



IN MEMORIAM

Reginald E. Zelnik
Professor of History
Berkeley
1936 — 2004

Reggie Zelnik died in a tragic accident on May 17, 2004. He was struck by a delivery truck as he was walking to a reception at The Faculty Club.

He had walked that way hundreds of times before, usually wearing a plaid shirt over a t-shirt, black jeans, and, in the winter, a Greek sailor's cap, leaning forward and carrying an old leather briefcase.

Reggie— as everyone, including his numerous graduate students, knew him— was born on May 8, 1936, in New York City; graduated magna cum laude from Princeton University; spent a year in Vienna as a Fulbright Fellow; served for two years in the U.S. Navy; received his Ph.D. from Stanford University; taught as a lecturer at Indiana University; and arrived at the University of California, Berkeley in 1964 — in time for the Free Speech Movement (FSM). A 28-year-old acting assistant professor without a completed Ph.D., let alone tenure, he became one of the most prominent participants in one of the most important events in the history of the University. Reggie was a consistent champion of the students' position, but he had great respect for the university as an institution and an unshakeable commitment to legal procedure as the best way to settle conflicts. He combined a strong political engagement with a profound sense of human fallibility and a quiet sense of humor. He was a leader but not a prophet. He was trusted by all sides because he had both moral integrity and gentle forbearance. Later in life, he became one of the main keepers of the movement's memory, but he never became a priest of its cult or a living monument to his own past. His brilliant article about the role of the faculty in the FSM is both a personal memoir and a meticulously researched historical investigation. It bears the proud but slightly ironic title: "On the Side of the Angels."

Reggie's active participation in the life of the university did not end with the parliamentary victory of the FSM. One of his main concerns and favorite places at Berkeley was the Institute of Slavic, East European, and Eurasian Studies, where he served as director (1977-80) and long-time chair of the executive committee. He was on his way to an institute function on May 17 when the delivery truck took a wrong turn.

Reggie was also an extremely influential member of the Department of History, heading countless committees, welcoming new colleagues, never forgetting the retirees, and serving one term (1994-97) as chair, an experience he found trying because holding a position of formal power was not something he enjoyed. He did enjoy serving on Academic Senate committees, especially the 1967 Commission on Governance, which produced a remarkably thoughtful report that was later published in book form.

Reggie's scholarly work was characterized by some of the same preoccupations as his civic life on campus. A historian of Russian labor, he was fascinated by the meaning of industrial strikes as conflicts over social justice: conflicts that, like the FSM, exposed latent tensions and created new ones but stopped short of embracing a revolutionary transformation. Reggie's first book, *Labor and Society in Tsarist Russia*, is a rich description of the physical and political world of St. Petersburg factory workers culminating in the story of a dramatic short strike. His last major book, *Law and Disorder on the Narova River*, is the story of a strike as a

“case history” of the changing lives and roles of Russian workers. Both events ended in public trials that forced all the participants — strikers, administrators, and judges — to become self-conscious about their place in society and their understanding of what constitutes justice and “due process.” At the time of his death, Reggie was working on a comparative history of strikes in France, Germany, and Imperial Russia.

Reggie’s main scholarly interest, however, was not the workers as members of a social class, but the individual human beings who became workers, stopped being workers, reacted to being classified as workers, and related to people who were not classified as workers. Reggie’s introduction to his translation of an autobiography by a radical worker, Semen Kanatchikov, is a subtle exploration of one man’s evolving attempts to tell — and shape — a story of his life. The last piece Reggie ever wrote is a biography of Anna Pankratova, a radical worker turned labor historian and Party official who had to make difficult, and sometimes impossible, choices in order to stay afloat in Stalin’s Russia while staying faithful to her roots and her sense of human decency. One of the titles Reggie considered was “Neither Devil Nor Angel.”

But Reggie’s greatest academic passion was the training and nurturing of graduate students. Reggie supervised 28 Ph.D. dissertations and advised untold numbers of other students at Berkeley and elsewhere. Dozens of Russian historians throughout the world consider him their mentor and friend. And he was. His marginal comments, seminar questions, and letters of recommendation were legendary, but it was his ability to relate to individual human beings that made him the most respected and beloved Russian historian of his generation. Reggie’s approach to his students was essentially the same as his approach to his historical subjects: everyone had a unique story to tell, and it was Reggie’s job to hear it and help it take shape. The teacher and friend in him reinforced each other but never quite overlapped: he was a revered mentor who never became a guru and a mischievous drinking companion who always remained larger than life.

Reggie was larger than life because he was wise — wise in the sense of being able to see the truth clearly and make judgments accordingly, wise in the sense of never doubting the real or expecting the impossible. He combined commitment and resignation, humor and earnestness, solidity and restlessness in a way that appeared seamless. He felt strongly about his family, his politics, and his profession, yet there was not a hint of self-righteousness or self-satisfaction about Reggie. He knew that he knew, but he never preached — he just did what he understood to be the right thing.

And the right thing, as Reggie understood it, was helping people tell the best possible stories and live the best possible lives. He worked hard on every student paper, every application, and every dissertation — and yet each new draft would sound more like its author and less like Reggie. The greatest disappointments and the greatest triumphs of his life were those of others — and yet he never expected a reward and never felt that he was taking time out of his schedule to do something extra, either optional or required. He just did what he understood to be the right thing. This combination of strength and generosity was so striking, so effortless, and so utterly inexhaustible that people kept coming, writing, and calling — asking for help or just wishing to be closer and trying to live up to his expectations, which seemed impossible but never out of reach.

Reggie was there for all of us. He still is.

Yuri Slezkine
Victoria E. Bonnell
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