

In memoriam Christopher Kobrak

(21 January 1950 – 8 January 2017)

Early this year our highly respected colleague and friend and member of the Council of EBHA, Chris Kobrak, passed away. He held the Wilson Currie chair for Canadian Business and Financial History at Rotman School of Management at the University of Toronto (Canada), and has been Professor of Finance at the ESCP Europe in Paris. He was an auditor (CPA), and for years engaged in international business as a business man before he dedicated a second time himself to history, undertaking his PhD with Fritz Stern at the Columbia University of New York. Due to his German-Jewish roots – his father left Berlin in the very last moment in the 1930s – his main research interest lay with the German big business during the Third Reich. He produced a book on Schering, „National Cultures and International Competition. The Experience of Schering AG, 1851-1950“ that was published in 2002. Only a short-while afterwards, he co-authored with me “Big Business and the Third Reich,” in *The Historiography of the Holocaust* (2004). At that time Chris was very much influenced and motivated by Gerald D. Feldman and Peter Hayes and their work on National Socialism.

These topics paved the way for Chris to become active in the German Association for Business History (GUG), where he engaged in the working group that studied the role of business in the Nazi period. Also, he gave the keynote in April 2000 at the GUGs annual meeting on “The German Entrepreneur in the World. From Internationalization to Globalization” in Berlin. He was a regular visitor at GUG's conferences and quite often in Germany undertaking research such as for the book, *Banking on Global Markets: Deutsche Bank and the United States 1870 to the Present* (2007).

Beside his research interests in foreign investment, banking and insurance history, regulation, corporate governance and political risk, he interested himself continually in the methods of his research field. He was passionate discussing appropriate research methods and questions, he never tired in asking complex questions and could argue for hours on the possibilities of history. A joint article with me on "Varieties of Business History" in *Business History* (2011) was just one outcome, which resulted from a panel with Gerald D. Feldman, Christopher Kobrak and Andrea H. Schneider. He wrote many more articles with great colleagues like Jeff Fear, Mira Wilkens and Jana Wustenhagen. And he edited a series of books with Per Hansen and Gabriele Teichmann amongst others. He always remained open to new research areas, such as with the question of "Finance and Family-Ness: An Historical Assessment," in *The Endurance of Family Business* (2013).

His international family molded Chris. With roots in Germany and Ireland, he was born on 21 January 1950 in New York. His life in business led him to Japan among other countries. For academic career and personal reasons directed him to Paris before he began to strike additional roots in Toronto a few years ago. Chris greatly appreciated the intellectual exchange with colleagues; he passionately engaged himself in networking, and helped to establish the World Conference in Business History.

After he accepted the chair in Toronto, his experience with the German business association (GUG) inspired him to establish the Canadian Association for Business History (CBHA), modelled after the GUG. He was driven by the deep conviction that co-operation between business and academia is not just possible, but fruitful and inspiring, since it creates a mutual understanding, access to additional sources and new avenues for professional research. With his positive, winning and integrating way, he was immediately successful in finding potent allies for his new pursuits. The founding of the CBHA was Chris' initiative and brought him great joy.

He was involved in many associations: besides the American Business History Conference (BHC) – where he served as trustee, he was for years the auditor for the European Business History Association (EBHA); he was at last member of the Council. No duty was too much for him, and every duty he performed with gravity and devotion. Program-committees, brainstorming pools, funding groups or organizational committees – everything that helped to improve the field--was worth his time. And he was a great benefit for every group for which he involved himself.

Chris was a personality. He was disputatious – and winning. He was intellectually outstanding – and wonderfully entertaining. But most of all he was relational and could build connections. His long list of publications does not only show that he worked fruitfully on a variety of topics, but also that he was highly co-operative, working in teams along with many co-authors. These proved enriching experiences for those who worked with him.

With Chris Kobrak the field of business history is losing one of its most energetic and vigorous members, who could bridge nations and continents and languages, who stimulated intellectual discourses, and who did not forget to live well on top of all this activity. Even if our discussions easily extended over a very long time, accompanied as they were by classical music and a good glass of wine, they always felt too short.

Chris Kobrak loved magicians. With his sudden passing, he spirited himself away – from one second to the other. In the end, this is perhaps a worthy and dignified way to disappear, although his professional output and legacy of his passion will remain on the stage.behind him Even if those, who knew him and who were close to him are perplexed by his passing: this is what magicians aim for!

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