

History Happenings

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In Memoriam

Abraham D. Kriegel 1938-2012



Professor Abraham D. "Abe" Kriegel died in Memphis on Wednesday, January 18, 2012. Abe was born on February 15, 1938, in the Bronx and earned a Ph.D. in history at Duke University. He came to the University of Memphis in 1964, where his wife, Reva, joined him a year later. At the university, Abe helped to build the Department of History, the Marcus W. Orr Center for the Humanities, and the Bornblum Judaic Studies Program. Abe is survived by his wife, his daughters Lara and Miriam, his sons-in-law Alex Lichtenstein and David Bryfman, his beloved grandson Jonah, and his step-grandchildren Hannah and Max.

Colleagues, students, friends, and family came together on Thursday, February 2, to pay tribute to Abe Kriegel. Students and his closest friends in the department offered remembrances of Abe's intellectual stature, personality, and humanness.



Speakers at the memorial reception included Dr. Janann Sherman, who presided over the event, Dr. Walter R. "Bob" Brown, Dr. Robert Frankle, Dr. Maurice Crouse, Dr. Major L. Wilson, Dr. Barbara Frankle, and Reva Kriegel

Steven Patterson, whose dissertation Abe directed, evoked Abe's lessons

*Dr. Steven Patterson, associate professor of history and political science at Mississippi College, was not able to attend the memorial reception. Abe directed his dissertation, which was later published under the title *The Cult of Imperial Honor in British India*. Dr. Patterson's reminiscences were read by Dr. Janann Sherman.*

As I sit down to write this, after hearing of Abe's death, I am in between classes, one of which is a course on modern England. I still use my notes from Abe's class on 19th-century England when teaching, and I can almost hear the low rumbling of Abe's voice distilling the years of accumulated wisdom and research about the Victorians. I also remember his chuckles and the asides, mixed with the penetrating wit.

Yet in retrospect, I think his greatest gift as a teacher was his insistence on work that was crafted and revised until it could pass his seminar. Woe to the graduate student who turned in substandard work, and if there is such a thing as "quality control" in a graduate program, Abe was it. In one graduate class I made the mistake of calling a historian a "master stylist" without really thinking it through. Abe's then took the historian's work and proceeded to point out the various "infelicities" (one of Abe's favorite words) in the work. He demanded competent prose from his students, yet he preferred something that hummed and bristled with intellectual energy. And one needed only to look at his journal articles when looking for a "master stylist" to emulate. Precision in language was his gift, and you ignored that lesson at your own peril in his class.



Thus, my best editor when I write today is to imagine Abe reading my work, and as a historian I like to think that with teachers and students there is an unbroken chain, extending back decades, if not centuries, where we are affected, academically and emotionally, by our best teachers. In the Great Chain of Academic Being, I will continue to impart the things I have learned from Abe to my students, who will hear stories of my major professor just as Abe told us of his major professor at Duke.

Bob Brown talked about his long and intimate friendship with Abe and his family

In August 1965, leaving my first faculty meeting at what was then Memphis State University, Abe Kriegel, second-year veteran in the History Department, invited me to join him and his wife Reva, also a new faculty member, for lunch. As we walked to the university cafeteria, he brusquely asked, “Well, what’cha workin’ on?” I replied, “The aborted French Estates Generals during the Fronde,” or “Fraaaahnd” as I pronounced it in my Mississippi French. Looking puzzled, Abe said “The Fraaaahnd?” And then, sarcastically in proper French, he said, “It’s the Frohnd.” I thought, “Am I stuck with this guy as a colleague?”

Little was I to realize that this was, in that famous phrase in *Casablanca*, the beginning of a beautiful friendship. It was an unlikely friendship: Abe, whose Jewish family immigrated from eastern Europe to New York in the early 20th century, and who grew up playing stickball on the streets of the Bronx; and me, whose Presbyterian forebears “immigrated” from South Carolina to a farm in the red clay hills of central Mississippi before the Civil War, and who grew up playing softball in a field surrounded by kudzu.



From our inauspicious beginning, we were destined to share much during the next forty-seven years and I came to feel like a member of their family. In the early days, routinely teaching four or five classes a semester, we worked in the office until 10 or 11 at night, escaping for a quick early dinner together at Abe and Reva’s house, or dropping in on one another’s offices to compare ideas for a class presentation the next morning, gossip about departmental politics, complain about work loads, or just have a good laugh. Weekend afternoons sometimes found Abe in the backfield and me in the line of the History Department football team, as we were yet again defeated by the formidable Art Department. Saturday evenings might mean a game of Monopoly, in which Abe, the fiercest of combatants, refused to allow the game to end at 3 AM because he could not admit

defeat. Or, they would find a group of us in Kell Mitchell’s living room discussing the troubling political and social issues of the turbulent 60s and early 70s. While he might be on the losing team in football or Monopoly, rarely was Abe, with his keen intellect and rhetorical skills, defeated in these debates.

Our common affection for England sprang from his scholarly interest in its 19th-century politics and cult of honor and mine in its 17th-century material culture, and led to occasional memorable encounters there. One night found us side by side in the Royal Albert Hall lustily singing “Land of Hope and Glory” with a crowd of thousands. On a whirlwind trip through East Anglia, we stood on a bridge over the Cam at Cambridge, and while looking at King’s College fantasized about what our lives might have been like had they been spent in that beautiful place. This shared interest in England and academic life in general led Abe to introduce me to C.P. Snow’s novel *The Masters*, describing the political machinations over a hotly contested election of a master of a mythical Cambridge

college. This resulted in fascinating conversations identifying the similarities of our own personalities and roles in department politics and those of some of our colleagues with specific eccentric or crafty dons in Snow's novel.



Equally entertaining were discussions of the zany misadventures of Morris Zapp, the brash Jewish literary scholar from a west coast American university as an exchange professor in a provincial English university in David Lodge's *Changing Places*.

Abe was a great storyteller who could have written a novel about life in the academy, in the Bronx, or in the South as entertaining and revealing as these, suggested by his numerous essays in literary journals recounting in a keenly observant, witty, and often bitingly satirical way his experiences in and observations of these worlds. Few of us who knew and interacted with him were spared a pseudonymous appearance revealing and even embroidering on our own eccentricities and foibles.

I never tired of Abe's animated accounts of events past and present so punctuated with his own laughter that his words would be obscured. Many occurred at what Abe called in one of his essays "Conversational Lunch" in a greasy spoon on Summer Avenue or a pretentious bookstore bistro. Perhaps our most memorable conversations in recent years took place in the middle of the night on the telephone, for I was the only person he knew still awake and game to talk at midnight or later. These ranged widely, but in recent years often centered on nostalgic discussions of our common childhood enthusiasm for major league baseball. I listened with envy to his accounts of watching the Brooklyn Dodgers play at Ebbets Field in the early 1950s, while I, in remote central Mississippi, had to rely on radio broadcasts and a weekly televised game. We tested our memories reconstituting the outfielders of the 1949 Yankees and Red Sox, the batting order of the 1951 Giants, or the events of a World Series game.

Abe Kriegel was a fine scholar, challenging teacher, keen critic, and sometimes-combative colleague, but by me he is best remembered as an interesting, delightful companion, and above all as a loyal, thoughtful, generous, warm friend who provided his support when it was most needed, and who for almost half a century greatly enriched my life.



Robert Frankle focused on Abe's outstanding performances in the areas of teaching, research, and service

Abe taught a wide range of courses, from lower-division introductions to world civilizations and American history through upper-division surveys of British history to specialized graduate courses in the 19th and 20th centuries. His combination of intelligence, erudition, and wit made him an engaging, indeed stimulating, teacher. He could be very demanding, but always with the aim of pushing students to achieve their full potential. He had an incisively critical mind that enabled him to point out fallacies in students' thinking and infelicities in their writing. But he did so with the goal of making them better students and a lot of people became better thinkers. Abe's love of learning was infectious and it is not surprising that he stimulated several students to obtain advanced degrees in his field of modern British history, including his daughter Lara, who is now a major scholar in the History Department at the University of Indiana.



He created and taught a course on the history of Judaism, an important addition to the curriculum. He also became interested in exploring critical issues and ideas in today's society, bringing to them both his keen analytical mind and his vast historical knowledge. Thus, he developed and taught two special topic courses, one entitled "the Intellectual and the Academy in History," the other on the causes, nature, and consequences of war. Both courses ranged over two millennia and several continents. He was careful to assign different viewpoints on a particular issue and then require students to debate a question, thereby strengthening their critical faculties.

Abe's research was of similar high quality. He published numerous articles in the leading journals of his field, including the *English History Review*, the *Journal of British Studies*, and the *Journal of Modern History*. One particular noteworthy article, appearing in the *Journal of British Studies*, put forward an original and subtle analysis of how two groups with different ideologies, evangelical Christians and aristocratic Whigs, managed to come together to pass legislation outlawing slavery in the British Empire. For its excellence, this article was awarded the coveted Walter Love Award for the best article published in all British history for the year 1987. Abe also produced a meticulously researched and much lauded edition of *The Holland House Diaries*, making this important source much more accessible to scholars. Abe also regularly wrote insightful and lucid book reviews for leading historical journals, including *Albion*, the *American Historical Review*, and *History*.

Abe's outstanding scholarship earned him grants and awards from such leading scholarly organizations as the American Council of Learned Societies and the American Philosophical Society. Most impressive was his receipt for the academic year 1979-1980 of the prestigious and highly competitive John Simon Guggenheim Fellowship which allowed him to do research on the topic of the concept of Honor.

Just as Abe's teaching expanded, so did his writing. He began publishing more broadly on contemporary issues, ranging from postmodern to changing generational values to conversational lunch. Nor did he spare the academy. In a series of witty and sometimes withering articles in literary journals, he critically examined the seamy underside of university life, from its petty politics to its pretentious jargon. Abe always wrote a lucid and pleasing prose that could appeal to both his fellow scholars and to a larger intellectual audience.

Dr. Kriegel also provided valuable and extensive service to the department, the university, the profession and the larger Memphis community. He chaired the History Department from 1988 to 1992. He served in numerous search committees. He was an active member of the planning committee that developed the Bornblum Judaic Studies Program. He helped to evaluate grants and fellowship applications for both the National Endowment for the Humanities and the Rockefeller Foundation.

Early in his time in Memphis, he marched in support of Martin Luther King and civil rights and against the war in Vietnam. He also took a leading role in fostering interfaith dialogue between Christians and Jews. But above all else, Dr. Kriegel was a wonderful colleague. He cheerfully gave faculty helpful advice whether it was about an article they were writing or a new restaurant. He was especially welcoming to new faculty, often inviting them to lunch or to his home for dinner. And he was able to lighten even the most tedious meeting with a clever witticism. He will be sorely missed by faculty and students alike.



Maurice Crouse recalled Abe as an essayist



The subject of our tribute today was known by various names throughout his career, from Abie as a child to the name he used for his non-academic essays—Abe Kriegel. My remarks will be mostly about Abe Kriegel, the essayist.

We had little in common because of our origins, he a Jewish lad from the Bronx and I a rural North Carolinian, yet we bonded. We had a common birthdate, though not the same birth year. I also twice served as academic counsel when the university for some inexplicable reason did not want to promote him to professor (we won the appeal on the second time around). All of this helped.

I admired Abe for his carefully honed writing. He knew well the double meaning of the Hebrew word *dabar*, that words are not just sounds but active things with real power. He would no more use an incorrect or inexact word than a carpenter would use an axe to drive a nail. He sometimes consulted with me about his use of Southern expressions in his essays, since

Southernese was something of a secondary language for him, and he wanted to make sure he was getting the expressions right before he used them.

Abe could be merciless in critiquing even university presidents, vice-presidents for research, and deans of graduate schools for misuse of words—a university president who said, “I’m just filled with temerity to be in the presence of these giants” (the giants happened to be two of his predecessors as president); a vice-president for research who repeatedly urged the faculty to continue producing those “monograms”; and a dean of the graduate school who insisted that every candidate for a graduate degree have a “culminating experience,” and that within a specified time span. He gleefully noted the absurdity of a sign that was posted on the wall of the student cafeteria for almost a decade: “All food leaving the building must exit through the rear doors.” One of his essays found fault with the sign about the university’s continuing program to eliminate vehicular traffic on the campus: “BUILDING TOWARD A PEDESTRIAN CAMPUS,” which he admitted was an improvement over an earlier attempt which read “BUILDING TOWARD A PEDESTRIAN UNIVERSITY.”

What is perhaps the defining essay was entitled “Out of Context: A New York Jew in the New South,” in which he wrote about the incongruities of being not just a Jew in Memphis, but a “New York Jew” in a region that was only beginning to creep toward being a New South. Both his daughters had certificates from Baptist Memorial Hospital to the effect “She’s a Baptist Baby.” His younger daughter, as president of the student body at an Episcopalian school, led the commencement parade with a banner displaying an enormous Christian cross. Abe chastised Seesel’s supermarket for advertising “braided egg bread” — “Who are you kidding, Mr. Seesel? Your braided egg bread



is challah, the traditional loaf associated with the Jewish Sabbath and religious holidays. If God had intended it to be called braided egg bread, he would have called it braided egg bread.” He once agreed to deliver in the back seat of his 1957 station wagon an enormous challah baked in Memphis on a Friday afternoon for 500 guests at a wedding in Birmingham, Alabama, on Saturday. This led to a surreal episode when he stopped along the way for gasoline at a self-service

station in Iuka, Mississippi. The strains of Kinky Friedman and his Texas Jewboys were heard performing “They Ain’t Makin’ Jews Like Jesus Anymore” on the radio in the distant service bay. One of the mechanics called to the other, “Hey, Jim Bob, get your ass over here.” The two continued staring at the challah while Abe pumped the gas. Finally Jim Bob said, “That’s the damndest challah I’ve ever seen.” Now, there might have been a Jew with the unlikely name of Jim Bob, but I doubt it. Abe himself could not explain how Jim Bob would have known what the object in the back seat was. His concluding comment was “Go figure.”

Then there is the classic essay about his early career as a busboy, then waiter, and finally headwaiter at a Jewish summer resort in the Catskills, memorable for his frequent puzzlement as to what his guests were ordering. Many of them had grown up in eastern Europe and were ordering in English that sounded like the English used in Leo Rosten’s *Education of Hyman Kaplan*. He was completely buffaloeed by one guest’s request for “a horder ‘ot dust,” which turned out to “an order of hot toast.”

The title of the essay “Up for Grabs” suggests his concern about the disturbing tendency of students, and even historians, to create “history” in which such matters as what constitutes proper investigation, the rules of evidence, and an adherence to “the facts” become matters of opinion. The theme is continued in “Can You Prove It Didn’t Happen?” where Abe quoted one student as summing up the debate on a certain issue with “Whom can say?” He cited one student who defended the picture of the parting of the sea for the Israelites fleeing Egypt on the basis of her viewing of Cecil B. DeMille’s *The Ten Commandments*. She had seen it, so it must have happened that way. Admitting that he had used the wrong verb in asking if anyone had seen *The Messiah* (referring of course to Handel’s famous oratorio, which the class was discussing at the time), he was nevertheless startled by a student’s claim that he had indeed seen the Messiah—on Highland Street, outside the Studio Theatre. Truly, things appeared to be “up for grabs,” and “whom can say?”



What I find to be by far the darkest in tone was the letter to his daughter Lara, who was considering following in his footsteps as a historian, warning her of what she was in for, especially at the hands of university administrators but also from faculty colleagues. (Despite the warning, she did in fact follow in his footsteps to considerable acclaim; Abe proudly displayed a report of her book on his office door.) Abe served as chair of the department for four years and they clearly were not satisfying years for him. Innocent readers might take this letter to be a series of wildly rambling—and in all likelihood, invented—tales about academic eccentrics. Some of the people are never named; others are assigned fictitious names such as Marvin, Peter, Nigel, Duncan, Joe, Paul, Kornblatt, Edwina, Pat, and Ralph. Those in

the know would recognize these wild-sounding tales as barbed “zingers” about very real associates in a very real university setting who were creating very real problems. I would hope for Lara’s sake that she has found that most of Abe’s warnings do not apply to her situation.

Abe produced valuable work in British studies, but these essays are the part of Abe’s heritage that I will cherish forever. They are Abe at his most delightful.

There is one other aspect of my relationship with Abe that I want to mention. He was one of my clients who looked to me for help with personal computers. Abe would often call me at my office when he was working from his home. As soon as I heard the words “You have a minute, Maurice?” I knew that after brief chit-chat, Abe would soon go on to outline a problem he was having. With the minor problems, a brief explanation of what to do was all the help he needed. For bigger problems he would wait until he had a long list of things and would then treat me to a free lunch in exchange for my providing solutions.

Abe had already hinted that the time was fast approaching for another of those free lunches, but we did not get to have it. I had already planned to get something from him in return, to pick his brain during the lunch about something else that involved writing. Ever since I was in college I have periodically returned to the poetry and art of William Blake, always seeking but never arriving at much understanding. I had lately noticed that the name of E. P. Thompson often came up in scholarly discussions about Blake. (Abe’s students will remember his fondness for E. P. Thompson’s writings.) Although Blake had never been mentioned in any of our conversations about Thompson, Abe seemed to remember everything else that Thompson had written about, and I knew that he would surely have remembered what Thompson said about Blake. Alas, I never got to discuss Thompson’s treatment of Blake with Abe. I know it would have been enlightening.

Major Wilson shared with colleagues, students, and Abe's family some personal memories

Abe and I came to the University the same year and of course quickly became the rising stars in the class of 1964. Most striking of all, we brought great diversity into the Department of History. He came from the crowded and noisy streets of the Bronx. There, a babel of voices—Protestant, Catholic, Jewish, etc.—imparted to him intellectual stimulation, a critical bent of mind, and as a consequence a liberal awareness of different points of view.

I came from a cotton patch in the boondocks of central Arkansas and its cultural consensus informed by Protestant fundamentalism. Its authority came from the original rendition of Holy Writ found in the King James Bible; and its exclusive claims of salvation rejected, among other things, the claim of Catholics to be Christians. Naval service in World War II and college on the G. I. Bill began to open a larger world to me. The company of Abe contributed still further to my liberation. One of my fondest memories is that of marching with Abe during the sanitation strike in 1968. Here I came to share more fully the passion in his heritage for social justice.

Reva (with Abe's help) quickly earned a reputation of being the "hostess with the mostest." Sparkling conversation mingled with elegant dinners often ended with my favorite dessert, Reva's chocolate mousse. Abe later reminded me that I praised it as a great chocolate pudding, to which I replied, "Abe, tell that little woman of yours not to change a thing!" Later in our luncheons I invited Abe to sample more good southern dishes, and when he began to eat hominy grits I saluted him as "a good ole boy."



In the early years Abe and I indulged his love for basketball and mine for golf. Even though I was somewhat taller, Abe always bested me in our pick-up games with graduate students. Here I was no match for the roughhouse art of rebounding he may have learned in the Bronx. Happily, I was his master on the links to which I enticed him for a few very forgettable rounds of golf. I can still remember his first drive off the tee: two hundred yards in the middle of the fairway, one hundred yards up and one hundred yards down.

It was also a joy to introduce Abe to the flora of the South, so different as he discovered from the plants in the Bronx window box. I showed him the different kinds of oak and maple trees, impatiens and daffodils, azaleas, camellias, and other kinds of shrubs. Here also were the kinds of grass he needed to know, as he became caretaker of the lawn in what must have seemed like an incredibly spacious yard. Say "no" to crabgrass, dandelions, nut grass, and rag weeds; say "yes" to Bermuda, fescue, and zoysia.

In a more serious vein, finally, I cherish two great things Abe passed on to me. He deepened my love for the King's English and its quest for greater precision in the choice of words. Secondly, Abe inspired me by his joyful embrace of life, an embrace that triumphed heroically over serious health issues from early on. Abe will be sorely missed.

Barbara Frankle provided glimpses of Abe's unique personality



A lot of you don't know that actually the relationship of the Frankles with Abe and Reva Kriegel started with me. I knew them both before I even knew Bob, and in fact we announced our engagement at their house, back many, many years ago. And at that time—this was before I deviated from the true path and entered darkness and became a full time academic administrator—I was a Victorian scholar. That was when I first met Abe and I was doing, at that time some startling kinds of research. I was actually researching women and their social role, in 1964, when you didn't do such things. And Abe was one of the few—he was a traditional historian at that point—who really accepted the type of work I was doing, and in fact helped me, using that wonderful critical analysis and his wide range of knowledge to encourage me along the way. But of course, at the same time he said, “The title of your thesis is *wrong*—you call it ‘Concepts of Gentility’ and it’s ‘Conceptions of Gentility.’” At this point my supervisor and I talked about it and he said, “No, it’s ‘Concepts.’” However, that was Abe getting to the heart of things and readily sharing those ideas.

Working with Abe and researching with Abe and sitting with Abe for hours in that great tea room and with Reva was remarkable, as have been the almost fifty years that we were friends and colleagues. And as graduate students one story I want to share and then I'll sit down. Abe and Reva and I went to see *Fahrenheit 451*, which is a dystopian film about people who are rebelling against an autocratic government that is burning books, and they are memorizing them, and as we left Abe said, “Pity the poor guy who had to read the multivolume Money Penny and Buckle *History of Disraeli!*” That was one of the most mordant comments I know of as far as his scholarship, and Abe's trenchant wit will be indeed be missed, as will the other qualities of generosity, kindness, and the constant intelligence.



Reva's words closed the event



I hope I can hold it together. Many of you probably have observed that over the course of years, many years here in Memphis, there was a metamorphosis. That gruff, almost arrogant guy from the Bronx came to truly love and admire and appreciate—I'm going to use the word—"southern gentility," and I would be remiss if I did not thank you all for sharing your memories, for comforting our family, for being here today, and keeping his memories alive. Thank you.