

Chris Kobrak (January 21, 1950– January 8, 2017): A Tribute

MIRA WILKINS

Chris Kobrak died in Paris, on Sunday, January 8, 2017, less than two weeks short of his 67th birthday. He was U.S. born, in the greater New York City area. His death was a surprise, a shock. In the month before, he had been in Toronto, where he was teaching; in Sarasota to visit with a close friend and take in some golf; driven to Miami for a brief visit; flown to Paris; spent Christmas with friends in Berlin; and then was back in Paris seeing his friends Jeff Fear and Jeanne Weckler, and his stepsons (whom he loved dearly), as well as other friends; and making plans to fly to Toronto on Friday, January 13 in time to celebrate the 80th birthday of Joe Martin. It was all very exhausting.

Chris's life divided itself into two careers, and over the years he retained the friendships from each. After graduating from college (Rutgers) in 1972, with a major in Philosophy, he took time off to go to the University of Frankfurt and learn German. He returned to the United States and got an M.A. (1975) and M. Phil. (1978) at Columbia University. His field was Modern European History. Next, he completed the MBA program (1980) in Finance and Accounting at Columbia Business School, and in 1981 passed the CPA exam. During 1980–1981, he joined the prominent accounting firm of Peat, Marwick, Mitchell (now KPMG). His background in philosophy, modern European history, finance, and accounting, along with his CPA, would serve him well.

This was all a preface to his first career, in business, which was with the U.S.-headquartered multinational enterprise Sterling Drug (Sterling Drug was the renamed in 1942 Sterling Products).¹ Chris's roughly nine years at Sterling Drug had a formidable impact on his future academic life (his second career). Deciphering the complex history of Sterling Drug (with its pre- and post-World War II relationships

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1. For a brief history of Sterling Products/Sterling Drug, see Wilkins, *Maturing of Multinational Enterprise*; Wilkins, *History of Foreign Investment in the United States, 1914–1945*; and Wilkins, *History of Foreign Investment in the United States, 1945–2012*.

with the German firm Bayer before, during, and after the latter was associated with I.G. Farben) was only part of the fascination of his new job. At Sterling Drug, Chris's initial position was as a financial analyst in its consumer product division, looking at operating results and investments, along with pricing strategies. He was promoted in 1983 to serve as Treasury Director Europe and Africa. He handled financial matters for Sterling Drug's European and African subsidiaries, such as funding and hedging, and he spent time in Europe and in Africa. Next, still at the very international Sterling Drug, he was off to Japan for two years (1987–1988). Then, he was back to the United States, serving as the Vice President of Finance, Strategic Resources. Chris left Sterling Drug in 1990 (in 1988 it had been taken over by Eastman Kodak). For the rest of his life, he retained friends, insights, and perspectives from his years at the company.

From his college days, Chris had had a yearning to be an academic. His second career saw the fulfillment of that dream. After leaving Sterling Drug, he was back in Europe, now in France, and beginning his teaching in Paris in 1991 at ESCP (as of 1993, ESCP-EAP and later ESCP Europe). Along the way, he had learned to speak fluent French. At ESCP, he made new long-standing friends, began a new love life, and determined to get a Ph.D. from Columbia University. His circle of friends grew wider. He traveled regularly across the Atlantic between New York, Paris, and Berlin. ESCP provided him with travel and research funding as he pursued his doctorate.

At Columbia, in the doctorate program, he became a specialist on German economic and business history. The group of scholars he studied under and met while preparing his dissertation would have influence on the rest of his life and formed a new coterie of friends. He was greatly influenced by Gerry Feldman, Volker Berghahn, and Fritz Stern. He plunged into the world of European economic history. Peter Hayes became a close friend. In Europe, he got to know Alice Teichova, who was, at that time, writing on the history of multinational enterprise.² He completed his doctoral work at Columbia University in 1999. His dissertation was in business history, specifically on the history of the German pharmaceutical company Schering AG, 1851–1945.³ It was at this point that Chris came into my life.

2. Alice had convened a conference on the history of multinationals in the 1980s; the papers presented were later published. Teichova, Lévy-Leboyer, and Nussbaum, *Multinational Enterprise in Historical Perspective*. Alfred Chandler, Mira Wilkins, Harm Schröter, and Geoffrey Jones were among the contributors to that volume. Chris did not attend the conference, but the field of the history of multinational enterprise had long been attractive to him and he became an admirer of Al Chandler and Geoff Jones. Harm Schröter would, much later, become a friend and part of his European circle.

3. Kobrak, "Between Nationalism and Internationalism."

I did not know Chris, or of him, in the 1970s, 1980s, or 1990s. Everything about Chris that I have written above, I learned later from him or from others close to him. I think it must have been Gerry Feldman who suggested that Chris send me his completed dissertation for comments. (I still have the 763-page dissertation in my home library.) I do not remember when I first met Chris in person. It could have been in Odense, Denmark, in 2001. Per Hansen was hosting a workshop on dictatorship and political risk in the 1930s, and Gerry Feldman had suggested that I would be an appropriate participant.⁴

Chris became a good friend over the next few years, and for slightly more than a dozen years before his death Chris was an important part of my life. He lived in Paris and then Toronto, and I lived in Miami, but that did not matter. We managed to get together not only in France, Canada, and the United States (Miami, New York, and elsewhere) but also in Greece, Turkey, and Norway. More important, in the last years of his life, we talked on the phone roughly once every two or three weeks, and sometimes more often. Chris had an inexpensive phone service from Paris to the United States, and he chatted frequently with his many friends across the Atlantic. He was happy in later years to learn when he moved to Toronto that the cost of a call to the United States was that of a local one.

When I first met Chris in the early twenty-first century, he was already active in the European Business History Association (EBHA), the Society of European Business History (SEBH), the European Association of Banking History (EABH), the Gesellschaft für Unternehmensgeschichte (GUG), the (British) Association of Business Historians (ABH), and the European International Business Academy (EIBA). He would go to some Academy of International Business (AIB) meetings. In time, he became deeply involved in the (U.S.) Business History Conference (BHC). Soon after he went to the University of Toronto in 2012, he committed time and energy to the establishment of a new Canadian Business History Association (CBHA). He believed very strongly that business history and banking history should be joined in a single discipline.

Chris had a remarkable circle of friends. He liked people. At every stage of his career, he made friends and kept them. And then there were the relatives as well; he had on his mother's side a coterie of Irish relatives, and there were also relatives on his father's German side. Chris wanted to be with people. He invited new friends to his

4. Later, Chris and Per Hansen would publish a book of selections from this and two other workshops, which started with a joint article by the two of them (with Christopher Kopper). Kobrak and Hansen, *European Business*; Kobrak, Hansen, and Kopper, "Business, Political Risk."

home and to dinner. He combined old and new friends. Over time, his circles of friends expanded exponentially. He was never at a loss for conversation. Beginning in the 1990s, and then for the rest of his life, Chris regularly took part in economic and business history meetings and presented papers at conferences.

In 2002 he published his first book, which was based on his dissertation.⁵ The preface of that book reveals his associations with the historians of Central Europe (Gerry Feldman, Volker Berghahn, Fritz Stern, Peter Hayes, Alice Teichova); the influence of Al Chandler and Geoff Jones; and also his involvement with groups of others who would for many years remain friends, including Christine Berghausen, Bonnie and Bob Hoffman, Harold James, and Andrea Schneider. (I was mentioned in his preface, along with Al Chandler and Alice Teichova.)

His second book was his history of the Deutsche Bank in the United States, published in 2008.⁶ It combined his interest in business and banking history with his general knowledge of German business history. There were acknowledgments to many of the same groups of friends as in his first book, but now a new set of friends were included, some of whom had been and would be coauthors with Chris on conference papers, journal articles, and book chapters; in particular, Jeff Fear, Jana Wüstenhagen, and Don Brean. These also now included Youssef Cassis, Duncan Ross, Per Hansen, Peter Hertner, John Wilson, Phil Scranton, and Christopher McKenna. So, too, there were friends from the academic side of the international business world, whom he got to know at the European Academy of International Business: Jean-François Hennart and John Dunning. And there were thanks to friends of many years, Barbara Lindheim and Kevin Farewell.

Chris wrote the chapter on insurance history in the United States in the path-breaking Swiss Re volume, edited by Peter Borscheid and Niels Viggo Haueter, *World Insurance*, published by Oxford University Press in 2012. Between the time of his first book and this contribution, Chris was becoming well known in the business history world. He was publishing (usually with coauthors) in all the leading business history journals: *Business History Review*, *Business History*, *Enterprise and Society*, and *Entreprises et Histoire*, as well as collections of other journals and edited books. He coauthored with Andrea Schneider, Jeff Fear, Jana Wüstenhagen, Don Brean, Michael-Jörge Oesterle, and Michael Troege. In many instances, there

5. Kobrak, *National Cultures and International Competition*.

6. Kobrak, *Banking on Global Markets*.

were not single articles coauthored with these people but multiple ones.⁷

Not long after the Crisis of 2008, Chris put out a call for papers for a special issue of *Business History* on the history and the causes of economic crises. He assembled a set of papers and asked me to take a look. I went over the contributions and he asked me to join him in editing the special issue and coauthoring the introduction. Chris did virtually all the work; he wrote the introduction and I went over it. This was his project, so I was hesitant to join him as coeditor and coauthor, but on his urging I did so. I had a lot of fun arguing with him over details and clarifying what he was (we were) trying to say. This was basically his publication, not mine. Several people have said that I was a frequent collaborator with Chris. I read most of what he was writing (not always before it was published). This was, however, the only instance where I coauthored with him, albeit the publication appears three or four times on his (and my résumé): once in 2011 as an edited special issue; once as a joint article; and then in 2013 once or twice when the *Business History* issue, containing the article (the introduction) was published by Routledge in book form. (For the edited book, Chris wanted me to join him in writing a concluding article. I said this really should be his, and he single-authored the concluding chapter in the 2013 book).⁸ Chris's other coauthors played, I am certain, much more important roles in the final products of their joint efforts than in my case.

Chris's coauthoring was a way to work with people. He also enjoyed joint teaching (he particularly liked joint teaching at ESCP with Ludovic Caillaud). Many of his writings came out of conferences. His radius of activities in Europe extended far beyond Paris and Berlin. As time went on, he regularly went back and forth to London and elsewhere in England.

By the end of the first decade of the twenty-first century, Chris was no longer the fresh Ph.D., eager to enter the business history world. He was becoming well known, and the number of different projects multiplied. He had long been interested in corporate governance and reputation, and enjoyed participating in the special issue of *Business*

7. A sample of his coauthored papers includes the following, and I am including only one per coauthor; this list shows the versatility of his interests. Kobrak and Oesterle, "Nationalism and Internationalism in Corporate Governance"; Fear and Kobrak, "Corporate Governance in America and Germany"; Kobrak and Wüstenhagen, "International Investment and Nazi Politics"; Kobrak and Schneider, "Varieties of Business History"; Brean and Kobrak, "Corporate Governance in the 21st Century"; Kobrak and Troege, "From Basel to Bailouts."

8. The special issue was *Business History*, April 2011; the book was Kobrak and Wilkins, *History and Financial Crisis*. See the introduction, Kobrak and Wilkins, "The '2008 Crisis' in an Economic History Perspective." See also Kobrak, "Concluding Thoughts on the Use and Abuse of Financial History."

History Review that his Oxford friends Chris McKenna and Rowena Olegario edited.⁹ He came to know Janette Rutterford at the Open University, and they had plans for a joint publication. He thought highly of the contributions of Les Hannah, Dick Sylla, and Bob Wright.

Will Hausman and Jeff Fear got Chris involved in writing on several German immigrants in the United States, a project funded by the German Historical Institute. Between 2007 and 2010, he was a trustee of the Business History Conference. He got to know the principal participants in the Business History Conference and the journal editors. He was invited to join the editorial board of *Business History* and *Enterprise and Society*. He served on the book prize committee of the Business History Conference for several years.

When the second decade of the twenty-first century began, Chris realized that he would be up against the French retirement requirements. Joe Martin, who for a number of years had been seeking to find the right person in Canadian business history for a new opening at the Rotman School of Management, University of Toronto, invited Chris to teach in Toronto, first on a visiting basis in 2012, with the high probability that he would be appointed on a regular basis after he retired from ESCP Europe. Between 2012 and 2016, he commuted between Paris, still teaching at ESCP Europe, and now getting assimilated into the University of Toronto milieu. He immersed himself with enthusiasm and pleasure in his new position as Wilson/Currie Chair of Canadian Business and Financial History.

Chris was a curious choice for a senior appointment in Canadian business history. He knew little specifically about the topic, and among some Canadians there were murmurs of discontent. Chris was aware of this and resolved to learn his Canadian business history, including financial history. He made a large group of new friends in Canada, whom he very much enjoyed. So, too, he kept his friendship of many years with Don Brean. He became deeply committed to setting up the new Canadian Business History Association, involving a wide collection of Canadian scholars, many of whom were new friends. And he embarked with Joe Martin on writing a book comparing the history of banks and bank regulation in Canada and the United States.¹⁰ In fall 2016, Chris had the regular appointment at the University of Toronto and was looking forward to a happy future there. He kept his apartment in Paris and planned, as he had done for several years, to commute back and forth.

During the last years of his life, Chris was still making many new friends, and not only in Canada and not only among Canadian business and financial historians. Chris was very generous. He often participated

9. Kobrak, "Concept of Reputation in Business History."

10. Kobrak and Martin, *From Wall Street to Bay Street*.

in apartment swapping. He would trade his Paris apartment. Richard John came to know him through an apartment exchange. Chris got to know Phil Scranton well and welcomed him to Paris. So, too, in Paris, he wanted to see more of Patrick Fridenson.

Toronto and Boston are not far apart, and Chris visited Harvard Business School to attend seminars. He got to know Walter Friedman, as well as Teresa da Silva Lopes, who was visiting there and who also had worked with him on the BHC Book Prize Committee. And then there were trips to Chicago to see Peter Hayes, whose friendship he cherished through the many years. And there were more conferences in Europe; he so much enjoyed Mary Yeager and her husband, John Lithgow, at one of the many conferences.

Chris was always talking about people he had seen and been with. He mixed talk about friends with formidable conversations over politics, public policy, the economy, business history, financial history, Central Bank policies, business ethics, sanctions, organizational theory, history, and you name it. Chris was also a good listener and provocateur, in the best sense of the word. Often, when I was stumbling through a concept, trying to understand something difficult, Chris would make suggestions and prod and challenge my thoughts. I was delighted to have him push me toward clarifying what I was trying to articulate. Our phone calls would often run over an hour, and then might resume the next evening or several days later.

On a regular basis, Chris and I talked about what he was up to and also what I was doing. From a novice in the business history world at the beginning of the twenty-first century, Chris had become the consummate insider, knowing everyone, going to meetings, relishing in all of his plans. He had plans for writings on corporate taxation (in the context of regulation), doing more on corporate governance, on trust, on business history, and on theory. He had strong views and loved to debate them.

During the first week of 2017, I got a flurry of e-mails from Chris. Here are some short excerpts:

Mon., Jan. 2, 2017, 4.07 am Miami time (10.07 am Paris time)

The first week of 2017 promises to be very hectic, recommendations, chasing commas (as you say) for the book with Joe [Martin], and preparation for two chapters that I promised to deliver before the end of February.

Mon., Jan. 2, 2017, 11.25 am Miami time

As soon as Joe [Martin] and I get the book back to University of Toronto and I get finished with the Hagley books [for the Hagley

book prize], I have promised an article to the Canadian History Review on the history of Canadian business history and a chapter for a compendium being put together on the work of the finance area of Rotman, my bit finance and history obviously. After that I can turn to some things promised to Teresa [da Silva Lopes], Ben Wubs, and others. I am tired just thinking about it.

Thurs., Jan. 5, 2017, 5.42 pm Miami time

I just got back from dinner with Jeff Fear [and talking about our planned articles]. Mira, you realize 5 pm, your time, is 11 pm, my time [this after I had recommended that he call on Friday, Jan. 6, 5 pm my time.]

Fri., Jan. 6, 2017, 4.37 pm Miami time

Am still up working, so I will call in about 20 minutes.

This was just a small part of my e-mails from Chris in the last week of his life. I spoke to him until midnight (Paris time) on that Friday, January 6. It was our last conversation. Saturday, he planned to (and did) spend a lovely evening with his close friend Jeanne Weckler. He was going to call me on Sunday evening, January 8, a call I never received since by then he had died. Chris will be missed by all his many circles of friends. He enriched the lives of so many. He will be very much missed. He will be missed personally, but the business history profession will also miss him. His past contributions will long be remembered, as will his warmth, enthusiasm, and good cheer.

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