

# A Pioneer in Space Science, an Acclaimed Street Photographer

**Jules Aarons**, a CAS research professor emeritus, is remembered for his research and his city scenes

By Natalie Jacobson McCracken

JULES AARONS WAS renowned for both his pioneering radio-beacon studies of the ionosphere and his frequently exhibited photographs of street scenes.

Aarons, a College of Arts & Sciences research professor emeritus of astronomy and space physics, died on November 21, 2008. He was eighty-seven.

“Aarons’s dual career is even more incredible when you consider that within space science he made a dual contribution — important discoveries in ionosphere physics, which had applications for national defense, and in fundamental research,” says Michael Mendillo (GRS’68,’71), a CAS professor of astronomy and a long-

time colleague and friend.

Aarons (GRS’49) earned a bachelor’s degree in physics at City College of New York in 1942, served in

the U.S. Army Air Force during World War II, then was a civilian employee at the Air Force Cambridge Research Laboratories (AFCRL) until 1981. He earned a master’s degree at the Graduate School of Arts & Sciences in 1949 and a Ph.D. at the University of Paris in 1954 as a Fulbright scholar.

He became the Air Force’s leading expert on how radio transmissions from satellites were disrupted when they passed through the atmosphere on their way to Earth. As a branch chief and senior scientist at AFCRL, Aarons led the creation of a global network of observatories monitoring the sun and

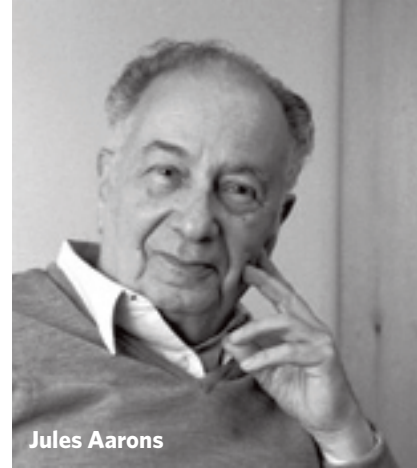
the ionosphere, the upper regions of the Earth’s atmosphere.

He retired from the Air Force lab at Hanscom Field in Bedford, Massachusetts, in 1982, returned to BU as a research professor, and became professor emeritus in 2005. At BU, he turned his attention to more basic research, using data about radio wave disruptions to understand the nature of the ionosphere.

“Jules had many wonderful mentoring relationships with students,” Mendillo says. “His research productivity and gentle advice to students, staff, and faculty had an impact that endures.”

But science did not satisfy his creative impulse, Aarons told the *B.U. Bridge*, the University’s weekly newspaper, in 2001. In the 1940s, he began shooting scenes of everyday life on the streets of Boston’s North End and West End and later in other cities around the world.

His photographs of groups and individuals, which he developed and printed himself, were made with a twin-lens Rolleiflex with a waist-level viewfinder, allowing him to capture scenes without his subjects’ being aware.



Jules Aarons

“I always was interested in unguarded moments,” Aarons told the *Bridge*. “I think that spirit is in my photos.”

“Aarons worked with great patience and humanity to capture visually life in the street,” Michael B. Shavelson (CAS’83, COM’83) observed in the spring 2003 *Bostonia* cover story about Aarons’s photographs.

His work is in the permanent collections of the Museum of Modern Art in New York, Bibliotheque nationale and Bibliotheque historique, both in Paris, the Boston Public Library, the Museum of Fine Arts, Boston, and elsewhere. The most recent of Aarons’s six books of photographs and essays is *Public Spaces/Public Moments: The Photographs of Jules Aarons* (Gallery Kayafas, 2006).

“To be successful at an art you have to be devoted,” Aarons told the *Bridge*, “and I always took photos with a purpose. If I was traveling and I could get a few hours for myself, I wasn’t going to do shopping or go to a museum. I just went out to photograph.”

**WEB EXTRA**  
See a slide show of Jules Aarons’s photographs at [www.bu.edu/bostonia](http://www.bu.edu/bostonia).



Les Marais, Paris