, two of his great loves – and meeting the greatest of those loves, pretty, clever Norma Handy of neighbouring Abertillery, at a party.

A familiar social history unfurls: tin baths in the kitchen with the whole family bathing in turn; dog-racing, where a rabbit-skin-covered football powered by a motorbike played the hare's role; mustard-gas canisters in the landing cupboard; constant, low-level food-poisoning; summer work as a fitter's mate in the mine. A lifelong commitment to left-wing politics was formed.

Having done poorly in his school-leaving exams, Malcolm had one of the many lucky breaks that characterised his life. In the expansion of higher education following the War, he won a place at the University of Wales, Aberystwyth, to study Geography, where he again encountered Norma. Marrying in 1953, they taught in Cardiff schools before another huge stroke of luck took him, in 1962, to Trinity College, Carmarthen, then a teacher-training college. Despite rural, Welsh-speaking West Wales being something of a foreign land to a Valleys boy, he found at Trinity an extraordinarily congenial group of colleagues of remarkable quality, many memorable students, and the autonomy to teach and research as he pleased, without the pressure to publish or specialise.

He had a prodigious ability to get by (and often a lot more) in a wide range of European languages, starting with German and Welsh at school, Anglo-Saxon at university, and Norwegian from a stint as a pianist in a nightclub frequented by the Crown Prince. But it was Russian that dominated his interests, and that was to give his working life the scope he

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craved. After a visit to the Soviet Union in the early 1960s, he taught himself Russian, read Russian literature extensively, and studied Soviet politics and history.

The freedom that Trinity offered allowed Malcom to extend his teaching into the field of Soviet politics and history. A programme administered by Central College, Iowa, delivered him a long series of US students, eager to study and visit the Soviet Union and then the Russian Federation. Twice-yearly trips to the USSR – a round trip taking in Moscow and Leningrad/St Petersburg (and occasionally, Kiev) – gave him the opportunity to befriend numerous Soviet citizens. Among the fund of anecdotes that emerged were many about the US students who accompanied him: their marvellous energy and enthusiasm, and sometimes, their understandable naivety faced with the Communist and then post-Communist world. His children remember (but cannot confirm) stories of how, should a student get into a scrape, Malcolm would seize the opportunity to visit the authorities with several bottles of vodka and emerge, hours later, with the student, the expectation of a hangover, and a hoarse voice from much discussion and singing.

He was an inspirational teacher: entertaining, attentive, intelligent, hugely knowledgeable on a wide range of subjects, and inventive in his pedagogical methods. At least one cohort of students found themselves charged with ‘being’ the Politburo, grappling with such issues as Jewish emigration and Nixon-Brezhnev detente. Malcolm had an extraordinary memory and a gift for turning historical detail into engaging narrative, complete with striking characters. Like many people with absorbing work and interests, he was not a very attentive parent while his children were young, and left most family and domestic labour to Norma (including when she was working full-time as a teacher). But, to his own surprise, he became an excellent grandfather, eager to entertain and charm (his poems for my children on their birthdays stand in family legend). In his last decade, he became an extraordinarily tender, patient, and competent carer for Norma, who died with

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Alzheimer's in 2016; they played duets, he on the piano, she on the violin, almost to her dying day. He moved in September 2018 to a residential home in Newcastle Emlyn, where the wonderful staff's care, attention, and catering gave a golden glow to his life's final phase, although lockdown isolation took a severe toll on a man who considered himself a sociable introvert. His death was sudden, though hardly unexpected. He is survived by his children, Geoff, Jane, and Rhod, and by his grandchildren, Sam, Nanon, and Sara.

Donations in Malcolm's memory may be made to the Benslow Music Trust, an educational charity whose music courses both Malcolm and Norma loved attending: Benslow Music, Benslow Lane, Hitchin, SG4 9RB, UK (bank account details can be supplied).