

Obituary: Rolf George Beilharz 27/07/1936 to 02/02/ 2026

"A man is, in part, defined by his passions."

Rolf Beilharz was born on 27th July 1936, in the German Templer colony at Haifa (in then Palestine), the eldest child of Gustav Beilharz and Meta née Krafft. Several generations earlier, his forebears had emigrated from their villages in Germany's Black Forest to the Holy Land as founding members of the Temple Society, an independent Christian-based faith community modelling living together in harmony and mutual support.

Rolf started kindergarten in Haifa in September 1939 just as World War II was declared. The British authorities in Palestine rounded up all the German men of military age and the rural Templer communities were quickly surrounded by high barbed wire fences in a settlement in Bethlehem/Galilee. In July 1941, just after Rolf's fifth birthday, all Germans in Palestine (including the interned men) were transported to Australia. From Sydney, over 660 Templers were interned at Camp 3 in northern Victoria. Rolf began school at Tatura in October 1942. The Beilharz family was released from internment five years after arrival and a year after the war had ended. Unable to find work, Gustav and family moved to Sydney. Enrolment of the non-English-speaking children at Manly West Public School was handled in a kind and friendly way. Rolf, a curious and dedicated student, soon did well.

In August 1948, Gustav found work with accommodation on Sydney's North Shore. By now, all three children had good English and Rolf started at North Sydney Technical High School in the following year. In 1954, Rolf began his course in Agricultural Science at the University of Sydney, sponsored by the NSW Government. His bond required him to do five years of research in government agricultural institutions after graduation. During that undergraduate course he met his wife-to-be, Vyrna Smith. After their final exams, Rolf and Vyrna became engaged. They both graduated with Bachelor of Science in Agriculture (first class honours), married in December 1958, and started their new life together at North Rocks, not far from Parramatta, where Linda was born in April 1960. They moved to Berry near Nowra where Margie was born in October 1961. Rolf first worked with poultry and then dairy cattle.

In 1963, Rolf, Vyrna and the two young girls travelled to Iowa State University, USA, where Rolf attended many classes and wrote his doctoral thesis on genetics and animal husbandry. In 1965, universities in Brisbane, Armidale and Melbourne all offered Rolf a position and he opted for a lectureship at the University of Melbourne, with a focus on animal behaviour and the need to re-evaluate breeding programs. He maintained that breeders had to concentrate on the environment in which they expected animals to function, as well as on enhancing their productivity through gene selection. This was scientific heresy at the time, but other researchers were increasingly drawn to the same conclusions. Rolf's expertise was the genetics of natural selection including environment interactions, which meant consideration of the whole animal within its environment rather than selection of single traits in animal breeding.

His introduction to the science of animal behaviour was an important step in his career. It eventually led to his having a huge impact through identifying characteristics of dogs, which helped select them as helpers in a range of community service roles, including seeing-eye dogs, customs and quarantine sniffer dogs, and dementia assistance dogs. He attracted particularly good Masters and PhD students, whose research in these and other areas was fascinating.

Rolf and Vyrna, with their children, also lived overseas for his work on several occasions: a year in Argentina (1968/1969) and in Germany (1970/1971), with a further six months there in 1979/1980.

His philosophical contributions were at the high end of concepts on evolution. This is clearly expressed in his manuscript he titled *Breeding Better Livestock*, now being prepared by family and academic colleagues for digital publication at <https://oafs.live/publications>. His core message was that because of the high potential reproductive rate of any species, competitive elimination must take place. Numbers, fertility, survival to mature size and life expectancy interact to set population size and demographics within the given environment. With no more than a fixed amount of food and shelter available, only those individuals of any species remain that successfully master all challenges and use the available resources most efficiently.

In down-to-earth terms, Rolf engaged in wide-ranging experimental work in animal breeding and environmental modification, ranging from improvement of animal welfare to feral goat management and breeding for yield and fineness of cashmere fibre production. He guided breeding programs for high-performing working dogs where the traits sought were acute senses, rapid learning, obedience to command, and sound temperament in exacting situations. His ability to unpack complex issues in defining “traits” and “fitness” was extraordinary.

He made prominent contributions in the lifting of the import ban on German Shepherd dogs in Australia to overcome a 1929 ban that had led to genetic inbreeding and welfare challenges. His breeding oversight catered for specific purposes of working dogs, in such areas as for police, customs, quarantine, the armed forces, guide dogs for the blind and dementia assistance dogs. One of many publicised successes was the Customs’ ‘super-sniffer’ breeding colony.

For most of his time at the University, the academic environment suited his unfettered teaching and research performance. As Rolf approached retirement, the Faculty was fortunate that several of those he’d supervised in his PhD program who had gone on to impressive careers were appointed within the Faculty, taking over leadership in their disciplines. It was a very fitting transition. In retirement from 1996, Rolf continued to work on his major treatise, *Breeding Better Livestock*.

Rolf exhibited humility, ethical Christianity, absolute honesty and true scientific adherence. He always adopted a consensus model, and was calm and non-confrontational. As a friend and colleague, he was loyal, generous with his time and

always helpful. Rolf lived Templer principles: being responsible for more than oneself, consideration for others and doing the right thing (even if others didn't).

His diagnosis of Alzheimer's-form dementia was most unexpected and at their terrace house on Drummond Street, Vyrna increasingly became Rolf's carer. She cared diligently and compassionately for him for many years, until he could no longer stay at home. First Rolf, then Vyrna, moved to care at Rathdowne Place in Carlton, able to remain in their neighbourhood. Vyrna having predeceased him, Rolf passed away quietly in February 2026.