

Prof. Ben Gomes-Casseres

Memorial Minute for Barney Schwalberg

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I'm Ben Gomes-Casseres, professor in the business school. My colleagues in Economics asked me to speak about Barney Schwalberg today because I was his student 52 years ago.

Economics is known as the "dismal science" . . . but you wouldn't know it from listening to Professor Schwalberg. I remember him vividly as a tall, lanky man with flowing black hair and dark rimmed glasses, commanding the auditorium with his booming voice. He taught Introduction to Economics, but it might as well have been Introduction to Life.

A good friend of mine from the class of 1976 recalls one day when Professor Schwalberg was explaining the workings of supply and demand in agricultural goods. He was making a point about "bumper crops" and went on and on about these "bumper crops" until one of us meekly raised their hand to ask: "Professor Schwalberg -- "what is a bumper crop?" Barney didn't skip a beat -- "well, it is a crop of bumpers!" The class broke out in laughter.

He taught with sharp humor but also with rigor, and kindness. The same friend recalls when he went to Professor Schwalberg to ask for review of a grade. "Do YOU think your paper is good or are you just hoping for a better grade?" Barney asked. The student paused and admitted -- "a better grade." "Good," Barney replied, "because your paper is NOT good, and if you thought it was good, then you are not being objective about your own work." This comment stuck with that student for life.

You can imagine why we loved him then and remember him now with such respect. Many of my classmates report that they didn't major in Economics -- they majored in Barney Schwalberg. And this was almost literally possible because he was so versatile as a teacher. Over time he taught not only the wildly popular Introduction course, but also higher level courses in statistics, microeconomics, comparative economic systems, economics of education, and more.

Looking at his career today, I am guessing that the reason he could do all of this was because he saw Economics as a way to puzzle logically about the world. As a child, he devoured books on Chess and became an excellent player himself -- reading the Russian masters, and, of course, teaching his students the game when he stayed late at the office.

He loved the Russian language and culture, perhaps because of Chess. During the Korean War, he enlisted, learned Russian quickly, and was sent to Hawaii to translate intercepted Russian communications. After the War, he earned his Economics degree from Harvard, specializing in Soviet economics and education. Later, he continued this work through the Harvard Russian Research Center and relished coffee and meetings with other Soviet scholars and émigrés.

Barney was a cosmopolitan New Yorker who spent some of his youth in Jerusalem before the Second World War. He came to Brandeis in 1965 and retired in 1999. In 2009 he and his wife Adelle moved to Brunswick to be closer to their daughter Renee and her family.

When Adelle passed away in 2011, Barney lived in an independent living community, where he was known to hold court on a variety of topics in the dining room. Later, he moved to an assisted living center, where the staff cherished him for his kindness and wit; they note that he corrected their grammar until his last days. He died in late November at the age of 95. He is survived by his daughter Renee, son-in-law John Anton, and granddaughters Claire and Leah Anton.

Professor Schwalberg died as he had lived -- an engaging and kind man, and a master teacher. May his memory be a blessing.