

Christopher Kobrak, In Memoriam (January 21, 1950- January 8, 2017)



New Year's Eve 2016

It comes as a tremendous shock to me, as it must be as for a great number of the business history community, to confirm that Christopher Kobrak passed away early this week just short of his 67th birthday. It is even more of a shock because I spent New Year's Eve with Chris, had dinner a few days before he died, and was scheduled to meet with him this Wednesday (Jan. 11) to work through another joint article. As the picture above attests, he was in excellent spirits, in his usual talkative, energetic mood, and always the life of the party. This photograph is one of the ways of how I will always remember him, a glass of wine in hand, and utterly willing to engage people and debate ideas in a spirited way in an agreeable setting as possible.

Chris liked to stir the pot. He liked to throw out ideas or comments, often just to spark a conversation. Proof might be my expression in the picture which probably says: "Really?"; "Whaddya mean?" "Wait, did you really say that?" In fact, I first met Chris at a business history conference in Bratislava where we ensued a two-hour conversation about the effect of American anti-trust and German cartels in a hotel bar; the conversation really turned on the differences between American and German business cultures. (I apologize to the others in the group for both of us.) It was the start of many a collaboration, let alone a friendship, but started with a debate.

Chris liked to engage--and engage is the right word, as he welcomed people into the conversation and wanted to listen to their opinions. He was engaging as a person. Ideas were something to pour over, discuss, bounce off of someone else, something to figure out further, develop nuances or hone further in conversation in a social circle, among friends or potential new friends. He welcomed people into these circles, into his home. Ideas were social, not sterile things written on a page. It is not surprising then that so much of his [academic work](#) was written with partners: Mira Wilkins, Andrea Schneider, Jana Wuestenhagen, Per Hansen, and myself. These homegrown discussions and academic debates were friendly in tone--engaging,

amiable, sparked by a tremendously gregarious personality who liked someone talking back at him and even disagreeing with him. Chris loved to be around people. He enjoyed the dialogue, the give-and-take, the exchange. Being an intellectual was an inherently social act, even if writing was usually spent alone. I like to think there was something Old World about him in creating a sort of intellectual salon.

Chris made sure that he had cheap international calling because that kept him connected to the network of people that drove him around the world. No matter where he was (Japan, Germany, France or Canada), he was able to connect with so many different people in a swift manner and bring them together. This was less "networking" than a way of creating an extended intellectual family. People sensed this and were drawn to him.

This is not yet the time to reflect on his academic work and intellectual achievements, which will be forthcoming in a great number of business history journals, but to reflect briefly on his life and person-- a bit what it was like to know him and work with him.

Chris was born in New York, but made a home in Europe and became emotionally rooted in Paris. He remained a New Yorker at heart and in the way he talked and moved. His love for the *New York Yankees* baseball team, well, was his own character flaw. (Substitute in your closest friend's obsession with whatever sports team.) His family history bridged both the Old and New Worlds with links to both Germany and Ireland. One of the connections he was most proud of was that his family tree that reached back to Edward Lasker, the Jewish liberal who was a thorn in the side of the Iron Chancellor Otto von Bismarck. Lasker also blew the whistle on the many scandals following the 1873 financial crash. Chris used to say that his own interest in corporate ethics, banking/finance, and financial crashes had family roots. The brother of Edward had earlier also immigrated to America and had a son, Albert Lasker, who became one of the most famous advertising men in America at Lord & Thomas. He was drawn to these emigre stories. I managed to recruit Chris for at least two of the three articles for the *German-American Immigrant Entrepreneurship* project on [Julius Weltzien](#), [Henry Villard](#), and [Otto Jeidels](#) in part based on his academic work on Schering and German finance, but his own emigre experience drew him to these figures. His own father barely made it out of Germany in the late 1930s when so many other German-Jewish families did not.

He grew up speaking German in spite of his father's distasteful experience and clearly was drawn toward German history in general. He received his bachelor's in Philosophy from Rutgers, which informed his later work on business ethics, started a history MA degree in history, but interrupted it to attain a CPA and MBA in Finance and Accounting at Columbia University, then worked for ten years in actual businesses in the U.S., Europe, Africa, and Japan. He managed to learn Japanese while there and before joining ESCP in Paris where he then learned French with an American/New York accent. This business background also meant that he had skills about accountancy and finance that most business historians rarely acquire,

including a sophisticated reading of annual financial reports. He joined ESCP-EAP as a finance professor, but his love of history, particularly German history still attracted him back. He went back to school--another testament to his ability to switch gears and continue learning--to acquire a PhD at Columbia University in German/European History with Fritz Stern and Volker Berghahn.

Having known him long enough, in many ways Chris was a displaced German historian who happened to study business. He really admired the late Gerald Feldman who wrote about German political economy with a serious but humorous flair and insisted on a strong archival-empirical basis for any good history. Chris' own works betray the deep commitment to [archival evidence](#) and good clear narration as evidenced by his article with Andrea Schneider on "Varieties of Business History" in *Business History* (2011). He thought that more business schools should require history in its curriculum. His own work on business ethics, big business and Nazism, and corporate fraud are clearly informed by some of the damage done by business in the 20th century that affected his own family. His defense of history, of the use and abuse of history for understanding business, owes a great deal to his mentorship, and later friendship, with Gerald Feldman. And he argued for greater academic-business collaboration to enhance access to information and archives.

He was fascinated in particular with German-American business connections so that his first book on Schering (*National Cultures and International Competition: The Experience of Schering AG 1851-1950* (2002) and another one on the Deutsche Bank (*Banking on Global Markets: Deutsche Bank and the United States 1870 to the Present* (2007) as well as a series of comparative articles with me on German and American accounting and corporate governance mirrored his own transatlantic life.

Much of his participation in the Society for German Business History (*Gesellschaft für Unternehmensgeschichte*) and the newly formed Canadian Business History Association that he helped found near the end of his life was driven by these objectives. He was extremely active in most of the business history organizations in various capacities. It says a lot about him that as he had to retire from ESCP in Paris, he sought out new challenges and new parts of the world. He had that much energy and "love of the game." In 2012, Chris moved to Toronto to become the Professor and the L.R. Wilson/R.J. Currie Chair of Canadian Business and Financial History at Rotman School of Management. Chris was a poster child for eliminating mandatory retirement. He still had so much more to offer.

It speaks volumes about him that his Paris apartment was filled with family, guests, and new/old friends even when he was not there. An immensely generous man, he loaned out his apartment to friends at the drop of a hat. Many of us in the business history crowd have spent time there. Others have met him at his favorite restaurant around the corner from his home in the 11th arrondissement, the [Auberge Pyrénées Cévennes](#), a true gem of a restaurant serving classic Lyonnaise cuisine. It was there that I saw Chris for the last time, perhaps, most appropriately. (Please go in honor of

Chris; the entire staff knows who he is as it was his home away from home.) Some of you will also remember the *soiree* he hosted at the European Business History Association in Paris in 2012 where he managed to fit almost a hundred people into a modest size Paris apartment. Also, as usual, he put me to work prior to that party. We had a running joke between us about my friendship being contingent upon repairing his apartment. This entire holiday season when he was again in Paris, his home was completely booked up with people and events. He was to host another party for his former ESCP colleagues in the finance department on Tuesday night and spend time the next day writing with me. He was always looking forward to the next day with optimism and energy.

Please, as sad and tragic his sudden death is, please raise a glass of wine in his honor--in good cheer. He deserves as much.

Jeffrey Fear