

## **Memories of Vladimir G. Tremi**

Let me begin by mentioning that I am forever grateful to Vlad Tremi for plucking me from my boring computer programming job in the medical insurance industry and luring me to the Duke economics graduate program. Had he not done that, instead of becoming a professor and teaching about the wonders of the market system, I would have been exposed to the vagaries of real markets!

I think Vlad has always had a great ability to find and attract excellent graduate students. But in my case being a native of Russia, the main criterion was probably Vlad's desire to find a student who would have first-hand knowledge on the subject of his studies of alcohol consumption and black markets in the former Soviet Union. I don't know whether Vlad learned anything from me that he hadn't already known about drinking and black markets in the USSR. I suspect he did not. But I do know that I have learned a great deal from Vlad both about economics in general and about the real workings of the Soviet economy and society, which I had mistakenly thought I knew quite a bit about. To this day, when I teach classes on the transition of Soviet-type economies to markets or speak at conferences, I bring up points and tell stories that I learned in Vlad's class. Too bad I could not possibly master Vlad's unsurpassed feel for Soviet economic statistics and his ability to uncover information about the Soviet economy that teams of Soviet statisticians tried to hide.

As most prospective students know, a professor's deep understanding of economics is not always sufficient to induce them to go to graduate school. Students need food, shelter, and an occasional beer, not to mention the tuition money. And Vlad was great at making sure that his students could earn enough for those necessities and then some. I do not know how he managed to keep getting grant money year after year, but others and I could certainly appreciate it. Many a student has benefited from Vlad's council, guidance, and support. In fact, as I recall, Vlad has been responsible for more Ph.D.'s who specialized in comparative economics than most major economics departments in the United States.

But what I have admired the most was that Vlad was a friend to his students, and this friendship continued after graduation. I remember spending countless hours in his office, talking about economics, the Soviet Union, Duke, and so on. And, of course, I was always looking forward to Vlad's dinner parties, both for the food (thank you, Emma!) and company and the stories Vlad would tell.

Formally, Vlad has retired. But he certainly has not lost his energy and intellectual curiosity. Recently, for the third year in a row, he has organized a panel at the American Association for the Advancement of Slavic Studies, and he continues to do his research. I wish Vlad many more productive years to come!

*Michael Alexeev, Ph.D. 1984*

## **Vlad Tremi Retires**

Some scholars' deeds are deep but narrow;  
others'— broad but shallow.  
Yours are fully four-dimensional.

From Tugan to Baranovsky,  
from Strugatsky to Starovsky,  
from Voloshin to Walras.  
And in vodka veritas  
From samogon to samizdat,  
numismatics, Goskomstat.

Inverted matrices,  
converted indices,  
pages of wages,  
and prices and salaries and calories.

Accounts and tables  
and statistical fables.  
SNA and NMP,  
NNI and GNP

You have diddled the Riddle,  
  
unwrapped the Enigma,  
  
mastered the Mystery,  
  
of Soviet Economy, Culture, and History.

*Gregory Grossman, Professor Emeritus of Economics, UC Berkeley  
November 1999*

Books. Books are the first thing that, as a graduate student, I associated with Professor Trembl. His office on the third floor of the Social Sciences Building was replete with books, many of them in Russian, and no doubt in a few other foreign tongues as well. A trip to his home on Long Leaf Drive—I can't even remember the names of some of the roads I lived on in North Carolina, but I remember Long Leaf Drive in Chapel Hill with great clarity—only cemented the association, as his study was as book-lined as his office. And though I vaguely recall a Tremblism along the lines of "books are for reference, not for reading," he had read more than his share of them, including those unrelated to his professional specialty. Professor Trembl's knowledge of Japan, for instance, is extensive, and his command of outlandishly esoteric facts is justifiably renowned.

I got to know Professor Trembl first as a student in his Soviet economics course, then as his teaching assistant, and later as a colleague. One consistent, and consistently admirable, aspect of Professor Trembl's scholarly work is carefulness. His publications on Soviet economic thought and Soviet statistics, for instance, are really masterful in their care. The fact that Professor Trembl was so careful in his research made it pretty clear that he was not some wild, eccentric person—but you sort of needed the assurance, given that his chief interests appeared to be illicit production of alcohol, indeed, almost all matters illicit, in the Soviet Union.

How much has happened to me as a result of the modest beginning in Professor Trembl's Soviet economics classes! Russia became and remains a major element in my professional and personal life. (Alcohol, and all things illicit, too—I teach a course on the regulation of vice.) Many of my best friends are acolytes of Professor Trembl. (Just two days ago I sent a personal e-mail to four close friends—three of them had received their Ph.D.'s under Professor Trembl's tutelage.) When I started to attend professional meetings concerning the Russian economy, I was more than once declared by perfect strangers to be a member of the "Duke mafia," even when I wasn't affiliated with Duke—because I was known to be affiliated with the capo, Professor Trembl. Is there any other field of economics that possesses a widely known "Duke mafia"? Well, maybe the history of economic thought—and Professor Trembl made contributions there, too!

Like all members of the "Duke mafia," I have inherited various traits from Professor Trembl. One is a profound skepticism concerning official statistics, and a willingness to consider unconventional explanations for changes in reported data. A second is a belief that important economic insights can be gleaned from non-economic sources. Professor Trembl famously illustrated the pervasiveness and particulars of the Soviet second economy in a slide show drawn from a Soviet humor magazine. And speaking of humor, another legacy from Professor Trembl is his many jokes and anecdotes about Soviet life, which I (along with the other mafia lieutenants) continue to share with my students.

It isn't surprising that my professional and personal life continues to revolve around the Duke mafia, because Professor Trembl and his wife Emma drew the family together—

both their nuclear family and the extended family. It is this, beyond all the scholarly assistance, for which I am most grateful. I met Professor Trembl's mother, and got to know one of his children, his son Alex, pretty well. Nick Malyshev remains a close buddy, and his sister is Professor Trembl's goddaughter—yes, Professor Trembl is officially a Godfather. I have been in the company of Professor Trembl and Emma from Honolulu to St. Louis, Asheville to Moscow. And many, many happy times on Long Leaf Drive. Books may be the first association that a graduate student in the Duke mafia makes with Professor Trembl, but it is the wonderful, caring family that is the lasting association.

*Jim Leitzel, Ph.D. 1986*

One of the things I love most about Vlad is his wry sense humor and dead-pan delivery. A favorite story about Vlad is this:

I was helping Vlad set up a computer in his office at Duke (that wonderful office filled with books and a window on the green...), and there were dozens of cables hanging out of the back of the computer. This mess of cables faced the door and was not terribly attractive when a person first walked into the room. I suggested that we drill a hole in the table and run the cables down through the hole to get them out of sight. He looked at me and said, "Kim, there are two things that can be used to remove a tenured member of the faculty: moral turpitude and drilling holes in University property." Note: I immediately looked up "turpitude" in the dictionary!

Vlad taught me so much, I could never enumerate all of it, but one of the most important lessons was about collegiality. I walked into his office fuming one afternoon, because a certain professor would not allow me to take an extension on a paper without a severe penalty. Rather than sympathy, Vlad held up his hand and said, "I am going to invoke Senatorial Privilege: like the Senators, one should never speak ill of another colleague in front of a student." It is difficult not to admire someone like Vlad!!

Vlad was always unfailingly kind and supportive. He taught me to think critically, and to look at all data and statistics VERY CAREFULLY. He also showed me how to be respectful of students in my classes, as he was always respectful of his undergraduates.

*Kim Neuhauser, Ph.D. 1994*

I arrived in Durham to study Soviet-type economies with Professor Trembl in August 1991, the same week that the failed coup in Moscow made it clear that the Soviet Union and its economic system would soon be dismantled. I was lucky to have had Vlad as my advisor during that time of rapid disciplinary change and uncertainty. He offered me unwavering support through my years at Duke and then he opened all sorts of doors for me in Moscow, enabling me to do research on Russia's emerging banking system. Perhaps most importantly, he had a keen sense of just when I needed a (kindly delivered) push to maintain momentum.

Vlad gave me a wonderful education as to how the Soviet system really worked, sharing with other students and me all varieties of economic stories that played out behind the façade of central planning. Vlad showed me how a good economist must be a good detective, creatively looking for the hidden story in numbers while at the same time realizing their limitations. I am particularly grateful to him for giving me both the opportunity and the encouragement to teach my own courses early on in my graduate years. It was through those first experiences that I came to enjoy teaching, which led me later to seek out a job at a liberal arts college.

My wife and I have as our fondest memories from our years in Durham the dinners that we shared with Vlad and his wife, Emma, at their house. I truly feel privileged to have worked under and received the support of such a special man.

*Will Pyle, Ph.D. 1997*

## **Vlad Tremi: A Happy Day**

Sometime in 1986 I encountered Vlad in the third-floor hallway late in the morning. He looked over at me and said, coyly, "Can you guess where I was this morning?" Now I had known Vlad for twenty-six years at that point, and never once had I seen him act in a manner I could have called "coy." Boisterous sometimes, busy always, sometimes frowning, often gracious, and when with students, warm and open in his generosity. But never "coy."

So I replied, "Playing golf," figuring that I had to be wrong, since as far as I knew while Vlad loved to ski, he never did play golf, so he'd have to tell me where he had been and get me off the hook from guessing again. And he said, "No, the Oval Office." It took me a moment to register that he meant the Oval Office. To my "Wow" he replied that he had been brought in to brief President Reagan at 7:30 a.m. prior to the Reagan-Gorbachev meeting in Reykjavik, Iceland. He went on to say, "Can you believe it? I came to this country from the Ukraine as a teenager, and this morning I was talking to the president of the United States in the Oval Office." His wonder was so genuine, so expansive, and so unguarded that I simply grabbed his right hand and started shaking it, saying, "How wonderful, how wonderful."

I hope he told hundreds of people about that memorable morning.

*E. Roy Weintraub*

When I think of Professor Trembl, I think of someone who was, and continues to be, a superlative mentor. I certainly would not have completed my dissertation had it not been for his seemingly infinite guidance, wisdom, and great patience.

But Vlad's expertise extends well beyond economics. He has also guided me to some of the giants of Russian music. After I expressed an interest in the music of Shostakovich in 1989, Vlad loaned me a copy of *Testimony*, a controversial memoir dictated by Shostakovich to Solomon Volkov. I found the book riveting and set off reading several more books on Shostakovich, while becoming familiar with almost his entire musical output. In the interim years, I've become similarly engrossed in the biographies and music of Tchaikovsky, Rachmaninov, Stravinsky, Prokofiev, Schnittke, and others. In November of 2001 at the annual meetings of the American Association for the Advancement of Slavic Studies, Vlad noted to me that Volkov had written a book on the history of St. Petersburg that reads like a cultural who's who of 19th and 20th century Russian and Soviet history, including, of course, Shostakovich. Later that Month, Vlad sent me a copy of the book, which I am currently reading with great interest.

Thinking of Vlad also reminds me of scores of wonderful stories and vignettes, of which I will share a few.

During the academic year 1989-1990, Chris Giosa and I took Vlad's two courses on Soviet Economics. During the winter of that academic year, Chris and I both grew full beards. One day we decided that we should shave off just our mustaches to see how Vlad would react. We could both imagine that outwardly Vlad would look at us in class with a little smile and continue on with his lecture unphased, while inwardly he would be quite amused. Though we realized that imitation is the highest form of flattery, ultimately, we chickened out and never went mustacheless.

Vlad loves to tell stories of how perverse incentive structures in the Soviet Union led to seemingly bizarre, but in fact entirely rational, economic decision making. The story I like the best is the one about the used light bulb market. For most of us, it is hard to fathom the rationale for a market in burnt out light bulbs. But in the scarcity-driven Soviet economy, the market was entirely reasonable. Light bulbs were rarely available to individual consumers, but were obtainable for State-sponsored activities. Thus, it would be difficult to purchase a light bulb for a new lamp in one's home, while burnt out bulbs in State-run offices or factories were routinely replaced. So if someone purchased a new lamp and needed a bulb, he would buy a used light bulb for a small fee and replace a functioning bulb at work with the dud. He would then take the functioning bulb home for the new lamp, while the burnt out bulb at the office/factory would be replaced with a new functioning bulb. Meanwhile, the maintenance person at the office/factory would take the used bulb and sell it on the used light bulb market.

In 1990 or 1991, Chris Giosa and I attended a talk by Stanislav Shatalin, one of Mikhail Gorbachev's top economics advisers, whose radical 500-day plan for economic change



was scrapped by Gorbachev in favor of a less progressive plan. Vlad had organized the talk and had been hosting Shatalin and others from the Soviet Union during the week. A short while into the talk, Vlad left the conference room with a rather serious look of concern on his face. He never returned. We were shocked by the apparent snub to Shatalin. However, Vlad had something much more important on his mind. Later in the day, Chris and I bumped into Vlad and asked why he had left the talk in such haste. Now with a look of sorrow, Vlad said slowly, "They drank all my vodka." He left the talk to buy more Stolichnaya so he could continue to be the gracious host.

Vlad has spent a good part of his career looking into the wonders and whimsies of Soviet and post-Soviet economic statistics. One time during class, Vlad mentioned how he had been reading a very interesting article on Soviet economics statistics. The article had been translated from a Japanese economics journal. As he was reading the article it became more and more familiar, as if he had read it before. Finally, Vlad realized that he was reading his own article, which had originally been written in English, translated into Russian for a Soviet journal, subsequently translated from Russian to Japanese, and finally translated back into English. How much the last iteration of the article resembled the original piece is still a mystery.

*Erik S. Weisman, Ph.D. 1996*