

*A Compilation of Memories  
In Honor of the Retirement of*

*Keith Hitchens*

*Professor Emeritus*

*Department of History  
University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign  
Fall 2019*



## *Professor Mark Steinberg, University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign*

I have so many vivid images of Keith (especially appropriate to recall here in Odessa, a region and city with many connections, both happy and brutal, to Romania and Romanians). Many are personal. Many mornings, just after 6am, when starting out on my morning walks with Jane, my late wife, we would often pass Keith walking along Delaware street toward campus, often in his green felt hat, ready to start his work day. We would wave or sometimes pause to chat for a few moments: about his travels (he was often off somewhere, usually Romania), some new honor he was receiving, the weather, our health. He was always, even when illness began to slow him down, friendly and warm, smiling and caring. Indeed, Keith is a key part of the warmth and humanity of our neighborhood. And of the history department and East European and Russian studies across departments. Somewhat later in the morning, we might see him in a cafe talking with a graduate student—early morning meetings in a local cafe is something almost all of his graduate students mentioned to me as something they loved and appreciated about Keith (even if it was rather too early for some of them!).

In the department, I have been on many graduate exam and dissertation committees with Keith. Here one could see Keith at his best: erudite and generous, encouragement his students' work with sharp questions but also warm respect. No surprise that he is admired and loved by generations of graduate students. I could say more about his scholarship (his long list of books and articles) and many awards that include membership in the Romanian Academy. But I am more in the mood, at this distance, to return to the person. For Keith, though a consummate scholar, is no less a warm, humane, and generous human being—which surely shapes his work. His modesty, his sincere concern for others, his generosity with students, and his empathy are among his many virtues. And, it must be said, who cannot enjoy his rumpled bohemian style. His warm presence in the hallways of Gregory Hall has been as much a sign of his impact as the new books, in many languages, that have regularly appeared in the display case near the office.

Congratulations, Keith, on meaning so much to so many people. Not least to me, where you have been an important and wonderful part of a department I have loved for more than 20 years. Thank you.

*Professor Richard Burkhardt, University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign*

Everyone will know two things about Keith's exercise program, how he kept mentally fit by learning languages at a prodigious clip and how he walked everywhere with a book-laden brief case in each hand. There are two things that younger colleagues may not know however about Keith in the 1980s. The first is that when the University of Illinois instituted the University Scholar's program to identify the top researchers on the campus, the History Department Executive Committee decided to make Keith its first very first nominee. I happened to be department chair at the time, and I remember that it was an unalloyed pleasure to write the nomination for Keith, and that it was a joy for the whole department when Keith was indeed chosen in that very first crop of University Scholars. OK, I know the fact that Keith was one of the very first University Scholars can probably be found in the university's records somewhere, but here is another thing about Keith from those days. In conversation with Keith I learned from this sober scholar that he was a big fan of the TV show "Hill Street Blues." Once I learned that, I figured I should watch it too, and I also figured that since the recommendation came from Keith, I could probably get away with it at home. We all benefited from Keith's great example!



*Patricia Hollahan, Kalamazoo, MI*

My late husband, Leonard Olson, was one of Keith's Ph.D. students from the mid-70s. Leonard went on to a career in the Urbana Fire Department, and he and Keith stayed in touch regularly, even once we moved up here to Kalamazoo. I don't know if you want to cast your net as far as students who've gone on to other careers, but I know that Leonard would want to send his best wishes—and I want to add that I hope that no one is toasting Keith in any of that California gully wash.



*Professor David Ransel, University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign / Indiana University*

Warmest congratulations to Keith Hitchins on his retirement. We started out the same year at Illinois and shared an interest in the eastern side of Europe. I enjoyed swapping stories with Keith about life behind the iron curtain. The most remarkable one I remember was Keith's account of the seizure of the manuscript of his first major scholarly work as he left Romania after a long research stay. Luckily, the police consulted scholars in Bucharest and were told that publication of Keith's manuscript in the West would be equal to having two ambassadors in Washington. A special envoy soon after showed up at Keith's room in Budapest and handed back all Keith's manuscripts and notes. The key here was Keith's history of the Romanian national idea, not any sympathy for the socialist regime of the time. Keith, a Yankee traditionalist, was no friend of socialism. I recall him questioning my anti-war activities at the time, cautioning me that if the communists took over in Vietnam, they would soon turn the place into another Romania. Keith was traditionalist in language as well. When I was editing the Slavic Review I asked his advice on whether to change the journal's spelling of Rumania to Romania, as the State Department and major U.S. newspapers had done. It bothered him that Americans had so little confidence in their own ways of doing things that they would make this spelling change just because a foreign regime preferred it. He pointed out that Germans demonstrated more confidence in their customary usages, for example, sticking to their spelling: Rumänien. Of course, everyone knows what a remarkable linguist Keith is. A Romanian specialist needs to master a few languages, but how many Romanian historians would you find, when you drop by their office, perusing newspapers in Albanian? Which is the least of it. I believe it was only when I took over the Slavic Review that I discovered the extraordinary range of his abilities. Did I need someone to review a book on Turkish literature in Turkish or a Georgian book on Georgian history, no problem, just ask Keith. Not only could he do these things, but he gladly took on these demanding assignments. Once when I told him I would be visiting Estonia, he asked me to buy an Estonian reader and grammar for him. I would not be surprised to learn that he later took on reviewing assignments in that language. Most important, Keith single-handedly sustained and grew the field of Romanian studies during the long period when few people seemed to care. His many publications, journal editing, mentoring of students, and rescue of bibliographic resources kept the field active and laid the foundation for its current revival.

## *Professor Miha Wood, Allegany College of Maryland*

Dr. Hitchins has always been a generous teacher and mentor, as well as a very dear friend. He has always been one of the warmest and wisest individuals I have ever known. I am so grateful for all his support and kindness since 2001, when I started working with him after I arrived in the United States for the first time as a new graduate student. Growing up in Romania, I first became acquainted with Dr. Hitchins as a result of his writings on Romanian history during my high school years. I frequently read and drew upon his many articles and books as I prepared for our country's history day competitions during the 1990s. Little did I know that I would someday have the opportunity to become one of his graduate students at U of I. I remember clearly how nervous I was in the spring of 2001 when Dr. Hitchins travelled to Bucharest to attend a conference, and I had recently heard from Illinois that I had been admitted as a new grad student in the History Department's Ph.D. program. Right away, I was struck by his warm and friendly demeanor, his modesty, and his immense breadth of knowledge of not only Romanian history, but also of the wider realms of Eastern European and even Central Asian history. As time went on, I was regularly amazed by Dr. Hitchins' prolific work as a historian in so many areas, and the many, many languages he mastered as part of his scholarly work: Romanian, German, French, Italian, Spanish, Russian, Bulgarian, Tadjik, Kurdish, Hungarian. As an intellectual, he's truly amazing! Over the years I spent as a graduate student at Illinois, Dr. Hitchins expertly guided me through every phase of our work together. Our first meeting on campus in August 2001 was followed by a get-to-know-Champaign-a-bit lunch at Murphy's on Green St. with many of the other grad students he was working with. He knew the perfect way to welcome a new international student to the campus community and to begin building a support system for me that allowed me to better navigate what was a very new to me higher education system that I didn't yet know very well. Throughout my years as a graduate student, Dr. Hitchins consistently and without fail offered constant support and encouragement, making sure that my academic journey was going to be a productive and enriching experience. Honestly, without his work as my mentor, I wouldn't have been able to become a practicing academic and a classroom teacher in my own right in the United States. Moreover, he has always been a model for how to interact with students and engage them, to help them succeed, and to help them begin to discover their strengths even when these young students do not always see their own potential. Lastly, I still have all of my seminar papers, essay exams, and dissertation chapters from my grad school days that have Dr. Hitchins' detailed feedback. These texts are little treasures that I keep in my own office as a reminder of



how I should provide my own students with suggestions on how to improve their own writing and accomplish their academic and personal goals. Dr. Hitchins is a constant, shining example of professional generosity and personal friendship. There are so many instances in my life that illustrate his level of care and support. He made a special trip to Detroit, Michigan, to attend my wedding in the summer of 2004, and he visited my family in Romania while I was there to work on my dissertation research. Dr. Hitchins even helped my new husband Greg, then a grad student in US history at the University of Pittsburgh, to receive library privileges at U of I for the entire year we lived there together while he was writing his dissertation. I also remember Dr. Hitchins' helpful (and much needed) advice for my husband when Greg was asked to publish his first official book review. Just like all grad students would do, Greg's first draft was a far too harsh review of the book, and Dr. Hitchins kindly reminded him that a book review should highlight the book's merits and to present critiques in a more focused way with carefully measured language. As a result, my husband published what was a far more successful review. Since then, Greg uses this advice constantly in his own academic work and with his own students. I wholeheartedly and warmly can say that my own career as a history professor would not have been possible without Dr. Hitchins' input, advice, and guidance. He generously shared with me copies of various articles, books, newspapers, and magazines from his own personal collections that became vital components of my own research. Not only that, but the amazing U of I library contains entire book cases and rows of shelves on Romanian, Eastern European, and Central Asian history and culture – and it is all due to Dr. Hitchins' never-ending efforts to grow and enrich holdings that, in turn, bolster the work of many other students and researchers. I never forget how I consider myself so lucky in life to have been his student, friend, and mentee. Every student deserves an advisor who is as warm, generous, and brilliant as Dr. Hitchins. In my own career, I do my absolute best everyday to live up to the model he provides for all of us, to teach and guide my own students as I know he would. Dr. Hitchins had an impact on my life in so many ways that I could never, ever forget.



*Professor Marianna Tax Choldin, University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign*

I came to UIUC in 1969, and for the next 20 years I lived happily in the Slavic and East European Library, with my second home in the Russian and East European Center, as it was then called. In 1987 I succeeded Ralph Fisher as Center director. In 1989 I was named Mortenson Distinguished Professor in the Library, and two years later I became founding director of the Mortenson Center for International Library Programs. Throughout, I maintained my close relationship with the Slavic Library and the Center, remained active in AAASS (now ASEEES), and through the Mortenson Center I brought dozens of librarians from the former Soviet Union and Eastern Europe to UIUC. It seems as though Keith and I have been colleagues forever. We met at Center events and, most often, in the Slavic Library. All of us—Larry Miller, then head of the Slavic Library, in particular —helped Keith locate Romanian materials he needed. As you no doubt know, Keith had an amazing and wide-ranging collection in his office as well as at home, but there were always new publications. (Some of those were ever-fresh editions of the complete works of Nicolae Ceaușescu, Romania's Great Leader. Most important for Keith, though, were the hard-to-get old publications. We did our best for him—funding was better in the 1980s, so our best was also better in those years)—but sometimes there were frustrating limitations. Keith traveled often to Romania, especially to Cluj, where he spent a lot of time in the University Library. He and the director were close colleagues, and Keith always returned with suitcases full of paper. But at some point in the 1970s (or was it in the early 1980s?), something happened, and the flow of paper slowed to a trickle; maybe it even dried up. If I remember correctly, there was a problem with the photocopy machine in the library director's office.

Now for our Great Adventure. Keith will have to fill us in on some important details, as I never wrote down anything, for reasons that will become clear. Please bear in mind that this was Ceaușescu's Romania. As was the case throughout the East Block countries at that time, photocopy machining there were not very many of them—were a big problem. The Cold War was icy, and information was, or was supposed to be, tightly controlled. A photocopy machine was, of course, a means of disseminating information, some of which might be deemed dangerous to the State if it reached unauthorized readers. Better to be safe. Better not to have one of those machines. I don't know how this director had managed to get one; I imagine Keith does know. Keith and I were talking one day in the Slavic Library, and he asked me if there was any way that we could get a machine for the library director's office. I'm sure I blanched. I've been a student of censorship in the



Russian Empire, the Soviet Union, and now post-Soviet Russia for more than 40 years. I'm an inveterate optimist, but I simply couldn't imagine how our Slavic Library could buy a machine for Keith's director in Cluj. We were sending American English-language publications to Cluj regularly as part of our international exchange, but we couldn't very well just buy a photocopy machine, put it in a carton, and ship it off to Cluj.

I'm sure Keith and I discussed this problem with Larry Miller, who must have approved the daring plan we came up with. I phoned our contact at Kubon & Sagner, our longtime and trusted book dealer in Munich who sent publications to Romanian libraries for us. Their staff was very familiar with Romanian libraries, as well as with photocopy machines available in Europe that would be appropriate for the director's office.

We settled on a small, reliable Canon machine, a modest workhorse, very ordinary, not too expensive, no bells and whistles. Kubon & Sagner agreed to purchase the machine for us, and to deliver it to the library in Cluj. Furthermore, they would deliver toner cartridges as needed.

What about money, you might ask. Kubon & Sagner had an account with us, of course, and we paid them for books and journals sent to us as well as to our exchange partners. The Canon and cartridges were paid for as though they were books. Not exactly kosher, but we were never audited. And indeed, that little photocopy machine churned out copies of documents selected by Keith for years, to the benefit of Keith and of other scholars. When he came back from a trip to Romania, I would check with him to see if that little Canon was still performing. It was, and perhaps it is performing still, a quiet, unassuming soldier in the larger struggle that played out in the late 20th century.

Keith, you are recognized as a brilliant scholar, and you are indeed that. But you also accomplished something of great importance as a devoted user of libraries, and I've always admired you for that. As someone with a lifelong commitment to freedom of expression, I am proud to have been your partner.



*Professor Dana Rabin, University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign*

I will always remember Keith Hitchins and his extreme kindness. He observed my teaching in the first semester that I was tenure track in the department. It was a small group and we sat in a circle and talked about Moll Flanders. I'll never forget the generous typewritten observation that I found in my mailbox.

In subsequent years we often saw each other at Espresso Royale on Daniel as Keith held office hours in the early morning. His Continental style was renowned. The students I knew who took his classes raved about his amazing command of so much knowledge. His 8 o'clock classes always filled.

We will miss you Keith – thank you for being such a wonderful colleague.

*Professor James Barrett, University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign*

Happy to pass this on to Keith, especially since I am not sure I ever shared it with him. We asked about having some of the most dismal offices in History finally painted. O and M (Operations and Maintenance) responded by proposing a good deal: They were not busy, so for a flat charge they would paint every office in the department. I mentioned that most offices had very large numbers of books, but they assured me that they would be able to shift them and get the work done. Great! The work went on well until they reached a certain point up on the fourth floor. A foreman came in sheepishly: "Um, you know Professor Keith Hitchens' office? Well, I don't think we're going to be able to paint that one; I've never seen so many books in my life..." Little did he know, of course, that the office books represented only a small proportion of Keith's books. Keith Hitchens is a brilliant scholar and mentor and a wonderful colleague. we will all miss him. But maybe now we can get that office painted!

Congratulations on a wonderful career and good luck!



*Professor Fedja Buric, Bellarmine University*

The first time we met it was the unofficial St. Patrick's Day in 2003. It was my first day on campus and I was utterly lost and a bit shell shocked by the chaos. You took me for a coffee at Espresso Royale and as soon we entered the coffee shop and escaped the chaos outside Kamm's, it was clear to me that this was the place where I wanted to pursue my PhD and that I wanted you to be on my PhD committee. Prior to meeting you, I had read some of your works and heard lovely things about you, but during that first conversation—during which we touched on the ups and downs in Yugoslav history, the Djilas affair, the Tito-Stalin split, and the most recent wars—your profound insight and probing questions opened up a stream of new questions for me that had me running to the library.

That first Espresso Royale conversation set the tone for the rest of our interactions while I was a graduate student. Every single conversation I had with you left me with an almost insatiable thirst for more knowledge in my field. Every time I felt down or uninspired, or even ready to give up—especially during my last two years—I'd meet with you and my melancholy would be cured, my inspiration rekindled.

I wanted to thank you from the bottom of my heart for all the wonderful conversations, for your mentorship, and your profound kindness that humbled me into trying to be a better scholar, but more importantly, a better human being. I continue to draw inspiration from your work and from the example you set for the rest of us.

Enjoy the well deserved retirement!





*Professor Christine Holden, University of Maine*

I was beyond prelims when Keith arrived, and so did not have the opportunity to take classes with him. But I did serve as his research assistant during my last year in grad school, 1968–69, and it was a wonderful experience. I remember particularly helping alphabetize the collection of books he had in his office, and it was a real challenge to have to remember to file them under “Last name first,” but then remembering that the Hungarian authors, of whom he had many, were already “reversed”; luckily, he took over for any books in non-Roman alphabets, already an additional area of research beyond Romania. Keith gave me the opportunity to help edit an article by a Romanian scholar on Brancusi [pronounced “Brankoosh”], asked my advice on some of his own writings as to their ease of understanding for non-Romanian specialists, and made the invaluable recommendation that the best way to learn to write better was to read widely works by quality authors—even if not historians. He was unfailingly kind and supportive, modest about his own considerable accomplishments, yet with an excellent sense of humor.

This last quality came through when in the fall of 1968, a group of us grad students made a short movie, in which we satirized some of Illinois's traditions (e.g., pretending to plant carrots in the famous Morrow plots by the library), and encouraged professors to join us in being somewhat less than serious about their work. A grad student was lingering in the 949.8 section of the stacks on the 10th floor, foolishly not turning the lights on, when around the corner appeared Keith, wearing a convincing pair of Dracula teeth, muttering imprecations in perfect Transylvanian dialect. Of course, the poor student sank to the floor, pulling several books off the shelf as he did so. “Dracula” smiled confidently and moved on into the 950 section.

But seriously, we all were in awe of “Herr Doktor's” enormous personal collection of beloved and well-read books (many of them finding a home in his garage), his interest in and mastery of non-European languages of Central Asia--and therefore his ability to study and interpret their histories, his impressive work ethic and devotion to intellectual inquiry for its own sake, his concern for academic friends (particularly those in Southeastern Europe, who were constantly struggling against the political and economic situations of the time), and his modesty when reminded of these qualities. At any academic gathering where there were scholars from Romania, mentioning that I knew this American scholar of their country always elicited remarks of admiration, and acknowledgement of how much he had deserved the political and academic

honors bestowed on him by their country. I hope he now understands how much so many of us owe him, cherish him for how he helped us, and wish him all the best.

Dear Keith, “thank you,” and “Multumesc foarte mult.” [Mooltsumesk fo-arte moolt]



# *The Invitation*

*Dear Colleagues,*

*You are warmly invited to a party honoring*

***Keith Hitchens.***

*On the occasion of Keith's retirement, we will celebrate his many years of service, scholarship, teaching, and friendship in the Department of History at the University of Illinois.*

*The party will take place on*

*Saturday September 28*

*from*

*4 pm until 6 pm.*

*Join us at the home of*

*Maria Todorova and Stoyan Toshkov,*

*57 Chestnut Court in Champaign.*

*As is the tradition, we are collecting stories and memories to share at the party. Please send yours to John Randolph at [jwr@illinois.edu](mailto:jwr@illinois.edu).*

*In lieu of gifts, Keith has requested that donations be made to the graduate fellowship fund via the advancement portal on the department's website.*

*See you at the party,*

*Dana*



# *The Guest of Honor*



*On Saturday, September 28, 2019, faculty, graduate students, staff and friends gathered at the home of Maria Todorova and Stoyan Toshkov to honor you and your many years of service, scholarship, teaching and friendship.*

*John Randolph had amassed quite a collection of reminiscences from faculty and former students and, as master of ceremonies, eloquently orated them in your honor. The guests were truly astounded and in awe of your personal scholarship, dedication to and admiration of your students, and the immense contributions you have made to Eastern European History and to the Department of History. What an incredible career!*

*Maria Torodova, as your closest colleague, added her admiration for you, as a person, and your scholarship.*

# *The Host and Hostess*











